

Pathways to Justice and Accountability for Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: Lessons Learned and Policy Recommendations from the Frontlines

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Executive Summary

Despite more than two decades of international efforts to prevent and respond to conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), perpetrators from Sudan to Myanmar to the Democratic Republic of the Congo continue to commit atrocities with impunity. In conflict situations worldwide, sexual violence is increasingly used as a weapon of war by combatants, decimating societies, fueling displacement, and violating core principles of international humanitarian and human rights law.¹ The consequences for individuals and communities are devastating, with impacts that reverberate across generations and undermine peace, security, and global stability.

CRSV encompasses a range of abuses, including rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage, sexual torture and mutilation, and any other form of sexual violence that is directly or indirectly linked to a conflict.² Since 2000, preventing and responding to CRSV has become a key pillar of the United Nations (UN) Security Council's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda.³ There is widespread rhetorical consensus that CRSV poses a threat to both individual and collective security and impedes post-conflict recovery and sustainable peace. Yet, despite increased political attention and five subsequent UN resolutions explicitly concerning CRSV, implementation lags far behind commitments.⁴

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Sexual violence remains a silent crime, with an estimated 80 percent of cases in conflict settings going unreported.⁵ Survivors face significant barriers to accessing life-saving medical and psychological services amidst active hostilities, especially those who experience multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination, such as LGBTQ+ individuals, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities, members of diaspora communities, and refugees or internally displaced persons.⁶ Deficits in training and specialized expertise, weak state capacity, and social stigmatization discourage survivors from speaking out about their abuses, which precludes many from seeking justice and redress. Even when laws and policies are in place to prevent and respond to CRSV, a resurgence of hostilities can fuel

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renewed patterns of sexual and gender-based violence after war—including domestic violence—that perpetuate insecurity.

Russia's unprovoked full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine has laid bare these troubling trends. Since February 2022, the Ukrainian Office of the Prosecutor General has recorded more than 149,000 instances of war crimes by Russian forces, including the forced deportation of nearly 20,000 Ukrainian children.⁷ The UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine has documented 376 cases of CRSV against 262 men, 104 women, 10 girls, and 2 boys in temporarily occupied territories, during house raids, and as a method of torture against detainees, though the full extent of CRSV remains unknown.⁸ Russia's deliberate use of sexual violence and its targeting of civilian and healthcare infrastructure reflects broader patterns of CRSV that are endemic in humanitarian crises and conflict zones worldwide.

Amid these atrocities, there is growing momentum for accountability. Concerted efforts by the international community, government officials, prosecutors, and civil society have enabled the timely documentation and investigation of war crimes in Ukraine.⁹ Landmark court cases in the Central African Republic, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have opened pathways for prosecuting CRSV within national frameworks.¹⁰ Across these efforts, women and women-led organizations have been vital first responders for survivors—providing essential services, advocating for legal support, rebuilding communities, and facilitating individual and collective healing.¹¹ Now more than ever, coordinated solutions are needed to support their work and dismantle the culture of impunity that obstructs dignity and justice for survivors.

In September 2024, the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS) convened leaders from Ukraine, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Colombia to share lessons learned for responding to the global scourge of CRSV. Drawing on their insights from across conflict settings, this report presents actionable policy recommendations for the international community and key stakeholders to hold perpetrators accountable, meet survivor needs, and follow through on their commitments to deliver justice.

Key Recommendations

Provide Urgent Survivor-Centered Medical and Psychosocial Services

- **Provide Timely and Holistic Support:** Deliver immediate survivor-centered assistance during armed conflict, including health care, legal assistance, and psychosocial support that addresses intersectional needs.
- **Integrate and Innovate Services:** Establish survivor support centers, secure digital platforms, and integrated “one-stop” relief centers in collaboration with civil society to deliver safe and confidential care.
- **Monitor and Improve Delivery:** Develop robust, evidence-based monitoring frameworks to assess the delivery of CRSV services and ensure interventions meet survivors’ priorities.

Co-Create Evidence-Collection and Documentation Processes

- **Design Survivor-Led Protocols:** Engage survivors, frontline organizations, legal experts, and war crimes prosecutors to co-design standardized protocols for documenting CRSV, aligned with ‘Do No Harm’ principles and the Murad Code.
- **Develop Secure and Ethical Data Practices:** Develop clear protocols for data collection and sharing that prioritize survivor consent, identity protection, and data security.
- **Conduct Robust Trainings:** Conduct trauma-informed and gender-responsive CRSV trainings for health workers, community leaders, police officers, judges, prosecutors, and qualified psychologists to minimize the risk of re-traumatization.
- **Bolster Local Capacity and Funding:** Enhance capacity through direct, flexible, and sustained funding to civil society organizations, particularly women-led organizations, who are leading evidence-collection and documentation efforts.

