

Nation, Gender, and Memory Politics: Women's Forgotten Contribution to Kosovar Nation-Building

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Abstract: Women have long been central to independence struggles, yet their contributions are routinely erased. Kosovo is no exception. This article shows that the exclusion of Kosovo-Albanian women from the national master narrative is not incidental but a structured effect of the nexus between nation-building, militarisation, and gendered memory politics. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Prishtina and feminist theories of nationalism and memory, the following paper demonstrates how post-war commemorative culture elevates the militarised male 'freedom fighter' while confining women to two permissible positions: revered mothers of the nation or passive victims whose suffering is recast as sacrifice for the nation. These binary constructions, sustained by political elites and dominant narratives, consolidate male privilege in nation-building and reproduce patriarchal order. The study advances an interdisciplinary framework for analysing how gender regulates admission into collective memory, opening avenues for further research at the intersection of nationalism, militarism, and feminist memory studies.

Keywords: resistance movements, state-building gendered memory politics

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Women have played active roles in independence struggles worldwide, yet their contributions are often forgotten – including in Kosovo (Enloe 2014). Before becoming a UN protectorate in 1999 and declaring independence in 2008, Kosovo was an autonomous province of the Yugoslav Republic of Serbia until 1989. With the socialist federation's unravelling and the ensuing wars (including the Kosovo War

1998–1999), memory cultures in the successor states fragmented along ethnic lines (Friedman 2013: 97; Sundhaussen 2004: 399–405). In Kosovo, commemoration is increasingly centred on the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and the ‘liberation struggle’, foregrounding Kosovo Albanian men as heroic combatants and nation-builders. By contrast, the multidimensional roles of Kosovo Albanian women – despite their centrality to the independence movement – are largely absent from the national narrative (Krasniqi 2014: 204; 2020). Without diminishing the importance of the women who fought in the KLA, this article focuses on women active in the civil resistance of the 1990s (Demiri 2018: 1, 35; Luci, Gusia 2015: 206–207, 218; Mujika Chao 2020: 855).

That movement emerged as Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević revoked Kosovo’s autonomy in 1989, claiming the region as the symbolic and ethnic heart of Serbia. To implement this ethnonationalist project, the Albanian population was to be displaced from the province. Over the following years, Kosovo Albanians were systematically excluded from public life: restrictive laws eroded Albanian-language education and media, suspended the Kosovo assembly, and brutally suppressed dissent. These measures contributed to a deteriorating political, social, and economic situation and increasing violence against the Albanian population. In response, a broad-based civil resistance movement took shape, forming a society within a society – commonly referred to as a parallel system – with state-like bodies such as Albanian-language schools, health clinics, and cultural centres operating independently of the Serbian state and actively resisting its authority (Calic 2010; Clark 2000, 2013; Krasniqi 2010: 43–47; Pula 2004). The movement encompassed much of the Kosovo Albanian population; thousands of women participated, ensuring societal survival and drawing international attention to the conflict (Luci, Gusia 2014: 203; Mujika Chao 2020: 853).

Only recently has this research gap begun to receive scholarly attention, driven almost exclusively by Kosovo Albanian academics and activists. They have challenged the tendency to overlook or forget civil resistance and its significance in the history of Southeast Europe in both national and international socio-political discourses and memories. This silencing has been particularly evident in relation to the diverse experiences of women (Berisha 2019: 9, 12; Mujika Chao 2020: 843).

Civil resistance is marginalised not only within national narratives, where it is replaced by a heroic, masculine portrayal that valorises the armed resistance of the KLA and the NATO military intervention of 1999 as precursors to statehood. International studies likewise examine Kosovo primarily in relation to the war or the NATO intervention, as if this constituted the origin of the country’s sovereignty (Berisha 2019: 9, 12). Yet women’s voices remain underrepresented and, when present, are often reduced to rape and victimhood narratives or subsumed within maternalist framings that emphasise reproduction and family (Krasniqi 2007: 2; 2014: 204; 2020).

In the context of an ethnographic examination of memory culture, nation-building, and gender, this study analyses the processes of the structural marginalisation of women's contributions within the national master narrative.¹ It interrogates the absence of collective memories surrounding women's extensive socio-political engagement in civil resistance and deconstructs the gendered representations produced through male-dominated state and power structures. Ultimately, I argue that the exclusion of women's memories is a systematic outcome of the nexus between nationalism, militarisation, and gendered memory politics.

The article presents the arguments in four sections. Section one outlines theories linking gender, nation, and memory. It situates the study within feminist debates on these concepts and scholarship on Kosovar nation-building and gender-specific memory construction. Section two details the ethnographic approach and reflexivity. Section three analyses how armed resistance dominates memory politics and how permissible masculinities and femininities are constructed. Section four concludes with the implications for feminist memory studies and nation-building scholarship, including the potential of feminist archive-making as a methodological and political practice.

The state of research and theoretical positioning

This article builds on feminist and interdisciplinary work that connects gender, nation, and memory, while noting the absence of a consolidated framework that integrates all three. I draw primarily on: (a) feminist analyses of nationalism (and militarism) (Anthias and Yuval-Davis; Enloe; Nagel); and (b) theories of collective memory (Assmann and Assmann; Gillis), complemented by feminist memory studies.

