



Foreign, Commonwealth  
& Development Office



Wilton Park



Report

**Strengthening the international response to  
Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV)**

Wednesday 11 – Friday 13 May 2022 | WP2045



## Report

# Strengthening the international response to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV)

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In association with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

### Executive summary

Wilton Park and the United Kingdom (UK) Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) hosted this conference in May 2022, bringing together over 60 global experts, including representatives from survivor networks, civil society, UK and partner governments, academia, the International Committee of the Red Cross and advisers to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Through an exchange of good practice and lessons learned, the Wilton Park conference considered which responses have worked well, areas of shortfall and what more is needed to build international momentum, ensuring that survivor insights and needs are central to action. It explored campaigns such as the Dr. Denis Mukwege Foundation's 'Red Line Initiative', the draft Crimes Against Humanity Convention and the UK's proposal for a new conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) Convention.

The core recurring themes from the Wilton Park conference were:

- **Progress:** a strong desire to build on previous initiatives and best practice, ensuring coherence across initiatives and avoiding silos, with an emphasis on drawing and building upon the evidence base.
- **Partnerships:** the importance of effective collaborations with diverse stakeholders, and for the UK to work meaningfully with States, civil society, expert practitioners, international organisations and, crucially, survivor networks.
- **Principles:** the importance of policy development better reflecting survivor needs and experiences, inclusive of minority and marginalised groups as well as the need for long-term, sustainable funding and resourcing.

This report sets out the key recommendations, many of which will need further detailed consideration.

### Terminology and Scope

This report uses the general term 'survivor' to describe a person who has suffered from CRSV, while acknowledging and respecting each individual's right to choose the most appropriate language to express their experience.

The report does not seek to reflect the individual experiences or opinions of event participants, including survivors, but rather it is a summary of the main discussion points and outcomes from the dialogue.

## Background

1. In 2012, the UK launched the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI)<sup>1</sup> with the goal of galvanising the international community into tackling CRSV, by breaking the international silence and ending the culture of impunity.
2. The first international policy conference on PSVI took place at Wilton Park in November 2012. The first Global PSVI Summit was held in London in 2014 and convened over 120 States and other stakeholders.
3. In November 2021, the UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss pledged to improve global responses to CRSV and work towards its elimination, including through exploring a new CRSV Convention. Officials have since been scoping the parameters and potential international support for a new CRSV initiative. The UK aims to progress understanding of CRSV as a key global security issue and strengthen international approaches to its prevention and response.
4. The Wilton Park conference is one of a number of discussions being held in the run up to the UK hosted international PSVI conference scheduled from 28-30 November 2022.

## Country-specific focus

5. **Lessons learned and good practice** examples were drawn out from different country contexts:

- Building on past election-related violations in **Kenya**, including sexual violence, survivors' networks are actively monitoring for early warning signs and liaising with national authorities ahead of the summer's upcoming elections.
- The **Democratic Republic of the Congo** has made concerted efforts to prohibit military use of child soldiers. Children have been educated on gender equality, and specialised police teams established to handle sexual violence cases. The Ligne Verte hotline provides free support and referrals to survivors, and one stop centres have been established. The government has been considering a reparations fund, starting with CRSV survivors and then moving onto other grave violations. However, ongoing instability, lack of long-term funding and infrastructure in rural areas remain critical challenges.
- **Colombia's** peace agreement is the world's first to have gender at its core. It established a gender sub-commission to review all the peace documents from a gender perspective and survivors have been empowered and placed at its centre. Proposals come directly from survivors, including minority and LGBTIQ+ communities.
- In **Iraq**, parliament passed the Yazidi Survivors Law which provides a reparations framework for many survivors of Islamic State crimes, including women and girls subjected to sexual violence.
- Sexual violence is already a feature of the **Russia/Ukraine** conflict. Recording and documentation of evidence has begun, with the International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict already being used by some investigation teams; however, there are concerns over a 'perfect storm' of over-documentation leading to potential further traumatising of survivors. The broader legal context surrounding women's rights in neighbouring States was highlighted, including strict regulation of sexual and reproductive health services.