Challenge Shame and Transform Stigma

- **Amplify Survivor Voices:** Promote public acknowledgment of CRSV survivors through official statements, exhibitions, media campaigns, and memorial events.
- **Leverage Community Leadership:** Partner with trusted religious and traditional leaders to challenge societal norms and stereotypes surrounding CRSV survivors.
- **Target Outreach to Men and Boys:** Tailor communication strategies to reach male survivors and ensure men and boys are addressed, acknowledged, and included in all CRSV interventions.
- **Deploy Community-Level Interventions:** Develop locally-driven models for shifting stigmatizing attitudes and supporting survivors’ reintegration, such as art-based therapies, community counseling programs, and raising awareness through media and documentaries.

Pursue Criminal Justice and Accountability

- **Enhance Justice Mechanisms:** Strengthen the capacity of national and subnational justice institutions to prosecute perpetrators of CRSV, ensuring compliance with international humanitarian law principles and standardized procedures for investigations and prosecutions.
- **Prohibit Amnesty for Crimes:** Prohibit amnesty provisions in CRSV cases and reinforce state obligations to international law, including under CEDAW and the WPS Agenda, in all peace negotiations and transitional justice processes.
- **Utilize Sanctions Regimes:** Explicitly list sexual violence as a standalone criterion in sanctions regimes and include targeted sanctions for perpetrators and enablers of CRSV in new and revised National Action Plans on WPS.

Prioritize Interim and Comprehensive Reparations

- **Implement Wartime Reparations:** Initiate urgent wartime reparations to address immediate needs and extend support, recognition, and compensation to survivors during and after a conflict.
- **Recognize Survivors' Legal Status:** Grant legal recognition to survivors as civilian victims of war, including for children born of wartime rape, without a deadline for status recognition.
- **Establish Comprehensive Reparations Programs:** Design holistic reparations frameworks in collaboration with survivors that integrate medical, psychosocial, and economic empowerment measures, such as capacity-building initiatives and income-generating activities.

Gaps And Challenges In Addressing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

Despite the strides made by the UN Security Council in preventing and responding to CRSV, major gaps persist on multiple fronts. Fifteen years after UN Security Council Resolution 1888 established the mandate for the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, lack of political will, resourcing deficits, and national constraints have hindered full and effective implementation.¹² Recognizing the diverse needs of CRSV survivors and that many barriers are context-specific, this report highlights four key obstacles that continue to prevent survivors from accessing justice and seeking redress across conflict settings.

Access to Resources and Trauma-Informed Services

CRSV has immediate and devastating consequences for physical and psychological well-being. Indiscriminate attacks on civilian infrastructure and medical facilities decimate healthcare systems during wartime, putting access to psychological and trauma care at risk.¹³ Hospitals are often overcrowded and understaffed, forcing centers to reduce or cease operations altogether.¹⁴ Deficits in specific CRSV expertise among emergency service workers, mental health providers, law enforcement officials, and prosecutors prevent service delivery and case management in trauma and gender-sensitive ways. Additionally, conflict exacerbates existing disparities in access to services and referral pathways, further marginalizing vulnerable communities who face heightened risks of CRSV.¹⁵ Survivors who are forced to flee their homes as a result of conflict are especially at risk and may struggle to access essential services while migrating or in host countries.¹⁶

Documenting and Reporting CRSV During Wartime and in Occupied Territories

War crime documentation efforts are particularly challenging in areas of active hostilities, and especially for survivors in occupied territories. Humanitarian and human rights organizations often face limited or no access to occupied territories due to security risks or restrictions imposed by conflict forces. Gathering reliable evidence is difficult in these areas, as witnesses may be unwilling or unable to testify due to fear of retaliation or coercion. For example, many Ukrainian survivors living in formerly occupied territories are concerned about retribution from returning Russian forces or charges of collaboration by Ukrainian authorities.¹⁷ It is estimated that there are 10 to 20 unregistered instances of CRSV in Ukraine for every registered case—a trend observed across other conflict settings worldwide.¹⁸ Moreover, political instability and societal collapse can disrupt traditional reporting mechanisms and reduce access to legal and psychosocial support systems. This also impacts frontline civil society organizations working tirelessly to document these atrocities who face immense strain on their physical and mental health, livelihoods, and well-being.