Despite decades of public and scholarly interest in memory culture, gender as a central category of collective remembering remains overlooked by mainstream mem-

¹ The silencing of women's diverse memories of civil resistance, however, cannot be reduced solely to national memory politics. This also applies to the (at least initial) practices of the international community's peacebuilding missions and interventions, including the UN-Mission (UNMIK). Their approaches contributed to the reproduction of the hegemonic national memory discourse and, in doing so, equally reinforced the erasure of women's significance in the 1990s. Although a detailed analysis of the international dimension lies beyond the scope of this article, it is important to stress that patriarchal norms should not be viewed exclusively as a cultural characteristic inherent to post-conflict societies. As dominant international peacebuilding discourse tends to imply, such norms are equally reproduced through the very interventions that claim to address them (Balbon 2023: 5; Luci, Gusia 2015: 199). Likewise, it becomes evident that gender, as a category of social and political organisation in Kosovo, cannot be explained solely by reference to a patriarchal legacy. Rather, it was also reproduced in the post-war context, both through the nationalisation of memory politics and through the interventions of international missions (Gusia et al. 2019: 2; Krasniqi 2007: 21; Krasniqi, Sokolić, Kostovicova 2020: 461; Luci, Gusia 2015: 210; Musliu, Klajiqi 2023).

ory research. For example, most discourses on public commemoration focus on the political space of the nation while neglecting to take into account the gender of the actors (Altınay, Pető 2016: 2; Jacobs 2017: 424; Schraut, Paletschek 2008: 7, 10). At the same time, the number of independent feminist publications examining memory and gender is growing. Increasingly, the suppressed stories of women who have been erased from historiography are being examined and integrated into memory culture (AFŽ Arhiv/CRVENA 2024; Altınay et al. 2019; Hirsch, Smith 2002: 4–11; Luci, Krasniqi 2006). In this article, ‘memory culture’ encompasses both the social functions of remembering as well as the subject matter and representations of historical memories. It constitutes adherence to a social obligation that poses the question: ‘*What must we not forget?*’² (Assmann 1992: 30). Simultaneously, memory culture plays a decisive role in constructing national identity, nation-building, and legitimising and negotiating contemporary power structures, politics, and gender issues (Paletschek 2009: 165; Schraut, Paletschek 2008: 8).

A gendered perspective is increasingly considered in analyses of war memories, and feminist historiographies often interrogate hegemonic war narratives (Altınay, Pető 2016; Mannergren Selimovic 2020; Lazović 2018). Such analyses not only reveal that the struggle over remembering and forgetting is gender-specific, but also ‘how much war, interpreted as the culmination of national crisis and as climax of identification with the nation, is a suitable subject of research to elucidate the differences and partial contradictions in the memories of men and women’ (Schraut, Paletschek 2008: 274).

In the context of Kosovo, a growing body of research documents stories by and about women and highlights their contributions to societal developments, as well as to nation- and state-building processes (see, e.g., Berisha 2019; Demiri 2018; Krasniqi 2014, 2021; Farnsworth 2008; Gusia et al. 2019; Luci 2002, 2014; Luci, Krasniqi 2006; Luci, Gusia 2015, 2019; Mujika Chao 2020; Musliu, Klajiqi 2023; Krasniqi 2007). Together, these works constitute part of a feminist counter-public whose research offers an alternative historical account of the 1990s, thereby challenging both the paternalistic discourse of international missions and the male-dominated master narrative in post-war Kosovo. In doing so, they contribute to what anthropologist Marie-Aude Fouéré terms a continuous ‘process of archive making’ (2016: 84) and what Kosovar sociologist Lirika Demiri describes as ‘a discursive collective space that explores the history of the 1980s and 1990s in Kosova through the multiplicity of everyday lived experiences of women activists’ (2018: 36).

Their works underscore the far-reaching roles of women in civil resistance and nation-building. They demonstrate how women’s political significance rose during the

² The original in German is ‘Was dürfen wir nicht vergessen?’, translated by the author.

1990s, so that by the end of the decade, tens of thousands were involved in shaping and sustaining the resistance process. Although Kosovo Albanian women were also pushed out of public life and back into the private sphere by Milošević's policies, their active participation in the movement created new opportunities to enter the public sphere and engage in socio-political action. In this way, their political significance increased steadily, and they emerged as a visible and significant force within the resistance movement (Krasniqi 2021: 325; Luci 2002: 73; Mujika Chao, Gusia 2022: 53). Women sustained the Albanian parallel system by providing medical care and education, as well as by supporting the distribution of aid and food in besieged areas. Women were central in documenting violence committed by Milošević's regime and in providing information to the international community. By strategically drawing on patriarchal assumptions about women's social roles – as they were perceived as less suspicious by the Serbian regime – they were able to document police and military violence in places to which their male colleagues had only limited access. Moreover, they organised public demonstrations, most notably the 'Bread for Drenica' protest in 1998, in which thousands of women participated. They were thus the first to transform the resistance from passive to active, aiming to garner international attention and thereby hasten an end to the conflict – a goal they achieved (Farnsworth 2008: 2, 338; Marí 2018; Mujika Chao 2020: 851, 855; Munn 2006: 295; Musliu, Klajiqi 2023: 550).

It is not only in Kosovo that there has been a significant expansion of the body of feminist historiography documenting women's suppressed contributions to nation- and state-building and systematically recording their experiences of war and resistance. Similarly, across post-Yugoslav successor states, women made decisive contributions during the Yugoslav wars through aid networks, war crime documentation, and peace activism, yet remain largely invisible in memory cultures (Lazović 2018; Žarkov 2007).³

Many of these works share the feature that, alongside documenting women's experiences in war and resistance, they illuminate the gender-specific dimensions of their participation in such nationalist projects. In doing so, they highlight the nexus of nation and gender – a component of nationalist projects often overlooked or dismissed as irrelevant by hegemonic theories (Mayer 1999: 13). They thereby counter

³ This dynamic is particularly evident in Bosnia and Herzegovina where official commemorative practices prioritise male martyrs, while women's roles in resistance and civil society work continue to be marginalised (Jacobs 2017; Helms 2013; Simić 2009). Comparably, in the Ukrainian context, analyses reveal how women decisively shaped Euromaidan and the Donbas War through protests, provisioning work, and military service, yet were long erased from hegemonic narratives. Feminist analyses and literary self-testimonies render this gap visible and reinscribe women as historical subjects into national memory (Khromeychuk 2017; Wallo 2020).

