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Heroines of war: Justice for the women in Kosovo

- *A qualitative study about the impact of humanitarian NGOs in fighting against gender-based violence in Kosovo*

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Dedication

Dedicated

to the heroines of the war, to the survivors whose voices matter, to everyone who work and engages continuously in Kosovo

to identify and discover lost family members; to recognize and achieve justice for survivors in the aftermath of the war's gender based violence

To everyone who pursuits in ending men's violence against women in all its forms

Abstract

Title: Heroines of war: Justice for the women in Kosovo – A qualitative study about the impact of humanitarian NGOs in fighting against gender-based violence in Kosovo
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This thesis examines how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) address the recognition of the women survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) during the Kosovo war, exploring their roles as street level bureaucrats and the impact of stigmatization on their work. The thesis gives insights into how NGOs work with individual GBV survivors among stigma, societal attitudes, trauma, struggles with identification, and lack of family support while advocating for their human rights. The analysis and results are based on five semi-structured interviews: four with NGOs and one with a state actor in Kosovo. The qualitative method with a thematic analysis as approach, has been used to analyze the empirical material, employing the theoretical frameworks of stigma and street-level bureaucracy as analytical tools to interpret the results. The findings show that NGOs face stigma from families and communities, challenging interactions with and identification of survivors, leading to increased suffering, isolation, and normalization of GBV. Despite these challenges, the collective efforts of NGOs over decades have fostered public discourses and acknowledgment of GBV survivors. Their advocacy has pressured institutions, resulting in state recognition, legal reforms, and funding for survivor pensions.

Key words: Gender-based violence (GBV), Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Stigma, Street-level bureaucrats

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1. Introduction

Our country, our society is stigmatizing us. […] We don't want anything from the state but justice. […] But I will not stop. I will fight for justice for other women, for the justice that has been denied me (RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty, 2020).

These powerful words echo the struggle for legal and social recognition for women worldwide, highlighting the issue of gender-based violence (GBV). Amnesty International (n.d) reports that one-third of women globally have experienced GBV simply because of their gender. During armed conflicts, girls and women are especially vulnerable to sexual violence and rape, these crimes often go unreported and unpunished. States are responsible for investigating, criminalizing, and implementing laws to punish perpetrators and protect women's rights (Amnesty International, n.d).) The European Commission (n.d) explains that GBV is directly targeted against women and girls, because of their gender, harming them physically, sexually, and psychologically, as stated in article 3 of the Istanbul Convention[1]. The Stockholm School of Economics (2022) explains that GBV during armed conflicts mainly takes the form of sexual violence and rape against women and girls, used to humiliate and weaken the enemy. Policy analysts and scholars refer to gender-based violence as a weapon in war. GBV during armed conflict and post-conflict leads to trafficking, exploitation and domestic violence among refugees, perpetuating the cycle of violence (Stockholm School of Economics 2022).

Stereotypes significantly impact women's experiences of war. Women and children are often portrayed as victims in need of protection, increasing their vulnerability and being used as tools of warfare. This makes it difficult for women to seek help and justice due to stigmatization. Families may exclude female survivors because sexual violence is seen as collective shame, sometimes forcing them to leave their homes and communities. This shame makes it very difficult to investigate how many women have been exposed to GBV (Kvinna Till Kvinna, n.d). The United Nations (1998, p. 1-2) defines sexual violence in armed conflict as rape, torture, forced pregnancy, prostitution, sexual humiliation, and degrading treatment, used historically to destroy communities, terrorize entire populations as part of genocidal strategies. The international community has long failed to address, demonstrate, and act upon sexual violence during armed conflict. The turning point came in the early 1990s, following the sexual war crimes committed during the war in former Yugoslavia (United Nations, 1998, p. 1-2).

[1] The Istanbul Convention.

1.1 Research problem

Despite the well-documented increase in sexual violence against women during armed conflicts, these issues receive little awareness. Women's rights organizations face increased risks of violence and threats when advocating and documenting for women's rights, according to Kvinna till Kvinna (2023). Catherine N and Niarchos (1995, p. 651, 656 & 659) argue that rape is war against a woman's body and a crime against one's gender. The authors writes that a mass rape was committed in former Yugoslavia as a part of military strategy, where rape was used as weapon in armed conflict. While the exact number is unknown, it is estimated that between 20 000 – 50 000 women were raped in former Yugoslavia. This form of violence illustrates the suffering women have endured in warfare for centuries. Kvinna till Kvinna documents (2023) that more than 20 000 survivors of sexual violence from Serbia's war against Kosovo still await justice, with very few perpetrators convicted. A notable case is that of Vasfije Krasniqi Goodman who is one of the very few who shared her story, who was raped by Serbian military officers, and has not seen justice (Kvinna till Kvinna, 2023).

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2020) addresses that the international human rights framework recognizes rape as violation of human rights, based on gender-based violence toward women and girls. The international standards recognize rape and sexual violence as war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity. However, international laws are not sufficiently implemented at national and local levels. States have the responsibility to criminalize and indict rape in accordance with international laws, addressing GBV as a serious systematic human rights violation against women and girls. The implementation of measures to combat gender-based violence is hindered by discrimination, myths, prejudices and stereotypes in the media and the criminal justice system. These factors lead to underreporting, inadequate responses, normalization of violence, re-victimization, stigmatization and impunity for perpetrators (OHCHR 2020). Several key actors, including governmental bodies, civil society organizations and public institutions are responsible for protecting women and girls during and after war (The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2022 p. 13). NGOs play a pivotal role in addressing GBV and advocating for human rights, improving communication and cooperation among stakeholders, and implementing GBV prevention strategies (International Organization for Migration, 2018, p. 17).

Despite over 20 000 unheard voices and experiences of gender-based violence in Kosovo, the perspectives of survivors remain neglected. The stigmatization of survivors creates significant obstacles for civil right organizations working with GBV survivors and working to increase their recognition. NGOs play a central role in addressing GBV and acknowledging survivors in Kosovo, yet there is a significant gap in addressing the barriers survivors face. Therefore, it is important to address stigma and the significant role of street-level bureaucrats in advocating for policy changes, improving support services, and achieving justice.

1.2 Aim and research questions

The purpose of this research is to analyze how non-governmental organizations in Kosovo work for the human rights of female survivors of gender-based violence, investigate how stigmatization influences their work, and examine how these NGOs function as street-level bureaucrats.

1. In what ways do civil right organizations in Kosovo operate as street level bureaucrats, and how does stigmatization impact their work?
2. How do civil right organizations in Kosovo work with individual GBV survivors?
3. How do civil right organizations in Kosovo work with the recognition of GBV survivors?

1.3 Relevance for human rights

This thesis focuses on women's rights in Kosovo, adopting a human-rights approach. NGOs in Kosovo play a crucial role in advocating for survivors of GBV. This research highlights their function as street-level bureaucrats and examines the impact of stigmatization on their work, underscoring the importance of addressing individual GBV survivors within a human rights framework. To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), various stakeholders such as policymakers, ministries, institutions, and civil organizations must be involved. Women in Kosovo face deep-rooted socio- cultural norms, economic inequalities, traditional gender stereotypes and exclusion when seeking justice for gender-based violence (Institute for Development Policy, 2023, p 17 & 18). The 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols categorize sexual violence, rape, and other forms of violence against women in war as human rights violations and war crimes[2]. Gender-based violence violates women's human

[2] IV Geneva Convention Relative to the protection of civilians persons in time of war.

rights and fundamental freedoms, discriminating against several articles of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)[3].

In conclusion, the examination of women's rights in Kosovo and the context of GBV survivors from the war emphasize the crucial role of NGOs as advocates for justice and equality. Despite the legal frameworks and international conventions on guaranteeing women's rights in Kosovo, deep-rooted socio-cultural norms and inequalities challenge the implementation of these rights. The stakeholders at all levels are crucial to addressing the challenges, with a focus on how and why NGOs work to uphold and develop human rights, ensuring the protection, respect, and implementation of women's rights in Kosovo.

1.4 Delimitation

Given the constraints of limited word count and timeframe, this thesis will be limited to non-governmental organizations working for survivors of wartime GBV in Kosovo. Additional interviews or the influence of politicians, legal institutions, survivors, or their families will be excluded. The focus is exclusively on how NGOs work with the female GBV survivors, excluding men to maintain a clear and manageable scope. The amount of reading different theories and collecting several previous research for the study, became very limited as well, in order to meet with the reduced time and word scope. The study is limited to two different theories, "street-level bureaucracy" and "stigma". These theories were chosen for their relevance to understanding how NGOs operate and the role of stigma in supporting GBV survivors. Other potentially relevant theories were not included, which is explained further in section 4.3. The thematic analysis method employed for analyzing the results was limited. While this method revealed several important themes, a more in-depth analysis exploring additional themes and data patterns could have provided a richer analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p. 57). Qualitative thematic analysis is a flexible approach and revealed important structured themes through coding. However, a deeper exploration of the data, possibly combined with another qualitative method, could have led to the creation of more themes and deeper analysis (Hsien and Shannon, p. 1277-1278). Despite the limitations regarding time,

[3] CEDAW General Recommendation No. 19, n.d, p. 1-3: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

scope, theoretical frameworks and methodology, they have not hindered the investigation of the intended aim and research questions.

1.5 Disposition

This master's thesis consists of nine chapters. The first chapter introduces gender-based violence as human rights violation, outlining the research problem, aim, and research questions. It discusses the role of NGOs in Kosovo, the relevance of human rights, and research limitations. The second chapter provides background information on Serbia´s war against Kosovo and its aftermath, including Kosovo's gender equality laws and their limitations in addressing gender-based violence, with relevant statistics. Chapter three presents the literature review, examining the efforts of NGOs in supporting GBV survivors in Kosovo, including the role of court institutions. It also explores gender perspectives on war and its impact on GBV survivors. The fourth chapter introduces two theoretical frameworks: "Stigma" by Erving Goffman (2020) and "Street-level bureaucracy" by Michael Lipsky (1980). These frameworks are selected for analyzing the empirical data, providing insights into how professionals implement human rights and how society responds to gender-based violence, guiding the analysis and discussion of the research findings. The fifth chapter outlines the qualitative research methodology, covering data collection, selection, analysis, methodological discussions, and ethical considerations. Chapter six presents the findings from the interviews and their analysis. Chapter seven provides a deeper discussion and analysis for the results using previous research and the chosen theoretical concepts. Chapter eight offers a final conclusion with summarized insights based on the results, analysis, and discussion, reconnecting to the research questions. The final chapter lists the sources cited in this research.