Societal Stigmatization and Intergenerational Trauma

Stigmatization poses a major barrier for CRSV survivors, which often prevents them from accessing justice, healthcare, psychological support, and long-term reparative services. Survivors report feeling shame and pressure to hide their abuse from family and community members, which compounds

the emotional toll of their experiences.¹⁹ Many delay disclosing sexual violence until significant time has passed or until they can access psychosocial support and safe counseling.²⁰ Male survivors often face heightened stigma due to patriarchal norms and hegemonic masculinity that stifles discussions of sexual violence.²¹ Families and neighbors may also grapple with guilt over their inability to prevent the abuse, while others fear becoming victims themselves. These dynamics contribute to significant underreporting of CRSV and a lack of comprehensive, disaggregated data.²²

The repercussions of stigmatization also extend beyond access to immediate care. Social exclusion, untreated trauma, and limited access to support services can prevent survivors from securing employment and achieving financial independence, perpetuating cycles of poverty and insecurity. These impacts are often intergenerational and can reinforce patterns of gender discrimination and inequality that predate the conflict. Children born of wartime rape also face challenges, including ongoing trauma, societal indifference or discrimination, and legal uncertainty in their status or right to citizenship.²³ Yet, children affected by CRSV are often left out of humanitarian responses and post-conflict transitional justice mechanisms.

Implementing Legal Frameworks and Delivering Justice

Perpetrators and enablers of CRSV are rarely held accountable for their crimes. While CRSV is now widely recognized as a crime under international law, prosecuting such offenses during wartime is especially difficult due to weak governmental authority, lack of territorial control, and the reluctance of national officials to investigate abuses committed by conflict parties. Compounding these challenges is the pervasive perception of CRSV as an inevitable byproduct of war, which reinforces impunity and erodes public confidence in the judicial system.²⁴

Despite increased global efforts to address and prosecute such atrocities—as evidenced by legal actions in Iraq, Guinea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, Ukraine, and at the International Criminal Court (ICC), among others—it can take decades for justice to be delivered.²⁵ Thirty years after the Balkan Wars, many survivors still feel neglected and forgotten.²⁶ Delayed justice impedes survivors' abilities to reintegrate into their societies and rebuild their lives with dignity.

Efforts to secure justice within traditional legal frameworks also too often overlook the agency, safety, and well-being of survivors. Evidence-gathering methods can have unintended consequences such as re-traumatizing survivors, duplicating efforts, or discouraging reporting due to fears of data confidentiality breaches.²⁷ Capacity constraints among national and local law enforcement, variations in the admissibility of evidence, and deadlines in victim registration can prevent survivors from seeking redress in criminal proceedings. While technological innovations offer new opportunities for addressing CRSV—including the ability to collect real-time data on a mass scale—prosecutors are often overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information and face challenges in sorting and analyzing evidence in a systematic and timely manner.²⁸

Best Practices And Policy Recommendations

Several potential entry points, connected in important ways, have emerged as critical to ensuring a holistic approach to justice and timely support for CRSV survivors during and after a conflict. Tackling CRSV requires a multi-faceted approach that engages a range of stakeholders and encompasses physical protection services, criminal and non-prosecutorial accountability mechanisms, and transformative efforts to challenge trauma, stigmatization, and intergenerational impacts. This section highlights five key areas for progress with best practices that can be adapted to other contexts to advance survivor-centered action.

Provide Urgent Survivor-Centered Medical and Psychosocial Services

CRSV survivors need immediate medical and psychological care to address the trauma and upheaval they endure. Delays in accessing comprehensive services increase the risk of long-term medical complications, emotional distress, and internalized shame.²⁹ Individual vulnerabilities and intersecting factors—such as ethnicity, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, age, ability, and cultural background—shape both the experience of violence and access to resources and support networks. Strengthening monitoring and reporting on CRSV-related service delivery can enhance the evidence base for action and ensure interventions are survivor-driven and tailored to their specific needs.

Civil society organizations have been instrumental in advancing innovative solutions to support survivors during wartime. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, Medica Zenica has played a central role in providing medical and psychosocial aid, deploying a range of services such as crisis intervention centers, legal counseling clinics, and a unique telephone hotline for immediate help to survivors and their family members.³⁰ After the war, staff continued to offer comprehensive resources and empowerment training to communities rebuilding from conflict, including expanding care to survivors of domestic violence and human trafficking.³¹ Emphasis was placed on understanding the consequences of trauma, treating survivors and their families with dignity, and facilitating self-reflection through knowledge and skill-building in safe environments.

After the end of the Kosovo War, the Kosovo Rehabilitation Center for Torture Victims (KRCT) established regional branches across the country to provide emergency services and trauma-informed case management to CRSV survivors.³² A key aspect of their approach was community-based rehabilitation, which extended care beyond individuals to include families and community members in group sessions. Their holistic model facilitated societal healing and resilience by addressing both the immediate and long-term impacts of trauma. KRCT also worked to raise awareness about the issue and destigmatize mental health for survivors by integrating services directly into primary healthcare settings, thus improving accessibility and uptake.

