

# Security Sector Reform and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

**Understanding the impacts of  
peacetime GBV capacity-building**



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## About the Enhancing SSG/R Policy & Practice project

The Enhancing SSG/R Policy & Practice project is part of a multiyear strategic partnership between the Netherlands' Ministry of Foreign Affairs and DCAF. The project enables DCAF and the Netherlands' Ministry of Foreign Affairs jointly to identify and explore emerging issues of relevance to security sector governance and reform (SSG/R). It connects researchers, policymakers and practitioners, with the objective of generating stronger evidence of how SSG/R contributes to stability and development.

## About DCAF

DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance is dedicated to improving the security of states and their people within a framework of democratic governance, the rule of law, respect for human rights and gender equality. Since its founding in 2000, DCAF has contributed to making peace and development more sustainable by assisting partner states, and international actors supporting these states, to improve the governance of their security sector through inclusive and participatory reforms. It creates innovative knowledge products, promotes norms and good practices, provides legal and policy advice and supports capacity-building of both state and non-state security sector stakeholders.

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# Acronyms

<b>CRSV</b>	Conflict-Related Sexual Violence
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organization
<b>DCAF</b>	Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of the Congo
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-Based Violence
<b>ICRC</b>	International Committee of the Red Cross
<b>IFRC</b>	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
<b>JurFem</b>	Ukrainian Women Lawyers' Association
<b>MINUSMA</b>	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>SSG</b>	Security Sector Governance
<b>SSR</b>	Security Sector Reform
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>WPS</b>	Women, Peace and Security
<b>WPS NAP</b>	National Action Plan on implementation of the UN Security Council resolutions on Women, Peace and Security



# Executive summary

Harnessing the preventive power of the rule of law is essential to deterring sexual violence and ensuring that women's rights to safe and effective participation in public life, as well as in peacebuilding and reconciliation processes, are fully realized. Security sector and law enforcement actors are on the frontline of the response.<sup>1</sup>

This study critically examines the assumption that security sector reform (SSR) initiatives focusing on gender equality and gender-based violence (GBV) improve security responses to conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) during times of armed conflict. Through interviews, a survey and documentary analysis, it evaluates the impacts in 2024 of internationally supported police and justice sector GBV and CRSV capacity-building conducted in Mali and Ukraine over the period 2017–2022. Bringing its findings and analysis into wider expert dialogue, this study draws out a range of evidence-based recommendations to strengthen SSR and Women, Peace and Security (WPS) approaches to GBV and CRSV and SSR policy, guidance and programming more generally. This research forms part of DCAF's "Enhancing SSG/R Policy & Practice Initiative" funded by the Netherlands' Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In Mali, SSR capacity-building initiatives by international actors like DCAF and MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) improved awareness of GBV and CRSV within the police and gendarmerie. However, SSR efforts were often focused on technical skills rather than holistic institutional change. Modest resources and personnel, inadequate laws, bias and stigma have limited the impacts of GBV capacity-building. The research drew out the need for more carefully contextualized, locally owned and long-term approaches to SSR.

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<sup>1</sup> "Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: Report of the Secretary-General, 2023" (New York: United Nations, 2023), para. 20, <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/SG-REPORT-2023SPREAD-1.pdf>.

Ukraine has made strides in addressing CRSV through its justice system, particularly through the Office of the Prosecutor General. This office and the prosecution and judicial training centres have benefited from GBV and CRSV capacity-building support from DCAF and UN agencies. International capacity-building contributed to survivor-centred approaches and understanding of the connections between CRSV and other forms of GBV. But nonetheless, gaps in GBV support services and barriers to justice remain. Moreover, such is the focus now on CRSV response that approaches to GBV lag behind.

Both the Mali and Ukraine cases show that GBV capacity-building before conflict does prepare the ground for a better response to CRSV. It can contribute to the institutionalization of GBV training and development of structural measures to address GBV, and to coordination between community organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and security sector actors.

Examining the impacts of GBV and CRSV capacity-building highlights the importance of SSR focusing on values, attitudes and institutional norms, as well as knowledge and skills. Moreover, SSR should engage beyond state security and justice institutions to support the NGO advocates and service providers and informal community structures that are critical to GBV response and security and justice.

From a WPS policy perspective, this study shows the importance of maintaining a distinct focus on the prevention of GBV and CRSV. Approaches to CRSV should be intersectional and seek to empower rather than sensationalize survivors. WPS work should continue to emphasize the challenges of bias and stigma and seek to document what works, especially in changing attitudes and organizational culture within security institutions. Finally, SSR's roles in relation to CRSV need to be framed within gender-responsive SSR, not in isolation: the institutional transformations that gender-responsive SSR strives for are the enablers of effective CRSV response.



Participant during a DCAF training, © Media Expertise

# Introduction

## Research questions

A foundational assumption of security sector reform (SSR) support to the security and justice sector is that the development of institutional capacity on violence prevention and response in peacetime will enable the security sector to protect civilians better during times of armed conflict or escalating violence. More specifically, SSR policy, guidance and support have theorized that where a country's police, military and justice sectors have been sensitized to gender inequality and gender-based violence (GBV), they will be willing and able to prevent and respond to conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). This understanding is also a fundamental part of UN Women, Peace and Security (WPS) resolutions and policymaking. WPS national action plans and institutional strategies frequently

### Key research questions

1. How are police and justice actors responding to CRSV?
2. What have been the impacts of internationally delivered and/or supported SSR interventions – specifically, SSR interventions directed at gender, GBV and/or CRSV – on security sector action to prevent and respond to CRSV?
3. What lessons can be learnt for SSR policy, guidance and programming more generally?
4. What are the implications of these findings for how the WPS Agenda conceptualizes SSR in relation to prevention and protection?

prioritize training police and militaries on gender and CRSV.

This research critically examines some of these assumptions around the impacts of gender-focused SSR interventions on prevention and response to GBV, taking CRSV as its focus. It examines police and justice responses to CRSV in Mali and Ukraine, where SSR initiatives focused on gender equality and GBV ahead of the current upsurge in conflict in each country. The research analyses the impacts of this gender equality and GBV capacity-building with the police and justice sector (training, but also inter alia external expert support to the development of policy, practices and curricula and sharing of research and analysis) upon subsequent action and response concerning CRSV. The research strived to apply an intersectional approach to gender analysis; for example, considering whether prevention and response measures meet the particular needs of children and minorities, acknowledge male victims and recognize potential targeting of LGBTIQ+ individuals and communities. The impacts of DCAF's own past gender capacity-building activities

were evaluated alongside those of other international assistance providers.

This study focuses on responses to CRSV by police and justice actors as an indicative example of security sector responses to GBV. By doing so, it seeks to document lessons learned and generate evidence-based recommendations to strengthen SSR and WPS policy, guidance and programming concerning CRSV, GBV and prevention and protection more generally. This project's findings and analysis are, it is hoped, valuable to policy communities engaged with SSR, WPS, gender equality, violence prevention and protection of civilians.

The research project is part of the broader DCAF "Enhancing SSG/R Policy & Practice Initiative" that connects researchers, policymakers and practitioners with the objective of generating stronger evidence of how good security sector governance (SSG) and SSR contribute to stability and development. This work is funded by the Netherlands' Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of a four-year strategic partnership with DCAF aimed at enhancing SSG.

## Case study selection and the research process

Mali and Ukraine present good case studies for this analysis because each country has been the target of recent internationally supported SSR capacity-building interventions on GBV, and each allows analysis of how the transition to greater insecurity and deeper conflict affects the legacy of that capacity-building. Moreover, DCAF's past work and ongoing engagement

in Ukraine and Mali give a unique opportunity to explore the factors that enable and inhibit peacetime GBV capacity-building to be impactful in times of conflict.

In Mali the research was conducted by a staff member of DCAF's Bamako office and an external gender expert, supported by DCAF Geneva's Gender and



Security Division. The institutions focused on, in light of past capacity-building activities, were the Police Nationale du Mali (Mali Police) and the Gendarmerie Nationale du Mali (Mali Gendarmerie). In Ukraine, DCAF partnered with the Ukrainian Women Lawyers' Association, JurFem, to undertake the research. The target institutions in Ukraine were the National School of Judges of Ukraine, the Prosecutors' Training Centre of Ukraine and the Office of the Prosecutor General.

In both Mali and Ukraine the foundation for the research was a review of national frameworks related to CRSV response and SSR; documentation related to SSR support programmes conducted over the period 2017–2022 that focused on gender, GBV or CRSV; and documentation evidencing the development and impact of mechanisms related to CRSV since 2019. In Mali the research team conducted seven interviews and administered a survey, collecting inputs from the Mali Police, Mali Gendarmerie, the GBV One Stop Centre in Bamako and UN Women. In Ukraine, JurFem conducted 11 interviews with staff of the Office of the Prosecutor General, the prosecutors' and judges' training centres, NGOs and experts working with UN Women and the Council of Europe.

In October 2024, DCAF convened an expert workshop in Geneva to share and reflect upon the findings from Mali and Ukraine and develop collectively an analysis of how they inform and challenge the project's questions around SSR and CRSV response. Our partner researchers from Mali and Ukraine participated, alongside experts from DCAF's offices in

Burkina Faso and Niger and 35 Geneva-based experts from the UN, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), NGOs, academia and across DCAF. Participants are listed in [Annex 1](#). The inputs from this workshop have been integrated throughout the report. DCAF is extremely grateful to everyone who participated so generously in this knowledge-sharing process.



