

UNSPEAKABLE CRIMES AGAINST CHILDREN

Sexual violence in conflict

In conflict-affected countries across the world where Save the Children works¹, alarming numbers of girls and boys, from infants to adolescents, are subjected to sexual violence.

In some contexts, children, particularly girls, make up the majority of survivors.² Yet the rights of child survivors to protection and a timely, appropriate and just response are frequently neglected.

- In post-conflict Liberia, 83% of survivors of gender-based violence in 2011–12 were younger than 17, and almost all of these cases involved rape.³
- In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), in 2008, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) recorded 16,000 cases of sexual violence against women and girls, of which nearly 65% involved children, mostly adolescent girls. An estimated 10% of victims were children less than ten years old.⁴
- An assessment in December 2013 in the Central African Republic (CAR) identified rape as the most common form of violence experienced by 40% of girls who reported violent incidents. Girls as young as five years old had experienced sexual and physical violence.⁵
- More than 38,000 people appealed to the UN for help after facing sexual assault or other gender-based violence in Syria in 2013. UNFPA described this figure as “just the tip of the iceberg”, with rape considered so shameful that some girls have been killed by their families in honour killings. Many families are reported to have married off their young daughters when they became refugees.⁶

Adolescent and younger girls are the main victims of sexual violence against children in conflict and are at risk from the long-term physical and mental consequences.⁷ In addition to violent acts such as rape, girls are also vulnerable to sexual exploitation and early or forced marriage, and are at risk of forced pregnancy.

Sexual violence against boys, although less apparent, is also extremely common⁸, leading to similarly severe physical and psychological consequences as those experienced by girls. However,

due to social and cultural norms, it is often very challenging to highlight and respond to boys' vulnerability.

During periods of armed conflict, places where children should be safe may become places where they are most vulnerable. Children can be exposed to sexual violence by military personnel or others in the community while at home or school or while undertaking household tasks away from their home. Collective rapes of children and other forms of systematic violence perpetrated by both state and non-state actors may be used as a way of controlling communities through fear. Compounding this, in conflict contexts mechanisms to deter or hold perpetrators to account, whether military or civilian, are often unavailable, allowing such violence to continue and escalate.

During armed conflict, children are also particularly vulnerable to **abduction, recruitment and/or use by armed forces and groups**. Both boys and girls are used by armed forces and groups for sexual purposes, a trend⁹ that is prevalent across a range of conflict-affected countries. Children often become the 'property' of one or more fighters and are forced to provide sexual services to them, sometimes over a period of months or years. The shame and stigma attached to sexual violence make it difficult for children to return to their communities. Children may also attach themselves to abusive individual fighters or commanders as a self-protection strategy.

Children who are forced by conflict to flee to neighbouring countries as **refugees**, or who become **internally displaced** within their own countries, are further exposed to danger and insecurity. They may be repeatedly displaced and separated from their families during attacks, and are often compelled to walk for days with no protection. In these conditions they are especially vulnerable to sexual violence, as the high reported rates of rape and sexual assault in many displacement settings demonstrate.

Sexual violence as a form of torture against children in detention is a particular – and major – concern within the juvenile justice sector. The risk can increase significantly during conflict, when justice systems are weak and rules on detention are misapplied or not enforced, or when certain children are targeted because of their ethnicity, nationality or perceived association with a political or armed group.