Legislative solutions can complement civil society efforts to provide comprehensive and long-term support to survivors. In 2014, the Colombian government enacted historic legislation—Law 1719—to address wartime sexual violence, instructing health providers to deliver timely, quality, and

comprehensive services for CRSV survivors.³³ In addition to providing free medical attention and psychosocial support, Law 1719 expanded the legal definition of sexual violence and established it as a crime against humanity. However, compliance with these guidelines was optional rather than mandatory, resulting in significant implementation challenges in practice.³⁴

Multilateral policy actions have also played an important role in bolstering Ukraine's efforts to expand and strengthen services for survivors. In May 2022, the Ukrainian Government and the UN signed a historic Framework of Cooperation on the Prevention and Response to CRSV, which established a comprehensive coordination mechanism to combat wartime sexual violence.³⁵ Since then, Ukraine has launched several services to provide trauma-informed care for survivors. Key initiatives include specialized Survivor Relief Centres operating across 11 cities that provide one-stop-shops for free, confidential, and unconditional support by qualified psychologists, legal officials, and social workers.³⁶ To increase access, Ukraine developed a Platform for Assistance to Survivors—the first online system to provide comprehensive information on critical services for war victims, including CRSV survivors.³⁷

The Ukrainian Government has also partnered with the Mukwege Foundation to adopt a holistic care model, first initiated by the Panzi Hospital in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.³⁸ This model seeks to integrate services for survivors of sexual violence into existing health structures, enhancing access to a range of services and preventing stigmatization. Central to the holistic model is compassionate care, which emphasizes quality, confidentiality, respect, and self-determination at the core of interventions. Training healthcare professionals, service providers, and psychologists in similar approaches can strengthen their ability to engage with CRSV survivors and address the unique needs of diverse populations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Provide Timely and Holistic Support:** Deliver immediate survivor-centered assistance during armed conflict, including health care, legal aid, and psychosocial support that addresses intersectional needs. Governments should adopt national legislation mandating health providers offer free and comprehensive care to survivors as a standard of care. Psychological support should also be directed to human rights activists, social workers, mental health providers, and aid workers on the frontlines who may face secondary trauma.
- **Integrate and Innovate Services:** Establish survivor support centers and secure digital platforms to deliver safe and confidential care. Donors should collaborate with civil society to fund “one-stop” centers that integrate health, legal, and psychosocial services. Employing innovative outreach strategies like multilingual campaigns and mobile services can increase access to lifesaving resources for rural, displaced, and diaspora communities.
- **Monitor and Improve Delivery:** Develop robust, evidence-based monitoring frameworks to assess the delivery of CRSV services. Data collection should be disaggregated to identify gaps and ensure interventions meet survivors' priorities. Consultation with civil society organizations and humanitarian actors embedded in local communities is critical for tracking progress, improving coordination, and filling service gaps.

Co-Create Evidence-Collection and Documentation Processes

Documenting CRSV crimes is important for creating a historical record that can be used for legal accountability and securing reparations. In many conflicts, however, systematic efforts to collect testimonies began too late to develop a complete narrative for prosecutions.³⁹ In ongoing conflicts, such as in Ukraine, evidence-gathering and investigation occur amidst persistent instability.⁴⁰ While the timeline and pathways to justice may vary for survivors, prioritizing their dignity, safety,

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and autonomy is essential. Accordingly, documentation processes must be co-created with survivors, ensuring their active and meaningful involvement in conceptualizing, implementing, and monitoring these efforts.

Meaningful coordination and cooperation among civil society, the judicial system, government actors, and international stakeholders responding to CRSV is critical to a holistic response. Ukraine's law enforcement agencies—including the Office of the Prosecutor

General, National Police of Ukraine, and State Border Guard Service—are working in close coordination to gather and share evidence across territories, including using open-source intelligence instruments to preserve data on platforms like the Core International Crimes Evidence Database (CICED).⁴¹ Civil society is also on the frontline of documentation efforts due to well-established community networks and local expertise. Women-led organizations like the Center for Civil Liberties and La-Strada-Ukraine are leading evidence-gathering efforts, operating a National Hotline and a chatbox to expand digital avenues for reporting.⁴² Yet, local organizations require sustained funding and capacity-strengthening to continue and scale up activities.

Civil society also plays an important role in ensuring investigations are trauma-informed and survivor-centered. For example, KRCT facilitated testimony collection for criminal proceedings by arranging for women police officers to visit their offices in plain clothing, with a trained psychologist present to support survivors throughout the process. Similarly, Medica Kosova conducted interviews in private counseling rooms within their centers, creating a safe and confidential space for survivors to share their accounts outside of intimidating formal settings.⁴³ Examples from Colombia and Bosnia-Herzegovina further highlight the leading role of civil society in bridging gaps in CRSV service provision and responding to the specific needs of survivors throughout the investigation process.