Sexual violence "is as destructive as an artillery shell. It is used conspicuously, systematically to humiliate and terrorise populations"

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/sexual-violence-in-conflict>.

## Recommendations:

- The international community should continue shining a light on CRSV, wherever it occurs.
- Further efforts and research should be undertaken to evaluate and learn what works on CRSV prevention and response.
- Forums should be established for conflict-affected States to exchange experiences, to debate and disseminate best practice on implementation.
- Ensure consideration of gender, and gender-based violence (GBV), in future peace agreements, to facilitate cultural shifts in times of peace as well as conflict.

## Underlying social norms and gender inequality

6. There is currently a **highly polarised environment** on anything related to 'gender', with a divergence between States pursuing progressive and inclusive language and approaches, and States regressing on LGBTQI+ issues and women's sexual and reproductive health rights. **Rhetoric on refugees** makes it particularly difficult for people fleeing from sexual violence. **Radical diplomacy** is needed to mitigate wars and violence. The **Covid-19 pandemic** has stalled gender equality efforts and increased rates of GBV.
7. **Very few men, in any sector, are leading international or domestic dialogues on CRSV.** Topics perceived as **'women's issues' remain side-lined and underfunded**, and significant gaps surround gender mainstreaming. CRSV is frequently siloed, despite the continuum between violence against women and girls in times of peace, and of conflict. Sexual violence occurring on the side-line, or as conflict dies down, for example in internally displaced person's camps, rarely receives attention. Efforts to tackle CRSV and prevent sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) linked to conflict, for instance perpetrated by the UN and humanitarian responders, are also often siloed. For example, in Syria humanitarian aid deliveries have been used by community leaders for years as a tool for perpetrating SEA.
8. There are similarly few prosecutions of **sexual violence against humanitarian workers**. Consequences instead lean towards the withdrawal of staff and humanitarian aid, leading to the increased vulnerability of the left behind civilian populations.
9. Conversations and engagement should **not be limited to likeminded communities**. Gender, CRSV and PSEA should be mainstreamed throughout prevention and response initiatives. There remains **a lack of effective cross-sector mitigation** and despite decades of awareness raising, humanitarian responses all too often include basic failings, such as lack of secure toilet facilities and well-lit areas. Programmes delivering food and cash can increase, or even cause, GBV incidents without appropriate gender analysis and targeted implementation.
10. Systemic failures within national militaries and law enforcement should be tackled, with reforms to such **highly masculinised environments** which foster gender inequities, discrimination and violence. Even a small increase in **women's presence in peacekeeping** patrols can have a substantial impact on rates of SEA.

Conflict-related sexual violence is often siloed, or side-lined with 'women's issues'"

11. The link between existing research and application in policy-making could be strengthened. There is a weak evidence base of research and understanding on the links between CRSV and pre/post-conflict gender inequalities. **Research gaps exist** on changes in warfare dynamics and CRSV usage, including increases in online sexual violence or its perpetration in the space of terrorism and violent extremism. Research on social and gender norms, GBV and CRSV should consistently pursue an **intersectional approach**, ensure appropriate **data disaggregation** and inclusion of a **plurality of lived experiences**. Universities, concerned over safeguarding, are frequently **hesitant on survivor engagement**, but survivors should be central to research and study design.

#### Recommendations:

- Continue efforts to promote gender mainstreaming and enhance co-ordination between groups and experts to remove silos surrounding CRSV and PSEA.
- Engage men from key sectors, such as political, military and judiciary, in CRSV dialogues and enhance their awareness of CRSV perpetration and impact.
- Scaling-up should occur on activities which are shown beneficial in tackling and reframing harmful social norms and promoting gender equality.
- Building positive social norms and embedding gender equality needs to occur at community level, nationally and internationally, alongside developing strong institutions to promote and enforce these principles.
- Enhance the presence of women in military and peacekeeping operations, including in UK armed force deployments.
- Commission intersectional, survivor-driven research to identify evidence-based CRSV solutions.