2. Background

2.1 Serbia's war against Kosovo

Human Rights Watch HRW (2001) documented several war crimes committed by Serbian government against Kosovo between March 24 and June 12 during 1999, including forced expulsions, murders, tortures, and rapes. The Serbian government executed systematic ethnic cleansing to terrorize, murder and forcibly expel ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. The Kosovo war began on February 28, 1988, after the Yugoslav attack on the villages of Likoshan and Qirez in Drenica, Kosovo, and continued until June 11, 1999. The war was fought between the forces of the Federal Republic Yugoslavia - Serbia, and the Kosovo Liberation Army with air support

from NATO, and assistance from the Albanian Army. During this war 862 979 ethnic Albanians from Kosovo were forced to flee their homes (HRW 2001), over 1600 people are still missing (Humanitarian Law Center Kosovo, 2022) and over 13 000 Albanians were killed and massacred, with approximately more than 20 000 women and men were raped, as an instrument of war (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2019). Serbian police, the Yugoslav Army, and paramilitaries were accountable for these war crimes in Kosovo, particularly rape and executions (HRW, 2001). After the war, survivors of the sexual violence in Kosovo lacked support from institutions, and the topic remained heavily taboo, resulting in stigma, shame and reducing dialogue about survivors. International organizations present in Kosovo have not fully recognized rape as a weapon of war. Serbia has not been held accountable for its war crimes in Kosovo, and the international community has failed to ensure justice in Kosovo (CIS, 2019). Since 2018, the Republic of Kosovo has started registering GBV survivors and verifying their status. Kosovo established laws to recognize war victims who survived sexual violence and rape during the war (Betimi Për Drejtësi, 2023).

2.2 Challenges in achieving gender equality

Kosovo has challenges regarding gender equality across different sectors. Gender discrimination and stereotypes affect equal access to education, employment, and participation in decision-making processes. Women, particularly those in rural areas, face barriers in accessing healthcare services due to socio-economic factors and cultural norms. Cases of gender-based violence have limited enforcement in courts. There is a lack of specialized professionals in the justice and healthcare systems to help survivors of GBV. Civil organizations, the security sector, and public institutions are the main actors in implementing empowerment, involving women in decision-making, ending discrimination, and addressing violence against women (Republika e Kosovës, 2020, p 10-12).

2.3 Legislation and statistics on gender-based violence

Kosovo has enacted several laws to promote gender equality and protection against GBV, through following legislations: Gender Equality law, Law on Reproductive Health, Criminal Code, National Strategy for Protection from Domestic Violence and Violence against Women 2022–2026, Law on Protection from Discrimination, Concept Document for Gender Responsive Budgeting and Ratification of CEDAW, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. These legislations are the legal bases for promoting gender equality, however ending all forms of discrimination and violence against girls and women, remains a challenge.

Official statistics reveal an alarming increase of gender-based violence in Kosovo. Between 2019 and 2022, the Kosovo Police reported 2764 cases of domestic violence, with an increase of 13.65% from the previous year. However, cases of sexual violence are underreported due to stigma and fear of marital status. Survivors of GBV from the war, face significant barriers in accessing justice and support services (Institute for Development Policy, 2023, p. 16 & 18: Republika e Kosovës, 2020, p 51-52). According to EUROSTAT (2023), in 2021 76.8 % of women in Kosovo are aware of the existence of support services for GBV, while 23.2 % are not. Additionally, 5.9% of women have experienced physical violence inclusive threats, from a non-partner in 2021. Overall, 9.4 % of women reported experiencing physical, threats (excluding sexual) by any perpetrator. When including sexual violence with threats or physical violence, this figure increases to 10.3%. However, there is low reliable data on sexual violence only.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Breaking the silence: Civil women's rights organizations pave the path to justice in Kosovo

Anna Di Lellio (2016, p. 622) emphasizes the significance of women's rights activist and the survivors' voices, in her article "*Seeking Justice for Wartime Sexual Violence in Kosovo: Voices and Silence of Women*". Women activists advocated for justice both during the war and after, however in the patriarchal context of state building, the perspectives of women became silenced. In peacebuilding, the concern of gender was underscored by the Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000). Particularly visible in the UN observations of gender-based violence during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Gender stereotypes of gender-based violence were repeated by governmental bodies and international organizations, including the UN for allowing the normalization of gender-based violence in Kosovo. Women's rights organizations played an important role in rehabilitating and identifying survivors of sexual violence. However, public discourse around sexual violence often frames it as dishonoring and staining families, leading to social denial at both community and institutional levels. The author argues that during and after armed conflict, social and political discourses in Kosovo have been shaped by gender stereotypes, further marginalizing women and undermining their human rights. Di Lellio argues that the collective efforts of women's networks are important in advocating for the survivors' rights. These networks initiate global and national campaigns centered on

women's perspectives to achieve justice and societal inclusion. This includes legal recognition of rape as a war crime and providing support for survivors (Di Lellio, 2016 p. 622-625).

During the 1998–1999 war in Kosovo, Serb forces under Milosevic's leadership, committed grave human rights violations, including ethnic cleansing and the use of rape as weapon of war, writes Remzije Istrefi and Arben Hajrullahu, in their article *"Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Kosovo and Lessons to be Learned from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia"* (2021, p. 199). Three survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in Kosovo: Shyhrete Tahiri, Vasfije Krasniqi and Marte Tunaj has publicly filed for crime reports to punish the perpetrators of war rape and seek justice through the Kosovo Special Prosecution (KSP). Despite their efforts, Tahiri and Krasniqi's cases lost in court, while Tunaj won her case in 2000, her perpetrator was acquitted two years later in a retrial by the Gjilan District Court. Istrefi and Hajrullahu (2021 p. 203-204) highlights these cases as systematic failure within the juridical prosecution in Kosovo, noting that only these three have publicly sought justice, indicating the widespread neglect experienced by most victims, particularly women.

The authors assert that the survivors face fear and barriers to speaking out, including cultural and familial pressure and prejudice, as well as fears of punishment from their families who condemn the rapes as something the survivors have "allowed" argue the authors. The survivors' traumatic experiences have been largely overlooked in public discourse on rape, aggravated by inadequate coverage in media, academia, and documentation of war rape. Consequently, many victims remain silent, placing their faith in Kosovo's civil organizations, as Istrefi and Hajrallahu argue. They emphasize that civil rights organizations play a crucial role in supporting survivors with economical, psychological, and medical assistance. These NGOS advocate survivors' rights both nationally and internationally, securing legal recognition for them, such as inclusion in the law on the status and verification of civil victims of war in Kosovo in 2014 (Istrefi and Hajrallahu, 2021, p. 205-206). While this legal recognition grants survivors inclusion to the law with access to a pension of 230 euros, it is depending on certain criteria outlined by the law. Despite the progress of legal recognition, Istrefi and Hajrallahu (2021, p. 205-206) claim that societal stigma continues to hinder survivors from applying for the pension, perpetuating their silence and marginalization.

3.2 UNMIK and EULEX: Challenges in pursuing justice

The United Nations Interim Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and later the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) were assigned to oversee juridical processes and investigating war crimes, writes Istrefi and Hajrallahu. Initially, approximately 1200 war crimes were identified by UNMIK, however, only a fraction of these cases saw active investigation and trial. According to The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), this lack of progress was systematic. The Human Rights Advisory Panel (HRAP) of UNMIK criticized UNMIK for lacking in supervising and informing war victims of their rights, by handling them with indifference. Despite structural and international support, UNMIK's efforts did not lead to convictions for cases of conflict-related sexual violence by the time its mandate ended in 2008, assert Istrefi and Hajrullahu (2021, p. 209-211).

The authors point out the transition from UNMIK to EULEX presented further challenges in managing war crimes and conflict-related sexual violence in Kosovo. EULEX received 1200 war crimes cases from UNMIK, where allegations of corruption within EULEX, insufficient resources and lack of political will hindered progress. Conflict-related sexual violence cases were not prioritized, due to time constraints and difficulties in identifying witnesses and evidence. Only two cases reached trial, the survivors Vasfije Krasniqi and Shyhrete Tahiri, with only one resulting in acquittal, despite family and neighbor's witnesses testifying against the perpetrator, a Serbian police officer named Jovica Dejanovic´, the Court condemned the documented photograph evidence *"has lost its evidential value"*. EULEX became criticized for insufficiently engaging local legal experts and failing to promote the transfer of responsibility to the Kosovo Court. Additionally, a lack of effective case management led to citizens of Kosovo initiating proceedings against EULEX for alleged human rights violations, concludes Istrefi and Hajrullahu (2021, p. 211-213).

In summary, these three articles highlight civil rights organizations as crucial in addressing gender-based violence and advocating for survivors' rights in Kosovo. Civil rights organizations tackle societal stigmas and gender stereotypes that maintains shame, taboo, and silence around GBV, hindering survivors' access to legal recognition and support services. Public discourses in Kosovo regarding survivors of GBV during the war, is shifting due to collective efforts of civil rights organizations. However, persisting challenges, including systematic failures in judicial prosecution, corruption allegations and limited resources, hindering survivors' pursuit of justice. It is important to emphasize the collaborative nature of

addressing GBV, including non-governmental organizations governments and communities, further challenging societal norms to support the survivors effectively.

3.3 The female body as battleground: Gender lenses on war

Laura Sjoberg (2013, p. 221-223) argues in her book*" Gendering Global Conflict Toward a Feminist Theory of War"*, for the context of war rape, by emphasizing gender roles as tool of both symbolic, systematic, and ethnic violence, that serves to humiliate and destabilize not only targeted individuals, but entire societies. Sjoberg argue that raping women is symbolic violence, further systematic during armed conflict, which is characterized as a weapon to destroy a population. Sjoberg exemplifies forced impregnation as purpose of physical terror and ethnic manipulation to the ethnic group and the whole state. Further the intention to corrupt the possibility of social and biological reproduction, all of which, explains why war rape is an integral and systematic part of a system that maintain women's subordination. Sjoberg highlights the normalization of war rapes, emphasizing the dehumanization of women's lives both in post conflict, during conflict and after conflict (Sjoberg, 2013, p. 222-223).