mainstream discussions of nationalism in post-conflict countries, where gender is not considered a critical analytical category. By contrast, feminist scholars have argued since the 1980s that nation and nationalism cannot be fully understood without accounting for gender and sexuality as integral elements of both concepts (ibid.: 13). Pioneering work in the feminist interrogation of nationalism theories was done by Cynthia Enloe (2014), followed by scholars such as Floya Anthias (1989), Nira Yuval-Davis (1993, 1997), Deniz Kandiyoti (1998), Cynthia Cockburn (1998), Jelena Batinčić (2001), and Dubravka Žarkov (2007) (Einhorn 2009: 4). Social and cultural anthropology, long concerned with the aesthetics, roles, and politics of gender identity in the formation of kinship and other social groups, has also, over the past two decades, contributed to a deeper understanding of gender in the context of nation and nationalism (Luci 2014: 30–31). Early feminist research on women in nationalism, however, tended to overlook the fact that men, like women, are socially constructed categories. As gender-specific subjects and analytical as well as social categories, men received comparatively little attention, even though such research established that nations are masculinist projects. Only in the past two decades has scholarship begun to examine explicitly the roles of both women and men in nation construction (Einhorn 2009: 5; Mayer 1999: 15; Munn 2008: 441). It has thereby become evident that men and women participate in the national project in distinct ways. Central to this perspective is the insight of Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989: 7–10), who identify five key roles of women in national and ethnic projects: biological reproduction; boundary reproduction; cultural transmission; signifiers of ethnic and national difference; and participation in national struggles.

This study builds on the outlined research and simultaneously addresses an existing theoretical gap: While many studies examine the gender-specific dimensions of women's participation in nationalist movements, they rarely analyse the mechanisms through which certain women's stories become anchored in memory culture while others are systematically excluded. Individual theoretical works do explore why only specific notions of femininity and masculinity enter national narratives, but do not apply these approaches to empirical cases such as Kosovo (Iveković 2005; Kandiyoti 1998; Mayer 1999; Yuval-Davis 1997). Against this backdrop, the study asks which memories of women's roles are admitted into the Kosovar master narrative, a central framework of memory culture and nation-building, and how this selection contributes to the systematic exclusion of other women's stories. In doing so, the research connects the concepts of nation, gender, and memory and addresses the identified gap.

Two pioneering contributions that methodologically combine these three concepts in the Kosovar context merit particular attention. The first is anthropologist Nita Luci's dissertation 'Seeking Independence: Making Nation, Memory, and Manhood in Kosovo' (2014), which investigates the mobilisation and contestation of gender ideologies

in Kosovar state- and nation-building projects during the 1980s. The second is the analysis of the gendered dimensions of nation-building through the Kosovo art installation 'Thinking of You' by Vjollca Krasniqi, Ivor Sokolić, and Denisa Kostovičová (2020). Building on these approaches, the present contribution extends the existing literature by examining women's memories of civil resistance in Kosovo in conjunction with theoretical reflections on militarism. This enables a more precise explanation of the structural mechanisms underlying the marginalisation of women's contributions. To my knowledge, no previous study has methodologically integrated all four concepts within the context of Kosovo's civil resistance.

Methodological approaches and reflections on ethnographic research

In line with its dual focus on theory and empirical data, this study draws on two phases of fieldwork conducted over five months in 2022 and 2023 in Prishtina, the capital and largest city of Kosovo. Given the marginalised position of civil resistance within Kosovo's collective memory – reflected in the absence of public memorials, exhibitions, and commemorative events – the research prioritised ethnographic interviews and informal conversations, coupled with participant observation. At the same time, public space (predominantly shaped by monuments dedicated to KLA fighters) proved equally significant, as it reflects how collective memory is publicly represented and articulated, indicating which events are commemorated and which are erased or forgotten. The scarcity of memorials to civil resistance, and the fact that among them only one, the *Heroinat* (Heroines) memorial in Prishtina, commemorates Kosovo Albanian women, underscores the selective nature of this memory culture.

On this basis and drawing on informal conversations with individuals who largely advocated for a more nuanced view of the past, 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted in English and one in German. All interviewees were born in Kosovo, hold Kosovar citizenship, and, with the exception of one, currently reside in Prishtina. To reflect the heterogeneity of the research field and enable greater comparability, Kosovo Albanian individuals from different generations were interviewed. Interviews were conducted with six men and fifteen women between the ages of 24 and 65. One group consisted primarily of women with direct memories of the civil resistance, many of whom had been active in student movements, civil society, or political organisations. These interviews explored which memories were most significant for those directly involved. The second group comprised individuals whose age limited their personal recollections; many attended the so-called parallel education system as children. These interviews examined their historical understanding of the 1990s and the current relevance of memories of civil resistance, with particular attention

to women's experiences. Additionally, three interviews were conducted with Kosovo Albanian interlocutors working in academia and civil society on this topic. They were selected because their long-standing engagement with these debates provides situated perspectives on the historical background and current discourses. The interviews offer contextual insights into how women's contributions to civil resistance are narrated, omitted, or only partially acknowledged in dominant narratives and are incorporated as supplementary material in the analysis. Across all three groups, interviews were analysed thematically across related themes rather than as consecutive narratives, accounting for both the diversity of individual accounts and the patterns common to them – including recurring motifs, self- and other-description, and the ways everyday language reflects broader gendered and political meanings.