Police officers at a workshop on implementing the Istanbul Convention.  
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# How the linkages between security sector responses to CRSV and SSR are understood

## The roles of police, prosecution and justice actors in CRSV prevention and response

Police and justice services to victims of sexual violence and other forms of GBV are often poor, with prosecution and conviction rates low. In many countries, victims of sexual violence find police unwilling to investigate and bring cases to prosecution. Police may not regard sexual violence as a priority concern compared to other forms of violence, or may consider sexual violence in a family or community context as a domestic

matter to be privately “resolved” between the parties. Often there are no female police officers to attend to a female victim, which can effectively prevent women from filing a complaint. Where an investigation does occur, victims often experience invasions of privacy and attacks upon their dignity, including being asked to “prove” that they resisted the attack or to describe their clothing or demeanour. At times, victims of sexual violence are at risk of

mistreatment, discrimination or even further sexual abuse at the hands of police.<sup>1</sup>

As CRSV grew in prominence within UN policymaking from around 2007, there was a clear recognition of the importance of police, prosecution and judicial authorities in CRSV response. The UN Security Council resolutions on WPS contain multiple references to police roles in assistance to and protection of victims of sexual violence, and to police and justice institutions' responsibilities to prosecute those responsible for crimes against women and girls in armed conflicts. Security Council Resolution 2467 (2019), for example, called for states to enhance the investigation and prosecution of CRSV:

*... which could include enacting ... victim and witness protection laws and providing ... legal aid for survivors, and establishing ... specialized police units and courts to address such crimes, removing procedural impediments to justice for victims such as restrictive limitation periods for filing claims, corroboration requirements that discriminate against victims as witnesses and complainants, exclusion or discrediting of victims' testimony by law enforcement officials and ... lack of facilities for closed hearings ... prompt investigation, prosecution and punishment of perpetrators ...*<sup>2</sup>

Offender accountability for CRSV is considered a critical aspect of achieving justice for individual survivors, especially where the justice mechanism gives victims participation, voice and validation and publicly condemns and censures the perpetrator's acts. Prosecution and accountability are considered also to have preventive value: the prospect of prosecution for CRSV may

dissuade armed actors, particularly if the likelihood of investigation and punishment is perceived as certain and consistent.<sup>3</sup>

Implementation of investigation and prosecution commitments, which have their foundations in international human rights and humanitarian law and international criminal law, is supported by standards and resources developed over the last decade through a range of multistakeholder consultation processes. Key are the International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict, the Global Code of Conduct for Gathering and Using Information about Systematic and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (the Murad Code), the UN Model Legislative Provisions and Guidance on Investigation and Prosecution of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and the UN Framework for the Prevention of CRSV.<sup>4</sup> All of these sets of standards emphasize the importance of legislating in line with international human rights law, norms and standards; the principle of "do no harm" and respect for the informed consent of victims/survivors; and the requirement that police, prosecutors and judges, among others, receive appropriate professional training in CRSV response. A survivor-centred approach to CRSV and GBV is best practice.

Providing an indicative framework for what good police response looks like, the UN Framework for the Prevention of CRSV defined actions to prevent the occurrence, escalation and recurrence of CRSV to include:

- gender-sensitive early warning and early response systems, which may involve detecting increases in misogynistic hate speech, sexual and gender-

based violence; using sex-and age-disaggregated data and analysis; and implementing technological tools for monitoring of and alerting to CRSV;

- › development of complaint mechanisms within state institutions to capture and respond to reports of GBV, including CRSV, during and after periods of conflict and other emergencies;
- › police capacity to detect and respond to potential victims of CRSV, including conflict-related trafficking and other forms of exploitation, at borders and other contexts of displacement;
- › provision of foot and vehicle patrols and security details to vulnerable areas, and establishment of safety protocols;
- › codes of conduct, training with police on attitudes/protocols/responses and policies to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse;
- › deployment or increased recruitment of female officers; and
- › implementation of prevention efforts in detention settings.

Actions of particular applicability to national investigators, prosecutors and judges include:

- › investigation and prosecution of CRSV, under both international criminal law and domestic legal provisions as applicable;
- › promotion of legal reforms, enhancing access to justice and accountability;

- › training and sensitization of investigators in the detection and ethical documentation of human rights abuses, including CRSV;
- › forensic assessment of consenting survivors and access to justice, including provision of legal aid, accompaniment and witness protection through legal processes, as needed;
- › inclusive and gender-responsive protection mechanisms for victims and witnesses, survivors themselves, their children (including those born from sexual violence) and affected communities;
- › survivor-centred prosecution and investigation that minimize risks of retraumatization or physical danger before, during and after trial; elimination of corroboration requirements that discriminate against victims; protective methods of testifying; and meaningful witness protection;
- › clear mechanisms for the submission of *amicus curiae* briefs to assist local judges in their consideration of charges of CRSV as an international crime; and
- › awarding of collective and/or individual reparations to the extent possible.<sup>5</sup>

Other practitioner resources emphasize that an effective response to CRSV needs dedicated investigators and prosecutors and a specific CRSV prosecution strategy. Investigating police need a basic understanding of international criminal and humanitarian law as applicable in this

context, including the law regarding indirect perpetrators with command responsibility. They may need to apply specialized investigative techniques and technology, such as DNA, forensics and crime-scene analysis. Police should prioritize forming working relationships with local and international organizations that provide emergency medical services.<sup>6</sup>

In the background, largely, of these policy and guidance texts is the recognition that in many conflict contexts, members of state police and armed forces are themselves perpetrators of CRSV. DCAF's influential 2007 study, *Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict: Global Overview and Implications for the Security Sector*, presented 51 profiles of countries in which CRSV had been recorded over the preceding 20 years.<sup>7</sup> Many documented allegations against police included committing sexual violence against women and men at checkpoints and in detention, and against refugees at borders and around camps, raping political activists and their family members, committing acts of rape as “revenge” for rebel activity, raping teenagers, sexual attacks against LGBTIQ+ individuals and committing rape within the context of genocide. The Peace Research Institute Oslo's Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict Database, spanning 1989–2015, documented state forces (including police) as the reported perpetrators of sexual violence more often than non-state or rebel forces.<sup>8</sup> The UN Secretary-General's annual reports on CRSV repeatedly document national police among perpetrators. Security Council resolutions too have implicitly acknowledged that police can be perpetrators, calling for police codes of conduct and manuals to prohibit sexual violence, and highlighting the need to prevent

individuals responsible for acts of sexual violence from being recruited, retained or promoted within the security sector. As such, there is a tension between seeing police forces as institutions that communities rely upon to protect them from CRSV, provide support and facilitate justice, and seeing police as potential CRSV perpetrators.

Despite decades of advocacy and policymaking around CRSV, as the UN Secretary-General has observed, impunity remains the norm.<sup>9</sup>

Criminal convictions for CRSV have been achieved in recent years in several countries: in Ukraine ([discussed in Chapter 4](#)); in the Central African Republic, where the Special Criminal Court has also awarded reparations to some victims; in national courts in Colombia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC); in special mobile courts and military courts in South Sudan; and in military courts in Ethiopia.<sup>10</sup> Nigeria has convicted a member of Boko Haram for rape as a terrorist offence.<sup>11</sup> In July 2024, a Guinean court convicted the former president and others for sexual violence as a crime against humanity, under the principle of command responsibility.<sup>12</sup> Sweden and Germany have prosecuted individuals who travelled to Syria or Iraq to join a terrorist group for aiding and abetting rape as an international crime.<sup>13</sup> The Netherlands, too, has arrested individuals suspected of involvement in CRSV in Syria.<sup>14</sup> Yet these cases remain exceptional, in the context of the enormous scale of CRSV. Alongside the biases and barriers specific

to CRSV cases, in many conflict-affected contexts police and justice institutions have extremely limited reach and effectiveness: “Weakened or collapsed rule of law institutions have created a risk of ‘rule of

lawlessness’ by eroding what should be the first line of defence against atrocity crimes.”<sup>15</sup> An urgent priority in fighting impunity is strengthening the security sector in countries where CRSV is taking place.

## **The role of SSR in prevention and response to CRSV**

DCAF’s 2007 study, *Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict*, challenged the SSR and security policy community to treat sexual violence as a key form of insecurity, rather than a side-effect of conflict. It observed that at that time, capacity-building and support initiatives within the security sector very rarely focused specifically on sexual violence. Yet early scholarship on CRSV indicated that strong systems of accountability and control within armed forces and police made sexual violence less likely,<sup>16</sup> meaning that SSR should be understood as critical to preventing CRSV as well as a response to it.

The UN Secretary-General’s 2008 report on SSR, the foundational document for UN SSR policy, included as one of its ten core principles that SSR be gender-sensitive and include the reform of recruitment processes and improvement in the delivery of security services to address and prevent sexual and gender-based violence. Likewise, the UN Security Council resolutions on CRSV from the outset prioritized support to judicial and law enforcement systems, and requested UN-assisted SSR efforts to seek to protect women and girls from sexual violence. Successive Security Council resolutions have outlined the need for legislative and policy reform, training for security sector personnel, the inclusion of more women in the security

sector, vetting to exclude perpetrators of sexual violence from the sector and improvements to judicial proceedings to better address survivors’ and witnesses’ needs. The UN’s 2020 policy for field missions on Preventing and Responding to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence tasked missions to address CRSV at structural, functional and legislative levels of SSR, “incorporating CRSV concerns into national security dialogues, mappings, policies, legislation and management oversight, to support the development of inclusive and effective national defence and security institutions”.<sup>17</sup> It mandated UN Police to undertake capacity-building activities with host states’ police in preventing and investigating CRSV through, for example, assisting in the development of policies, standardized operating procedures and training curricula, and delivering specialized police investigation courses. Subsequently, Resolution 2467 (2020) called upon the UN and states to address CRSV in SSR processes and support programmes, inter alia highlighting the need for vetting and promoting equal opportunity of women at all levels of the national police service and other security positions.<sup>18</sup> These provisions demonstrate both how an SSR lens on CRSV can open space to address security sector personnel as potential perpetrators and how the gendered institutional culture of the police

(or prosecutors or judiciary) might undermine effective CRSV action.

Yet while SSR and addressing CRSV might seem self-evidently complementary, some observe that there can be tension between international support for SSR and protection of civilians. Instances are cited of UN missions in the Sahel supporting host-state military action to protect civilians even where

the host state lacks commitment to the SSR needed to prevent its forces themselves from committing human rights violations, including CRSV. This underscores the importance of international assistance to CRSV response integrating and incentivizing human rights and accountability mechanisms not only as concerns “enemy” perpetrators but as concerns the assisted nation’s police and armed forces.<sup>19</sup>

## Applying understandings from gender-responsive SSR

Over the last two decades, DCAF has led research on and discussion and development of assessment and guidance tools for “gender-responsive SSR”.<sup>20</sup> Protocols, procedures, guidelines and training of security sector actors on gender equality and GBV are central elements of this approach. SSR capacity-building to improve GBV response ideally includes analysis of legislative gaps; developing strategic plans around specific forms of GBV; development of specialized services for GBV victims; building security sector capacities through the development of policies, procedures and record management systems; training and professional development of police, judges and lawyers; strengthening oversight of case handling; and advocacy campaigns within the security sector and wider society to address bias and stigma. Multisectoral prevention and response measures should be established, linking security and justice actors with other service providers and community structures. Gender-responsive SSR approaches advocate that improving response to GBV must include measures to increase women’s full, meaningful and equal participation in security sector institutions.