With gender lenses on war, gendered experience becomes important to address on both micro and macro level, according to Sjoberg (2013, p. 253-259). The micro perspective focuses on the individual experiences, by centering on the individual experiences and voices of survivors directly impacted by war, a deeper understanding can be gained of the lived realities of war. These individual voices often tend to get overshadowed from macro perspectives, where societal norms, power dynamics and political strategies behind war, fail states to understand the individual experiences of war. Furthermore, beyond the battlefield, traditional gender norms interact with patriarchal structures to perpetuate violence, increasing failed justice with risk of social stigma and replicated violence. The risk of gender-based violence is therefore not only to be seen during war, but also in the individual consequences of war, directly impacted within the systematic response from the state (Sjoberg, 2013, p. 253-259).

In line with Sjoberg, Anne-Kathrin Kreft (2022, p. 4 & 7) underscores in her article *"This Patriarchal, Machista and Unequal Culture of Ours": Obstacles to Confronting Conflict-Related Sexual Violence"* the consequences of conflict-related sexual violence, and the responses to it. The consequences are both physical and psychological, including wounds to the person's genitalia, diseases, forced pregnancy and increased vulnerability, as well as depression, trauma disorders, anxiety, social dysfunction, and suicidal thoughts. The social

consequences impact the victim's well-being and living conditions, leading to poverty, inadequate access to healthcare and education, further stigmatization, rejection and exclusion from spouses, family, and society. Silencing and stigmatization are higher for women, who face social rejection from their families. The attached shame and guilt of the women results in limited sympathy and solidarity from the social environment (Kreft 2022, p. 4 & 7). Kreft (2022, p. 1-2) argues that the response from the state, institutions and families are anchored in patriarchal norms, which creates gendered hierarchies and tolerate conflict-related sexual violence against women. Kreft states that discussing sexual violence is difficult for victims due to feelings of guilt and shame, combined by the lack of support, understanding, and solidarity when societies and communities stigmatizes these victims. The stigmatization of victims also come from family members and communities, resulting in labeling, prejudices, and further harm to victims. The fear, shame, and guilt experienced by victims results to not speak of the rape, which reinforcing the culture of silence, sustained by patriarchal structures in societies and families. This cycle and normalization of sexual violence in war result from the oppression against women (Kreft 2022, p. 1-2).

In summary, this discussion increases discourses on the broader long-term consequences of gender-based violence, by highlighting how GBV perpetuates cycles of destruction and subjugation. Dehumanizing women's bodies marks the subordination of women, undermining gender equality, and dissolves the structure of societal gender norms around masculinity and femininity. The consequences of GBV are physical, physiological, and social, attached to shame and guilt felt by victims, stigmatization by families and society. Patriarchal norms perpetuate the stigmatization and silence victims, resulting to a culture of normalization of this violence.

4. Theory and Analytical Framework

4.1 Street-level bureaucracy – Michael Lipsky

"Street level bureaucracies", as termed by Michael Lipsky (1980), explains the professionals that work in the public sector, providing public service with direct contact with individuals and citizens. "Street-level" indicates their daily interactions with citizens, addressing diverse individual needs with a distance from institutional frameworks, while "bureaucracy" signals equivalent treatment of citizens through laws and governmental regulations, emphasizing hierarchical structures, and institutional authority. Street level bureaucracies work in various sectors, including welfare departments, hospitals, schools, police departments, social service

agencies, and non-governmental organizations. Their interaction with citizens has an impact on the room of action and which interventions they can provide, influenced by the individuals' rights to public support based on their needs and conditions (Lipsky, 1980, p. xi-).

The outcome of street-level bureaucrats' efforts in different fields, are strongly determined by their discretion, autonomy, decision making, resource management, managing norms and practices influenced by responsiveness, political processes, and agency performance. Understanding how street-level bureaucracies are influenced by public policies and their efforts in the field, it becomes important to analyze responsiveness at both general and individual levels, considering the difference in capacities and achievements among grassroots bureaucrats. Lipsky emphasizes the efforts, experiences and outcome of public policies, highlighting the role of both individual and collective behavior when establishing practices and routines. He further explains how these behaviors influence decisions and work pressures. According to Lipsky, these conditions can explain why grassroot bureaucrats may transform their own rules, goals, and attitudes. Public sector professionals often enter their roles with high expectations, commitments, yet face due to organizational pressure, legal frameworks, resource constraints, bureaucracy, and distress of client's different needs. He underscores that social stereotypes can shape how street-level bureaucrats in the public sector executes and act in their daily work, influenced by their interpretations which can result in treating individuals differently despite official policies. Lipsky suggest that official policies and how different organizations experience rules and frameworks must be analyzed, to understand why street-level bureaucrats sometimes develop their own rules, goals, and attitudes in how they operate, because of their high pressures, expectations, and experiences (Lipsky, 1980, p. xi-xiv).

The interventions and the benefits of the public service that street-level bureaucrats can provide for citizens, have complex limits due to social and political contexts, governmental rules, policies, and hierarchy. Street-level bureaucrats are torn between political efficiency and governmental policies as well as service in the requests of individuals. Their direct involvement in people's lives shapes the experiences of providing service for the individuals, at the same time impact the constitutional relationship between citizens and the state. This explains the key role street-level bureaucrats have in fostering citizenship. The public sector has expanded responsibilities and roles in providing for example healthcare, education and security through policing and law enforcement. Street-level bureaucrats gain a greater influence on people in need of support in their daily work and interactions. Despite the challenges, street-level

bureaucracy has a crucial role in providing interventions and benefits to citizens, influencing citizenship dynamic and shaping the constitutional relationship between the individuals and the state (Lipsky, 1980, p. 4, 6 & 8).

The daily interactions with individuals of the street-level bureaucrats public service, is a cornerstone when implementing policies directly impact people's lives, whose clients respond differently to critical decision-making moments. From the perspective of the citizen, street-level bureaucrats serve as extensions of the state, maintaining a balance in the interaction between citizens and the state, and collectively being the voice of the citizens, and advocating for citizen need within society. Street-level bureaucrats play an important role in policy making through discretion and interaction with citizens, combined with a certain degree of autonomy from organizational authority. These aspects impact the collective actions of the agency the street level-bureaucrats work for. Through their discretion and direct citizen interactions, street-level bureaucrats can contribute to policy making, which often practices autonomy in their organizational framework. The standards of the responsiveness and discretion vary depending on state policies, norms, hierarchies, and individual characteristics, influencing the recognition of people's needs and demands (Lipsky, 980, p. 8-9, 12-13 & 23).

In summary, the significance of discretion, organizational autonomy, the political and social dynamics within street-level bureaucrats' contexts, associated with daily interactions with individuals, underscores the definition of grassroots bureaucratic work and its implementation process.

4.2 Stigma – Erving Goffman

Erving Goffman (2020) produces the concept *stigma,* which describes the human effort to be recognized in social contexts, since people may experience that they do not reach the identity expectations that are valued and required in society. It focuses on how individuals manage identities that are considered deviating. According to Goffman, where norms about identities exist, so does stigma. There are three forms of stigma: body stigma, group stigma and character stigma. Body stigma implies physical abnormalities that cause negative marks on the personal character. Group stigma is connected to a category of people, when these people gain stigmatized characteristics based on for example, religion, nation, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Individuals that are a part of these groups may be discriminated against, as a result of the groups stigmatized characteristics. Character stigma refers to negative judgements on an

individual's personality, character, or morals. Deviating from society, in a negative way that is considered abnormal, is Goffman's definition of being *stigmatized.* Goffman underscore identity when analyzing stigma, he explains that there are three forms of identities that are crucial to understand stigma. *Social identity* is associated with personal and structural competences that impact the "social status". It is further constituted by assumptions of how one should be, and the categories that the individual belongs to, further the characteristics the person expresses. The factor that distinguishes the individual from someone else is *personal identity*. These two forms of identities affect the expectations and definitions of others on oneself, which shapes the third identity: *self-identity*. The individual's concept of oneself is influenced by social experiences and their own independence (Goffman, 2020, p. 7-11).

The norms of identities establish the possibility for the individual to live up to these expectations, while trying to achieve normality and hide their stigma, to reduce the risk for stigmatization. Over time, collective movements have fought for the right not to be stigmatized, or to be judged as deviant. The definition of disability and knowledge of disability has changed, further the perspective on sexual orientation. Stigmatization changes in the social environment, when people manage their stigmas with more openness, whose surroundings consider greater tolerance and adaptation. This openness can however cause fear of the consequences that stigma causes, Goffman argues that certain groups in society can be socially condemned with strong and illegal stigmas, where the stigma is so deeply rooted in society, which can make it difficult to change society's definition and acceptance of these stigmas. Stigmatization is therefore not about the characteristics or identity of a human being, but instead interactions between people, as well as governing mechanisms in society. These governing mechanisms take place in normative expectations, institutions, conventions, rules that influence people's actions in interaction with others (Goffman, 2020, p. 12-15).

The categories of people are a product of social environment. Within social interactions, rules and norms are created for individual behavior that shapes one's fulfillment of social status, which results in societal demands and normative expectations. In instances where an individual deviates from the social norm, categorizations are created where the person's characteristics is condemned. Should these descriptions differ from societal norms, the individual becomes a discredited person, with the label of stigma. The issue of stigma is not only made visible in the process of adapting norms and expectations, but also in applying these norms in specific categories. Goffman illustrates how people become discredited, for example when a patient

receives a mental diagnosis. It is not the prejudices against the patient belonging to a certain category that constitutes the biggest problems, rather that people unconsciously do not realize their prejudices and treat the person as stigmatized, who does not fit into their categories (Goffman, 2020, p. 24-25, 29 & 76). Goffman observes that a stigmatized person considers himself as an ordinary individual, at the same time observes that others treat him differently. The group which the person associates with often share similar stigmatized experiences, despite that the actual group who discredited is the one that the person originally belongs to. People tend to judge individuals by discredits and stereotypes that are associated with the group of which the individual belongs to, which can result in reinforced stigmatization of the person. Individual thoughts and the social circumstances along with how people fit into the society's norms shape the process of stigmatization (Goffman, 2020, p. 157, 162, 164 & 181).

In summary, stigma represents the discrediting of people and how they navigate to adapt their identities of the norms and expectations of society. However, how people become stigmatized is not solely determined by individual characteristics, rather, it appears from the interactions between individuals and the governing dynamics in society. The universal process in society governs the concept of stigma when identity norms are present.