Training documenting entities is crucial to minimizing harm and preventing re-traumatization. After the war in Kosovo, four women's rights organizations developed a comprehensive manual on best practices for documenting wartime sexual violence, emphasizing stress- and trauma-informed approaches.⁴⁴ In Ukraine, UN Women and the Ukrainian Women Lawyers Association "JurFem" have conducted extensive trainings for the National Police and other security sector institutions.⁴⁵ They

also partnered with the National Agency on Civil Service to launch a video course aimed at equipping civil servants with the skills needed to identify and respond to CRSV cases. Similarly, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, specialized programs have trained officers on how to manage domestic violence and psychological trauma, as well as promoted the use of standardized methodologies for evidence collection and witness documentation.⁴⁶

Building trust within survivor communities is also key to encouraging legal reporting, especially given the barriers posed by shame and stigma. The SEMA Network in Ukraine—an organization dedicated to uniting survivors of wartime sexual violence—plays a vital role in raising awareness about CRSV in rural areas and creating safe environments for members to share their stories.⁴⁷ Exchanging personal narratives in face-to-face settings provided tangible examples of restorative healing processes, which inspired other survivors to come forward with their testimonies. This approach also emphasizes survivor empowerment and agency, ensuring they retain control over their own narratives and decide if, when, and how to share on their own terms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Design Survivor-Led Protocols:** Engage survivors, frontline organizations, legal experts, and war crimes prosecutors to co-design standardized protocols for documenting CRSV. These protocols should align with ‘Do No Harm’ principles and the Murad Code, empower survivors to report safely, and ensure collected evidence is admissible in legal proceedings without fear of exploitation or exposure.⁴⁸ Additionally, documentation protocols should include guidance on gathering and preserving contextual evidence—such as the locations of villages that may later be destroyed, local slang or identifiers for armed groups, and other situational markers—to ensure critical evidence remains intact for future accountability processes.
- **Develop Secure and Ethical Data Practices:** Develop clear protocols for data collection and sharing that prioritize survivor consent, identity protection, and data security. IT tools should be employed to digitize and safeguard sensitive information, especially during active conflict. Legal processes must incorporate privacy safeguards, such as closed court sessions, anonymized testimonies, and secure infrastructure for witness protection.
- **Conduct Robust Trainings:** Conduct trauma-informed and gender-responsive CRSV trainings for health workers, community leaders, police officers, judges, prosecutors, and qualified psychologists who are among the first points of contact for survivors. Trainings should be integrated into law enforcement and medical curricula and cover the psychological impacts of CRSV, best practices for interacting with survivors, and strategies for identifying and referring cases that minimize the risk of re-traumatization.
- **Bolster Local Capacity and Funding:** Enhance capacity through direct flexible and sustained funding to civil society organizations, and particularly women-led organizations, who are leading evidence-collection and documentation efforts. Donors should simplify grant applications, ease burdensome reporting requirements, and allocate funds to local organizations that enable quick adaptation as war dynamics shift.

Challenge Shame and Transform Stigma

Comprehensive interventions must counteract the stigma attached to CRSV, which often silences survivors and deters them from seeking the support they need. Colombia’s Constitutional Court described the ‘triple process of invisibility, silence, and impunity’ that surrounds cases of sexual violence, especially those involving men and boys.⁴⁹ This cycle of shame and social stigmatization exacerbates survivors’ socioeconomic marginalization, community isolation, and psychological distress, all of which hinder long-term recovery.

Formal acknowledgments of CRSV-related harms can aid in national healing efforts and combat stigma. Colombia spearheaded a letter of dignification to recognize the injustices suffered by survivors upon their registration in the National Registry of Victims.⁵⁰ Other countries have designated national days to honor CRSV victims and survivors, serving as a means to preserve their stories and publicly affirm their experiences.⁵¹ National memorialization processes, such as Kosovo’s symbolic dress exhibition and the ‘Mother and Justice’ mobile memorial for Yazidi survivors, also help raise awareness of both the trauma endured and the resilience of survivors.⁵²

Effective strategies for challenging stigma at the community level include public awareness and media campaigns that amplify survivor voices. For example, the “Rutas del Conflicto” project in Colombia, developed in partnership with the National Center of Historical Memory, used multimedia storytelling to share the testimonies of CRSV survivors.⁵³ Journalists collaborated with traditional media outlets to broadcast their stories on the radio, television networks, and online through the “Yo sobreviví” (I survived) initiative, which helped to shift public perceptions about sexual violence. Similarly, Kosovo’s ‘Be My Voice’ (Bëhu Zëri Im) campaign—symbolized by a small yellow flower—encourages open dialogue about the wartime legacy of sexual violence and fosters solidarity with

survivors facing stigma.⁵⁴ Other efforts in South Sudan and Ethiopia have leveraged diverse communication platforms to raise awareness about CRSV and advocate for community-based interventions.⁵⁵