In several countries, such as Afghanistan, the DRC, Haiti, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Sudan and Timor-Leste, as well as in the Western Balkans, UN programming has supported the development of special police units focused on sexual violence and GBV where, alongside staff training on domestic and sexual violence, systems have been established to facilitate referral of victims to medical and other services. Such units have been shown to increase awareness of women’s rights at the community level and women’s trust in security sector institutions, and in some cases have increased reporting and conviction rates and expanded survivors’ access to services.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, a study from Mauritania found that work on gender-responsive policing, including skills training on gender and GBV, had positive impacts on public perceptions of domestic violence and led to increased reporting of violence by women.<sup>22</sup> Many of the conflict-affected countries where CRSV prosecutions are taking place, as described above, have benefited from these types of GBV programmes, albeit not always described as SSR support.

Several elements of the gender and SSR approach (as represented by policy, training and guidance tools) are particularly pertinent to considering how SSR addresses CRSV. First, the gender and SSR approach is grounded in recognizing how socially constructed gender roles impact individuals' vulnerability to GBV or propensity to commit acts of violence, and how conflict and societal insecurity affect these roles. This approach is consistent with what in CRSV literature is referred to as the "continuum argument": the contention that wartime sexual violence is on a continuum with peacetime GBV, and that pre-war GBV against women and gender inequality are likely to be predictive of CRSV occurring. Some CRSV scholars contest this, pointing to how CRSV is exceptional in its forms, severity, perpetrators and organization.<sup>23</sup> Donor-led responses to CRSV, including through SSR, have been built upon different understandings of whether CRSV is on a continuum with "everyday" violence, depending upon the different politicizations of sexual violence. Menzel and Tschörner show how in Sierra Leone CRSV was treated as linked to domestic violence and women's marginalization and vulnerability, whereas in the DRC the "weapon of war" narrative remains dominant.<sup>24</sup> Yet common to these analyses of CRSV is the recognition, as described by Nordås and Cohen, that "the choice of rape and other forms of sexual violence is most certainly gendered and is shaped by structural forms of sex and gender inequality, including patriarchy".<sup>25</sup> Understanding these alternative perspectives should help security and justice actors to distinguish their responses to GBV and CRSV, as appropriate to the dynamics of their context.

Second, gender and SSR approaches foreground working closely with diverse local women's organizations and gender experts, ensuring that they are part of the SSR process at all levels and empowering them to influence SSR meaningfully.<sup>26</sup> This helps to ensure that SSR's vision of the problems is addressed and potential solutions are grounded in the realities of communities. While "local ownership" is common to wider SSR guidance, centring the participation of women and men from community-level organizations is very different from the conventional approach, which tends to see local ownership as ownership by national ministries and officials. International programmes to address CRSV, including through SSR, have in some contexts been criticized as inadequately reflecting the insights and priorities of local women's rights groups; and SSR responses to CRSV have also been critiqued as manifesting "technicalization", wherein technical templates are carried by professions between contexts, "rendering alternative approaches invisible and/or implausible".<sup>27</sup> Situating local ownership of SSR with the women's sector, as well as state institutions, offers the potential for more contextually grounded approaches.

Third, SSR programmes with an explicit focus on gender usually try both to improve security sector actors' response to GBV in communities and to address the risk or reality that those same security sector actors are themselves perpetrators of GBV. In Liberia, for example, SSR support to the police helped to establish a Gender Affairs Section with responsibility for responding to complaints against police personnel of sexual harassment and domestic violence.<sup>28</sup>



Sierra Leone's police reform likewise focused on addressing sexual harassment, abuse and exploitation by police, as well as improving community policing and handling of GBV cases.<sup>29</sup> This focus on both internal institutional culture and external service provision should, it is hoped, open space to reduce the potential for one's own forces to be implicated in sexual exploitation and abuse or CRSV.

Fourth, gender and SSR practice has given rise to a body of analysis of the effectiveness of gender training for the security sector. In SSR guidance, gender training is seen as a tool to transform the institutional dynamics that inhibit effective GBV response: bringing trainees to recognize how their own and their society's unconscious gender bias and gender-based stereotypes lead to poor handling of GBV by their security sector institutions. Yet in reality, gender training for security sector actors is often too short and mechanistic to transform trainees' biases and attitudes. DCAF's research into peacekeeper gender training, for example, suggests that while it conveys information about the gender equality policy framework, it does not build a more equal view of gender roles or less discriminatory views.<sup>30</sup> As Holvikivi observes, it frames gender "as a problem that is amenable to knowledge acquisition and the development of technical skills".<sup>31</sup> This should be read in the context of broader scepticism within SSR evaluation literature as regards whether SSR capacity-building interventions have led to improved security outcomes, arguing that training is often poorly tailored to context and learning needs.<sup>32</sup> One counter-example of a successful approach to working with the security sector on GBV is the Living Peace programme now integrated

into the training curricula of the police and defence forces in the DRC. Conducted by NGOs with (among others) the Congolese National Police, the programme addressed social norms through a combination of group therapy and community outreach, encouraging police to question and change rigid, gender-inequitable and violence-supportive norms and attitudes, both within their own families and in the wider community. Evaluation of the programme found that it helped police learn non-violent strategies to cope with conflict, and led to clear commitments to integrate the social norms approach into their work to address sexual violence and GBV.<sup>33</sup>

Analysis of the success and shortcomings of gender-responsive SSR reinforces the importance of engaging with the gendered institutional cultures of the security sector and the incentive structures that lead to poor service delivery. Training is one element, but likely only to be meaningful where it engages with gender norms in society and the institutions. It is important, moreover, to examine holistically the barriers to effective CRSV response from the perspective of victims/survivors and communities. Security sector capacity-building around CRSV needs to engage systemically, including at governance and oversight levels. Visibility of GBV is key, and can be enhanced through support to the documentation of GBV by NGOs and work with media and external oversight actors.

## Endnotes

- 1 See, for example, UN Women, “Progress of the World’s Women: In Pursuit of Justice” (New York: UN Women, 2011), <http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2011/7/progress-of-the-world-s-women-in-pursuit-of-justice>; Mirko Fernandez and Jane Townsley, “Handbook on Gender-Responsive Police Services for Women and Girls Subject to Violence” (New York: UN Women, UNODC and the International Association of Women Police, 2021), <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/01/handbook-gender-responsive-police-services>.
- 2 “Resolution 2467” (New York: UN Security Council, 23 April 2019), paras 14, 15.
- 3 Kathleen Daly, “Sexual Violence and Victims’ Justice Interests”, in Estelle Zinsstag and Marie Keenan (eds) *Restorative Responses to Sexual Violence* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017); UN DPO et al., “United Nations Field Missions: Preventing and Responding to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence”, 2020.
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Gender focal point of the National Police and participant during a DCAF training on the treatment of GBV by DCAF, © DCAF.

Renforcer la sécurité  
des **citoyens** au  
moyen des services  
de **sécurité** et de  
**justice** responsables



# Mali

## Context

Since 2020 Mali has experienced increasing insecurity and political turmoil; this has contributed to cases of CRSV, particularly in the northern and central regions of the country. Humanitarian actors reported 392 cases of CRSV affecting women and 294 cases affecting girls in 2023.<sup>1</sup> CRSV is committed by members of armed groups, militias, self-defence groups, foreign security personnel and members of Malian security forces. Sexual violence has been committed in the framework of the conflict as an intimidation tactic, to reinforce group cohesion and as a reward for combatants.<sup>2</sup>

The conflict moreover exacerbates all other forms of GBV. For example, women and girls who have been forced to leave their homes

due to widespread insecurity are more at risk of GBV. Cases of forced and early marriage have increased as families order young girls to marry to protect them and send them away from areas occupied by armed groups. The conflict has also contributed to the forced displacement of 390,000 civilians, 57 per cent of whom are women. This displacement increases the vulnerability risks of women and girls to GBV, as it leaves them in a situation of poverty and isolation from their community. Notably, 11 per cent of GBV and CRSV victims are women and girls living in internal displacement camps.<sup>3</sup> In Mali it is difficult to draw a clear line between cases of violence directly linked to the conflict and “classic” forms of GBV, as the demarcation between areas of conflict and peace is blurred.

Sexual violence against women and girls should be read in the wider context of tolerance for GBV and impunity for perpetrators that persist in Malian society. Mali has ratified all major international instruments on prevention of and response to GBV and the promotion and protection of women's rights, but despite advocacy by women's activists and the Ministry for the Promotion of Women, Children and Family there is no law criminalizing acts of violence that constitute GBV beyond criminalization of rape. Some crimes that may be considered CRSV under international law are included as crimes against humanity, but judges have not tried any case under this criminal category.<sup>4</sup> Four cases involving 146 victims of CRSV from northern Mali have been pending before the courts since 2013; advocates describe the proceedings as "stagnated".<sup>5</sup>

In 2019 the then government of Mali and the UN signed a joint communiqué to commit to working together towards responding to and preventing CRSV, followed by an action plan in 2021. The action plan sets out a holistic approach to ending CRSV, including efforts to facilitate access to justice, security

and psychosocial support for victims, as well as boosting national actors' capacity to respond to cases. Additionally, Mali has a national strategy to end GBV for 2019–2030 which outlines various commitments for national institutions, including security actors, to prevent and respond to GBV. However, implementation is slow due to the lack of coordination among national, international and civil society actors and the absence of national allocation of funding.<sup>6</sup> In November 2022 the transitional authorities promulgated a law addressing both survivors and children born of conflict-related rape, which authorizes compensation for damages resulting from serious human rights violations, including coverage of medical costs for the treatment of sexually transmitted infections and sterility, reconstructive surgery and rehabilitation.<sup>7</sup> More recently, in 2023 the Islamic High Council issued a *fatwa* (a religious ruling according to Islam) prohibiting sexual violence. This is an important step forward for Mali to tackle stigma around this issue, although it does not counteract the limitations in the legal framework and the absence of a national GBV policy.<sup>8</sup>

## Research process

The target institutions of DCAF's research in Mali were the Mali Gendarmerie and the Mali Police. The research team conducted a document review of the legal and policy framework surrounding GBV and CRSV, the most notable capacity-building initiatives undertaken to prevent and respond to CRSV in partnership with international actors, including DCAF's past activities,

and approached the relevant institutions. The gender focal points of each assisted in shaping the research methodology and helped to facilitate the research process.

The researchers conducted seven interviews in June 2024 with personnel from the Mali Gendarmerie and the Mali Police. Interviewees were selected by the director-

generals of their respective institutions in light of their participation in DCAF capacity-building activities on gender and GBV over the period 2019 to 2023, as well as their experience in dealing with cases of GBV. Interviews were conducted with the gender focal points from both institutions and front-line personnel in charge of dealing with cases of GBV. Representatives from the GBV One Stop Centre in Bamako and

UN Women were also interviewed. Due to the unavailability of some participants to be interviewed in person, a survey was conducted with 17 members of the Gendarmerie and Police. Surveyed and interviewed personnel include front-line personnel of various hierarchical levels who have dealt with cases of GBV and CRSV. The interviews took place and the survey was completed in June 2024.