4.3 Operationalization

The theoretical frameworks are a combination of Goffman's theory of stigma and Lipsky's theory of street-level bureaucracy, applied within the context of human rights. Although these are entirely different, they are used to analyze and understand how NGOs operate as street-level bureaucrats when delivering social services to GBV survivors. Goffman's theory of stigma is connected to human rights principles such as freedom, dignity, equality, and non-discrimination, as outlined in key human rights conventions. CEDAW Article 2[4] obliges states to eliminate discrimination against women, while the Article 3 of the Istanbul Convention emphasizes the rights of women to live free from violence[5]. Additionally, the UDHR[6] states the right to dignity and non-discrimination for all individuals in Article 1. Addressing stigma is not only a moral essence but also a legal obligation under international human rights law. This theoretical framework helps to understand the social exclusion and discrimination faced by GBV survivors and NGOs in interaction with the survivors in Kosovo. Lipsky's theory provides

[4] The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.
[5] The Istanbul Convention.
[6] The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

insights into how professionals work and engage with citizens based on their needs, focusing on autonomy, responsiveness and discretion. I intend to examine how the NGOs function as street-level bureaucrats, particularly how they navigate and address the stigma associated with GBV survivors. This includes understanding the obstacles that GBV survivors face due to stigma, and how it affects NGOs' ability to deliver individual support and recognition to these survivors. While perspectives from other theorists could provide additional insights and nuanced perspectives, the focus on Lipsky's and Goffman's theoretical concepts remains central to this research.

5. Method

5.1 Qualitative method

For this research, a qualitative methodology is chosen to investigate the efforts of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in supporting women survivors of GBV in Kosovo. Qualitative method is used to understand, identify, and analyze human behavior within the context of human rights, encompassing social dynamics, norms, gender roles and cultural norms (Smith & Smith, 2018, p. 70-71). To explore the subjective experiences and perspectives of the respondents, who are the representatives of the NGOs, qualitative interviews are selected. Thematic analysis is chosen as the method of analysis. This approach involves coding and categorizing empirical evidence to identify patterns (themes) within qualitative data through open engagement and interpretation. Qualitative research is bound by context and interaction, emphasizing the interpretation of the respondents' perspectives within their specific contexts. As a researcher, I adopt a hermeneutic position, focusing on understanding and interpreting human interactions and processes while integrating theoretical concepts to analyze empirical data. Hermeneutic serves as a compass in qualitative research within the field of human sciences, enriched by the interpretation of individual perspectives and experiences (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2017, p. 16-18: B. Thompson Hardy, 2018, p. 79 - 83). The chosen qualitative method aligns with the purpose and research questions of the study, enabling the collection of empirical evidence to shed light on the perspectives of NGOs in their efforts to uphold human rights.

5.2 Data selection of interview respondents

To address the research questions, it was important to identify non-governmental organizations in Kosovo to gather diverse perspectives, experiences, and knowledge concerning gender-based violence and its aftermath since the war. By choosing to interview these NGOs, I aim to access

valuable insights and experiences from professionals directly engaged with women survivors. This approach encourages the recognition of survivors' voices and experiences through the organizations as well as provided insights into the NGO's efforts to assist and support women. There are four licensed NGOs in Kosovo specializing in supporting and rehabilitating GBV survivors. I conducted further research on these NGOs through their websites. I initiated contact with them by sending information letters via email. The table below presents the four licensed NGOs in Kosovo dedicated to supporting survivors of GBV resulting from the war:

Table 1 – Facts about Interview respondents

Non-governmental Organization (NGO)	**Location (City)**	**Interview respondent**	**Facts**
Kosova Rehabilitation Center for Torture Victims (KRCT)	Pristina	Feride Rushiti – The executive director and founder of KRCT.	**Feride Rushiti** is a medical doctor who started treating civilian torture victims in 1999 during the conflict in Kosovo. KRCT was founded in response to the need of psychosocial support of trauma and torture victims, she had a focus of survivors of sexual violence and her engagement for advocating for human rights in this organization, has developed the legal framework for addressing treatment and rehabilitation of torture survivors.
Center for the Promotion of Women's rights (QPDG)	Drenas	Kadire Tahiraj - The executive director and founder of QPDG.	**Kadire Tahiraj** is a specialist in biochemistry as a lab technician, who have been advocating and supporting the rights of war rape survivors, since the establishment of the NGO in 2013. Her organization provides psychosocial and financial support to survivors, with the aim to help traumatized women integrate into society by reducing trauma symptoms.
Medica Gjakova (MG)	Gjakova	Fehmije Luzha – Head of Pshycho-social Department	**Fehmije Luzha** is a psychologist who offers individual and group psychosocial counseling. MG was established in

			2011, with the mission in supporting women's physical and mental health, who has faced gender-based violence, by offering psychological, gynecological, and legal guidance, alongside economic empowerment with the goal to secure rehabilitation throughout their lives.
Medica Kosova (MK)	Gjakova	Veprore Shehu – Executive Director of Medica Kosova.	**Veprore Shehu** founded MK in 1999, and along with her staff provides medical, legal, and psychosocial support for women affected by war trauma, especially women who have experienced sexual violence in the war. The NGO influence gender policy and conduct research to improve women's well-being in Kosovo, with the aim to enhance the health and living conditions of survivors from GBV.

This form of selection can be considered as *purposive sampling*, aimed at selecting participants relevant to the research questions. Purposive sampling emphasizes the importance to strive for in-depth and broad information, perspectives, and diverse knowledge about the research. When selecting interview respondents, it was crucial to maintain an open and objective approach, avoiding bias towards individuals known to me or those who might confirm preconceived notions. Therefore, I chose different non-governmental organizations across different cities in Kosovo, each with distinct experiences and expertise in different fields but sharing a commitment to women's rights. This approach eased the collection of comprehensive data with diverse perspectives through open-ended interview questions (Yin, 2013, p. 93). This selection process had a "snowball effect", during the interviews, as each organization mentioned each other, highlighting each other's work. Consequently, based on these recommendations and insights, I included a fifth interview with the Head of the Commission for the Verification and Recognition of Sexual Violence Victim Status. In Kosovo – particularly this Commission, the state and these NGOs are not divided, instead connected through continuous cooperation. The Commission provides monthly funding to these NGOs, which have received state licensing for

their non-governmental work. These NGO further support the legal rights of survivors in applying for pensions according to the law.

Despite this governmental connection, the direction of this selection remains non-governmental. Moreover, the Commission's focus on survivors of gender-based violence, underscores its close collaboration and involvement with the four NGOs. The Head of Commission, Leonora Sulemani, is not a politician but an independently elected official tasked with maintaining dialogue and cooperation between the four NGOs and the state. Alongside her collogues in the Commission, she assesses the legal right of verification of survivors and if the survivors meet the legal standards for financial pensions according to the law. This inclusion of a 5th respondent aligns with the snowball sampling technique, as described by Bryman (2018, p. 508) who emphasizes the importance of choosing a network of individuals who in turn recommend others, it becomes essential for the relevance and purpose of research. This strategy is beneficial for using the connections within the network focused on the research topic.

5.3 Data collection

5.3.1 Interview guide, information letter and methodological challenges

In the first stage of this research, I extensively searched for statistics on the SDG goals, such as equality, living conditions, health, and violence, examining multiple indicators to broaden the search and yield more results. I searched in databases such as CEDAW, Gender Statistics Database, World Bank, IMF, UN database and the EU Commission's database. However, there was statistics on subjects such as economics, population, geography, etc., which were not relevant in this case, as Kosovo is not yet a member of the EU or UN. To address these methodological challenges, I consulted a university librarian, and together we could find reports on gender-based violence and facts, but not statistical figures. I also contacted SCB, which has a support number for Eurostat, and gained access to the database, where we found statistics for EU countries. In Eurostat, I found statistical figures on violence against women in Kosovo. I supplemented this with facts from Kosovo's government reports and their statistical institution, which also lacked statistical figures on violence and gender equality.

Before contacting the NGOs, I developed an interview guide following the completion of the introduction and theory chapter. In structuring the interview guide, I encountered a dilemma as

many of the initial questions were overly specific. This prompted a reconsideration and reshaping of the questions to ensure they remained open and exploratory, allowing respondents to freely share their opinions and experiences. Bryman (2018, p. 565) emphasizes the importance of avoiding overly specific questions in qualitative research to enable the capture of various perspectives. This interview guide was inspired by the early introduction and background research of Kosovo, including literature review and scholarly articles, which allowed identification of key themes within gender-based violence. These themes included power dynamics, patriarchal structures, gender norms, militarization, stigma, and societal attitudes toward GBV normalization. Inspired by the overlooked perspectives of women and the use of war rape as weapon, I focused the interview guide on how NGOs amplify women's voices and challenge societal stigmas.

Table 2 – Some examples of the Interview guide

Term	*Dimension*	*Under dimension*	Interview terms	Interview question
Stigma	*Stereotypes*	*Social Norms*	Negative beliefs, social attitudes, expectations, shame	Are there any social attitudes or negative beliefs of gender-based violence in Kosovo? If so, how does social attitudes towards survivors of GBV from the war impact your organization's efforts and promotion for women's rights?
Inclusion	*Equal participation*	*Representation*	Access and needs	What are the needs of the survivors who experienced gender-based violence from the war?
Culture of silence	*Systematic injustice*	*Fear & social norms*	Taboos, discrimination	Are there any taboos or instances of discrimination when addressing GBV in society?

Recognition	*Institutional and Community level*	*Legal framework, policy, documentation, discourses*	Cultural and social Norms, decision-making, inclusion efforts/approaches, dynamics in families and society, accountability	How would you explain the dialogue and approaches regarding survivors of GBV in politics, media or in the families?
Trauma	*Personal, professional, ethical, emotional experience*	physical, psychological, economic health	Expression and needs, communication, rehabilitation, empowerment, supportive response	How do the female survivors express their emotions and needs when telling you, their experiences?

Following the development of the interview guide, I wrote an information letter to all the organizations via email. The letter described a brief overview of myself, my research, and the purpose of the interviews. It also included information about the participation process, emphasizing consent, the option of anonymity, and the value of their input to my study. Another methodological issue in this process was lack of response. Despite sending out the information letter, I initially received no responses from the NGOs. Consequently, I sought assistance from my husband, who helped schedule the interviews. One week before my arrival to Kosovo in March, he arranged three interviews with Kadire Tahiraj, Feride Rushiti and Fehmije Luzha, with tentative scheduling for the end of March. Upon my arrival, I scheduled the last two interviews with Veprore Shehu and Leonora Sulemani in early April by contacting them directly via telephone and visiting their offices.