Following this methodological overview, it is essential to reflect on the research process itself, shifting particular attention to positionality, knowledge construction, and selectivity. Reflecting on one's own perspective is particularly important, as researching memories of civil resistance inherently involves participation in the process of memory-making. By documenting and analysing these narratives, I contribute to their preservation, thereby assuming a role akin to that of my interview partners, who carry and transmit these memories. This calls for continuous awareness of the factors shaping my own perspective (Gordon 2015: 9).

One key aspect concerns the selectivity involved in listening to conversations and writing field notes. It became clear that I was already interpreting narratives during the writing process, adding details that seemed relevant based on my prior knowledge, contextual understanding, personal experience, and research aims. This selectivity began at the stage of listening, as I retained those details I considered to be particularly salient. To mitigate this bias, I engaged in numerous informal conversations with different individuals and revisited the same participants on multiple occasions to discuss the 1990s, thereby seeking to minimise misunderstandings and misinterpretations. This process also revealed which experiences were most enduring or meaningful, as certain stories or events were mentioned repeatedly. I applied a similar approach to city walking tours, participating in several and revisiting selected ones. Given the scope of this article, the differences in how various guides narrated the same sites were not pursued as a separate line of analysis. They nonetheless sensitised me to the interpretive variability through which the past is publicly made meaningful. This resonates with Nicolas Argenti and Katharina Schramm's observation that 'Memory is not a simple, unmediated reproduction of the past, but rather a selective re-creation that is dependent for its meaning on the remembering individual or community's contemporary social context, beliefs and aspirations' (2009: 2) – a reflection that applies not only to the research participants, but equally to my own practice as a researcher.

Another important consideration is the 'echo chamber' I inhabited within the research field, shaped by factors such as age, background, academic training, language skills, and research interests. I primarily interacted with civil society actors who speak English, mostly hold university degrees, and engage with issues of collective remembrance and civil resistance. This group tends to take a critical stance towards Kosovo's national master narrative and advocates for a multi-perspectival view of the past. Accordingly, my research reflects only the memories of a specific segment of the Kosovo Albanian population, which is not representative of Kosovo as a whole, nor even of Prishtina. Crucially, by foregrounding certain memories, I simultaneously exclude and marginalise others – particularly those of older individuals, given my limited proficiency in Albanian (and Serbian). Moreover, any oral-history-based research is inherently constrained by language barriers, as nuances risk being lost in translation. As a German citizen born and raised in Germany, I also lack comparable life experiences and familiarity with local communication styles, limiting my ability to fully grasp or convey the context and atmosphere of the narrated events. This heightens the risk of misinterpretations, which I sought to counteract through ongoing dialogue (Farnsworth 2008: 5; Gordon 2015: 32). I am aware that 'an inter/view is an exchange between two subjects', and that my presence may have influenced how civil resistance and related experiences were articulated (Portelli 1991: 55). Likewise, my questions shaped the conversations, suggesting particular narrative structures, event sequences, meanings, and emotional undertones. Participants shared only those memories they chose to disclose within this specific intersubjective exchange (Lomsky-Feder 2004: 86; Luci, Krasniqi 2006: 16). Portelli aptly describes the intersubjective nature of oral narratives: 'Oral testimony, in fact, is never the same twice. This is characteristic of all oral communication, but is especially true of relatively unstructured forms, such as autobiographical or historical statements given in an interview' (1991: 55).

The Kosovar master narrative and the exclusion of women's roles in civil resistance and nation-building

Building on the theoretical, conceptual, and methodological framework outlined above, the following analysis examines the processes behind the structural invisibilisation of women's socio-political contributions to civil resistance within the national master narrative.

A key factor is the suppression of memories of the civil resistance movement itself, which forms the focus of the first analytical section. While certain activities performed by men in the resistance continue to be remembered and respected, women's engagement has largely vanished from collective memory. The subsequent section, therefore, investigates which notions of masculinity and femininity are permitted

within the master narrative constructed by Kosovo's male political elites, and how these conceptions relate to the lack of recognition for women's diverse roles in the 1990s. Given the complexity of Kosovo's memory politics and the absence of a comprehensive theoretical framework, the analysis does not seek to provide an exhaustive account. Rather, it aims to highlight the untapped potential of combining feminist perspectives on nationalism, militarism, and collective memory and to deconstruct selected aspects of Kosovo's memory culture.

Armed resistance as the master narrative of Kosovar memory politics

In examining why women's socio-political roles within the civil resistance movement have been forgotten, the most obvious explanation is the erasure of the movement itself. Interviewees frequently pointed to the dominance of a one-sided narrative of the past, centred on the armed resistance of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), as a key factor. One interviewee working in the civil society sector emphasised the different political ideologies that emerged in the 1990s and continue to shape the present. The complexity and multiplicity of events in that decade have produced a polarised ideological landscape, leading to conflict between political discourses and positions. At the core of this conflict lies the memory of the struggle against Serbian hegemony in the 1990s and, ultimately, the contested question of who liberated Kosovo (Krasniqi 2007: 16). Political scientists Mila Fridman and Larissa Pogodda demonstrate that in situations where memories become sites of struggle and conflict, diverse actors contribute to shaping the meaning of the past (2020: 203). In the case of Kosovo, this conflict unfolds primarily between the political party *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës* (LDK), founded and led by Ibrahim Rugova until his death in 2006 and associated with the civil resistance, and the *Partia Demokratike e Kosovës* (PDK), associated with the KLA. Both parties compete for a monopoly over the interpretation and preservation of the past, that is, for maintaining their respective mnemonic narratives and claims to 'truth'. In such a context, what sociologist Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi terms 'fragmented commemoration' emerges (2009), and the past becomes a contested sphere (Fridman, Pogodda 2020: 205; Hinton, O'Neill 2009: 5; Müller 2009: 3). In other words, an ongoing political struggle for dominance in collective memory, transforms the past into a political concept and a site of symbolic contestation. As one interviewee put it concisely: '[O]f course the campaigns for the past have been used for political campaigns and political truth' (Interviewee 18, 24.08.23). This struggle serves to advance particular interests and secure control over the political centre. Memories thus function as tools for power acquisition and legitimation, promoting a specific political order and shaping present power relations. In this process, the past is continually reinterpreted as a resource for power and identity politics (Assmann 2008: 57; Fridman, Pogodda 2020: 205; Lomsky-Feder 2004: 104).