## How are security sector institutions preventing and responding to CRSV?

Research participants described the existence of gender focal points and GBV cells in investigation units as the main resources for responding to cases of CRSV. Personnel from the *prevôtale*, a detachment of the Gendarmerie, investigate cases of CRSV in the northern and central parts of the country as part of judicial police duties. The Police have also adopted a toll-free number for victims of GBV/CRSV, and both institutions have conducted numerous sensitization efforts with communities on GBV and CRSV, including a survey on community perceptions of Gendarmerie officers on these issues. Inspections are carried out to provide oversight in respect of norms and possible violations committed.

It is difficult to gather a comprehensive picture of security actors' response to CRSV, mainly because of a lack of accurate data regarding cases. This is due in part to the underreporting of cases of CRSV: many victims are not willing to report due to fear of repercussions from armed groups,

security risks that they may face physically in reaching security or social services, or the lack of support services in areas affected by conflict. Security actors are also not able to investigate cases safely, particularly in areas that are out of the control of the state.<sup>9</sup> Notably, many victims do not resort to legal services even when they are available, due to a lack of trust in the legal system, including shortcomings in the legal framework as described above. Other obstacles such as geographical distance and the lack of well-trained justice and security personnel hinder access to justice and security. According to 2023 data, 72 per cent of victims of GBV remained without access to security.<sup>10</sup> As highlighted by NGOs working on women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health, in 2023 out of 15,000 cases of GBV documented, fewer than 100 achieved a legal outcome.<sup>11</sup>

Most research participants seemed unfamiliar with the concept of CRSV, and perceived sexual violence related to the conflict as an

international crime as an issue affecting only a part of the country. They had not received any specific training on CRSV and expressed a lack of familiarity with it. They did not think that clear guidelines on what they should do when confronted with GBV and CRSV cases existed. Although this research's literature review showed numerous action plans and strategies to deal with CRSV, it seems that these have not been adopted by operational personnel.

In general, it seems that police and gendarmerie personnel do not differentiate between cases of CRSV and GBV: their response is similar whether or not a case is

related to conflict. This reflects the blurred lines mentioned above between CRSV and GBV exacerbated by the conflict. Confusion around CRSV and GBV is also explained by the fact that personnel based in Bamako perceive the conflict as a remote issue. This is a misperception, as even areas where armed groups are absent are touched by the conflict, most notably by the arrival of internally displaced people, including women and girls more at risk of being victims of GBV. For front-line personnel dealing with victims, cases of violence related to the conflict are simply treated as GBV, rather than potentially as international crimes.

## What have been the impacts of SSR on CRSV response?

The UN Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was the lead actor supporting the government's capacity-building activities for security personnel on CRSV. Among the most notable initiatives, in 2021 MINUSMA partnered with the Police Academy to include a CRSV module in the training curriculum and provided additional training for police personnel. Within the framework of this project, the Police decided to appoint two regional CRSV focal points. Gender focal points from the northern and central regions have supported CRSV sensitization efforts for security personnel.<sup>12</sup> MINUSMA also worked with the High Islamic Council in developing an action plan engaging religious leaders in the fight against CRSV, and has in this framework worked to sensitize the armed forces, Police and

Gendarmerie on the importance of including GBV and CRSV in their work.<sup>13</sup>

With UN Women, UN Population Fund and MINUSMA support, the Mali Police adopted an action plan on GBV for 2018–2020, aiming at coordinating all initiatives to assist victims and refer them to support services. As part of this plan, the police increased their presence in internal displacement camps and areas of insecurity, and have worked with communities to sensitize them to GBV. The plan refers to all forms of GBV, including those linked to the conflict.

It is important to note that SSR support has gendered dimensions even where gender and GBV are not an explicit focus. Analysis of a Norwegian-led police team's capacity-building in crime scene management,

under the MINUSMA umbrella, showed that the Norwegian officers worked actively to promote gender equality and women's participation, even though this was not a central part of the project.<sup>14</sup>

DCAF has integrated a gender perspective throughout all its initiatives with the Gendarmerie and Police since 2017, mainly focusing on capacity-building and reinforcing accountability on gender and GBV. DCAF worked with the Mali Police gender focal points to increase their expertise on gender and GBV, and developed a manual for them to use as a reference and as training material for colleagues. The gender focal points received a training of trainers, and have since replicated it for parts of the institution. The Police have conducted a gender self-assessment, which has served as the basis for developing a plan to promote gender and women's leadership. Concerning the Mali Gendarmerie, DCAF has focused on supporting the creation and operationalization of a Gender Committee, including strengthening their capacity on gender and how to deal with cases of GBV, and developing a GBV curriculum now included in the training for recruits. DCAF has also supported a gender self-assessment for the Gendarmerie and the development of a gender action plan.

Although international training emphasized the legal and moral obligations of Gendarmerie and Police personnel in investigating GBV cases, it did not include reference to possible violations against the population by state security forces' personnel. The UN Security Council and Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights mechanisms continue to document extremely

serious allegations of CRSV perpetrated by Malian defence and security forces.<sup>15</sup>

The interviews and survey with the Mali Police and Gendarmerie suggest that the impact of gender and GBV capacity-building on CRSV response has been positive, but is limited in terms of institutional transformation. The interviews show results in two directions, discussed below.

First, capacity-building projects supported by international actors, including DCAF, within the Mali Police and Gendarmerie *have* catalysed attention towards gender equality within these bodies. Interviewees said there is more appetite to implement gender-related projects and activities within their respective institutions. Many survey respondents noticed a behavioural change among personnel on the importance of considering gender when dealing with cases of GBV, and in general of the importance of gender equality for better service provision and internal management. The research found that capacity-building initiatives on gender have contributed to supporting the development and leadership of female personnel, with respondents mentioning they are more aware of the key role women play in security institutions, specifically in dealing with victims.

Second, the capacity of Police and Gendarmerie personnel has improved when responding to cases of GBV. Several interviewees said they felt more confident in dealing with cases. One respondent described how personnel were previously unaware of how widespread domestic violence is, and observed changes in regards to stigma as a result of capacity-building initiatives:



Another respondent mentioned how they convinced a family to press charges against a perpetrator of violence against their daughter, explaining it was important to open a formal case to bring justice to their daughter and punish the perpetrator.



Many of our staff were unaware of the seriousness of domestic violence, but today there has been a big change. Raising public awareness has also meant that survivors are not stigmatized.

**Survey respondent from security sector institution in Mali**

Notably, respondents from the GBV One Stop Centre in Bamako, the main support service for victims that offers medical, legal and psychosocial support, described seeing a positive change in security actors' response in dealing with victims, which has increased trust among the population.

Nonetheless, this research identified that the impacts of capacity-building initiatives on gender and GBV remain limited, as they are seldom conceived as part of structural change within institutions. Several participants said that while their institutions' integration of gender throughout policies and practices has greatly improved, gender mainstreaming is limited. Reducing gender inequality is not seen as relevant to the core mandate of the Police and Gendarmerie, and this lack of prioritization affects the translation of initiatives, such as policies and action plans, into actual change with implications for the entirety of the institutions.

Respondents lamented the fact that activities are focused on improving technical competencies rather than functional ones, and do not reflect on how to enable the institution to respond to GBV. In other words, training equips personnel with new skills but does not address how staff will use these skills, how they fit in their workload and position and what resources will be allocated. Policies and action plans developed with international partners are perceived as too dense and lengthy to be practically used in day-to-day work. Training focuses on "what" should be done rather than "how"; it is not focused on how to put into action new knowledge and policies. This is especially important in the context of Mali, where there is a chronic lack of resources and staff capacity that cannot be solved by transferring technical skills alone.

Interviews showed that gender activities can sometimes be perceived as an obligation towards international partners, and are conceived as short-term outputs rather than focused on long-term results. Monitoring and evaluation frameworks governing international partners' projects are centred on activities and outputs, and neglect to analyse the impact of the work on the population in the long term. Criteria for developing capacity-building projects often do not match the needs of security institutions. Rapid turnover of staff within international organizations also hampers the implementation of GBV/CRSV support.

MINUSMA withdrew from Mali at the end of 2023. Local actors consider it likely that government efforts to implement the action plan on CRSV will considerably slow down, as there was strong reliance upon international partners for its implementation.

## Lessons learnt

The research has revealed several insights for international actors to consider in terms of support around CRSV, and more generally when developing capacity-building interventions as part of SSR support, specifically in fragile contexts such as Mali.

### Understanding of CRSV should be deepened and contextualized as part of GBV

There is a need to increase understanding of CRSV, how to identify cases and how to refer these to the justice system. The research in Mali has shown a great deal of overlap between CRSV and GBV. In Mali the conflict has not only triggered acts of sexual violence committed in direct relation to the conflict, but has indirectly exacerbated all forms of GBV that existed before. This is especially evident in the case of forced and early marriage: this form of GBV has always existed in Mali, but it is particularly acute since the intensification of the conflict as families have been obliged to marry young girls off to remove them physically from security risks. This situation, coupled with respondents' lack of understanding of CRSV and confusion with other forms of violence, highlights the need to frame CRSV capacity-building in the wider context of GBV. Any action plan, strategy or protocol to prevent and respond to CRSV needs to be contextualized as part of the broader fight against GBV.

### SSR should include advice and advocacy towards adapting strong legal frameworks concerning GBV

In Mali there are still critical shortcomings in the legal and regulatory framework concerning GBV. Laws aligned with international human rights standards are the foundation upon which effective security

sector responses can be built, and training security sector actors will have a limited impact if this institutional and governance framework is weak. SSR capacity-building to strengthen GBV response should engage on the level of support to legislative reform and encompass support to the civil society actors who advocate for this reform.

### Capacity-building should address institutional capacity holistically, not focus only on training

Capacity-building interventions should be developed as part of an effort to support security institutions as a whole. Training should focus not only on increasing technical skills but also on how personnel will apply them, the roles and responsibilities of staff in addressing CRSV and the resources dedicated to doing so. Considering the position of female personnel and their equal career opportunities should be part of a holistic approach. The research found that training has increased the confidence of Police and Gendarmerie officers in identifying cases of GBV, dealing with victims and referral mechanisms. However, the lack of resources and personnel available to deal with GBV, compounded by the limits posed by the legislation, makes it difficult for security personnel to pursue cases of GBV effectively. This is especially true of CRSV taking place in the northern part of the country, where state institutions are barely present.