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Strategic messaging and sensitization interventions can also help overcome the entrenched norms around masculinity, sexual orientation, and gender roles that

stigmatize male survivors. Although the majority of CRSV victims in Ukraine are men – including both civilians and prisoners of war – few survivors are willing to speak publicly about their experiences of sexual assault.⁵⁶ Targeted communications and outreach strategies that avoid terms like ‘rape’ or ‘sexual assault,’ and instead use less stigmatized language such as “victims of torture,’ can offer an alternative entry point for engaging male survivors. Additionally, sensitization efforts through mediums like documentary films, theater performances, and art activism can help normalize conversations about sexual violence and educate communities.⁵⁷

Trusted religious and traditional leaders can also be partners in changing attitudes toward sexual violence and improving support for survivors. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, religious leaders from Orthodox, Jewish, Catholic, and Islamic traditions publicly signed a declaration denouncing the stigmatization of CRSV survivors.⁵⁸ Muslim leaders further issued a fatwa urging communities to treat survivors with dignity and respect, reading the proclamation during Friday prayers to reach men and boys directly.⁵⁹ Similarly, faith leaders in Northern Uganda worked within communities and families to challenge negative perceptions of survivors, including the more than 25,000 women and girls systematically targeted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). These leaders also supported children born from wartime rape—often seen as a source of shame—by organizing traditional welcoming ceremonies and community dialogues to dismantle cultural prejudices.⁶⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Amplify Survivor Voices:** Promote public acknowledgment of CRSV survivors through official statements, exhibitions, media campaigns, and memorial events. These initiatives should foster understanding and reduce stigma while centering survivors' perspectives. Media outlets can also be key allies in breaking the silence around CRSV and tackling stigmatizing societal narratives.
- **Leverage Community Leadership:** Partner with trusted religious and traditional leaders to challenge societal norms and stereotypes surrounding CRSV survivors. Engaging faith leaders can help reshape narratives and foster inclusivity, particularly among men, boys, and elder community members.
- **Target Outreach to Men and Boys:** Tailor communication strategies to reach male survivors and ensure men and boys are addressed, acknowledged, and included in all CRSV interventions. Effective messaging should adapt language to reduce the stigma around male victimization and frame CRSV services in ways that resonate for all survivors.
- **Deploy Community-Level Interventions:** Develop locally-driven models for shifting stigmatizing attitudes, such as art-based therapies, community counseling programs, and raising awareness through media and documentaries. These initiatives should aim to prevent intergenerational trauma and create supportive environments for survivors' reintegration.

Pursue Criminal Justice and Accountability

Perpetrators of CRSV-related crimes must be prosecuted to deliver justice, combat impunity, and restore dignity to survivors. Under international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and related UN Security Council Resolutions under the WPS Agenda, states have specific obligations to investigate and prosecute CRSV crimes.⁶¹ Potential avenues for accountability can range from community-based tribunals and national prosecutions to leveraging multilateral sanctions and seeking redress in international courts.

Accountability for CRSV should be central to any peace process or transitional justice framework. When sexual violence is normalized as an acceptable military tactic, it risks perpetuating cycles of violence that can spill over into the post-conflict period.⁶² Incorporating accountability measures into peacebuilding efforts disrupts this culture of impunity, paving the way for societal healing and long-term violence prevention. Colombia's peace process offers a notable example, where the first-of-its-kind Gender Subcommission brought delegations of women affected by the war—including CRSV survivors—to engage directly with formal negotiators in Havana.⁶³ Their testimonies helped shape the final peace accord, which explicitly prohibits amnesty for sexual violence crimes. Additionally, Colombia's transitional justice mechanism—the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP)—advanced these commitments by opening Macro Case 11 in 2023, marking a significant step forward for investigating and prosecuting CRSV-related crimes perpetrated by the FARC-EP.⁶⁴

International justice mechanisms have been instrumental in establishing legal precedents for prosecuting CRSV, establishing its status as a serious violation of international law. Landmark decisions recognizing CRSV as war crimes, crimes against humanity, or acts of genocide emerged from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), and the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL).⁶⁵ The ICTY was a trailblazer in prosecuting CRSV cases as the first international court to classify rape as both a war crime and a crime against humanity, with over one-third of its convictions found guilty of sexual offenses.⁶⁶ The SCSL set another precedent by issuing the first conviction for sexual slavery as a crime against humanity and paved the way for subsequent rulings in Cambodia and at the ICC.⁶⁷ At the national level, Guinea achieved a historic milestone in 2024 with the conviction of eight individuals for mass atrocities, including sexual crimes.⁶⁸ The court's decision to reclassify these acts as crimes against