This intra-Kosovar conflict thus revolves not only around power, but also around the legitimisation and construction of identity – specifically the formation of a hegemonic Kosovo Albanian identity. This identity is constituted through mnemonic processes, namely via ‘memorial signs such as symbols, texts, images, rites, ceremonies, places, and monuments’ (Assmann 2008: 55). Historian John R. Gillis aptly summarises that ‘the core meaning of any individual or group identity (...) is sustained by remembering, and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity’ (1994: 3).

Moreover, memories of the struggle for independence are also employed in the project of nation-building, with Luci and Gusia noting that ‘memory, in post-war and post-independent Kosovo, both as knowledge and practice, has operated as the *sine qua non* of state and nation building’ (2019: 132). This is hardly unusual, given that since the 19th century scholars and politicians have recognised the connection between memory and the nation, and the nation has been regarded, at least from the perspective of hegemonic theories, as a constant negotiation between memory and history (Olick 1998: 377). This study builds on this understanding of the entanglement of memory and nation-building, while foregrounding the dimension of gender relations, which has all too often remained peripheral (Luci 2011: 5).

Following this insight, scholars have begun to examine the gendered dimensions of public narratives about Kosovo’s national liberation (Farquet 2018: 363). They emphasise the central role of men in these memories, distinguishing between two prominent and opposing forms of masculinity: the ‘peace-loving activist’ and the ‘freedom fighter’ (Krasniqi 2009: 162). In the post-war period, the militaristic strand occupied a stronger political position, and representatives of the armed resistance drew on the legacy of the KLA to rewrite the past and legitimise political power in the present. As a result, post-war remembrance has been dominated by the image of the armed freedom fighter, emphasising the role of KLA combatants as national saviours and constructing an ideal of the brave, heroic man. Several interviewees described this dominance in concrete terms. One, who grew up in Kosovo and now lives in Germany, acknowledged the widespread celebration of fallen KLA commanders while stressing that governing parties had actively instrumentalised this heroic imagery to secure electoral support in a post-war climate still shaped by memories of the conflict (Interviewee 1, 25.10.22). A journalist similarly reflected on what she described as a capture of history and a ‘monopolisation of narratives’ in the post-war period: ‘the soldier narrative was, kind of like, the only one that was being recorded, the only one that was kind of being told’ (Interviewee 9, 25.02.23). This is further underscored by the observation of one interviewee in her mid-sixties that ‘even historically we always were fighting’, suggesting that armed struggle is central to the master narrative while also extending beyond memories of the 1990s and drawing on a longer historical self-understanding shaped by repeated struggle (Interviewee 6,

23.11.22). In this way, the master narrative shapes processes of ‘national imagination’ and produces a Kosovo Albanian identity grounded in armed resistance, martyrdom, and self-sacrifice (Di Lellio, Schwandner-Sievers 2006; Farquet 2018: 366; Krasniqi 2009: 163; Luci, Gusia 2019: 132, 139). This insight is also illustrated by the youngest interviewee, who explains:

Whether it is mobilisation against the Ottoman invaders, whether it is mobilisation against Montenegro and Serbian invaders, whether it is mobilisation against Italian fascists, whether it is mobilisation against Serbia or anything else — we have particular bits in our whole ethnical identity that shaped us, that really recycled themselves throughout stages of our lives. (Interviewee 7, 24.11.22)

Although a growing number of diverse voices now complement the formerly one-sided portrayal and enable a more nuanced engagement with the past, the image of the male soldier of the national liberation movement continues to dominate collective memory. As a result, the voices of other groups, such as women, civilians, or relatives of missing persons, are marginalised or silenced. According to Johanna Mannergren Selimović, Professor of Peace and Development Research, this is not a phenomenon specific to Kosovo. She observes that at the societal level, particularly following violent politics, silence plays a central role in nation-building. She elaborates: ‘As remembering the past always comes with forgetting, silence engulfs that which is cut out of the story, or discursive formations, as Foucault would have it, and is thus a means to create and sustain a particular social order’ (2020: 3). This, which she terms following anthropologist Paul Connerton’s ‘hegemonic forgetting’, softens or weakens narrative aspects to construct clear subject positions that in turn produce specific power relations (ibid.: 3). This is confirmed by one interviewee, who pointed out that the contributions of women to the national past are not part of the culture of remembrance – except for the statue of Mother Teresa and the *Heroinat* monument. Why these two figures enter collective memory while women’s socio-political engagement remains marginalised is the question the following section turns to.

Heroic freedom fighters and the revered mothers of the nation

It is no accident that memories of the multiple roles of Kosovo Albanian women are absent from the national narrative; it is rather a reflection of the structural interplay of nation-building, militarisation, and gendered memory politics. This section therefore examines constructions of masculinity and femininity in relation to nation-building and militarism, thereby tracing which notions of femininity are permitted within the Kosovar master narrative and which are excluded. The Kosovar nation is itself a site of contestation between competing political narratives, most notably those that

foreground either armed or civil Albanian resistance against the Serbian regime. Since nation-building involves the continuous negotiation not only of history and memory but also of gender relations, these contests draw on 'socially constructed ideas of masculinity and femininity to shape female and male participation in nation-building as well as the manner in which the nation is embodied in the imagination of self-professed nationalists' (Banerjee 2003: 167). As McClintock observes, '[a]ll nations depend on powerful constructions of gender' (1993: 61). The competing constructions of the 'peace-loving activist' and the 'freedom fighter' have already been discussed, yet without considering the subordination of particular forms of femininity. This also applies to the question of why, in the post-war period, the militaristic strand held a stronger political position, enabling it to impose a master narrative aligned with its own interests.