## International actors should invest more time in building local ownership and adapting SSR approaches to institutional needs with a long-term perspective

Mali has a plethora of policies, action plans, protocols and other initiatives to prevent and respond to GBV and CRSV; these have been developed by national institutions in partnership with international actors. While they are highly necessary, interviewees from the Police and Gendarmerie revealed themselves to be largely unaware of them. Where they are familiar with these policies and protocols, respondents described finding them too dense and complicated to use. International actors should better harmonize efforts when developing policies, strategies and action plans, and focus on encouraging ownership and implementation of these at the operational level of security institutions. Capacity-building approaches should also be adapted to suit institutions' daily work rather than to meet monitoring and evaluation criteria set by donors and international organizations. International and national cooperation should focus less on producing outputs and activities and more on evaluating the long-term impact of capacity-building on security and justice provision.

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Participants at a workshop on "Challenges in Conducting Psychological Examinations in Gender-Based Violence Cases and Peculiarities of Work with Survivors", © Anton Tkachenko

# Ukraine

## Context

Since the February 2022 full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine has recorded more than 134,100 crimes of aggression and war crimes.<sup>1</sup> Over the subsequent two years an increase was observed in the registration of crimes of CRSV. According to the Office of the Prosecutor General's monthly public data, as of August 2024, 310 cases of CRSV had been recorded. The victims were 113 men (36 per cent) and 197 women, of whom 15 were minors (one boy and 14 girls).<sup>2</sup> The types of CRSV recorded include rape, mutilation of or violence against genitals, forced nudity, threats of and attempted rape and being forced to watch sexual abuse of loved ones.

The Russian invasion and the associated increase in violence and impunity in society

are also held to account for an increase in domestic violence. Moreover, destroyed infrastructure and lack of access to critical services have left many women and girls without support, increasing their vulnerability to violence.<sup>3</sup> According to data from the National Police of Ukraine, in the 12 months of 2023, 291,428 complaints about cases of domestic violence and GBV were registered (47,047 more complaints than in 2022), and 98,947 urgent restraining orders were issued against offenders (55,606 more than in 2022).<sup>4</sup>

There have been significant developments in Ukraine's legal framework to address GBV since 2016, following the signing and ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating

Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention). Recently, three key policies have been developed concerning police and judicial response to GBV and CRSV. The 2021 National Strategy in the Field of Human Rights includes actions aimed at preventing and combating GBV: it envisages bringing GBV legislation further into compliance with international standards; creating conditions for preventing and combating all forms of GBV, in particular violence and sexual harassment in the workplace, CRSV, sexual exploitation and GBV by law enforcement officers; and ensuring effective investigation of criminal offences related to GBV, in particular those committed on the temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine. The 2022 State Strategy for Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men includes a goal to combat all forms of violence, including CRSV. It envisions creating an effective and accessible arrangement for responding to cases of GBV; an increase in legal aid provision for women from vulnerable groups; and a disaggregated data collection system for legal aid recipients. Strengthening of the legal framework to respond to GBV has continued since February 2022.

Even before February 2022, although the problem of CRSV was not as widespread, policies were in place. A government Strategy for Prevention of and Response to the Conflict-Related Sexual Violence was developed in 2018 with the technical support of UN Women Ukraine and the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine. The strategy makes a range of recommendations pertaining to the prosecution and hearing of CRSV cases and building the capacity of law enforcement and judges. It is complemented by the 2022 Plan for the Implementation of the Framework on Cooperation between the Government of Ukraine and the UN on Prevention and Response to CRSV. Ukraine's 2020 National Action Plan for the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS NAP) likewise had a focus on response to CRSV by police, justice and prosecution authorities, assistance to survivors and access to justice. The WPS NAP, as amended in 2022, emphasizes problems associated with combating and responding to GBV and CRSV as being a lack of knowledge and skills of implementing entities, including those that ensure justice, and limited human and material resources and technical support.

## Research process

The target institutions of DCAF's research in Ukraine were the National School of Judges of Ukraine, the Prosecutors' Training Centre of Ukraine and the Office of the Prosecutor General. JurFem (the Ukrainian Women Lawyers' Association) analysed legislation, reports, statistics, plans and state

strategies concerning justice responses to GBV and CRSV, collecting information from official government websites and international organizations and through requests to authorities. JurFem also analysed documentation related to capacity-building in the Ukrainian justice sector concerning

gender equality, GBV and CRSV from 2017 until March 2022. This included DCAF's capacity-building programme on GBV and the administration of justice, conducted from 2018 to 2021 as part of the EU Project Pravo-Justice in partnership with the NGO La Strada-Ukraine.

JurFem conducted 11 interviews with the head of the CRSV Unit within the Office of

the Prosecutor General and senior staff of the Prosecutors' Training Centre and the National School of Judges, as well as lawyers and experts from La Strada, JurFem's legal aid line and UN Women Ukraine. An additional written input was included. Informants included participants and coordinators of DCAF's SSR support through Project Pravo-Justice. Interviews took place from May to July 2024.

## How is the justice system preventing and responding to CRSV?

**Prosecutors** The Office of the Prosecutor General is one of the main actors in developing national-level policies in the field of responding to GBV and CRSV, and is responsible for investigating and prosecuting allegations of CRSV. In 2020 it formed the Department for the Protection of Children's Interests and Combating Domestic Violence, now with specialized prosecutors. To enhance investigative capacity for sexual violence crimes, in 2022 a similar specialization was formed in the Office of the Prosecutor General's Department for War Crimes: the Division of Procedural Management of Pre-trial Investigations and Maintenance of Public Prosecutions in Criminal Proceedings on Crimes Related to Sexual Violence (CRSV Crimes Division). The Office of the Prosecutor General also collaborates with a CRSV expert group. From the end of September 2022, mobile groups including police officers, investigators, prosecutors and psychologists were deployed to areas that have been under the temporary military control of Russia. Some 200 prosecutors are

investigating sexual violence crimes, with national security and anti-trafficking bodies collecting evidence.<sup>5</sup>

Ukraine's Criminal Procedure Code does not set out specific pre-trial investigation and trial requirements concerning CRSV. Nonetheless, over the past two years the Office of the Prosecutor General has been implementing systemic changes to improve approaches to identifying and responding to cases of CRSV. In particular, the Office of the Prosecutor General is implementing new approaches to protecting the interests of survivors and witnesses:

- adaptation of the investigation process to the personality of the survivors (respect for the uniqueness of each, consideration of their personal identities, characteristics, group affiliation, etc.);
- prioritizing the safety, health and dignity of the survivors above other goals;

- ensuring inclusiveness and non-discrimination (avoidance of persecution, marginalization, pretended lack of personal autonomy or capacity);
- ensuring the opportunity for survivors to maintain control over their information (respect of and support for the survivor's right to privacy, control and autonomy in matters related to their personal history, identity and image, protection of the confidentiality of any personal information or data of the survivor); and
- prohibition of stigmatization (transfer and publication of any information about the survivors that could lead to actions that accuse, embarrass, insult, condemn, humiliate, ridicule or disrespect them).<sup>6</sup>

Consideration is being given to the different needs of male victims through the investigation process, in light of the different characteristics of the forms of CRSV to which they are subjected (often in detention settings), to avoid traumatization.

The Office of the Prosecutor General developed, in cooperation with national and international experts, the Strategic Implementation Plan of Powers of the Prosecutor's Office in the Field of Criminal Prosecution of CRSV, adopted in 2023.<sup>7</sup> This aims to improve access to justice for survivors of CRSV through prompt, comprehensive and impartial investigations, and ensure a survivor- and witness-oriented approach. In 2023 the Prosecutor General also approved a strategic plan related to international crimes that aims *inter alia* to ensure the protection of the interests of particularly vulnerable groups

of the population, such as survivors of CRSV;<sup>8</sup> plus support arrangements for survivors and witnesses of international crimes to enhance their protection and assistance,<sup>9</sup> so strengthening their trust in law enforcement agencies and improving the quality of pre-trial investigation. To improve communication with survivors of CRSV, the Office of the Prosecutor General has established the Coordination Centre for the Support of Survivors and Witnesses. Its functions include providing comprehensive information support at all stages of criminal proceedings, coordinating the provision of legal, psychological, medical and social assistance by relevant services and NGOs, and implementing measures to prevent revictimization.

The Office of the Prosecutor General actively seeks to identify problems and propose solutions concerning prosecuting CRSV. For example, special public "notification of suspicion" procedures are being used to prosecute perpetrators of war crimes, including CRSV, who are physically outside of Ukraine's control (*in absentia*).<sup>10</sup> This presented a problem in the context of the stigma surrounding sexual violence, in that notifications of suspicion were originally published with information identifying the survivor. Through work with the CRSV Expert Group, changes have been proposed in a draft law to ensure confidentiality of survivors, waive time limits for pre-trial investigation and enable remote participation in court proceedings.

Despite the frameworks in place, this research finds several weaknesses in CRSV response, each connected to the prosecution of sexual violence and GBV more broadly.



First, there remains a lack of a nationwide effective, comprehensive and coordinated policy for the prevention of and response to GBV. In general, access to justice for survivors of GBV is undermined by territorial distance from law enforcement agencies and courts, lack of financial resources to pay for legal assistance and court fees and ignorance of legal aid entitlement. Certain groups of women and men face multiple barriers, such as Roma women, internally displaced persons, persons with disabilities, elderly persons, HIV-infected persons and women who live in rural areas and mountain settlements. State bodies are inadequately coordinated in terms of data collection and information exchange between law enforcement agencies, social services and other structures.

Weak nationwide systems concerning GBV led to delays in assisting survivors of CRSV and investigating CRSV cases, because there was no mechanism in the initial period after the full-scale invasion to single out CRSV cases. There was an initial lack of understanding of how to proceed with these cases. The more remote the region was from the centre, the less the actors responsible for GBV and CRSV response had the information and skills to identify CRSV. Advocates for CRSV survivors underscore the need to improve coordination between different service providers: to map service providers to develop a common understanding and referral opportunities for victims at both national and local levels.<sup>11</sup>

Second, NGOs advise that boys and men affected by CRSV do not receive appropriate, high-quality and timely services. While there are some NGOs that provide specialized

assistance to women and girls affected by CRSV, a support system to meet the medical and other needs of men and boys still needs to be developed.

Third, there may be problems with the recognition of CRSV. Under Ukrainian law, CRSV is prosecuted under Article 438 of the Criminal Code as a violation of the laws and customs of war, categorized as a war crime. There is no definition of CRSV in the Criminal Code. GBV offences that are not war crimes are outlined in Chapter IV of the Criminal Code, covering crimes against sexual freedom and personal integrity (e.g. Articles 152–156-1), and domestic violence (Article 126-1). The lack of specific mention of CRSV in Article 438 often, it is claimed, leads to the misclassification of CRSV offences as ordinary crimes under Articles 152 or 153 instead of Article 438. This can result in improper legal responses and eventually in lighter sanctions. Furthermore, private prosecution rules of the Criminal Procedure Code complicate proceedings related to GBV, unlike mandatory proceedings under the Article 438 war crimes provisions. This legal ambiguity has been noted in high-profile cases, raising concerns about the correct classification and prosecution of such crimes.

