

HIDDEN SURVIVORS

Sexual Violence against Children in Conflict

*«We could scream but no one will hear us,
they cover our mouths and threaten us»*

Unnamed child, Colombia

Sexual violence is one of the most horrific crimes committed during conflict. It happens all over the world – from Afghanistan to Colombia to Somalia – and its consequences linger long after the fighting has stopped. Many survivors of sexual violence in conflict are girls and boys under the age of 18. Their experiences and specific needs are often overlooked, however, and the perpetrators of these awful crimes are rarely brought to justice. Save the Children welcomes the UK Government's commitment to use its G8 Presidency in 2013 to campaign for stronger international action to prevent sexual violence in conflict. This is a major opportunity to rally governments, the UN and civil society to re-double their efforts to end this scourge. But to be successful, their efforts must address the particular needs of children.

WHO ARE THE SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT?

Very little significant research has been conducted on the issue of sexual violence against children in conflict. Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of the literature focuses on the experiences and vulnerabilities of women. Girls are often included, but with little recognition of their increased vulnerability due to their young age. Worryingly, assumptions are frequently made that interventions developed to prevent and respond to violence against women are also suitable for girls, or that

child-focused interventions from non-conflict contexts can be replicated in conflict-affected environments. Meanwhile, boy survivors – and their very different experiences of sexual violence and its implications – are rarely considered at all.

This is particularly concerning given that the limited available data and Save the Children's own experience suggest that children make up a significant number of survivors of sexual violence in many conflicts, and sometimes the majority. The following snapshots offer some indication of the prevalence and scope of the problem:

- During the post-election crisis in Côte d'Ivoire between 1 November 2010 and 30 September 2011, children made up 51.7% of cases of sexual violence. In more than half of the cases of sexual violence against children, the survivors were below 15 years of age.ⁱ
- In 2008 in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the United Nations Population Fund recorded nearly 16,000 cases of sexual violence against women and girls. Of those instances, 65% involved children, mostly adolescent girls.ⁱⁱ
- In 2006, the *Lancet* published research estimating that nearly one-fifth of girls were raped in the greater Port-au-Prince areas during the armed rebellion between February 2004 and December 2005.ⁱⁱⁱ

While there is ample evidence of sexual violence against women and girls, there is little documentation of the existence or impact of sexual violence on men and boys. The evidence that does exist, however, points to a serious – if under-reported – problem. In the DRC it has been estimated that men and boys make up 4-10% of the survivors of sexual violence who seek treatment.^{iv} In Afghanistan, the UN Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict and others have repeatedly brought attention to the sexual abuse of boys. There have also been reports of sexual violence against boys as well as girls in the current conflict in Syria.^v

It's worth noting that some groups of children are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence. For instance, significant (if partial) evidence demonstrates that children with disabilities are at disproportionate risk of sexual violence.^{vi} Countering the perception that civilians are the only survivors of sexual violence in armed conflict is a 2006 study from Liberia that indicated that 32.6% of former male combatants – including children associated with armed forces and groups – had experienced sexual violence, compared with 7.4% of non-combatants. For females these figures were 42.3% and 9.2% respectively.^{vii} Other vulnerable groups include orphans and unaccompanied children, refugee and internally displaced children, members of child-headed households, working children, girl mothers, and children born of rape.

Certain settings are particularly associated with sexual violence. These include camps for displaced people, which are well known to increase a child's risk of sexual violence and exploitation.^{viii} In some contexts, even schools are not safe: in a 2010 UN review, incidents of sexual violence resulting from abduction or attacks at schools or education facilities, or on the journey to or from them, were reported in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Indonesia, Iraq, Myanmar and the Philippines.^{ix}

In Mutwanga Health Zone in the North Kivu province of the eastern DRC, there is a widespread phenomenon locally referred to as “*houses of tolerance*”, which are houses where girls are sexually exploited on a daily basis. Girls, some as young as 14 years old, go to the “*houses of tolerance*” to flee the dire poverty and lack of economic opportunities in their communities of origin, where their parents are unable to meet their most basic needs. Others have been separated from their families and have no other way to provide for themselves. Many have previously been victims of sexual violence. Save the Children is supporting the local children’s club and a partner NGO to sensitise girls, both in their communities and in the “*houses of tolerance*”, on the risks of engaging in transactional sex and on the legal framework in the DRC regarding child protection and sexual violence.

WHO ARE THE PERPETRATORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT?

Armed men make up a significant percentage of those committing acts of sexual violence in conflict, and they are frequently identified as the primary perpetrators.^x However, solutions to sexual violence in conflict must not overlook civilian perpetrators, as well. For example, in a recent study of 440 child survivors of sexual violence in the DRC, 81% of the perpetrators were described as civilians and 74% as known to the survivor’s family.^{xi} In Côte d’Ivoire, based on available information, only 31% of the cases of child rape were committed by armed men.^{xii} Civilian perpetrators in times of conflict may include ex-combatants as well as family and community members, teachers, doctors and the police, many of whom take advantage of – and are responding to – the violent environment and culture change this can bring about.