This chapter now turns to Cynthia Enloe's work, which highlights the link between masculinity and nation, noting that nationalism 'typically knows its origins in masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation, and masculinised hope' (2014: 93). The nation thus builds on the idea of masculinity, and it is almost exclusively men who claim the authority to define the nation-building process and establish the requisite notions of appropriate masculinities and femininities for the nation. Defining supposedly appropriate behaviours for nation members is necessary to preserve the nation's uniqueness. Additionally, these behaviours determine who belongs to the nation and who does not, thereby turning this behavioural code into a kind of national boundary. These specific codes are equally central to the identity of collective members, and the construction of national identity is tied to entrenched notions of this gender differentiation (Einhorn 2009: 11; Mayer 1999: 18; Yuval-Davis 1997: 37, 47, 67). The task of policing these shared norms and cultural codes thus typically falls to men, who ensure that women fulfil their assigned roles in the national project. Political and cultural sociologist Joane Nagel writes that, '[T]he scripts in which these roles are embedded are written primarily by men, for men, and about men, and (...) women are, by design, supporting actors whose roles reflect masculinist notions of femininity and of women's proper "place"' (1998: 243).

In the case of Kosovo, this means that norms and values tied to a specific form of masculinity shape the processes of national imagination. This masculinised understanding of nationalism centres on the ideal of the hegemonically masculine soldier or nationalist freedom fighter, thereby subordinating other forms of masculinity and femininity (Krasniqi 2007; Munn 2008: 442). However, the fact that representatives of the armed, military resistance held the dominant position in determining which masculinities and femininities were deemed appropriate for the nation cannot be explained solely by the male construct of the nation and its patriarchal hierarchies (Enloe 2014: 335). On this basis, the LDK could just as easily have prevailed in the political

power struggle. Interviewee 17, a feminist activist and journalist, helps explain why this outcome was not coincidental. She argues that citizenship in Kosovo has been shaped largely by wartime contributions, producing a political culture in which those who fought feel entitled to govern, and generating ‘the sentiment among voters and other citizens to feel like they owe it to them’ (Interviewee 17, 15.08.23). A similar point was raised by Interviewee 1 in the preceding section. To situate these accounts theoretically, the analysis draws on Enloe’s work (1993, 2007), which underscores the importance of examining the role of masculinity and femininity in processes of militarisation. Enloe draws attention to the mutual shaping of militarism, gender ideologies, and nationalism. Enloe argues that both nationalism and militarism are often informed by patriarchal values, reinforcing the privileging of men and the idea of masculinity (2000: 144). Militarisation, as Enloe defines it, is ‘the step-by-step process by which something becomes controlled by, dependent on, or derives its value from the military as an institution or militaristic criteria’ (ibid.: 291).

The role of militarisation in post-war Kosovo is particularly evident in the elevated status of the armed resistance, which the PDK has used to legitimise its power in the present (Krasniqi 2007: 15). It is important to note in this context that ‘[m]ilitarization and the privileging of masculinity are both products not only of amorphous cultural beliefs but also of deliberate decisions’ (Enloe 2000: 33). One such deliberate decision, as in Kosovo, is to emphasise a (in most cases male) candidate’s military past during election campaigns, as this image appeals to certain constituencies (ibid.: 32). Until recently, this electorate constituted a large segment of Kosovo’s population, which is reflected in the fact that, until 2019, the office of Prime Minister was predominantly held by former KLA fighters (Perritt 2008: 152). In this context, both Interviewee 17 and Enloe employ the term ‘khaki election’ to describe elections in which the success of competing political actors depends on their ability to present themselves as the victors of the war. That is to say, in such elections voters tend to favour parties whose candidates can demonstrate achievements within a military organisation or possess military skills (Enloe 2000: 6). In light of this, it becomes clear why the LDK lost the political power struggle to the PDK and why the image of the armed freedom fighter dominates post-war memory. The freedom fighter emphasises the role of KLA fighters as national saviours and constructs an image of the brave, heroic man, highlighting values such as militarised agency and honourable national masculinity (Krasniqi 2009: 163). The resulting form of masculinity is based on gender norms cultivated within or associated with the military, encompassing qualities such as bravery, strength, and honour (Balbon 2023: 6). In this context, and following Enloe (2000), one may speak of ‘militarised masculinities’.

Bringing these considerations together, it becomes evident that former KLA fighters capitalised on their association with militarised masculinities to secure electoral

success, particularly by benefitting from the portrayal of male KLA heroes (Balbon 2023: 13).⁴ Their political advantage over other forms of masculinity and femininity, however, had an additional cause. Militarised masculinities were linked to the capacity to provide protection, an especially salient need in the post-war context. Moreover, militarised masculinities often occupy the position of hegemonic masculinity – in Kosovo, embodied by the armed freedom fighter – standing at the top of a society in which a variety of masculinities and femininities exist in hierarchical relation to one another (*ibid.*: 6–7). The present analysis not only confirms this assumption but also illustrates the interconnection and mutual influence of militarism, nationalism, and collective memory. Furthermore, militarised masculinities tend to stand in explicit opposition to subordinated femininities. While the former are attributed with the capacity to provide protection, women are associated with the need for protection. Through this binary, militarised masculinities (re)construct gendered social hierarchies (*ibid.*: 6; Enloe 2000: 6). In this context, it is noteworthy that this binary is also evident in nationalist narratives through the metaphor of ‘nation-as-woman and woman-as-nation’, through which men assume the role of protector, their identity being closely intertwined with the nation (Mayer 1999: 15; Peterson 1994: 79).