The respondents in this study are not anonymized because they explicitly consented to the use of their real names. Each respondent was informed about the option of anonymity both in the information letter and again in person before starting the interviews. They all provided verbal consent to be identified by their real names, understanding the implications of this choice. Their decision to not be anonymous allows for a more transparent and personalized representation of their experiences and perspectives. This approach not only respects their agency and autonomy but also enhances the credibility and authenticity of the research.

5.3.2 Semi-structured interviews

The study is based on empirically collected material comprising five interviews with professionals from four NGOs in Kosovo: QPDG – Kadire Tahiraj, KRCT - Feride Rushiti,

MK – Fehmije Luzha, MG – Veprore Shehu, along with an additional interview with the Head of Commission for the Verification and Recognition of Sexual Violence Victim Status in Kosovo – Leonora Sulemani. To ensure diverse perspectives I chose qualitative interviews with NGOs dedicated to women's rights across different cities in Kosovo. This approach promoted a nuanced understanding of their perspectives and operational methods. Analyzing women's rights in Kosovo, as well as exploring differences in contextual approaches, was essential. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2014, p. 15, 17 & 30) interactions, dialogues, and meeting with individuals are crucial for grasping how they perceive their experiences. Interviews serves as means to engage in dialogue with respondents, appreciating the knowledge they offer. The interviews were conducted in the NGO's working offices in Pristina, Drenas, and Gjakova, with prior consent obtained for recording. Each interview lasted between 20-50 minutes, conducted in Albanian except for one conducted in English. Language choice is significant to ensure respondent comfort and flexibility in expression, aligning with Bryman's (2018, p. 577) emphasis on understanding both content and delivery.

Employing a semi-structured interview technique allowed for flexibility while maintaining some structured questions. This approach, as emphasized by Smith & Smith (2018, p. 73-75), enabled deeper exploration of respondents' experiences while providing space for reflection. Short, open, and flexible questions were employed to delve into various aspects of interest, focusing on individual perspective. Overall, the study employed qualitative interviews with a focus on women's rights NGOs in Kosovo, using a semi-structured approach to gain rich insights into respondent's experiences and perspectives.

5.3.3 Transcription and translation

I transcribed the interviews right after each session, which helped keep the details fresh in my mind and ensured I didn't miss anything, thereby enhancing credibility and aiding in my reflection process. I manually transcribed the interviews by listening to audio recordings on my computer and writing them down simultaneously. Since the interviews were conducted in Albanian (except for one in English) and my thesis is in English, translation was necessary. When translating quotes and data, it is important to understand language nuances that may differ between languages, especially in qualitative research where understanding words is crucial from data collection to transcription and translation. This is particularly important when using quotes, as the original meaning of respondent's words can be altered in translation (Van Nes, Abma & Jonsson, 2010, p. 313 & 316).

5.3.4 Thematic analysis

This research has an inductive approach. It shifts between concepts and data, integrating theories and concepts into the empirical data that arises during interviews. The strengths lie in gaining an understanding of how different meanings are presented, rather than testing hypotheses about reality (Yin, 2013, p. 96-97). In qualitative research the data collection from the interviews must be analyzed through a method - for the researcher to understand and conquer different meanings and deeper meanings. In this case, the understandings and the perspectives of professionals in NGOs when working with survivor's rights of GBV in Kosovo. The chosen analysis method is qualitative thematic analysis, a flexible approach allowing structured exploration of data themes. This method is particularly suitable for analyzing various forms of text data, such as interviews, which I have transcribed for this study. Hsien and Shannon advocates (2005, p.1277-1278) that thematizing large volumes of text into categories and themes, can navigate insights and understanding of the data. Braun and Clarke (2012, p. 57) underscore thematic analysis as systematic process of identifying and organizing themes across data patterns to make sense of *what* and *how* topics are discussed.

By repeatedly reading the transcriptions, I identified repeating and similar words and sentences, coding and categorizing them, as explained by Boréus and Kohl (2018, p. 58-59) that the breakdown of words and phrases leads to recurring themes, which provides a deepened and nuanced understanding of the content of the data material. This process revealed common denominators in the five interviews, for example, "to **listen"**, "maybe one day somewhere our experiences will become **written",** "they feel they can never **be heard** in the family or somewhere else"**, "to speak up** about their experiences and support them, **not silencing them"** and **"**the process of **documenting"**. I categorized them under the terms *acknowledgement* and *communication,* creating the theme **recognition**.

In analyzing the data, I employed a color-coded highlighting to identify recurring elements and categorized combinations of words and phrases to derive specific themes, aligning with Braun and Clarke's approach. This coding process not only describes participants' perspective but also interprets data content, highlighting associations central to the research questions. The navigation through these themes, captures important meanings relevant to the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2018, p. 61-63). In the last step as explaining in the above example, the thematic analysis of the data created these themes: **Identification, societal**

attitudes, trauma, recognition and advocacy, of which are presented and discussed in the research's analysis and results chapter.

5.5 Method discussion

5.5.1 Validity and reliability

Bryman (2018) explains that in the conduct of qualitative interviews good *reliability* and *validity* is required, which argues for the explanation in how the data material has been collected and the quality of its research. In other terms, the trustworthiness, and the authenticity of the research. The reliability in this study, can be confirmed by my choice of several sources of information for this research. Both previous research and theoretical concepts to analyze, highlight and problematize the data material, further having different interviews with different professionals in various NGO across the country and one state actor, the Head of the Commission. The semi structured interview, with both open and structured questions open the possibility of various answers and reflections from the respondent, which creates rich data material for the research. Different themes could also be categorized and analyzed in the data, which shows different patterns that generate a nuanced result and confirms the reliability of the study. The validity requires a critical approach, in explaining all the stages of the research process. By explaining step by step how I completed my research, how I applied the procedures of the research, the trustworthiness and the quality of the research has improved. This review has involved a critical reflection in how and why I chose qualitative research, to prove the validity, this method has had a strong advantage in finding several descriptions of reality, through the interviews with the various professionals at the different NGOs (Bryman, 2018, p. 465-476). I wanted to receive as many perspectives and experiences as possible through the interviews with the NGO professionals, which reflects reality and its content of various claim, which in turn strengthens the validity of the study (Yin, 2013, p. 83).

5.5.2 Source criticism

In scientific research it is important to be source critical of the sources used and in the way they are used, Leth & Thurén (2000) explain that the four-source critical criteria *authenticity, time, dependence,* and *tendency* must be considered:

In assessing the *authenticity* of the study, it is important to consider the potential biases that may affect the reliability of the results. One potential bias in this study could be the data selection bias, as only non-governmental organization and one stakeholder from the

Commission have been selected, excluding other actors in society such as politicians, legal institutions, survivors, and their families. Further reports from Eurostat and Kosovo's government. To reduce this potential bias, I have expanded my search in various scholarly articles, theoretical frameworks, consulted with my supervisor and with experts to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Regarding validity, attention was paid to ensuring that the research accurately reflects how the NGO's work for the survivors' rights in practice and amplifies the voices of the survivors. To ensure the tendency, the licensed NGOs were selected as advocates for the survivors' voices, the Commission included as an impartial actor with the focus on the legal right of survivors to apply for their verification and status pension. To use different sources throughout my research, with conducted thorough checks to verify credibility and reliability of the selected sources. *Time* considerations were also central, recognizing that GBV dynamics can evolve over time, I included scholarly articles in close timeframe during 21st century and conducted data collection spanning several years to capture any variations. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of perspectives and changes of GBV responses over time. Finally, the *dependencies* were carefully addressed, including factors such as political dynamics, societal attitudes, and cultural norms, all of which can influence the reporting and perception of GBV. By acknowledging and analyzing these dependencies the research aimed to present a nuanced and contextually informed analysis of GBV consequences in Kosovo (Leth & Thurén, 2000, p. 18 & 23 – 27).

5.5.3 My own interpretation

The criticism of this approach involves my interpretation of the data. When analyzing the data, it became important to raise awareness of my interpretation. Empirical research is characterized by reflection, which open to different interpretations and understandings, and therefore do not establish single truths. It is therefore important to emphasize reflection, where observations and interpretations of interviews form the data material. In qualitative research, it becomes important to have critical reflection and awareness (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2017, p. 20-21). The criteria of empirical research are determined by credibility, empirical anchoring, interpretation, critical reflection ongoing during the research process with ethical awareness and clarity of language to convey the empirical reality. I want to critically underscore that all the research and presented results and analysis is through my own interpretation. I understand that different truths exist through different interpretations of the empirical material. In its entirely, it becomes important to consider that the qualitative understanding enables meaningful research of the social reality by constantly contributing to new thinking and new understanding, which enriches

the reader who is encouraged to problematize and deliver new perspectives (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017 p. 429-432).

5.6 Ethical considerations

Interview research is determined by ethical considerations, influenced by the knowledge produced during the interviews, the social relationship between the interviewer and the respondent, maintain a balance of reaching valuable knowledge and at the same time respecting the integrity of the respondent from an ethical perspective (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2018, p. 33). The ethical considerations for this thesis comply the Swedish Research Council's (2002) four scientific ethical guidelines – the requirement *of information, consent, confidentiality, and utilization.* To fulfil the information requirement, I have clarified the purpose of the study, my identity, and my motives for interviewing the specific respondents in my information letter. I have particularly emphasized the voluntariness of their participation and their right to withdraw at any time. This was further confirmed orally before commencing the recording of the interviews. The consent requirement has been ensured by informing the respondents and obtaining their verbal consent to use their real names in reference to the interviews. They were also given the choice to be referred to by anonymized names, however, they opted to be referred to by their real names, thereby emphasizing their self-determination over their participation. The respondents are quoted with their own names, they are not deidentified, which can cause ethical discussion of confidentiality. However, the NGOs and the Head of the Commission gave me their consent in using their real names, additionally the respondents preferred me to refer them in their own names and organizations. The organizations have been referenced in other interviews and reports as well, writing scholarly articles of this specific topic. The confidentiality requirement is relevant as interview respondents share sensitive topics. I have gained confidentiality regarding survivors' names and specific personal information and have instead focused on the perspectives of non-governmental organizations to illuminate survivors' stories without exposing them directly. Certain details of survivors' stories have intentionally been avoided to achieve the ethical guidelines (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002, p. 7, 9-13).

