

Briefing Note for UN Member States: UN Security Council Annual Debate on Children and Armed Conflict

June 2021

The Covid-19 pandemic has had profound impacts on children living in situations of armed conflict, potentially exposing girls and boys to ever greater risks of grave violations including conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), undermining protection structures, and weakening responses. In this context, All Survivors Project (ASP) calls for:

- ***Increased capacity for monitoring and reporting of grave violations against children in order to identify new and emerging threats and the different ways in which boys and girls are impacted - this should include training of Country Task Force members on safe, ethical data gathering on CRSV against boys, as well as girls.***
- ***Improved availability of and access to safe, timely, quality, age-appropriate, survivor-centred medical care and mental health and psychosocial support services for all victims/survivors of CRSV, including in the context of child soldier reintegration programs where the rights, needs and wishes of both boys and girl victims/survivors of CRSV should be addressed.***
- ***The immediate release of all children detained for their real or alleged association with armed forces and armed groups, and support for their rehabilitation and reintegration which should include specialised gender-competent services for boys and girls who have been subjected to CRSV while in detention.***

Covid-19: new risks of CRSV

According to preliminary analysis the Covid-19 pandemic may have caused an upward trend in certain grave violations against children including military recruitment and use in hostilities, ill-treatment in detention, as well as sexual violence.¹ CRSV disproportionality affects girls, but recruitment and use and conflict-related deprivation of liberty particularly (although not exclusively) impact boys. They also represent situations in which children, whether male or female, are vulnerable to CRSV and other human rights abuses.

Loss of family income, closure of schools and disruption of protection activities resulting from the health crisis will inevitably increase the vulnerability of children to military recruitment and use. Any rise in numbers of children associated with armed forces or groups also means a commensurate increased risk of CRSV to those affected. While girls are highly vulnerable to CRSV in this context, boys are also known to have been subjected to rape and other forms of sexual violence including to pressure them to join armed groups, as a form of punishment if they refuse to do so, or as part of initiation ceremonies. In some cases, boys have been specifically recruited for sexual purposes.²

Children deprived of their liberty whether by state authorities or by non-state armed groups are also highly vulnerable to human rights abuses, including sexual violence -- in the last five years incidents of rape and other forms of sexual violence against boys detained including because of their alleged association with

¹ Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (OSRSG CAAC), [Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violations against children in situations of armed conflict](#), April 2021.

² Incidents of CRSV against boy CAAFAGs has been reported in recent years in Afghanistan, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Syrian Arab Republic, Yemen. Original sources available from ASP.

opposing forces have been documented in at least nine conflict-affected countries.³ Despite calls for the urgent release of all children in detention to protect them from contracting Covid-19, thousands of children continue to be detained in conflict-affected countries for their real or perceived links with opposing forces where they continue to be exposed to the risk of CRSV and other abuses.⁴

Enhanced monitoring and reporting of CRSV involving girls and boy victims/survivors

Even before the current health crisis, CRSV was severely underreported, and CRSV involving boys was still largely hidden from view. Restrictions on movement and changes to ways of working caused by the pandemic have created new obstacles for monitoring and reporting adding to the existing challenges of gathering data on more “sensitive” violations, such as sexual violence.

As the pandemic continues and its longer-term socio-economic repercussions and their impact on grave violations against children are increasingly felt, additional capacity is needed to identify new vulnerabilities, patterns and trends, and to ensure appropriate gender-inclusive advocacy and programmatic responses. This includes ensuring that the gender lens applied by members of Country Task Forces for Monitoring and Reporting is inclusive and addresses the unique risks and vulnerabilities faced by both girls and boys in situations of armed conflict, including to CRSV.

Effective health and reintegration responses for child victims/survivors of CRSV

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, victims/survivors of CRSV faced multiple barriers to accessing safe and quality health services. For boys this included lack of accessible age-appropriate, survivor-centred programs designed to respond to their rights, needs and wishes, and stigma and discrimination from healthcare providers. A rapid assessment by ASP in 2020 of the impact of the pandemic on male victims/survivors of sexual violence in Afghanistan found that fear of contracting the virus and reduced availability of services which previously existed had further exacerbated the difficulties in accessing required care and support, leading to multiple negative health outcomes.⁵

Release and reintegration programs for children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG) are also among the responses that have been negatively affected by pandemic-related disruption including to screening activities, closure of drop-in centres and child friendly spaces and suspension of family reunifications, as well as funding shortfalls.⁶ Prior to the pandemic, CRSV against boys was already a blind spot in many reintegration programs. For example, in the Central African Republic child protection experts have told ASP that during post-release interviews although girls often disclosed their experience of rape and other forms of sexual violence, it was much less common for boys to do so including because post-release interviews were not designed to support disclosure by boys, and staff were not trained to identify indicators of possible sexual violence involving boy victims/survivors. As programs recommence, CRSV involving boy victims/survivors should be factored into their design.

³ Afghanistan, DRC, Iraq, Israel, Myanmar, Somalia, Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine, Yemen. Original sources available from ASP.

⁴ UNICEF, “[Children in detention are at heightened risk of contracting COVID-19 and should be released](#)”, Statement by UNICEF Executive Director, 13 April 2021. In 2019, thousands of children, the majority of them boys, were deprived of their liberty in 15 countries for actual or alleged association with parties to conflict.

⁵ ASP and Youth Health and Development Organisation Afghanistan (YHDO), [Rapid assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on male survivors of sexual violence in Afghanistan](#), 19 June 2020.

⁶ OSRSG CAAC, Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violations against children in situations of armed conflict, April 2021.