Krasniqi, Sokolić, and Kostovicova also draw a parallel with nationalism. They argue: ‘Political construction of nationalism in postwar and post-independence Kosovo goes hand in hand with the construction of gender hierarchies’ (2020: 471). According to their analysis, this overlap is no coincidence but can be explained by the fact that representatives of the armed resistance, who appropriated militarised masculinities, enforced a master narrative based on their contemporary interests. This position of dominance also enabled them to determine which forms of masculinity and femininity were deemed appropriate for the nation. It must be added here that the connection between masculinity and militarism or nationalism can only be understood by taking the significance of both femininity and masculinity into account. Applied to the present study and the Kosovar context, this means that notions of femininity

⁴ It is important to note that in today’s Kosovo, military affiliation has become more of an obstacle than an advantage for a political career and is increasingly associated with negative rather than heroic attributes, challenging the hegemony of militarised masculinities. This aligns with feminist scholarship emphasising that hegemonic masculinities are constantly renegotiated and can be contested by alternative political masculinities, particularly in times of transition. Niklas Balbon, a political scientist, observes the emergence of new political masculinities in Kosovo that privilege educational credentials over military backgrounds. However, this shift does not automatically dismantle gendered hierarchies. The earlier hegemony of militarised masculinities entrenched gender norms and produced gendered conflict capital that continues to persist, even as its dominance is increasingly contested. Thus, the effects of militarised masculinities extend beyond their hegemony and remain relevant for this study (Balbon 2023).

can only be understood through an analysis of normative constructions of masculinity. This also underlines the necessity of the preceding discussion (Enloe 2000: 289; Yuval-Davis 1997: 1). As Peterson and Runyan note: '[M]asculinity and femininity are not "independent" categories (...) but are defined in *oppositional* relation to each other"' (1999: 8).

Building on this foundation, the analysis turns to the masculinist conceptions of femininity permitted within the national master narrative. It shows that these conceptions overlap with the roles of women in the national project (still ongoing in Kosovo) outlined by Anthias and Yuval-Davis.

As Yuval-Davis (2004) notes, the construct of the male protector, symbolised by the armed freedom fighter, is frequently accompanied by the figure of the female mother. Scholars such as Elife Krasniqi (2014, 2020), Jamie Munn (2006, 2008), Romaine Farquet (2018), and Vjollca Krasniqi (2007) similarly observe in their analyses of Kosovar remembrance culture that the prevailing symbolic role assigned to women is that of the revered mother and nurturer of the nation. As mothers, women are the biological reproducers of the nation and bearers of the community's future generations (Yuval-Davis 1997: 37). In this capacity, they are considered indispensable, for, as Yuval-Davis writes, 'If the Woman does not want to be Mother, Nation is on its way to die'⁵ (ibid.: 1). Furthermore, the significance of motherhood in nation-building remains present in the current political context. Interviewee 18, a former employee of a civil society organisation documenting stories of women, explains: 'But, eh, the way that the motherhood concept is used now is from our own president. (...) That's how you get in Kosovo's society; being a mother is highly valued (...). Says a lot about how building a nation is continued by motherhood, in that sense' (Interviewee 18, 24.08.23).

The significance of motherhood as an allegedly appropriate form of femininity should not be viewed solely in the context of the nation's biological reproduction. Women also reproduce the nation culturally and socially by transmitting its values from one generation to the next and by maintaining social cohesion (Yuval-Davis 1997: 67). Although the civil resistance relied on national cohesion and solidarity – as one interviewee retrospectively recalled: '[A]nd it's interesting; the solidarity between people was amazing. Today, we don't have that. Nowhere in the world can you find that kind of solidarity' – women's contributions are acknowledged only within the framework of family and kinship (Interviewee 6, 23.11.22). Their social sphere is thus restricted to the private domain (Krasniqi 2014: 203). This is reflected in the words of one interviewee, a 26-year-old social and cultural anthropology student: 'Of course,

⁵ The original quotation is from Karaman in *Narod* (Zagreb, Croatia), no. 10, 9 September 1995, p. 14, quoted in Meznaric (1995: 12).

when you hear about women in the 90s, you hear about this private domain, you know. Women were always more involved in the private domain, which is like house-keeping, cooking (...)’ (Interviewee 16, 14.08.23). She added that there were, of course, also women ‘branching out and writing and working in the universities and everything, or then women working in political parties’ (ibid.).

Yet within the master narrative, it is not this contribution but rather the female victim figure that dominates: women whose husbands left them and their children alone during the war, or who, as mothers, mourn children lost or imprisoned during the conflict (Farquet 2018: 373; Hoxha, Andresen 2021: 277). They are also remembered as victims of sexualised violence perpetrated by Serbian forces and paramilitary groups, particularly after this issue entered public debate in 2014, which led to legislative changes recognising sexualised violence during wartime (Luci, Gusia 2019: 138–139; Pollozhani 2019: 4). This was followed by the incorporation of the previously marginalised experiences of surviving women into public remembrance, although, as Krasniqi, Sokolić, and Kostovicova note, ‘its incorporation into nation building is challenging owing to its potential to destabilize the notion of male honour central to the construction of Albanian national identity’ (2020: 469). Such destabilisation arises from the symbolic embodiment of women as the bearers of national and collective honour, while men are positioned as the defenders of the sexual purity and honour of *their* women. In this light, the public acknowledgment of sexualised wartime violence has the potential to destabilise men’s role as the protectors of the purity and honour of both ‘their’ women and their nation, as the woman’s shame becomes the shame of the nation and, ultimately, of the man (Munn 2008: 448; Yuval-Davis 1997: 47).