Fourth, and relatedly, a significant proportion of sexual violence crimes are not effectively prosecuted. From May to early June 2023, JurFem conducted a survey on the effectiveness of responding to cases of sexual violence in Ukraine. Among the factors that prevent survivors from seeking help or reporting criminal offences, 58.4 per cent of respondents answered that survivors do not know how to act.<sup>12</sup> Such data indicate that national and local authorities are not

doing enough to raise awareness among citizens of the prevention of and protection against sexual violence. When sexual violence cases are reported, only some 50 per cent go to court. Monitoring over six months in 2022 found that out of 31 criminal offences registered under Article 153 of the Criminal Code (sexual violence), only 16 reached court. Cases are dropped through, for example, an overreliance on physical examinations and lack of accommodation of the reality that it is common for survivors of sexual violence not to seek help and report the crime immediately. There is as yet no analysis as to what proportion of these sexual violence crimes, if any, that are not taken to prosecution could rightly be considered CRSV.

**Judges** There is no specialization of judges in relation to GBV and sexual violence cases. In general, Ukraine’s criminal process in sexual violence cases has been criticized as focusing more on the rights of the accused than the survivor; courts frequently do not punish the accused, but merely assign a probationary period.

Responding to requests from judges, the National School of Judges is working on integrating issues related to handling cases of CRSV into its standardized curriculum training for trial and appellate judges and judicial assistants. The website of the Supreme Court has also posted a memo on the qualification of cases of CRSV for use by investigators, prosecutors, judges and human rights defenders.<sup>13</sup>

Between February 2022 and June 2024, 20 indictments of war crimes concerning CRSV against 29 people were presented to

the courts.<sup>14</sup> Only two convictions in cases related to acts of CRSV have been made so far, both in 2022 (one of these was confirmed on appeal in 2023). The acts concerned included the threat of rape, forced nudity and attempted rape. However, the court decisions in these cases do not use the term “CRSV”, formulating the crimes only as “cruel” or “brutal” treatment of civilians as a violation of the laws and customs of war, following the construction of the relevant article of the Criminal Code.

No detailed information was available about the procedures employed by the courts in these cases, or whether the tools provided for in the legislation for the protection and avoidance of traumatization of the victims were employed. Conclusions thus cannot be drawn about how the survivors were informed of their rights; whether the survivors’ consent to certain procedural actions was properly informed; whether they were provided with the opportunity to participate in the legal process, and if so, how their safety was ensured; whether closed court proceedings and video interviews were used; whether psychological support was provided, etc. The formulation of the judgments does, however, suggest a possible need for specialist training for judges to ensure that the sexual violence dimensions of the crimes are explicitly and fully considered – for example, regarding the construction of the *actus reus*, and appropriate application of the norms of international humanitarian law and the jurisprudence of the International Criminal Court.

## What have been the impacts of SSR on CRSV response?

The research drew out a range of examples of international advisory support strengthening response to GBV and CRSV, but also some outstanding challenges.

**Prosecutors** In the period from 2019 to 2021, activities were implemented within the framework of DCAF's Project Pravo-Justice aiming to strengthen recognition within the justice sector of domestic violence and violence against women as serious crimes and improve responses. In cooperation with the National Prosecution Academy, a manual, model lecture and online and offline training programmes on domestic violence were developed. These focused on inter alia survivor-centredness, gender sensitivity and ensuring non-discrimination. These have been integrated into the training programmes of the Prosecutors' Training Centre on an ongoing basis. Concurrent with the final stage of Project Pravo-Justice in 2021, additional training courses for prosecutors were introduced on survivor-oriented approaches to domestic violence and sexual violence crimes against children. These new courses are credited as both indicating and contributing to progress in overcoming stereotypes and prejudices among prosecutors, and the adoption of more survivor-oriented approaches to domestic violence. The Prosecutors' Training Centre also developed material on "psychology of interrogation of vulnerable groups of persons", which it considers a resource for both GBV and CRSV crimes.

The head of the CRSV Crimes Division of the Office of the Prosecutor General described investigators becoming aware that female family members of Ukrainian servicemen were being particularly targeted by Russian

combatants for questioning: "The Russian investigator has a conversation with her saying that she is a mother, that her son should return, not fight against the 'brotherly people'."<sup>15</sup> Investigators identified a pattern of seeking to terrorize women, and realized they needed to understand GBV to understand why and how women are particularly targeted in armed conflict. The CRSV Crimes Division took steps to improve their knowledge of GBV and its causes, including turning to the Office of the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict for advice and training. Prosecutors and judges were given training in Poland that addressed issues such as working with survivors, safety and security measures, planning and carrying out investigative actions, interviewing survivors and their family members, the Murad Code and experiences from the former Yugoslavia. "The understanding came that we are dealing with something much bigger than CRSV, and this is only a part of GBV ... In each war crime, we must look for a relationship with other crimes. Then we can see the scale and system of organization of the crime – who gave the order."<sup>16</sup> The CRSV Crimes Division directly credits this UN training with leading them to form new practices.

More generally, informants suggest that the GBV capacity-building programmes supported before February 2022 by international organizations, including DCAF, have significantly contributed to the speed and effectiveness of implementing survivor-centred approaches to CRSV

response. This is because the specialists who have undergone prior training and are now working in the Office of the Prosecutor General, National Police and Ministry of Internal Affairs already possess a deep understanding of GBV and the importance of adopting alternative approaches to their investigations. Demonstrating how capacity-building can have an amplified impact, the CRSV Crimes Division has worked with the Prosecutors' Training Centre and others to prepare materials on the identification and investigation of CRSV; these have been introduced into the training process for the professional development of prosecutors.<sup>17</sup>

**Judges** As part of DCAF's Project Pravo-Justice outlined above, training on the peculiarities of hearing domestic violence and other GBV cases was developed in cooperation with the National School of Judges. DCAF's capacity-building programming included a study visit, developing a GBV course and a team of "trainer judges", training and mentoring judges, and producing a handbook. CRSV was included in the training course developed in 2020. The course developers found the integration of CRSV to be a challenging aspect because it required trainees to have knowledge of international humanitarian law. In addition, they felt the module on CRSV could have been difficult to understand due to the stigma and stereotypes that existed at the time. The domestic violence training programme has been institutionalized and continued by the National School of Judges. Having international expert support was perceived by local NGO partners as making a significant contribution.



It was important that an international expert from DCAF joined [in the development of a course on sexual violence in 2019–2020]. It was a game-changer in the course development and teaching process. She advocated practical and applied teaching methods and encouraged us to pay attention to this issue, so that we would form understanding among judges [and] fight stereotypes regarding this issue. The involvement of the expert then changed the quality of the course.

**Staff member of La Strada-Ukraine**

**In general** Despite capacity-building programmes on combating domestic violence and GBV being institutionalized and seen as impactful, informants were nonetheless critical of the training of judges and prosecutors as lacking a systematic and consistent approach and being reliant on the support of non-governmental and public organizations. At the same time, informants urged involving international experts more thoroughly and continuously in the development of standard procedures, policies and other documents, so that national

approaches are synchronized with those of international judicial institutions.

DCAF's capacity-building programmes additionally enabled the partner local NGOs to strengthen their expertise on GBV and build strong links with prosecution and judicial authorities. As a result, when the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, the relationships

were already in place to cooperate with the security sector on CRSV. For example, Project Pravo-Justice partner La Strada has led training for judges on writing judgments regarding war crimes, which took into account the issue of vulnerable witnesses, survivors, tools for avoiding retraumatization during court proceedings, etc.

## Lessons learnt

It is clear that in Ukraine considerable attention is being paid to the investigation and consideration of CRSV cases, supported by the international community. The Office of the Prosecutor General has developed a dedicated structure and specialized approaches, paying attention to survivor-centred practices and the prevention of retraumatization. Still, the research has revealed a range of challenges and lessons for international actors to consider in terms of support around CRSV.

### Supporting local NGOs to build relationships with the security and justice sector pays dividends in times of conflict

International GBV capacity-building support is often focused on security sector personnel and relies upon experts from other countries to deliver training and advice. While security sector institutions do want and benefit from this international exchange, it is local civil society organizations (CSOs) that do the critical work of supporting and advocating for victims of GBV on a day-to-day basis. If armed conflict breaks out or violence escalates, international engagement becomes even more limited and the role of local CSOs even more essential. International SSR support around GBV has the most impact when it is delivered in partnership with local CSOs and experts, and enables and supports trust- and relationship-building between the security sector and those CSOs and experts.

### Judicial actors' understanding of the relationships and distinctions between GBV and CRSV is crucial

Informants from both the prosecution services and NGO sector emphasized that an understanding of GBV is essential for personnel dealing with CRSV. Such awareness is not only about recognizing acts of violence but also about understanding the systemic inequalities that make women more vulnerable in such situations. Prosecutors' and investigators' awareness of GBV can influence the approaches used to investigate cases of CRSV, encouraging them to consider the socio-cultural factors that contribute to women's vulnerability. This contributes to the quality of investigations of CRSV and the application of a survivor-centred approach.

## Coordination between actors involved in CRSV response and victim support remains challenging

Weak nationwide systems concerning support for victims of GBV have compromised identifying and assisting survivors of CRSV, especially for victims in remote regions. The support systems for male victims of CRSV, in particular, require better development. There should be further development of mechanisms for cooperation between state authorities, law enforcement agencies, CSOs and other actors in the field of combating and responding to CRSV, including mapping of service providers and clear referral procedures at both national and local levels.

## Best practices in survivor-centred approaches to investigation and prosecution of CRSV are missing in handling other forms of GBV

Interestingly, when comparing approaches to GBV and CRSV cases, expert informants observe differences in the awareness and sensitivity of the actors involved. Prosecutors involved in CRSV cases are, as a rule, considered to be more sensitive to the needs of survivors and better trained. In contrast, in the investigation of sexual violence as an ordinary crime there is no such level of awareness and sensitivity.

As such, education and training that has been provided to CRSV specialists should be made available more broadly to prosecutors, judges and others involved in the justice process. The Prosecutors' Training Centre and National School of Judges should more systematically implement training

programmes to overcome the stigmatization of survivors and eradicate victimization practices, ensuring respect for dignity and human rights at all stages of the investigation and judicial process. Specialized training modules on CRSV should include modern investigative approaches (including a survivor-centred approach), as well as measures to protect witnesses and survivors. Records should be maintained on who has done GBV and CRSV training.