In conclusion, my research, a master's thesis, aims to contribute to scientific knowledge and thus fulfills the utilization requirement by using respondents' data solely for research purposes, further is the research open to the public in the conclusive version. This alignment with the Swedish Research Council's ethical guidelines ensures ethically responsible and respectful treatment of participants in my study (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002, p. 14).

6. Results and Analysis

6.1 Identification

When analyzing the empirical data, all the NGOs found identification of survivors since the end of the war in the 1990s and onwards, challenging based on negative perceptions and societal attitudes from communities, families, state, and the survivors themselves. The respondents explain their first approach towards survivors as silent, cautious and the organizations did not primarily show the focus on survivors of GBV, instead began their goal of identification generally, as rehabilitation of all war victims, to not expose survivors, since heavy taboo and shame surrounded the survivors. Istrefi and Hajrallahu (2021) argues that survivors fear of speaking out with impact from familial pressure and prejudices, of which, Di Lellio (2016) similarly states that women became silenced after the war and the non-governmental organization plays an important role in identifying and rehabilitating survivors of GBV.

By being open and offer rehabilitation for trauma to all the categories of war victims, more people sought for help. This way, we could help many women exposed to sexual violence without directly intending to identify them as survivors of sexual violence. Slowly we could identify women survivors of sexual violence, […] otherwise, our organization would directly be stigmatized, and no one would come and seek rehabilitation. (Veprore Shehu)

The approach of avoiding stigmatization towards identifying survivors and offer them support, can be understood from Lipsky's (1980) perspective in direct interaction and contact with citizens, NGOs are influenced by the room of action and interventions that can be provided, further the conditions of the citizens. In accordance with Istrefi and Hajrallahu (2021) who emphasizes both survivors and civil rights organizations struggle with tackling societal stigmas and gender stereotypes that maintain silence and shame around GBV.

My generation were raised of not speaking or acknowledging sexual violence, to view the violence as something very shameful for women and men, that must be treated in secret. We firstly had to cleanse our own prejudices about sexual violence and break the taboos that affected our views, then to implement these rights in public. (Veprore Shehu)

The survivors were not the only ones stigmatized, the NGOs became a part of the stigmatization as well, getting questioned, threatened, and judged negatively for their work. However, as Veprore explains, before identifying the survivors, they first had to get rid of their own affected prejudices of sexual violence. She reflects that to acknowledge and be aware of one's own

prejudices and break generational perceptions, became important to implement human rights and support the silent survivors.

6.2 Societal attitudes

> *The 20 000 survivors of sexual violence were the most invisible in the aftermath of war, because societies and families were perceiving the sexual violence as shameful. That would somehow hurt the honor of the family which made it very hard to identify the victims, since the consequences of these crimes were isolated in the family, surrounded by stigma and prejudices. […] Everybody wanted to treat the experiences of GBV inside the family, hide it or bury it in the family. (Feride Rushiti)*

Sjoberg's (2013) explanation of individual voices of survivors tends of get silenced, when social norms and states fail to understand the individual experience of war, goes in line with the challenges NGOs face in addressing GBV survivors. When listening to Feride telling the challenges the survivors faced and the organization in addressing and identifying the survivors, parallels could be taken along with the interviews with Kadire, Fehmije and Veprore who all share the similar definition of negative attitudes and stigma from especially families, affecting survivors, which caused challenges for the organization to identify and rehabilitate victims. Lipsky (1980) explains the importance of non-governmental organization that provides public support services and addresses the needs of individuals, that are however impacted by their efforts in the field when human collective behaviors impact the outcome of the street level bureaucrats public service. These human collective behaviors, can be understood from Goffman's (2020) point of view, stating that the social environment can create categories of people, which results in societal norms and rules that shapes the perception of an individual.

> *After the war, not once was sexual violence mentioned. Not once. […] Still today is stigma and shame, and much taboo surrounding this subject. Women are not allowed to speak of it, threatened by families to get hurt or abandoned. […] We don't travel by car with our logo when visiting villages, we have become a very known organization and don't want to expose the survivors. (Fehmije Luzha)*

The strong anchored stigma experienced by survivors and their fear of seeking help, influenced by shame-filled discourses from families and environment, can be discussed in terms of the organization's limited ability to identify survivors and provide rehabilitation. These challenges

require the organizations to find solutions that address stigma, support survivors, and maintain their anonymity. Lipsky (1980) underscores the adaption and capacities of street-level bureaucrats in response to the constraints they face in their daily interactions with clients. The social dynamics and judgments behind stigma influence the experiences of survivors and reinforces the stigmatization of the person, in turn influence the strategies of NGOs in addressing GBV (Goffman, 2020).

> *I worked a lot in the field in the areas that were affected by the war, and slowly I began to reach and identify survivors. Sometimes, when I approached the families and they recognized who I was and why I was seeking them, they threatened me because they wanted it to stay inside the family, they did not want the world to understand what happened to their daughters, their wives, or their mothers. Because war rape is used to destroy the body and the mind of the person, not only the person but also the future generations, because it happened in the presence of the families before the children and husbands. (Feride Rushiti)*

> *The perpetrators are free, and we must at least identify the war crimes. […] When we visited villages of the female survivors, the families did not react well. They said that what happened to our girls and women in the war, we have buried. We pointed out to them; by burying and keeping these crimes a secret, you are working in the favor of the perpetrator. (Kadire Tahiraj)*

By burying these crimes and judging the women survivors, is the process of deviating from society in a negative way when the negative judgements are not considered as normal, causing for the individual to become stigmatized, states Goffman (2020). To fight against these stigmas and advocate for the human rights of survivors and for their justice, goes in line with Goffman's (2020) theory of street level bureaucrats having a crucial role in being the voice of citizens, to advocate for their needs and impact the collective actions of communities or the state.

6.2 Trauma

When addressing survivors' needs of support, stigma after the war and today is still present, according to all the respondents. The survivors suffer trauma, both physical and psychological health issues as result not only from the GBV in the war, but also from the judgements, treatments and responses of families and communities that make the violence continue and normalized. Sjoberg (2013) highlights this normalization of GBV as a systematic response from the state, when the consequences of GBV are endured during conflict and perpetuated after armed conflict. The physical and psychological trauma can be expressed in depression, suicide,

social dysfunction affecting the survivors' living conditions claims Kreft (2022), when the attached shame and guilt are reinforced by the lack of support and communities who stigmatize these victims.

At the family level, it is very hard to speak of sexual violence, because according to them it is the most shameful wound that exist in the world. (Feride Rushiti)

Approximately 2000 women committed suicide in the city Skenderaj, because of heavy stigma and shame, the families saw their death as natural cause. One woman jumped in front the train and the families talked about her death as something crazy, labeled her as cray and mentally ill. (Kadire Tahiraj)

The respondents express the normalization of GBV as suffering for the survivors, the shame, the guilt along with stigma from families, pushes the survivors into isolation, making the experience of gender-based violence even worse after the war. Once the survivor becomes discredited, the negative assumptions and definitions by others causes the person to develop a negative self-identity. The survivors are categorized in a certain group with stigma so deep rooted in society, making it hard to change these definitions of the human being (Goffman 2020). The consequence of the deep-rooted stigma causes a cycle and normalization of the gender-based violence, with attached shame and guild, causing women to be social rejected and excluded by families and society, with health issues such as suicidal thoughts and depression (Kreft 2022).

In the villages, women were not allowed to tell anyone of what happened to them. They were threatened by their families and afraid of getting hurt or abandoned if they exposed themselves as victims of sexual violence. You feel isolated, unheard, judged and in very bad health. You go to the doctor for your wounds and suffering, and they tell you that you have nothing, normalizing this violence even more. Physical wounds like headache, stomach pain, tension, anxiety, hyperactivity, and they don't take care of their health and hygiene, because of depression. They don't have the energy to take care of their own children, further they become portrayed as crazy. (Fehmije Luzha)

We have a case when the mother tells her daughters about the war rape, and the daughters insist on never getting married, that they are disgusted of men because their mother suffered, and their father did not support her. A case when a woman survivor had an arranged marriage who is only

treated as a maidservant. A 9-year-old girl that was raped during a whole day in the war, by Serbian police in front of her 6 year and 4-year-old sisters, who today suffer heavily both physically and mentally. […] Many women are viewed as mad and crazy, when in fact they are not – they suffer from trauma. (Kadire Tahiraj)

There are cases when women survivors end up in hospital and closed psychiatric compulsory care. One case when a woman got raped by multiple Serbian police officers, around 7-8 men, in front of her children and husband. The moment the Serb police were gone, the husband threw her out and she ended up in the psychiatric - she suffers a lot today; she is locked in and isolated not speaking to anyone. I am the only one she accepted to see, I approached her with notebooks of colors, since she used to love writing and drawing […] She does not recognize her own children, living in the context of war in her mind. The destruction of her was caused by her own family, specifically her husband. (Fehmije Luzha).

One may discuss that the connection between the survivor's experience of gender-based violence and the response from families can be understood from Goffman's (2020) theory of stigma, when the stigma around GBV survivors is determined by interactions of other people, including families, communities, and society. When these interactions and negative judgements influence the mind of the discredited person who does not fit the societal norms, in this case, labeled as crazy and abnormal, perceiving GBV as shameful, causes negative effects on the persons self-identity and psychological health. Goffman's theory is however more oriented in the individual interactions when analyzing stigma, and the structural causes of stigmatization do not receive as much attention. As Kadire and Fehmije both discuss that the labeling, the stigmatization and suffering the families cause the survivors, makes the gender-based violence continue for the women, the lack of support causing even more pain than the crime itself. As Sjoberg (2013) and Kreft (2022) argue, the response from the state and families reinforces the violence towards women, to understand the livings of war is influenced by the traditional gender norms that interact with patriarchal structures to perpetuate violence, these patriarchal structures in the families lack in turn with supporting and understanding to victims, causing deeper stigmatization against women. Di Lellio (2016) agree that gender stereotypes repeat gender-based violence towards survivors, because of negative public discourses in families and communities, excluding the perspectives of women and undermining their human rights.

In one village in Drenas, the Serb police took 37 women and young girls in a house, they kept them there for 2 weeks. They undressed the young girls and forced them to serve coffee and tea.