The fact that such memories nevertheless became part of the collective memory can be explained by the incorporation of wartime rape commemoration into the dominant patriarchal discourse and the nation-building project (Kola et al. 2022: 1416). A notable example is the *Heroinat* monument, which the interviewee mentioned in the previous chapter. *Heroinat*, the Albanian word for ‘heroines’, is located in central Prishtina and commemorates women who were raped by Serbian men during the 1990s. While representing a necessary intervention to address the absence of women from Kosovo’s commemorative practices, the monument has been met with criticism from civil society. For example, it has been criticised for homogenising the experiences of all Kosovo-Albanian women and highlighting precisely those experiences that marginalised and stigmatised them (Luci, Gusia 2019: 139). Interviewee 21 confirms: ‘[I]t’s like, it pisses me off, because it’s putting everything in one box (...). They treat us, they treat women, like a homogeneous group, which is not what they are’ (Interviewee 19, 19.09.23).

Luci and Gusia add that the exclusive focus on survivors of wartime rape, celebrated as ‘heroines’, reduces women’s recognition to ‘their sexual and cultural reproduc-

tive roles in marking the boundaries of the nation' (2019: 139). Through such commemorative politics, the female body is reaffirmed as both a protected object of the 'in-group' and a target of the 'out-group', serving as 'reminders of the possibility of sacrifice' (Billig 1995: 175). As Adem Kola et al. note, this framing suggests that 'such suffering was a "contribution and sacrifice", something to passively be undergone for the nation, akin to "national duty"' (2022: 1411). In this way, the recognition of sexualised wartime violence does not challenge dominant gender hierarchies within the nation-building process; instead, commemoration reinforces the gendered master narrative (Krasniqi, Sokolić, Kostovicova 2020: 467).

In sum, the analysis demonstrates that Kosovo's master narrative rests on binary and contrasting constructions of masculinity and femininity and on hierarchical gender identities and relations. Men are remembered as brave, heroic protectors and as the leaders and creators of the nation, while women remain in their service – commemorated as revered mothers and nurturers of the nation, as fragile victims, or as suffering maternal figures. Through the one-dimensional remembrance of women as victims and the emphasis on their maternal contributions to the nation, women are reduced to their reproductive function, reinforcing traditional roles in service of the nation. Such representations confine women to passivity and support, thereby denying them agency and subject positionality (Farquet 2018: 373; Hoxha, Andresen 2021: 270; Krasniqi 2014: 207; Krasniqi, Sokolić, Kostovicova 2020: 470). The effects of these constructions of femininity are also reflected in the words of Interviewee 18:

So, there were a lot of activists (...) and they never really received any kind of recognition, because we see all of the veterans of the war [...]. They are part of history, they are recognised as such, but what about their wives? If you are not a raped woman, what are you? You are either a raped woman and you are recognised now, after so many years, with a memorial and a piece of legislation that has been passed, or you are just not there. You don't have a status, a concept of being a veteran or a martyr or (...) I don't know how to put it. You don't have a specific title. (Interviewee 18, 24.08.23)

This study concurs with this assessment and adds that the extensive activism and socio-political engagement of women in the civil resistance are actively erased, as they fall outside the accepted frames of motherhood and sacrifice for the nation. Their central role and significant contributions to the struggle for national independence do not align with masculinist conceptions of femininity or the 'appropriate' place of women within the nation – not in the past or in the present. For, as Deborah McDowell argues, '[W]hat we call the past is merely a function and production of a continuous present and its discourses' (1989: 147). As a result, their stories are

marginalised by male-dominated state and power politics and remain absent from Kosovo's culture of remembrance. This, in turn, serves to consolidate male privilege in the current nation-building process and to maintain hierarchical gender relations and roles that play a functional role for the overarching politics of nationalism (Gusia et al. 2019: 4; Luci 2002: 72).

Conclusion

Combining ethnographic data with feminist theories of nationalism, militarism, and memory, this article demonstrates that women's erasure from Kosovo's nation- and state-building is not incidental. Rather, the suppression of their histories from collective memory stems from the nexus of nation, gender, and militarism, which simultaneously shapes gendered representations within Kosovo's memory culture. For this conclusion, it has been shown that post-war competition over mnemonic dominance favoured militarised masculinities that legitimised present power and produced a national identity centred on armed resistance, martyrdom, and self-sacrifice. The ideal of the male 'freedom fighter' is at the centre of this masculinised understanding of nationalism, with other forms of masculinity subordinated to it. Femininities, by contrast, are positioned in explicit opposition to this hegemonic masculinity, precisely because this position is occupied by militarised masculinities that (re)construct gendered social hierarchies. This hitherto under-theorised interaction of nationalism, militarism, and collective memory becomes particularly visible in the master narrative through binary and contrasting conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Rooted in hierarchical gender identities and relations, this narrative marginalises civilian voices and portrays men as the heroic protectors and creators of the nation, while reducing women to the symbolic role of mother of the nation or passive victim. Since memories of their diverse socio-political engagement in the 1990s lie outside this accepted framework, they are subjected to structural marginalisation; women are thus not remembered as agents of civil resistance.

To address this imbalance, methodologically the findings call for sustained feminist archive-making – oral histories, exhibitions, curricula – to challenge the narrow terms under which women are permitted to appear as national subjects. At the same time, the current discussion reveals a growing engagement with this topic, alongside an increasing number of interventions. These matter not only for memory activism, but also as case studies on shifts in knowledge production. Beyond reshaping Kosovo's post-war history and filling historical knowledge gaps, such initiatives problematise discussions of Albanian national history, particularly regarding women as Albanians, feminists, and collective memory. They contest the legitimisation of political power

through history and memory, disentangling it from potential instrumentalisation (Krasniqi 2020). Thus, the practice of remembering becomes a political act that breaks the silence.

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