

Improving documentation and responses to boys as victims of sexual violence in armed conflict

BRIEFING FOR UN SECURITY COUNCIL OPEN DEBATE ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT, JULY 2018

ALL SURVIVORS PROJECT

Introduction

“The level of invasion caused by sexual assault is difficult to match because it goes to the most private, core identity of a person.”¹

Sexual violence is one of the most chronically underreported violations against children during situations of armed conflict. The 2018 Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict lists seven countries in which incidents of sexual violence against boys have been documented.² With over 900 cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence against girls and boys verified across all country situations, this represents a discernible increase from last year. Although limited research on sexual violence against males has been undertaken, in settings where it has been investigated, conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys has been identified as “regular and unexceptional, pervasive, and widespread”.³ Men and boys are therefore included as an ‘at-risk’ group and in need of protection in the revised 2015 *IASC Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action*.

All Survivors Project (ASP) commends the Secretary General’s 2018 Annual Report for ensuring a specific reference to sexual violence against boys and highlighting this abuse in Afghanistan, CAR, DRC, Iraq, Somalia, Syria and Nigeria. However, information compiled by ASP from UN sources in the last two years shows that incidents of sexual victimisation of boys have also been reported in Burundi, Colombia, South Sudan, Sudan, Mali, Libya and Yemen.⁴ Research by the All Survivors Project indicates that boys are at far greater risk of sexual violence than is captured by the monitoring and reporting mechanism (MRM).

In the Central African Republic (CAR) for example, ASP has received credible information about cases of sexual violence against boys across the country in 2017 in a range of situations, including during attacks by armed groups. Likewise, in Syria, ASP research has found that boys are at risk of sexual violence in various settings including as child soldiers, in IDP camps and in

¹ A. Northwood/CVT Director of Client Services, “Supporting Survivors of Sexual Violence,” 10 June 2014. Available at <http://www.cvt.org/blog/healing-and-human-rights/supporting-survivors-sexual-torture>

² UN Security Council, Report of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict, 16 May 2018, UN Doc. (A/72/865-S/2018/465).

³ Sandesh Sivakumaran, “Sexual violence against men in armed conflict”, *European Journal of International Law*, vol. 18, No. 2 (2007), pp. 253-276.

⁴ Additional information is available here: <https://allurvivorsproject.org/>

flight across borders, as well as in detention where such abuses are already well-documented. ASP findings in Syria echo investigations by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (IICOI) which found that torture, including sexual and Gender Based Violence (GBV) has been used against thousands of people in detention including boys as young as 11 years old at a level that amounts to war crimes and crimes against humanity.⁵ ASP also found a high-level of vulnerability of boys to sexual and gender-based violence in Syria in the context of child labour, particularly where boys are working away from their homes and out of reach of the protection of their families having been forced to take on more “adult roles of income generation as a result of the years of conflict. The need for greater awareness among service providers in Turkey, home to over 3.5 million Syrian refugees, of the possibility that men and boys from Syria, particularly those who were detained in Syria, may have been subjected to sexual violence, and for increased efforts to identify and build capacity to respond to the needs of male survivors, is also identified.

The Children and Armed Conflict framework provides the tools to end and prevent grave violations against children. Yet as these tools are applied, there is often little consideration to the fact that war-affected children differ significantly in gender, developmental stage, ability status, culture, and a host of other factors.⁶ The need to apply a gender specific lens and use a gender competent approach in monitoring, documenting and responding to sexual violence cannot be overstated given the strong associations between men’s own experiences of violence and their use of violence. Men who had experienced sexual violence, including rape, were 3.5 times more likely to perpetrate rape against a man and men who had experienced homophobic violence or taunts were 5.5 times more likely to have raped a man.⁷ Sexual abuse in childhood has been linked to increased likelihood of men’s adult perpetration of sexual violence.⁸ Neglecting the needs of male survivors of sexual violence can reinforce and encourage patterns of violence⁹, while treatment of male survivors can help them better understand and address gender based violence against women and girls.¹⁰