CASE STUDY: EMMA, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

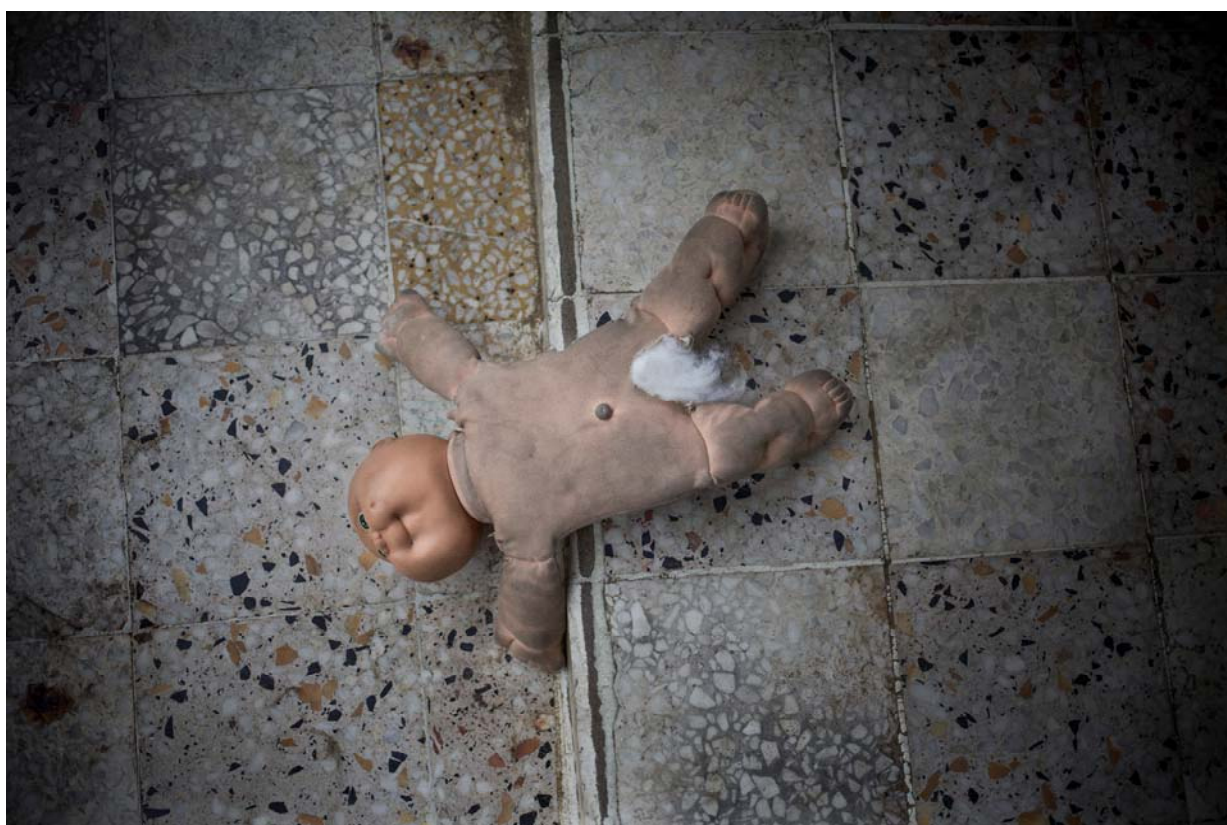
"I was raped by a soldier when I was going out to the fields.

"I had hurt my foot when we were fleeing the conflict. My friends and my mother and I were going out to the fields. It was 9 in the morning. I was finding it hard to keep up with everyone because of my foot, so I was left behind.

"Suddenly there was a soldier there. We were in the middle of the fields and no one else was around. He was carrying a gun and he said to me, 'You have a choice – either I kill you or you submit yourself to me.'

"I told him that I didn't want to make that choice and I started to run to escape him. He chased after me and caught me. He raped me. He didn't say anything to me while he was raping me but I was thinking 'I wish there was no war and no displacement because then this wouldn't be happening.'

"I then tried to flee again and started to run – he chased after me again but this time he didn't catch me. I ran home and changed my clothes. There was blood on them because he had taken my virginity."



THE CONSEQUENCES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS AND BOYS

Sexual violence has direct physical, emotional and cognitive consequences on children's lives that often continue into adulthood. Yet many of these consequences are misunderstood, denied or ignored.