Sexual abuse and exploitation is also committed by aid workers and peacekeepers, the very people who are supposed to assist and protect children in times of conflict and insecurity. Such sexual abuse and exploitation includes trading sex for non-monetary items, forced sex, verbal sexual abuse, child prostitution, child pornography, sexual slavery, indecent sexual assault and child trafficking.^{xiii} It is evident that sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers and peacekeepers can contribute to normalising and condoning sexual violence in communities already facing trauma and upheaval. It also promotes sex as a trade or survival tactic, putting already vulnerable children at further risk.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT ON GIRLS AND BOYS?

Reviews carried out by Save the Children point to multiple impacts upon girls and boys of sexual violence. Perhaps most obvious are the physical consequences: children are at greater risk of serious complications and death due to the smaller size and immaturity of their bodies. They are also at greater risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. The psychological consequences of sexual violence against children can include depression, sleep disturbances, anxiety, learning problems, self-blame, post-traumatic stress disorder, loss of self-esteem, loss of faith in the world and a long-term sense of insecurity.^{xiv} It can also negatively affect their emotional development, their ability to form relationships and fulfill their long-term developmental potential. The social impact of sexual violence on children can be devastating; they may drop out of school,

face family and community rejection, have to raise a child with very limited social support and be unable to find a partner. Sexual violence that results in pregnancy can lead to additional negative long-term impacts on health, economic opportunity and social status.^{xv} There is little research on the different consequences for girl and boy survivors of sexual violence in conflict, although as previously discussed boy survivors are even further hidden from view. However, the different implications of stigma for boy survivors coupled with a lack of age- and gender-appropriate services often means that they are even less likely to seek support than girls – potentially compounding problems over the long term.

Additionally there is wide agreement that one experience of sexual violence increases the risk of further abuse, often through coping strategies that increase vulnerability. For instance, some studies suggest that the risk of sexual violence may result in early marriages as a strategy of ‘protection’.^{xvi} Another ‘protection’ strategy against sexual violence is the joining of armed groups – ‘protection’ from sexual violence was reported among Liberian girl ex-combatants as the primary reason for joining an armed group.^{xvii} Studies have also found that if children experience sexual violence, they are much more likely to perpetrate sexual violence as adults. It is therefore particularly important to work with children to promote recovery and change attitudes in order to break this cycle.^{xviii}



Liliane (not her real name) with a children's counsellor in Shabunda, South Kivu, eastern DRC.

Liliane is 16 years old. She was raped by an older man while going to the field to collect firewood. When she became pregnant, her parents intended to force the man who raped her to pay a dowry and take her as his wife. However, Liliane had heard on local radio a play by the Shabunda children's club about the consequences of teenage pregnancy and early and forced marriage. She went to meet

the project's counsellor for children, who spoke to Liliane's parents and convinced them to keep Liliane with them and to help her raise her child. They also agreed that Liliane would resume her studies after the birth of the child. Liliane is now in her third year of secondary school and is raising her baby at home with her parents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The UK Government's focus on preventing sexual violence in conflict during its G8 Presidency year provides a unique opportunity to bring about a step-change in the way governments across the world tackle this awful crime. But to be successful, **it is essential that the initiative specifically address the challenge of sexual violence against children**, a phenomenon that is not only widespread but also uniquely destructive and under-recognised. This means that in addition to working within international conflict and human rights frameworks (the Geneva Conventions, the Rome Statute etc.) and the frameworks relevant to Women, Peace and Security and Sexual Violence

in Conflict, **international efforts to tackle sexual violence also need to draw on, and seek to implement, the core child rights frameworks.** These include the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and UN Security Council Resolutions 1612 and 1882 on Children and Armed Conflict, both of which address sexual violence. Similarly, in addition to the Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, key partners on this initiative within the UN system should include the Special Representatives of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict and Violence against Children.

Of 14,200 reports of rape registered in South Kivu between 2005 and 2007, only 2% of perpetrators were brought to justice.^{xix} This culture of impunity must end. Where there are no age-appropriate services for health or psychological care, where judicial systems are not designed to meet the needs of children, and where societies do not recognise the particular vulnerabilities that children face, reporting of abuse and exploitation against children will inevitably remain low and the culture of impunity for perpetrators will remain. **Governments must therefore be supported to introduce and strengthen age-appropriate legislation, robust age- and sex-disaggregated data collection, child-friendly services to respond to incidents of sexual violence and child-protection training for legal and health personnel, as well as finding ways to increase the participation of survivors** so as to break down the social and cultural barriers that prevent communities from acknowledging and tackling the problem. Wherever possible, **these efforts should build on structures and initiatives that already exist and focus on the community level.** This is where the fight to end impunity will be won.

Increased funding is also vital. Humanitarian projects that seek to address the multiple needs of survivors of sexual violence are rarely prioritised. Child protection was the second worst-funded humanitarian sector in 2009 – only 32% of requirements were met and many projects within that were only partially funded.^{xx} The published data do not disaggregate child protection funding further, so there is no common database indicating overall spend on programmes that tackle sexual violence against girls and boys in conflict. **If there is to be an impact on reducing sexual violence against children, programmes meeting survivors' needs must be fully funded.** Disaggregated data on funding for child-focused sexual violence programmes also need to be publicly available.

**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

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