Key Recommendations

ASP believes its research reveals only the tip of the iceberg and that urgent and intensified action is required to identify the real extent of the problem of conflict related sexual violence against boys and to respond appropriately. ASP calls for a working assumption that men and boys may be at risk of sexual violence, and data-gathering and screening processes should be designed to identify male and female survivors. Coordination between organisations conducting human rights research and humanitarian stakeholders should be maximised to the extent possible to ensure the development of a common analysis of risks, patterns and prevalence of sexual violence

⁵ IICOI reports including: *Out of Sight Out of Mind, Deaths in Detention in the Syrian Arab Republic*, UN Doc. A/HRC/31/CRP.1 (2016) and *“I lost my dignity”: Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic*, UN Doc. A/HRC/37/CRP (2018).

⁶ Wessells, “Children and Armed Conflict: Introduction and Overview, Peace and Conflict,” 198–207.

⁷ Fulu, E., Warner, X., Miedema, S., Jewkes, R., Roselli, T. and Lang, J. (2013). *Why Do Some Men Use Violence Against Women and How Can We Prevent It? Quantitative Findings from the United Nations Multi-country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific*. Bangkok: UNDP, UNFPA, UN Women and UNV.

⁸ See for instance, Whitaker, D. J., B. Le, R. K. Hanson, C. K. Baker, P. M. McMahon, G. Ryan, A. Klein and D. Rice. Risk factors for perpetration of child sexual abuse: a review and meta-analysis. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, vol. 32 (2008), pp. 529-548.

⁹ Monica A. Onyango and Karen Hampana, “Social constructions of masculinity and male survivors of wartime sexual violence: an analytical review,” *International Journal of Sexual Health*, vol. 23, No. 4 (2011), pp. 237-247.

¹⁰ Charli R. Carpenter, “Recognising gender based violence against civilian men and boys in conflict situations”, *Security Dialogue*, vol. 37, No.1 (2006), pp. 83-103.

against men and boys. Resources should also be dedicated to developing safe and effective methodologies for conducting assessments to support the development of better understandings of vulnerabilities of women, men, girls and boys to sexual violence and of the medical, MHPSS, protection and legal needs of survivors and victims. The security, well-being and informed consent of survivors should be prioritised in all data collection processes and referral pathways to appropriate medical, MHPSS, legal and other necessary support in place for survivors and other participants in investigations and other data collection processes.

In order to respond to the deeply hidden problem of sexual violence against boys in armed conflict, ASP calls upon UN member states to:

- **Encourage and support efforts to improve the documentation of rape and other forms of sexual violence against girls and boys in situations of armed conflict, including by the MRM; Ensure that data gathering and safe, anonymous information sharing on sexual violence against girls and boys should be strengthened as part of broader efforts to monitor and report on conflict-related sexual violence.**
- **Ensure that consistent definitions and standards for data collection are agreed across all mechanisms for monitoring sexual violence (including among others, GBVIMS, human rights reporting, the MRM and MARA) to ensure accurate and consistent investigation, recording and reporting of incidents of sexual violence against men and boys.**
- **Ensure strategies aimed at preventing grave violations against children in armed conflict factor in the gender-specific risks of sexual violence against girls and boys, and equal attention is paid to identifying and responding to situations where boys may be at heightened risk of such crimes; Deepen research and understanding of links between sexual and other forms of violence against boys and girls and its linkages with conflict mitigation.**
- **Broaden and promote awareness of sexual violence against boys to counter the stigma associated with it. All child survivors of sexual violence should have non-stigmatising, safe and confidential access to free and confidential services, including child appropriate and competent medical and psychosocial care and protection services.**
- **Resource measures to identify among vulnerable groups such as IDPs and children associated with armed groups and armed forces, boys and girls who may have been subjected to sexual violence. Facilities (such as listening centres and child-friendly spaces) should be designed to support confidential, safe access for male survivors. This should include the availability of confidential reporting mechanisms and well-trained male and female staff.**