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humanity enabled the prosecution of sexual violence within its domestic legal framework, marking a significant step forward in the pursuit of justice.⁶⁹

Sanctions can also be a tool of accountability that allows the international community to clearly and publicly condemn those responsible for CRSV.⁷⁰ The United States has imposed CRSV-based sanctions against individuals in at least seven

countries, including Sudan, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.⁷¹ Perpetrators may also be designated in UN sanctions regimes, seven of which refer to sexual and gender-based violence as part of their designation criterion. Targeted sanctions and the public listing of sanctioned individuals are powerful deterrents to impunity outside of the formal court system. However, at the multilateral level, research from GIWPS finds that geopolitical competition and bureaucratic impediments often prevent the systematic use of sanctions in bringing CRSV perpetrators and enablers to justice.⁷²

At the same time, evidence from past conflicts reveals a gap between the promises of international justice mechanisms and national enforcement. Despite the pioneering work of the ICTY and ICTR, most sexual violence cases in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda were never punished, in part due to the limited capacity of local institutions to process CRSV cases.⁷³ While both courts implemented support programs for potential witnesses—innovating ways to minimize re-traumatization during trials and enhance privacy safeguards—their failure to offer financial support to witnesses prevented many from testifying in The Hague.⁷⁴ In countries such as Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, rampant corruption and impunity in the judicial sector continue to fuel cycles of violence that prevent accountability.⁷⁵

Although Russia’s war of aggression is ongoing, Ukraine is pursuing accountability efforts in national and international courts, with efforts ranging from prosecutions at the ICC to a proposed international tribunal on aggression.⁷⁶ In 2022, Ukraine’s War Crime Unit established a specialized CRSV Department to assist in prosecuting sexual violence cases and signed a Strategic Plan to improve victim-oriented investigation and prosecutorial processes.⁷⁷ The government has also launched separate projects to specifically document and support victims of wartime sexual violence.⁷⁸ Any future peace process in Ukraine should draw on lessons from Colombia and the Balkans, ensuring that accountability for CRSV is central to a final settlement and the National Recovery Plan.⁷⁹

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Enhance Justice Mechanisms:** Strengthen the capacity of national and subnational justice institutions to prosecute perpetrators of CRSV, ensuring compliance with international humanitarian law principles and standardized procedures for investigations and prosecutions. Survivors and witnesses should have access to psychological support, legal counsel, and financial assistance at all stages of the trial process. Additionally, international donors should allocate aid within post-conflict recovery plans to the investigation and prosecution of CRSV crimes, including providing witness support and improving court infrastructure to meet survivor-specific needs.
- **Prohibit Amnesty for Crimes:** Prohibit amnesty provisions in CRSV cases to end impunity and ensure criminal justice can be pursued. Diplomatic actors should reinforce state obligations to international law in all peace negotiations and transitional justice processes, including commitments to women’s meaningful participation and addressing CRSV under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the WPS Agenda.
- **Utilize Sanctions Regimes:** Explicitly list sexual violence as a standalone criterion in sanctions regimes and include targeted sanctions for perpetrators and enablers of CRSV in new and revised National Action Plans on WPS. International actors should name perpetrators where there is sufficient evidence and deny legitimacy to state parties committing wartime sexual violence, including by utilizing the UN Secretary General’s ‘List of Shame.’

Prioritize Interim and Comprehensive Reparations

CRSV survivors have a right to effective remedy and reparation under international law, which can include compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction, restitution, or guarantees of non-repetition.⁸⁰ Reparations that take the form of interim and long-term financial compensations can be a catalyst for survivors to reintegrate into social life. Alongside criminal accountability, reparations are essential for redressing past harms, providing urgent financial support, and enabling survivors to rebuild their lives with dignity and justice. It is crucial that states meaningfully engage survivors in the design and

Reparations that take the form of interim and long-term financial compensations can be a catalyst for survivors to reintegrate into social life.

implementation of administrative reparations programs, which should not wait until the end of conflict or hostilities.