Physical injuries from sexual violence can be particularly severe because children's growing bodies are not fully developed. Children who have been raped can be at high risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, and girls are at risk of becoming pregnant and suffering life-threatening complications during child birth.

The **psychological and social consequences** for child survivors can be multiple and long-lasting. Boys and girls who have been raped might also encounter discrimination and rejection by their families and communities. Their chances of accessing further education, establishing a livelihood and getting married might be severely diminished or even eliminated, condemning them to increased poverty and/or **increased vulnerability to further exploitation**.

SAVE THE CHILDREN'S WORK ON CHILD PROTECTION IN EMERGENICIES

Supporting children who have suffered sexual violence

- *In DRC, Save the Children has set up 'listening posts' where boys and girls can confidentially report sexual assaults.*
- *In Colombia, our child protection spaces allow children to access emotional support and be referred to specialist services.*
- *In the Somali refugee camps of northern Kenya, child survivors and their families and carers receive specialist support and counselling from trained child protection staff.*

Helping change attitudes and behaviours

- *In Nepal, our children's clubs are challenging negative and violent attitudes towards girls and women.*
In Myanmar, we are working with communities to raise awareness of the risks associated with child recruitment by military personnel.

Helping reform laws and institutions

- *Around the world we are working to ensure that laws are in place to protect children and to integrate child protection into the training of national police forces, armies and peace-keeping forces.*

WHAT SAVE THE CHILDREN IS CALLING FOR

1. Place children at the centre of international action on sexual violence in conflict.

Children, and especially girls, can make up the majority of survivors of sexual violence in conflict situations, yet their particular needs for protection and child-sensitive responses are too frequently neglected.

- *Efforts to tackle sexual violence in conflict-affected states should include specific measures to prevent violations against children and to address the particular needs of girls and boys.*

2. End impunity for sexual violence against children. National and international justice systems should prosecute offenders of sexual violence against children in conflict, taking into account the best interests of the child and the key principles of informed consent, confidentiality and referral.

- *States should strengthen efforts in documenting, investigating and prosecuting perpetrators of sexual violence against children at the national and international level.*
- *Child-friendly justice systems must be established in which children are treated with dignity and compassion and benefit from adequate information, access to court, legal representation and mediation/guardianship in ways that respect the best interests of the child.*
- *Human rights defenders who document sexual violence against children must be protected and assisted in their work.*
- *States and the UN should offer financial and technical support to ensure that the needs of children are addressed as part of the rehabilitation of justice systems weakened by conflict.*

3. Fund the protection of children from sexual violence. In spite of increasing international attention to the issue of sexual violence in conflict, there remains a severe lack of funding and political priority for preventing and responding to sexual violence against children on the ground in conflict-affected countries. The work of first-line responders to child protection violations in emergencies is critically under-funded.

- *Effective protection against sexual violence – including for children – should be considered essential to all humanitarian responses and should receive the same level of priority as other sectors, such as food, shelter and water.*
- *Donors should commit to contributing their fair share of funding for protection, including child protection, in all conflict contexts, and this should be predictable over time. The gaps in funding remain large but the amounts required are relatively small. In 2013 major donor governments spent between 0% and just over 2% of their overall humanitarian funding on child protection and sexual and gender-based violence.¹⁰*

4. Strengthen and protect education. For child survivors and those who are vulnerable to sexual violence, education should be a vital form of protection, as well as being the best way out of marginalisation or entrenched poverty, which are closely linked to further sexual exploitation. Supporting survivors to access school safely is also an essential part of the healing process. However, in conflict situations, schools are often deliberately used or attacked by state military and security forces and armed non-state groups. This potentially introduces the threat of sexual violence against children by military personnel into the heart of schools, as well as significantly increasing children's vulnerability to other grave violations.

