

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

July 2022

Rape and other forms of sexual violence against children continues to be documented in situations of armed conflict across the globe. This grave violation nevertheless remains significantly under-reported and lack of data on the full extent of the problem, its causes and consequences – including the differing risks and vulnerabilities of girls and boys and the gendered impacts of this violation – has severe knock-on effects, including on the availability of and access to medical care, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and justice for all child victims/survivors. All Survivors Project (ASP) is calling for:

- Accelerated efforts to strengthen monitoring and reporting of sexual violence against girls and boys in armed conflict.
- Concerted efforts to reduce the risk of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) in situations of detention including by releasing any child detained solely on the basis of their real or alleged association with armed forces or armed groups.
- Additional resources to ensure the availability of and access to safe, timely, quality, gender-competent, age-appropriate, survivor-centred medical care and MHPSS services for all child victims/survivors of CRSV.
- Gender-inclusive justice for CRSV involving child victims/survivors to be prioritised and dedicated resources and capacities made available so that girls and boys can safely and meaningfully participate in such processes.

**Gender-inclusive monitoring and reporting of CRSV against children:** Each year the UN verifies hundreds of cases of CRSV against children, the vast majority of which involve girls. ASP's research and monitoring indicates that sexual violence against boys may be more widespread than verified numbers suggest. Already reports of sexual violence against boys are emerging in Ukraine and that Ukrainian boys may be among those who have fallen victim to human traffickers.<sup>1</sup> Recent investigations also point to the targeting of boys in countries including South Sudan.<sup>2</sup>

Barriers to reporting CRSV can be overwhelming for boys. For example, in Colombia men who were subjected to rape and other forms of sexual violence when they were children are only now beginning to come forward to report their experiences, in some cases more than 20 years after the event.<sup>3</sup> In Afghanistan, where CRSV against boys, including in the context of *bacha bazi*, has been a long-standing problem, risk factors for boys have dramatically increased since the Taliban takeover in 2021, while simultaneously the space for and capacities both to monitor and respond have decreased.<sup>4</sup>

*Additional resources should be committed to strengthening capacities to monitor and report on CRSV against both girls and boys in order to better establish the extent and impact of this grave violation, and its intersection with other factors that may heighten risks and vulnerabilities including age and sexual orientation and gender identity.*

**CRSV in situations of deprivation of liberty:** The risk of physical, sexual and psychological violence is particularly high when children are deprived of their liberty,<sup>5</sup> making the upward trend in the numbers of children detained in situations of armed conflict, of whom boys represent over 90%, of serious concern.<sup>6</sup> The majority of documented incidents of CRSV against boys take place in situations of detention – both by state security forces but also by non-state armed groups.<sup>7</sup> In Nigeria, Syria and elsewhere the lack of immediate, or in some cases any, access to detained children by child protection experts means that

information is often not available and safeguards are not in place to protect detained boys and girls against sexual violence and other forms of torture and ill-treatment.<sup>8</sup>

*Children should never be detained solely on the basis of their association with armed forces or armed groups. If detained it should only be as a last resort, for the shortest period of time, in accordance with child justice standards, and safeguards must be put in place to ensure their protection from CRSV, including regular and unimpeded access by child rights/ protection experts.*

**Effective health and reintegration responses for child victims/survivors of CRSV:** All victims/survivors of CRSV face multiple barriers to accessing safe and quality health services. This includes children deprived of their liberty for whom medical care and MHPSS services is rarely available either while in detention or on their release, including the specialised support needed for child survivors of sexual torture. Support for boy victims/survivors of CRSV is often neglected in other programming. For example, in Central African Republic, preliminary research by ASP suggests that fear of reprisals, taboos and other barriers to reporting combined with lack of awareness among service providers that boys, as well as girls, can be victims of CRSV means that there are no specific programs designed to support boys who have experienced CRSV.<sup>9</sup>

*Increased attention is needed and resources committed to ensuring the availability of and access to safe, timely, quality, gender-competent, age appropriate, survivor-centred medical care and MHPSS services for both girl and boy victims/survivors of CRSV, including for children in, or who have been released from, detention.*

**Timely and inclusive justice for child victims/survivors of CRSV:** Impunity for sexual violence against girls and boys by parties to conflict has previously been described as “endemic.”<sup>10</sup> This situation remains largely unchanged. In the meantime, lack of access to justice exacerbates the profound harms experienced by child victims/survivors and undermines long-term prospects for peace and stability. In Colombia, where efforts are underway to remedy this situation, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (SJP) is prioritising accountability for sexual violence crimes but it remains uncertain that all victims/survivors of CRSV will receive the justice to which they are entitled.<sup>11</sup> A recent submission to the SJP by ASP and its national partners in Colombia included the cases of 18 men who were children at the time that they were subjected to rape or other forms of sexual violence by armed actors. The impact of these experiences on those who provided their testimonies has been devastating. Even now, many years after the events, most are still living with the physical, psychological, economic and other consequences of the CRSV committed against them.<sup>12</sup>

*CRSV against children should be prioritised in criminal investigations and prosecutions and other transitional justice processes which should have dedicated resources, capacities and skills to enable the safe and meaningful participation of both girl and boy victims/survivors in such processes.*

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<sup>1</sup> UN “[Sexual Violence ‘Most Hidden Crime’ Being Committed against Ukrainians, Civil Society Representative Tells Security Council](#)”, 6 June 2022 and ASP, conversation with confidential source, 1 April 2022.

<sup>2</sup> See [Conflict-related sexual violence against women and girls in South Sudan Conference room paper of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan](#), 21 March 2022.

<sup>3</sup> ASP, Red de Mujeres Víctimas y Profesionales and Grupos Focales de Hombres Víctimas de Violencia Sexual, [Laying Down Arms, Reclaiming Souls: Sexual Violence against Men and Boys in the Context of the Armed Conflict in Colombia](#), 19 June 2022.

<sup>4</sup> ASP, [Conflict-related sexual violence: New Dangers Facing Men and Boys in Afghanistan](#), 25 January 2022. Bacha bazi is a practice involving the sexual abuse of boys and young men by men in positions of power.

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<sup>5</sup> Report of the Independent Expert for the United Nations Study on Violence Against Children, UN Doc. A/61/299, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> According to the UN Global Study on Children Deprived of their Liberty, (UN Doc. A/74/136, 11 July 2019), 94% of children detained in situations of armed conflict are boys.

<sup>7</sup> See ASP, [Checklist on preventing and addressing conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys](#), 10 December 2019.

<sup>8</sup> For example, the UN continues to be denied access to military detention facilities in Nigeria where thousands of children have been detained in recent years for their real or alleged association with Boko Haram.

<sup>9</sup> Preliminary research by ASP on CRSV and CAAFAG reintegration programming in CAR.

<sup>10</sup> UN Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict, UN Doc. A/73/907-S/2019/50, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> The SJP is the justice component of the Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-Repetition established under the 2016 Peace Agreement between the Colombian Government and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (FARC-EP – Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército del Pueblo).

<sup>12</sup> ASP’s partners in Colombia are Red de Mujeres Víctimas y Profesionales and two Focal Groups of Male Victims of Sexual Violence. For further information about the submission see ASP et al, [Laying Down Arms, Reclaiming Souls: Sexual Violence against Men and Boys in the Context of the Armed Conflict in Colombia](#), 19 June 2022.