#### Pursuing a survivor-centred approach

12. For survivors, the impact of abuse is deeply personal and traumatic, with stigma and shame just the tip of the iceberg. We are evolving and learning on a journey towards best approaches for survivors and overcoming obstacles. There is a need to **shift the shame and fear** from the survivor onto the perpetrator, and faith leaders can be critical to this norm change. It is important to **engage with the influencers of armed groups** on their practices and beliefs on sexual violence.
13. There is a broad awareness that GBV happens in all communities, yet the same assumption is not made in relation to the conduct of hostilities. States and organisations taking action on sexual violence could consider implementing a **reverse burden of proof**, including in times of conflict. For instance, assuming that CRSV will be occurring in a conflict-context and following appropriate steps to mitigate and respond, rather than waiting for the first survivors to come forward.
14. **Sequencing** is key to effectively implementing a **survivor-centred approach**. Whilst criminal accountability is important, for a survivor this is several steps down the line. Ensuring initial, and ongoing, provision of appropriate medical and psychological support will aid survivor recovery, promote a relationship of trust, enhance documentation quality, and reduce risks of evidence tainting.
15. A **trauma-informed approach** should be at the forefront. The draft Global Code of Conduct for Investigating and Documenting CRSV (the Murad Code) has helped with positive, safe survivor engagement, but more can be done to ensure appropriate referrals, understanding of capacity and consent, and comprehensive psychosocial support for survivors, including as witnesses in justice proceedings. **Survivor expectations** should be recognised and sensitively managed.

“We need to consider conflict-related sexual violence not as an event, but as a process. An event is a limited moment in time, but for survivors healing is a process”

16. **Survivors' voices must be the guiding action** in CRSV prevention and response policy and programming, from the inception through to implementation. In terms of programme design, a condition of future projects might be co-creation and detailed survivor engagement provisions, whilst measures for monitoring and evaluating success could include meaningful survivor involvement and comprehensive feedback.
17. When provided with adequate resources, support, and a platform, as well as sufficient information to make a conscious, informed decision many 'vulnerable' survivors can be empowered to speak for themselves and make their own decisions on engagement. **Perceived vulnerability is not an excuse** when deciding on survivor engagement. Age can impact survivors' ability to speak out, and there is often a **fear of engaging with those under 18**, either as direct survivors or as children born of CRSV. Yet, particularly older children can, and should, be encouraged to meaningfully participate. **Education, both in prevention and response**, can be key to engaging with young persons whether as a survivor or potential perpetrator.
18. Past proposals for the creation of **global survivors' network** were recalled, to enable survivors' shaping of CRSV actions, with discussion on:
  - **Survivor empowerment:** ensure survivors can actively define their needs and requirements.
  - **Adequate representation of survivors:** to help demonstrate the diversity of experiences and contexts of survivors. With challenging examples raised of involving survivors from contexts where they are currently unable/unsafe to speak out, such as Afghanistan.
  - **Network structure:** creating an effective platform for a plurality of survivor engagement, and establish structures for meaningful survivor consultations.
  - **Sustainable funding:** for potentially paid staff, volunteer travel costs and time off work, or survivor access to the network through e.g. mobile data. With donors looking to justify support through demonstrable impact.

#### Recommendations:

- Establish and ensure long-term funding for a global survivors' network.
- Rethink traditional homogenous survivor groupings, for instance actively engage with those under 18 and recognise their agency
- Necessitate genuine project co-creation with survivors as a future funding condition.
- Consider a reverse burden of proof when engaging in CRSV mitigation and response.
- Consult on potential justice avenues for survivors who have already 'overtold' their stories.

#### Funding and increasing women's participation

19. Local women's rights organisations are taking on a high burden in responding to conflict crises, yet remain **woefully underfunded**. These organisations are the **frontline responders**; they have strong networks of national and local contacts, know what translates well at a grassroots level, and how to overcome barriers. Yet, globally, they lack sufficient resources to **deliver long-term transformative change**.