... on the level of CRSV cases, usually, actors, in particular prosecutors, are more sensitive, trained; survivors are not summoned repeatedly ...

**Lawyer of JurFem:support**

Good practices developed for CRSV cases should be considered for application to GBV more generally, as appropriate, and to all forms of GBV, not only domestic violence. For example, provisions applied in CRSV cases that allow survivors to testify anywhere, have access to legal support regardless of their country of residence and report violence in any way (online/offline) should, local lawyers argue, be extended from CRSV to GBV cases.

## CRSV committed by the Ukrainian side is a sensitive topic

As of today, there is no information on registered criminal proceedings regarding CRSV by Ukrainian military personnel.<sup>18</sup> The Ukrainian legal system provides for

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responsibility for CRSV regardless of whether these crimes are committed by Russian troops or by Ukrainian service personnel. In accordance with the WPS NAP and the Framework on Cooperation between the Government of Ukraine and the UN on Prevention and Response to CRSV, the government, CSOs and international actors including DCAF are working with the security and defence sector to counter such crimes and promote the norms of international humanitarian law.<sup>19</sup> Gender advisers of the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces are involved in this work. Civil society partners suggest the need for a strategy and approach on how to communicate such cases sensitively. Practical exercises in training courses on CRSV should include consideration of offences committed by Ukrainian personnel.

## Endnotes

- 1 According to the June 2024 data of the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine.
- 2 According to the August 2024 data of the CRSV Division of the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine.
- 3 Khrystyna Kit, “Fighting Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Ukraine”, UN News ( 12 April 2022), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/12/1131317>.
- 4 Iryna Popika, “Domestic Violence in 2023: Data and Trends” (Analytical Centre JurFem, 22 April 2024), <https://jurfem.com.ua/domashne-nasylstvo-2023/>.
- 5 “Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: Report of the Secretary-General, 2023”.
- 6 According to the data provided by the Division of Procedural Management of Pre-Trial Investigations and Maintenance of Public Prosecutions in Criminal Proceedings on Crimes Related to Sexual Violence, Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine.
- 7 Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine, “The Strategic Implementation Plan of Powers of the Prosecutor’s Office in the Field of Criminal Prosecution of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence” (Kyiv, 2023), approved by the Prosecutor General on 26 June 2023, <https://www.gp.gov.ua/ua/posts/spECIALIZOVANI-DOKUMENTI>.
- 8 Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine, “The Strategic Plan for the Implementation of Powers of the Prosecutor’s Office in the Field of Criminal Prosecution of International Crimes for 2023–2025” (Kyiv, 2023), <https://www.gp.gov.ua/ua/posts/strategicnii-plan-shhodo-realizaciyi-povnovazen-organiv-prokuraturi-u-sferi-kriminalnogo-peresliduvannya-za-vcinennya-miznarodnix-zlociniv-na-2023-2025-roki>.
- 9 Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine, “The Concept of Implementation of the Support Arrangement for Survivors and Witnesses of War and Other International Crimes” (Kyiv, 4 November 2023), <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/v0103905-23#Text>.
- 10 JurFem, “Peculiarities of the Pre-Trial Investigation of Sexual Violence in Time of War: What Has Changed in a Year since the First Notice of Suspicion of Committing CRSV Was Issued?” (20 December 2023), <https://jurfem.com.ua/en/peculiarities-of-the-pre-trial-investigation-of-sexual-violence-in-time-of-war-what-has-changed-in-a-year-since-the-first-notice-of-suspicion-of-committing-crsv-was-issued/>.
- 11 JurFem, “State Institutions Responding to Sexual Violence during the Full-Scale Armed Aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine” (10 December 2022), <https://jurfem.com.ua/en/state-institutions-responding-to-sexual-violence-during-the-full-scale-armed-aggression-of-the-russian-federation-against-ukraine/>.
- 12 Popika, “Domestic Violence in 2023”, note 4.
- 13 Supreme Court of Ukraine, “Memo on the Qualification of Cases of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) (for Use by Investigators, Prosecutors, Judges, and Human Rights Defenders in Their Practical Activities)”, n.d., [https://supreme.court.gov.ua/supreme/pro\\_sud/aktyal\\_pytan1\\_kks/](https://supreme.court.gov.ua/supreme/pro_sud/aktyal_pytan1_kks/).
- 14 According to data provided by the Division of Procedural Management of Pre-trial Investigation and Maintenance of Public Prosecution in Criminal Proceedings on Crimes Related to Sexual Violence, Office of the Prosecutor General. Open resources for the search of court decisions do not contain information about verdicts passed before 2022 under Article 438 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine that contain elements of CRSV. Relevant information on the website of the Office of the Prosecutor General is also unavailable.
- 15 Interview with Anna Sosonska, head of the CRSV Crimes Division of the Office of the Prosecutor General, 28 May 2024.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine, “Guidelines for Investigating CRSV”, n.d., <https://www.gp.gov.ua/ua/posts/pam-yatki-z-rozsliduvannya-snpk>.
- 18 Allegations of CRSV recorded by the OHCHR, as of May 2022, included suspects “from the ranks of Ukrainian armed forces, including territorial defence, in 9 cases and law enforcement in 1 case”. OHCHR Ukraine, “Situation of Human Rights in Ukraine in the Context of the Armed Attack by the Russian Federation, 24 February – 15 May 2022” (29 June 2022), para. 98, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/ua/2022-06-29/2022-06-UkraineArmedAttack-EN.pdf>.
- 19 DCAF’s IHL capacity-building for Ukraine has included the development of two guidance documents: DCAF, “Parameters of Effective Military Training in International Humanitarian Law” (5 May 2023), <https://www.dcaf.ch/parameters-effective-military-training-international-humanitarian-law>; DCAF, “The Legal and Practical Elements of Surrender in International Humanitarian Law” (8 May 2023), <https://www.dcaf.ch/legal-and-practical-elements-surrender-international-humanitarian-law>.





# Conclusions and recommendations

## What are the challenges and gaps in how police and justice actors respond to CRSV?

Survivor-centred approaches to investigation and prosecution are not consistently applied across the spectrum of GBV

Survivor-centred approaches are critical in addressing CRSV, and GBV more broadly. These should encompass not only a focus on confidentiality, consent and protection through the justice process but also access to medical services and psychosocial and other forms of support. Unless trust is built into justice processes through a survivor-centred approach to GBV – to domestic violence, for example – victims of CRSV will not have sufficient trust to make a formal report. In Ukraine, CRSV is being addressed by donors and the state through an exceptionalist, “weapon of war” lens. While this has generated resources and political momentum for a strong response, it risks creating a tiered system of justice, wherein CRSV survivors can access victim protection and support measures unavailable to survivors of more “everyday” GBV.

Survivors can moreover play a transformative role when included in outreach, training and capacity-building initiatives with the security sector. In Ukraine, survivors have trained military and police forces on GBV, delivering lived experience knowledge and understanding of the stigmatization that hinders reporting and recovery. Survivor groups have identified and assisted other victims of CRSV and acted as a bridge to the security sector, including in regions security sector actors cannot access. Integrating a survivor-centred approach into SSR could lead to significant positive results in how the security sector responds to GBV, including CRSV.

## Stigma remains a significant barrier to justice and support for CRSV survivors

In Ukraine there is a high level of state commitment to addressing CRSV, but stigma remains a major challenge, making it difficult for victims, male and female, to come forward. In Mali and other contexts discussed during this research, such as Burkina Faso, stigma is even more pronounced. Despite the existence of GBV support centres, fear of ostracization by their families and communities keeps many victims from reporting to authorities or even accessing support services. Addressing stigma is crucial to creating supportive environments where survivors, male and female, can seek justice without fear.

## The potential for CRSV to be committed by national state security sector actors is little acknowledged

That national forces may be perpetrators of, as well as responders to, CRSV seems to have a low profile in capacity-building programmes with the security and justice sector. Capacity-building often falls short of the legal, regulatory and institutional reforms needed to ensure clear rules and procedures and a robust legal framework for the investigation of GBV within and by security force personnel. Avenues to report domestic violence perpetrated by personnel are critical, especially in a conflict context.

## What have been the impacts of internationally delivered and/or supported SSR interventions on security sector action to prevent and respond to CRSV?

### GBV capacity-building before conflict did prepare the ground for response to CRSV

In Ukraine earlier capacity-building by the the Office of the Prosecutor General, including DCAF's work on domestic violence response, has had a positive impact. This is recognized most clearly in the readiness of prosecution authorities to see CRSV within the context of wider forms of GBV and identify the need for survivor-centred approaches. In Mali, GBV capacity-building increased

police awareness of the gender dimensions of violence and enhanced their confidence in how to open cases and refer victims to support services, whether they are victims of violence related to the conflict or not. DCAF's work and other international capacity-building applied insights and approaches from other contexts, and as such could be critiqued as "technicalization" – wherein technical templates are carried by professionals between contexts. Yet the capacity-building was nonetheless welcomed by local partners and manifestly had positive impacts on GBV and CRSV response. It shows that capacity-building on GBV in fragile contexts can "lay the ground" for a more effective response to CRSV and other forms of GBV during conflict.

## GBV capacity-building programmes contributed to the institutionalization of GBV training and the development of structural measures to address GBV

SSR training interventions are at times critiqued as being "one-off". However, this research in both Mali and Ukraine demonstrated that the GBV training provided to police, prosecution and judicial authorities was aimed at, and did achieve, integration into national academy training curricula. Moreover, GBV capacity-building in Mali contributed to the appointment of gender focal points, and in Ukraine to the development of the special prosecution unit for CRSV. These are good examples of international SSR support helping to build gender structures within the security sector, which can be expected to play important roles in the long term in directing and developing GBV response.

## GBV capacity-building programmes contributed to coordination between community organizations, NGOs and security sector actors

The SSR programmes analysed in this research did engage with security sector actors' responses to GBV, at least in part, through NGOs and community leaders. In Mali this included working with the High Islamic Council. In Ukraine, DCAF's programmes were developed and delivered in partnership with local NGOs, helping them to build strong links with prosecution and judicial authorities. The impacts of this approach can be seen as conflict has intensified, especially in Ukraine, where these NGO partners remain centrally engaged in GBV response, working in coordination with formal authorities.

## The impacts of GBV capacity-building have been reduced by weak institutional capacity and inadequate legal frameworks

In Mali, as compared to Ukraine, capacity-building on CRSV response faced many challenges, including overarching resource and capacity challenges in the Police and Gendarmerie and an inadequate legal framework concerning GBV. To be effective in such contexts, SSR interventions need to engage on multiple levels: supporting efforts towards systemic reform, looking at GBV capacity holistically across the security and justice sector, and engaging CSOs and parliamentarians. Systemic reform of GBV response requires attention to, for example, staff dedicated to supporting GBV response (gender focal points, gender units, GBV teams, etc.), coordination with NGO and health services, opportunities for female personnel, gendered institutional culture, vetting of personnel with a history of GBV, and monitoring and oversight mechanisms.