Today, the mothers of those young girls, and the young girls themselves, can't stand the smell of coffee, every time they smell coffee, they feel like they are being exposed to those crimes again. […] The Serbian police did not spare anyone, not anyone, not children who were 6 years old and younger, not pregnant women or mothers with their children together. These crimes happened in their homes alone, and in presence of families. (Kadire Tahiraj)

There are still women and men who have not told anyone, who have kept this inside for 30 years, who suffer the trauma yet, who still have nightmares and remember everything they endured. They remember smells, colors, and circumstances. There is a case when a woman does not manage to see the sun, because it retraumatizes her, makes her remember. (Leonora Sulemani)

This wound of the war is not only related to the actual person, but the interaction and pain spreads because the crime of the war is an atomic bomb that causes long suffering consequences after the war. A systematic arsenal of war. (Feride Rushiti)

The respondents discuss the stories of the survivors, the attached shame and guilt, bad and difficult health conditions, and repeated trauma after the war, causing revictimization. It makes it difficult for them to speak about the violence and challenging for the NGOs to respond to the isolated pain. However, all the respondents agree in the importance of making their voices heard, when meeting and offering rehabilitation to survivors, they all want to be listened to, hoping that their voices will be written, documented, and recognized somewhere. It can be discussed that the pain and suffering of GBV survivors after the war, are in risk of getting buried, silenced which make it harder for the survivors to speak of their experiences. As Goffman (2020) discussed, stigma affects the individuals' self-identity including loss of personal integrity and social worth, where the social interactions contribute to stigma. This makes it harder for victims to speak of their experiences when society's reactions and attitudes worsen the situation of survivors and exclude them from the community. The NGOs responsiveness and addressing of survivors' experiences and voices can be understood from Lipskys (1980) point of view, their direct involvement in citizen's lives shapes the experiences of providing service for individuals, to listen to citizens, being their voice and advocate for their rights. As Feride mentioned, since the trauma, physical and psychological health issues are presented not only in the aftermath of GBV in the war, but in long term, a suffering that affects the survivors and their families, this war crime is considered as a weapon of war. Sjoberg (2013) reflects similarly, stating that rape is a symbolic violence that serves humiliated, destabilized, and ethnic destruction to not only target individuals, but also entire societies.

6.3 Recognition

As already discussed above, stigmatization of survivors was experienced individually, but perpetuated in both family and institutional level. The importance of acknowledgment from the families, the state, the international community, and the legal recognition to achieve justice, is very important according to all respondents. The lack of support from families, the stigmatization of survivors, surrounding negative attitudes reinforce the normalization of the war rape, causing isolation and suffering health issues for the survivors. The state's response to GBV is very important according to the respondents, which can lead to decreased stigmatization and higher acceptance of survivors. Di Lellio (2016) argues however that governmental bodies and international organizations have normalized GBV in Kosovo and that the public discourses create social denial and exclusion of survivors, because of dishonoring and staining families, shaped by gender stereotypes.

When providing service to survivors, we developed the recognition in the country by stating memory days of survivors with activities. The state started to support war crime survivors with pension, the survivors of sexual violence were left out completely because of the shame and taboos in societies. We then advocated for legal recognition, finally after 15 years after the war, our organization succeeded in integrating survivors of sexual violence in the law. This means that the survivors are valued and not silenced. (Feride Rushiti)

Despite societal stigma and challenges in including the voice of survivors, the impact of the advocation for the rights of survivors throughout the years, have been important to challenge the negative exclusion and perceptions of GBV and instead make them part of the public discourse. Grass root networks, in this case the NGOs in Kosovo, draw the attention to the survivors, when breaking the silence and collectively transforming the discourses on GBV survivors as shameful and taboo, to instead become a public dialogue. In line with this argument, NGOs provides public service as street level bureaucrats in Lipsky's (1980) point of view, because of their direct involvement and providing service in the people's lives which points out their role in fostering citizenship, the relationship between the citizens and the state.

A woman survivor went to a legal agent for help, seeing that Feride Rushiti appeared on television in an interview talking about the pension for the survivors of GBV. Overhearing the male lawyers saying, "not this again, they are killing us with this theme over and over, the women begged for it to happen to themselves anyway". (Fehmije Luzha)

When the GBV survivors start to become included in the public discourses, in media and on state level, the respondents reflect as something important and positive change, however, the stigma is still present, very deep anchored in society. Despite the increased visibility of GBV survivors, the negative marks on individuals still face stigma by the social environment, which can make survivors feel that their value and social identity are diminished due to their experiences of GBV (Goffman 2020). Istrefi and Hajrallahu (2021) agrees to this stating that communities condemn the rape as something the survivors "allowed", making the survivors even more silent. The obstacles and resistance that the respondents explain that survivors face, are bureaucratic barriers when trying to access support and resource from government organs, which can complicate their recovery and rehabilitation, according to Lipsky (1980).

The moment when the institutions of Kosovo recognize the women survivors and support them, the stigma starts to fade. […] If you can't convince your own parents, you hardly will convince your friends and the community around you. In this case, these women, the state is their parents. (Kadire Tahiraj)

We will achieve social justice by implementing the process of reparation for the survivors. Being accepted and recognized by the state is so important for them. The majority of survivors say, ***"without justice there is no peace****". The suffering and pain still exist because they want to see the perpetrator behind bars. (Feride Rushiti)*

There is big lack of cooperation with the government of Serbia to recognize the perpetrators and put them in court for punishment. It is not motivating when working for many legal cases that do not have an end. (Veprore Shehu)

The state being referred by Kadire, as the survivors' parents and support as the families exclude them, can be understood from Lipsky's (1980) perspective that the outcome of street level bureaucrats' efforts to change responsiveness at both institutional and individual level, affecting the relationship between the state and the citizen. The NGOs functions in this case as extension of the state, maintain a balance between the citizen and the state. Legal recognition from the state, further social and legal justice from the juridical system and accountability for perpetrators, are argued by the respondents as fundamental for survivors. The legal justice puts perpetrators behind bars, achieving social justice and freedom for survivors, which comes to be

a healing process. The struggle in legal justice, however, can be discussed by the lack of court proceedings and the government Serbia to hold accountability for the perpetrators.

Both international administrations, EUNIK and EULEX were not interested in going forward with these cases. One woman survivor testified in EUNIK, nothing happened, she testified in EULEX nothing happened, at least they should have informed her that this case will not move forward. […] Right now, we have succeeded with 4 cases that have indictment files in court. Justice is not only for the survivor; it is for the families and society as well. (Feride Rushiti)

This result show that survivors' participation in court to achieve justice is important for their human rights and healing, further for perpetrators to be held accountable. To address these crimes, international bodies, and court systems, are argumented as crucial to implement court procedures for survivors to achieve justice. As Istrefi and Hajrallahu (2021) discusses
The lack of management, not prioritizing survivors of GBV by UNMIK and EULEX is considered as a systematic failure and hinders the survivors' path to justice.

6.4 Advocacy

The respondents explain when the law on Verification and Status of victims of sexual violence from the war became implemented in Kosovo, the perceptions and attitudes of the survivors started to change. The NGOs emphasized the collaboration they have had with each other in advocating for their rights and implementing policy changes. On the other hand, the recognition of survivors by the state results in the state becoming an important actor in breaking the stigma and value the survivors.

All of us licensed NGOs worked together to advocate for human rights and for changing the laws, we also worked together with institutions to achieve legal rights for women. This collaboration had an important impact in softening the stigmatization in the families and communities, when the state recognizes your pain, so will the communities. (Veprore Shehu)

The organizations have completely changed the concept of survivors. We have together achieved for women to alone speak of their experiences, in media and in the political level. (Feride Rushiti)

Our governmental institutions and the NGOs are connected. We impact the work of the NGOs, and they impact our work as well. This process does not go separately, they go together. […] The cooperation that we have with these NGOs has been very positive, the NGOs have prepared for

documents and proceedings, and we have regular contact with them, I visit them once a month. (Leonora Sulemani)

To collaborate and advocate for women's rights is important to achieve change, further being recognized by the state is important. As Lipsky (1980) states, street -level bureaucrats can advocate for change by being the voice of citizens, achieving policy change, where the term bureaucrats further discuss the significance of the state in treating the citizens through laws and governmental regulations. This means that both actors, street level NGOs and bureaucrats the state combined with interactions with citizens, can provide public support based on their needs and conditions. It can further explain why in the outcome of public policies, the collective behavior in establishing practices makes grass root bureaucrats develop their own rules and goals, connected to Leonora's statement of the state and the NGOs not being separated but working together.

We are the first state in the world to provide victims a pension of 230 euro monthly, instead of the responsible perpetrator. Serbia who committed these war crimes are the one that should be paying this. […] We want to recognize their pain, their suffering and support them. This pension is personal from the state, to recognize their pain and respect them as survivors. (Leonora Sulemani)

So, when the state recognize that they are survivors, it means they validate the survivors' past. The prejudices in the families can start to fade. (Feride Rushiti)

The pension has a great impact on them, creating some financial stability, especially for women who have children, and who got abandoned by husbands and families […] The women whose families know, have smaller problems in comparison to the women who fear telling their families. Because these women feel more proud and stronger when having support from their families. (Fehmije Luzha)

The impact the state has on the survivors and their families are argued as positive, meaning that the state recognizes and value their pain, instead of silencing them and judging them. The transition of stigma, the negative social attitudes becoming more open and inclusive, taking place in the public eye, is a change Di Lellio (2021) express as a result from the collective effort of civil right organizations. Even though stigma is still present, this social and public change, can be analyzed from the perspective of Goffman (2020) who emphasizes that the negative

norms and perceptions the individual is not really about the individual herself, rather the interactions between individuals and governing dynamics in society that fosters the concept stigma. These identity norms can in turn be challenged by again, interactions between people, shifting new social norms and attitudes, towards greater acceptance and understanding.