"The least powerful and least funded - local women's rights organisations - are taking on the highest burden of responsibilities"

20. Administrative requirements and reporting to donor governments can place an **overwhelming burden** on CRSV projects. This could potentially be addressed through permitting **clustering of small, grassroots projects** or by reducing administrative and reporting levels for small grants. Positive examples of **flexible funding** from donors were highlighted in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which could be mirrored on CRSV responses. Funding applications, even for small organisations, can be **inflexible and bureaucratic**, particularly for organisations without specialist grant writers. A system could be created enabling smaller projects and organisations to gain funding, while also mentoring them on issues such as capacity-building, safeguarding, data protection, and good corporate governance as well as exit and legacy planning.
21. There is under-utilisation and **engagement with the well-resourced private sector**, which could be incentivised to fund or resource CRSV initiatives. Although caution was expressed on private sector involvement, amid concerns that some private entities might 'green-wash' their activities, may be potential perpetrators of human rights violations and may jeopardise survivor protection.
22. Women should be **meaningfully engaged** in conflict prevention and peace-building. There is often competition to be at decision-making tables, and it is important to allow broad, intersectional representation to avoid a hierarchy or competition between groups impacted by conflict.
23. Engagement between local women's organisations and faith leaders can be a powerful tool, particularly when combatting CRSV stigma and underlying norms. It is important to reflect further on the Declaration of Humanity by leaders of faith and leaders of belief.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Increase flexible funding for women-led grassroots organisations. Reduce the bureaucracy surrounding funding applications for small organisations and co-deliver funding with organisational knowledge and skills building.
- Continue to develop, implement and monitor Women, Peace and Security national action plans for fragile and conflict-affected States.
- Systematically engage women mediators in peace-building processes.
- Promote movement building between local women's organisations and faith leaders.

#### **Building awareness of existing commitments, tools and guidance**

24. Potential value was highlighted in **mapping existing State commitments** on CRSV, including under international and regional agreements, as well as voluntary declarations. This could establish how international commitments have been translated into national laws or effective action. It would serve as a useful advocacy and lobbying tool, and help to drive home enforcement of existing CRSV measures.
25. Going forward, there needs to be **increased coordination** of different initiatives and commitments made over past few years. Establishing **cross-sector communities of practice on CRSV** is one idea for enhanced coordination.
26. There are significant gaps in institutional memory of existing tools and guidance on CRSV, arising from factors such as staff turnover. In terms of embedding what already exists on CRSV, the concept of an international repository, such as a Centre for Excellence, was discussed, which could gather and promote know-how from States and civil society. It should be easily accessible and searchable, including versions for grassroots organisations and survivors. Although questions were raised for example on its hosting and management, longevity and funding.

"A recurring frustration is the overall lack of institutional memory"

“It is critical that any initiative identifies a clear ‘value-added’, with objectives to best serve survivors and those working with them”

## Recommendations:

- Undertake a mapping exercise of existing State commitments on CRSV, under international and regional agreements, as well as voluntary declarations. Obtain maximum value through implementation of existing commitments.
- Coordinate existing and future CRSV initiatives to ensure harmonisation and effective implementation.
- Develop an international repository for existing and future tools and guidance on CRSV.