- *States should criminalise all attacks on education and ensure that any attacks are impartially investigated and perpetrators brought to justice.*
- *States should support and endorse the draft Lucens Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict.*
- *Education should be considered an essential pillar of humanitarian action and donors should allocate greater funding for education in both the response and recovery stages of a conflict.*



5. Ensure that all relevant parts of the UN and other multilateral missions have the necessary resources, skills and political backing to address the issue of sexual violence in conflict.

- *Peace-keeping troops must have a clear mandate to provide effective protection to civilians, including specific measures for the protection of children.*
- *Child protection must be an integrated priority for any mission and dedicated child protection advisers must be deployed in sufficient numbers to carry out the mission's child protection functions.*
- *All mission personnel must receive adequate training in international humanitarian law, human rights law and refugee law, including specific training on the particular needs and responsibilities relating to children, both before and during deployment.*
- *All missions should respect the UN zero-tolerance policy with respect to sexual exploitation and abuse, including the prohibition against sexual relations with any persons under 18.*

6. Focus on girls and boys used by armed forces and groups. These girls and boys are among the most vulnerable to sexual violence.

- *Recognising the current UN 'Children, Not Soldiers' campaign launched in March 2014, state armed forces and armed groups must be pressed to release all children, including girls, associated with armed forces and groups, immediately and unconditionally.*
- *Vetting mechanisms must be established in affected countries in order to exclude from national armies any individual against whom there are credible allegations of having been responsible for crimes under international law or other serious human rights violations, including sexual violence and rape.*
- *Measures to prevent recruitment of children in the first place and programmes to support children's demobilisation and reintegration into society must include efforts to ensure long-term healthcare, psychological support, education and livelihoods.*

7. Increase investment in monitoring and reporting crimes of sexual violence against children. While under-reporting of sexual violence is a significant issue for all survivors, the barriers to reporting violence against children are even more significant. The lack of age-appropriate reporting mechanisms and the weakness in data collection mean that very few child survivors are recorded and assisted.

- *Investment in data collection to understand better the scale of sexual violence in conflict, and in particular to capture the experience of girls and boys under the age of 18, must be increased.*
- *States should support and adequately resource the UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM), mandated by UN Security Council resolution 1612. As the only process of recording human rights violations that reports directly to the Security Council, the MRM has a vital role to play in preventing and responding to grave violations of children's rights in conflict, including sexual violence.*

Endnotes

¹ Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Jordan, Lebanon, Mali, Myanmar (Burma), the occupied Palestinian territory, Somalia, South Sudan and Syria

² It is very difficult to access data on the scale of the problem of sexual violence against children in conflict. From the data gathered from Save the Children's programme experience, girls and boys under the age of 18 can make up a large part of the survivors of sexual violence, and often the majority. See *Unspeakable Crimes Against Children, Sexual Violence in conflict*, Save the Children Fund, April 2013, p.v

³ According to statistics gathered between January 2011 and August 2012 by the Ministry of Gender and Development in Liberia

⁴ Human Rights Watch, 'Soldiers who rape, commanders who condone', 16 July 2009, p 7:
http://www.hrw.org/en/node/84366/section/7#_ftnref4

⁵ *Bearing the Brunt of Violence: Women and Girls in the Central African Republic*. International Rescue Committee, March 2014

⁶ Reuters, 'UN aided 38,000 victims of Syrian gender-based violence in 2013', 8 January 2014
<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/08/us-syria-crisis-rape-idUSBREA0711R20140108>

⁷ *Unspeakable Crimes Against Children, Sexual Violence in conflict*, Save the Children Fund, April 2013, p.4

⁸ The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict.
<http://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/effects-of-conflict/six-grave-violations/sexual-violence>

⁹ The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict,
<http://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/effects-of-conflict/six-grave-violations/child-soldiers>

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.34

**Save the Children works in more than 120 countries. We save children's lives.
We fight for their rights. We help them fulfil their potential**

Save the Children
1 St John's Lane
London EC1M 4AR
Tel: +44 (0)20 7012 6400
Fax: +44 (0)20 7012 6963