7. Discussion

This dissertation began with a quote from a female survivor of GBV Vasfije Krasniqi Goodman in Kosovo, echoing the importance and need for survivors to achieve justice and fighting the stigma surrounding them. The results of the study highlight the persistence of stigma against GBV survivors, contributing to their suffering health issues at both familial and institutional levels. This stigma develops the normalization of gender-based violence, perpetuating both individual and structural consequences. Notably, the non-governmental organizations faced post-war stigmatization, causing difficulties for their efforts to identify and support the survivors. This made it difficult for the NGOs to tackle negative societal attitudes and identifying survivors, who became silenced and isolated. Drawing on the theoretical framework of stigmatization, as discussed by Goffman (2020), the results reveal how societal attitudes and norms contribute to the perpetuation of stigma against survivors, leading to their marginalization and isolation. Goffman's perspective offers a nuanced understanding, by underscoring that GBV survivors and NGOs are not the primary source of stigma, instead Goffman shows that the root of stigma comes from how individuals in society interact with each other and create norms considered normal and deviant. Goffman's theory can however be critiqued for its limited consideration of broader structural factors that shape stigma. In the context of Kosovo, Goffman's focus on individual interactions and societal norms may overlook the historical, socio-cultural, political, and economic factors that contribute to the normalization and perpetuation of stigma against survivors. Socio-cultural factors and lack of knowledge, as one respondent explained in the interview, that these negative attitudes were common in her generation. This suggest that socio-cultural factors can influence individuals' behaviors and interactions, perpetuating stigma. Despite increased awareness about GBV survivors in Kosovo, stigma remains, particularly in families. This shows that changing attitudes requires not only raising awareness but also challenging deeply held socio-cultural norms and beliefs.

The negative perceptions of GBV survivors within families often result in their silence and isolation. These survivors face significant challenges in speaking out about the gender-based violence they endured during wartime, as such war crimes are often viewed as bringing shame upon the families and hurting the honor of the family. Consequently, survivors struggle with feelings of shame and guilt, further worsen by societal rejection, exclusion, and lack of empathy by the communities. As Kreft (2022) accordingly points out that stigmatization contributes to the normalization of gender-based violence, creating barriers for survivors to acknowledge and address their own trauma, of which hinders the NGOs to reach, identify and support these survivors. The reinforcement of shame and guilt experienced by the women survivors remains from societal attitudes that fail to recognize and emphasize with their individual experiences according to Kreft. In line with Kreft's argumentation, the respondents illustrate the struggles faced in reaching and supporting isolated survivors. Tragically many survivors committed suicide after the war, and these narratives emphasize the profound suffering experiences by survivors and the urgent need for support and intervention. Furthermore, families and communities continue to stigmatize survivors, by after these tragedies, portraying them as mentally unstable or "mad", perpetuating the cycle of stigmatization and normalization of GBV. This portrayal and stigmatization of survivors not only deepens the physical and psychological traumas experienced by survivors, but also hinders the NGOs to address and combat gender-based violence effectively. Kreft's insights of normalization of GBV resonate with the lived experiences recounted by the respondents, highlighting the complex connection of societal attitudes and individual trauma in perpetuating the stigma surrounding GBV survivors. Sjoberg (2013) argue that the individual experiences of war tend to be neglected by structural perspectives, where the societal norms and power dynamics fails to understand the individual experiences of war. In line with Sjoberg's argumentation gender-based violence is not only seen during armed conflict, but also in the individual experiences after the armed conflict. The normalization of GBV goes back to Goffman's (2020) theory of stigma, who further highlights how individual actions and interactions in perpetuate and reinforce stigma surrounding GBV within communities and societies. The normalization of GBV can be traced back to the collective behaviors and norms that shape societal perceptions, contributing to the marginalization of survivors and the perpetuation of their suffering.

The results show the challenging social environment that causes dilemmas for the NGOs to operate to rehabilitate GBV survivors. These organizations themselves are influenced by negative social norms and are often subjected to judgements and have been exposed to threats

from communities. Consequently, the NGOs in Kosovo find themselves in trying to realize innovative solutions to support the survivors more effectively. In response to these challenges, the NGOs adopted different approaches to advocate for and rehabilitate GBV survivors. Their daily interactions with citizens can be understood to the role of street-level bureaucrats, while they navigate community dynamics and advocating for the human rights of survivors. As Lipsky (1980) highlights the importance of such grassroot efforts, emphasizing the need for NGOs to establish different strategies to identify survivors and offer support services based on their needs. Di Lellio (2021) further agrees with Lipsky regarding the role of NGOs as grassroots organizations in networking, advocating, and campaigning for survivors' rights. Di Lellio's argue that these efforts extend beyond individual support to encompass political recognition and action, both locally and internationally. By addressing GBV both individual and political levels, NGOs contribute to in positive changes in public discourses and governmental actions, illustrating further the importance of human rights networks in impacting systematic change. However, it becomes crucial to note here, that NGOs themselves may face silence and challenges in addressing human rights violations. In Kosovo, the NGOs confront dilemmas that hinder their ability to provide support services to survivors. It is therefore important to underscore the involvement of the state in raising awareness of GBV at the institutional level. Furthermore, the involvement of international human rights bodies to acknowledge war crimes and holding perpetrators accountable.

The results express the physical and psychological trauma experienced by GBV survivors, includes revictimization in their social environments. This trauma causes survivors to remember and live the trauma again, which contributes to further physical and psychological health issues, resulting in some women to commit suicide, or ending up in compulsory care, further be exposed to violence by their families. The analysis shows the NGOs role in approaching the survivors, by listening to them and validating their pain. The NGOs questions these stigmas and taboos remaining in families, engaging with survivors, and actively involving survivors in their organizational activities. Despite of threats and exclusion from families, the NGOs persist in their efforts to empower and support survivors. On one hand, as Lipsky (1980) argue, street level bureaucrats face challenges when interacting with citizens, and are at the same time influenced by the public opinion. As stigma and patriarchal norms takes place in Kosovo, perpetuated by the society and families, Lipsky's (1980) argumentation can provide understanding the position of NGOs, that establishes their own routines, transforming their attitudes, rules, and goals in favor of citizens. On the other hand, these organizational routines,

and strategies can be constrained by lack of resources, legal barriers, and lack of political acknowledgment when pursuing systematic change, causing challenges for NGOs to provide effective supports services to survivors. Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy may overlook the complexity of interactions between survivors, families, NGOs, and several groups in society. While Lipsky provide important insights by emphasizing the direct dynamics and interactions between street-level bureaucrats when delivering public services, these interactions can be influenced by cultural differences, social norms, and power dynamics, which can complicate the delivery of support service towards GBV survivors.

The results further highlight the consequences of war not only as individual, but structural as well, affecting survivors, their families, future generations, and societies. As Sjoberg (2013) asserts, gender-based violence serves as a systematic and symbolic weapon of war, targeting not only women, but entire populations. The NGOs explain the responses from society and international bodies, as negative and ignoring women, making it even more difficult to achieve legal justice. However, it is essential to recognize the limitations and complexities in addressing stigma at both individual and structural consequences of the war. Istrefi and Hajrallahu (2021) point out systematic failures within the legal system and international bodies in providing adequate support and recognition for GBV survivors, underscoring the need for a more nuanced understanding of intersecting factors that perpetuate stigma across all levels of society, and hinder survivors' access to justice and support services.

Despite challenges such as lack of documentation of GBV survivors and insufficient court proceedings, there has been a notable shift from treating GBV survivors an isolated taboo subject to engaging in public dialogue aimed at achieving legal justice and recognition in Kosovo. Implementing laws in favor of survivors has played a crucial role in valuing their experiences and increasing their rights to be heard in society. This transformation is a result of collective advocation by the NGOs in their fight for the rights of GBV survivors. As highlighted by Di Lellio (2016) and Istrefi & Hajrallahu (2021), these NGOs play a central role in strengthen women's perspectives, initiating both global and national changes in achieving justice and promote social inclusion. This shift, explain the important role of street level bureaucrats, as outlined by Lipsky (1980), who directly engage with people in their communities. NGOs serves as public agents of change by challenging social stereotypes which can shape their public work, and direct involving in people's lives. The service of NGO can in turn implement and develop the constitutional relationship between the citizens and the state.

8. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to increase the understanding of how civil right organizations operate as street-level bureaucrats and how stigmatization impact their work in Kosovo. This thesis also aimed to analyze how civil right organizations work with individual GBV survivors and the recognition of them.

When reflecting and concluding on this research, it showed that the NGOs functions as street-level bureaucrats by directly interacting with survivors, providing support services, and impacting the public dialogues of GBV survivors within the state. When the NGOs began their work of identification of survivors after the war, stigmatization was deeply rooted against survivors and the NGOs, hindering the access for survivors to legal and social support services, perpetuating negative societal attitudes and creating barriers for the NGOs to identify and help survivors. Addressing both individual GBV survivors and the recognition of them, proved challenging due to the lack of understanding and support from the families and communities, further their normalization of the gender-based violence. This, in turn, created challenges in the NGOs' efforts to advocate publicly and support survivors needs, since stigmatization was directed to the organizations as well, causing to hinder to find and rehabilitate survivors, including isolation and fear among survivors to seek help. Despite these challenges, years of dedicated advocacy and empowerment initiatives by NGOs have begun to reshape societal perceptions of GBV survivors. Their advocacy for gender equality and policy reforms, has elevated survivors' voices in public discourse, leading to significant legislative changes and a decrease of stigmatization in society. While progress has been made, the persistence of stigma remains a barrier for many survivors, preventing them from accessing support from the NGOs, pensions from the state and achieving legal justice. Addressing stigma at the community level remains crucial, alongside the ongoing need for legal justice and accountability for perpetrators.

In conclusion, civil rights organizations have operated as street-level bureaucrats in Kosovo by achieving significant changes in advocating for and supporting GBV survivors, leading to noticeable improvements in their rights and recognition within society. However, challenges persist, particularly regarding stigma and their rights for legal justice. Moving forward, continued efforts to raise awareness especially in community level among families, and advocate for systematic change regarding legal justice will be essential in ensuring the rights and well-being of GBV survivors in Kosovo.

7.1 Further research

Further research should focus on examining the structural reasons behind gender-based violence and the systematic response from states, including how it is perpetuated and the role of normalization and stigma. Increasing collaboration between NGOs and states is very interesting and important to adapt internationally, further exploring societal, cultural attitudes, and power dynamics which can provide insights into effective prevention and intervention strategies. Additionally, investigating the effectiveness of international legal frameworks, in prosecuting perpetrators of GBV in armed conflict is essential for advancing the understanding and improving responses to survivors' needs while holding perpetrators and institutions accountable. Lastly and very important, future research and interventions must adopt an intersectional approach that considers the unique experiences, voices, and needs of marginalized groups of survivors, too often has the voices of survivors been silenced and neglected.

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