## What lessons can be learnt for SSR policy, guidance and programming more generally?

### Internationally driven SSR programming needs to be better adapted to national contexts and focus on long-term impact and accountability

The research in Mali has shown how local security actors often find the guidance and policies developed through international support too technical and complicated to be used in front-line work. Training can be too skills focused, failing to engage with the institutional structures, resources and incentives that can enable new knowledge and skills to be applied, or conversely, discourage this. The impacts of capacity-building will be limited by inadequacies in the overarching legal framework.

International programming is often designed to yield results which can be measured during the lifespan of a project. This means it might fail to engage with legal reform or social change processes, for example, because they are necessarily slow and/or hard to measure, or they may never analyse the impacts of new policy approaches.

Such findings lead this research to reiterate the familiar recommendations that SSR capacity-building, whether on GBV or other areas, needs to be highly contextualized to the local institution. Support programmes should be co-designed with partner institutions, with appropriate investment of analysis, time and relationship-building. Engaging CSOs and other experts in this process will help identify critical contextual challenges, whether in legal structures, social norms or institutional cultural dynamics.

### SSR capacity-building should focus more on values, attitudes and institutional norms

SSR capacity-building should centre engagement with values and attitudes. Skills training often assumes that there is a common understanding of what constitutes a security problem; that is, something that is morally “wrong” and within the role of security sector institutions to address. However, across different cultural contexts some forms of violence and abuse are widely tolerated. Rather than being built only upon training, SSR initiatives can incorporate processes such as mentoring and community dialogue, which offer more meaningful opportunities to facilitate transformation of the attitudes and beliefs that cause some forms of violence and abuse to be overlooked, including within the security and justice sector. CSOs, faith leaders and social influencers alike can be partners, ensuring programmes are attuned to cultural nuances. Engaging community leaders in discussions can also provide a culturally resonant approach to shifting norms, especially around sexual violence. Examples of such approaches can be found in how the ICRC adapts its international humanitarian law dissemination activities to relate this law to local values and norms; Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation programmes that support

community healing processes as a way to foster social cohesion and collective prevention of GBV; and the Living Peace programme discussed in [Chapter 3](#). Such approaches moreover provide openings to draw links between GBV, institutional cultures in the security sector and masculine and feminine norms.

### Training approaches should be locally grounded

Where training is delivered, flexibility is needed in adapting to the capacities and cultural contexts of different audiences. Terminology may need to be adapted by local experts and trainers to ensure comprehension and applicability, especially regarding gender and GBV. Lack of literacy in the common languages shared among trainees and trainers might require materials that include visuals and basic, practical content. It is important to consider who creates and delivers the message, and whether approaches like exchanges, dialogues and discussions will be more impactful than standardized training.

### SSR should engage beyond security and justice institutions to support NGO advocates, service providers and informal structures

This research provided many examples of the important roles NGO advocates, service providers and survivor networks play in security and justice chains. In Mali and Burkina Faso, where stigma around GBV and CRSV prevents victims from speaking up, the presence of GBV One Stop Centres has been instrumental in encouraging them to file police complaints. In Ukraine, NGOs are offering essential expert research and technical support to prosecution authorities, alongside supporting victims. Local NGOs and CSOs can be the only actors reaching GBV victims in conflict-affected contexts, while informal community structures can be essential partners to reach beyond major centres. International GBV capacity-building support is often focused exclusively on security sector institutions, but it will be most impactful where it supports and empowers local NGOs and CSOs and helps them to build working relationships with formal security and justice actors.

## What are the implications of these findings for how the WPS Agenda conceptualizes SSR in relation to prevention and protection?

### SSR's roles in relation to CRSV must not be framed in isolation from the broader importance of gender-responsive SSR

This research affirms findings from the DRC and Sierra Leone that how CRSV is framed in terms of being on a “continuum” of GBV shapes donor and state responses. Exceptionalizing CRSV risks marginalizing the perspectives of local women’s advocates and experts, and leaving GBV across society inadequately addressed. Attention to CRSV can neglect addressing other forms of violence exacerbated by the conflict – for example, in Ukraine there is no avenue to report domestic violence committed by Ukrainian soldiers when they come back home. Approaching CRSV as a violation on a continuum with other forms of GBV, and moreover related to patriarchal thought patterns and gendered inequalities in power and resources, is critical to shaping effective policy responses. Local advocates and experts should be brought into policy discussions around CRSV at the earliest stages, to help strike the right balance between initiatives addressing CRSV and GBV more generally.

SSR does have an important role in relation to prevention of and response to CRSV. However, this should not be framed in isolation from the broader role of gender-responsive SSR in strengthening responses to GBV and progressing gender equality through inclusive security sector institutions that provide effective services to all.

### It is important to maintain a focus on both prevention and protection

The SSR dimension of ensuring that security sector institutions are themselves not violating human rights and that accountability is strong is easily marginalized in capacity-building programmes. It can be a sensitive topic for both NGO partners and the institutions themselves. A clear “prevention” dimension in any programme can help to keep this in view. The ICRC’s “Roots of Restraint in War” report offers an analysis of how informal and formal norms influence the behaviours of armed forces and groups.<sup>1</sup> The idea is that by understanding the sources of influence of perpetrators, humanitarian actors can better tailor approaches aimed at reducing violence. This analytical frame can be helpful not only for humanitarian actors but when designing preventive approaches in SSR and WPS programming.

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<sup>1</sup> ICRC, “The Roots of Restraint in War” (ICRC, 2018), <https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/4352-roots-restraint-war>.

## An intersectional and empowering approach to CRSV is needed

This project's discussions on CRSV underscore the need for intersectional approaches, especially when analysing factors of vulnerability among the population. When designing CRSV programming for refugees from Ukraine, for example, NGOs focused not only on women and girls but also on integrating a framework that addressed the needs of diverse groups, including people with disabilities and LGBTQ+ individuals. Moreover, CRSV training content should focus on justice and restoration, to avoid sensationalizing violence and inadvertently revictimizing survivors. This is a dimension pertinent to CRSV advocacy more generally: the importance of an intersectional lens and messaging that seeks to empower survivors.

## The WPS Agenda should continue to emphasize bias and stigma as part of engaging values, attitudes and existing norms with the security sector

The WPS Agenda's focus on training to improve security actors' skills in responding to GBV and CRSV can overlook that, as discussed above, not all actors perceive all forms of GBV as violations. One of the unique contributions of the WPS Agenda to security policy is its emphasis on addressing gender stereotypes, bias and stigma. These dimensions should continue to be amplified and evidenced. More research would be valuable on strategies for transforming gender bias in male-dominated institutions, shifting gender bias and overcoming stigma.

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# Annex 1: Expert workshop participants' list

Security Sector Reform and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence:  
Understanding the impacts of peacetime GBV capacity-building during  
war, 10 October 2024, Geneva

1. Ms Samiratou Aboubacar Nomao, DCAF gender expert, Niger
2. Ms Shahzada Ahmad, Justice Advisor , International Security Sector Advisory Team, DCAF
3. Dr Megan Bastick, Gender & Security Fellow, Gender and Security Division, DCAF
4. Ms Anne Bennett, Interim Head, Operations Department, DCAF
5. Ms Margaux Boffi, Programme Manager, Sub-Saharan Africa Division, DCAF
6. Ms Sabine Bouda Sidpawalemdé, DCAF gender expert, Burkina Faso
7. Ms Safiatou Diallo Dramé, gender expert, DCAF Bamako Office
8. Ms Eugenia Dorokhova, Programme Manager, Operations Department, DCAF
9. Mr Samuel Emonet, Executive Director, Justice Rapid Response
10. Ms Cecilia Ercole, Analyst, Sri Lanka accountability project, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
11. Ms Agnieszka Fal Dutra Santos, Research Coordinator, Geneva Graduate Institute
12. Ms Mary-Luce Fiaux Niada, Thematic Programme Officer on Migration & Protection, Africa Division, Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs
13. Ms Cristina Finch, Head Gender and Security Division, DCAF
14. Ms Katrin Fischer, Programme Specialist Africa & Middle East, UN Women Peace & Humanitarian Fund
15. Ms Nathalie Gendre, Deputy Head, Gender and Security Division, DCAF
16. Ms Tina Gewis, Regional Head of Programme and Development – Eurasia, Geneva Call
17. Ms Marta Ghittoni, Programme Manager, Gender and Security Division, DCAF
18. Mr Paul Gruet, Project Officer , Operations Department, DCAF
19. Ms Rebecca Mikova, Project Officer , Europe and Central Asia Division, DCAF
20. Mr Romain Kaser, Project Officer, Sub-Saharan Africa Division, DCAF
21. Dr Khrystyna Kit, Chairwoman, Ukrainian Women Lawyers' Association (JurFem)
22. Ms Sara Lahoucine, Senior Project Officer , Middle East and North Africa Division, DCAF
23. Ms Jennifer Langlais, Human Rights Officer – Desk Officer for Ukraine, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
24. Ms Alicia Matorras, Human Rights Officer – Desk Officer for Ukraine, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
25. Dr Elizabeth Mesok, SNF PRIMA Fellow, Gender, War and Security Research Group, Centre for Gender Studies, University of Basel
26. Ms Ornella Moderan, Senior SSR Advisor for the Sahel and West Africa, DCAF

27. Ms Caroline Ort, Director of Operations, TRIAL International
28. Ms Zuleyka Piniella, Global Coordinator - Prevention of Sexual Violence Programme, ICRC
29. Mr Matteo Polizzi, Project Officer, Gender and Security Division, DCAF
30. Ms Alicia Pons, Human Rights Officer, Women's Rights and Gender Section, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
31. Professor Liz Prügl, Professor International Relations/Political Science, Geneva Graduate Institute
32. Ms Madeleine Rees, expert on Women, Peace and Security
33. Ms Camille Rislér, Program Manager, Dr Denis Mukwege Foundation
34. Ms Helena Rodriguez, Policy Specialist - Rule of Law and Transitional Justice, UN Women
35. Ms Daria Rosokhata, Legal Analyst, Ukrainian Women Lawyers Association (JurFem)
36. Mr Amir Salim, Advisor, Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation
37. Ms Danae van der Straten Ponthoz, Head of International Advocacy and Policy, Global Survivors Fund
38. Mr Callum Watson, Gender Coordinator, Small Arms Survey



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