Legal recognition as a victim of sexual violence is often a prerequisite for accessing state-led reparation programs. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, Medica Zenica and 20 other NGOs successfully campaigned to amend the Law on the Protection of Civilian Victims of War to recognize survivors

of sexual violence as a special category of civil victims of war.⁸¹ This legal status provided survivors with public acknowledgment of the harm suffered and entitled survivors to monthly financial payments that expanded their socioeconomic rights. Recognition also served as a measure of satisfaction, validating survivors' vulnerable status and signaling societal empathy toward their existence. However, the fragmented legal framework and strict deadline for status recognition prevented many survivors from claiming their rights in practice.⁸²

Bosnia-Herzegovina also made trailblazing strides by granting legal recognition to children born of wartime rape—a group often neglected across many conflict settings.⁸³ In Rwanda, the law governing the Fund for Support and Assistance to Survivors of the Genocide excludes children born of rape from those eligible for genocide relief assistance.⁸⁴ While Colombia has one of the most comprehensive and gender-sensitive national reparations programs—including children born of war under the 2011 Victims and Land Restitution Law—recipients have been waiting for over a decade for reparations. Additionally, the budget lacks a dedicated allocation of resources for CRSV reparations, further hindering its implementation.⁸⁵

Nearly two decades after its war, Kosovo launched an ambitious reparations program offering CRSV survivors a monthly pension of 230 euros as compensation for the wartime traumas they endured.⁸⁶ However, the long delay in policy reform, bureaucratic hurdles in claiming status recognition, and ongoing stigmatization have deterred many survivors from enrolling; out of an estimated 20,000 recorded cases, less than 10 percent have applied for the state-led program.⁸⁷ Reports of inconsistencies in the program's implementation have also raised concerns that the law may exclude a substantial number of survivors, such as those who claim other government pensions.⁸⁸ Similar hurdles have been cited with the groundbreaking Yazidi Survivors Law, which requires survivors to

file a criminal complaint to be eligible for reparations.⁸⁹ Reparative processes should be pursued in parallel to criminal processes instead of conditional on a survivor's willingness to pursue criminal accountability.

For the first time during an ongoing conflict, Ukraine implemented an urgent reparations program to provide up to 500 CRSV survivors with a one-time payment of 3000 euros. The pilot program is led by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in collaboration with the Government Commissioner for Gender Policy and the Global Survivors Fund. The government also launched a Register of Damage—an international compensation mechanism to record evidence and claims of harm—and approved draft law No. 10256 on the registration of war damages caused by the Russian Federation.⁹⁰ Most recently, the Ukrainian parliament adopted new legislation in 2024 (No. 10132), recognizing survivors of CRSV as victims entitled to prompt reparations.⁹¹ Integrating restorative support into future reparations, including social, psychological, medical, and economic empowerment resources, can further promote survivors' reintegration and foster long-term societal healing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Implement Wartime Reparations:** Initiate urgent wartime reparations to address immediate needs and extend support, recognition, and compensation to survivors. Policymakers should prioritize reparative measures even while armed conflict is ongoing. In Ukraine, sustained funding for a pilot interim reparations project is needed to scale efforts through 2025 and beyond. Dedicating a percentage of frozen Russian assets and donor packages to funds for non-material damages and reparations for survivors is a potential financing avenue.
- **Recognize Survivors' Legal Status:** Grant legal recognition to survivors as civilian victims of war, including for children born of wartime rape. Official legal status, without a deadline for status recognition, is essential to honor survivors' right to reparation, welfare benefits, health and psychosocial assistance, and societal recognition of their vulnerable status and the harm suffered. Processes for legal recognition of a survivor's status should minimize administrative burdens, protect survivor interests, and prevent further stigmatization or ostracization. Status recognition and eligibility processes should also be conducted independently from law enforcement and criminal justice proceedings.
- **Establish Comprehensive Reparations Programs:** Design holistic reparations frameworks in collaboration with survivors that address broader social and economic needs. Programs should integrate medical, psychosocial, and economic empowerment measures, such as capacity-building initiatives and income-generating activities, to promote recovery, reintegration, and prevention of future harm. Providing financial counseling and vocational training for returning veterans and community-based educational programs can also be key entry points for preventing other forms of sexual and gender-based violence from spiking after war.

Conclusion: The Way Forward

The past two decades have seen a paradigm shift in global awareness and response to CRSV and its critical link to international peace and security. The 15th anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1888 underscored the global resolve to address CRSV as a security threat, prioritize protection, and ensure holistic justice for survivors.⁹² Yet, the persistent prevalence of CRSV demonstrates the stark gap between international commitments and the reality faced by survivors.⁹³ In too many countries and in too many cases, impunity remains the norm rather than the exception.

To bridge this gap, international actors must build on existing political commitments and work to tackle CRSV at individual, national, and international levels. This requires actionable, survivor-driven, and context-specific responses. Understanding the nature of these challenges and learning from past conflicts is essential to developing effective strategies that catalyze action. By embracing these recommendations, the international community can make meaningful progress toward fulfilling its obligations under the WPS Agenda and achieve lasting peace, security, and justice for survivors.

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