## Justice and accountability

27. There is **already a substantial body of law which criminalises CRSV**, yet challenges remain particularly surrounding domestic implementation and a lack of CRSV prosecutions. Lessons learned from stable settings should be leveraged. An evidence base should be established on drivers for CRSV, and the surrounding culture of impunity.
28. The ICC and other international criminal justice systems are necessary, but **effective domestic systems are vital**. Many contexts struggle to handle even domestic cases of sexual violence. Countries should not just be pushed on existing frameworks, but rather **supported towards implementation**. For example, Japan provides a legal drafting service to other Asian States, to avoid simply exporting its own system but rather helping States develop their own legal systems.
29. **Justice is a broad concept**, and considering criminal justice alone is a disservice to survivors. Justice can encapsulate access to education, livelihoods, a broad range of **holistic reparative measures**. Impactful CRSV justice initiatives may still be a drop in the ocean, but there are some positive examples to build upon.
30. Ongoing attention should be paid to the **rights of the accused**, for instance the presumption of innocence and pre-trial detention issues. In situations with weak rule of law, **political influence** on the judiciary or legal professionals cannot be discounted.
31. There is also an **ethical responsibility to those engaging in any accountability process**, including survivors, from the first moment of interaction until potentially years after testifying. There are still too few examples of **meaningful witness protection** exercises. **Specialised investigation and prosecution units** can provide support to survivors, but run the risk of further silos without efforts to ensure cross-training and knowledge integration into the wider non-specialist sector.
32. Initiatives working in this space were explored, including:
  - Dr. Denis Mukwege Foundation’s **‘Red Line Initiative’**: a five year strategy involving bold and new thinking to put an end to CRSV, including but not limited to the exploration of a new convention. Elements include a clear, moral rejection and outcry against CRSV in all its forms, State responsibility and building political will. A UK funded expert conference has been held on the international treaty making process.
  - The **draft Crimes Against Humanity Convention**: groundwork began in 2008, initiated as a project of Washington University School of Law, and then picked up by the International Law Commission in 2013. Following revisions to the draft text, it has sat for several years with the UN General Assembly’s Sixth Committee. To achieve progress, State champions are needed to back the initiative and a clear timetable set for its progression.

- The UK's proposal for a **new CRSV Convention**: announced by the Foreign Secretary in November 2021, efforts have since been underway to scope the parameters and potential international support for a new CRSV initiative. Results of an independent scoping were discussed, including the potential objectives for an initiative as well as its form, with potential for a soft law approach through a CRSV Declaration instead of, or building up to, a CRSV Convention. Key takeaways and lessons learned were also identified from past initiatives. Feedback is now sought on the FCDO's concept note and theory of change.

33. Whilst there was some limited support raised for a convention, the majority of participants, including States, **favoured a soft law initiative** and thought this more likely to be **positively received** in the current climate. Concerns were raised over **risks of duplication, potential dilution** of existing mandates and potentially a **significant investment of resources** to achieve little further tangible progress and potential **uncertainty for survivors**. **No clear gap** warranting a new convention had yet been identified, with strong legal infrastructure and normative frameworks already in place, and rather a focus could be addressing the **lacklustre implementation of existing commitments**.

#### Recommendations:

- Shift from what's criminalised on paper, to what's happening in practice on the ground in conflict-affected States. Draw justice actors' attention to examples of good practice for domestic implementation.
- Reframe justice as a journey, not centred purely on criminal convictions but on empowering survivors and communities.
- Consider areas of alignment between initiatives and explore potentially productive collaborations.
- Engage broadly and frequently on any new CRSV initiative, particularly with survivor networks and conflict-affected States.

#### Conclusions and next steps

The core recurring themes from the Wilton Park conference were:

- **Progress:** a strong desire to build on previous initiatives and best practice, ensuring coherence across initiatives and avoiding silos, with an emphasis on drawing and building upon the evidence base.
- **Partnerships:** the importance of effective collaborations with diverse stakeholders, and for the UK to work meaningfully with States, civil society, expert practitioners, international organisations and, crucially, survivor networks.
- **Principles:** the importance of policy development better reflecting survivor needs and experiences, inclusive of minority and marginalised groups as well as the need for long-term, sustainable funding and resourcing.

This three day dialogue is part of the ongoing collaborative process to tackle CRSV through the UK's PSVI. The next steps in this process should centre on:

- A considered reflection and building upon the core themes and key recommendations emerging from the Wilton Park conference.
- After a decade of the UK implementing its PSVI, further reflection and evidence gathering is needed to establish its progress and blockages in achieving its core objectives. There is a need to identify what more can be achieved for and with survivors, and to establish concrete commitments for driving forward the initiative.

- As the UK aims to progress its new CRSV Convention initiative, it seeks feedback on the FCDO's concept note and theory of change. It is interested in establishing productive collaborations, as it helps develop the mandate and resources for driving forward the initiative.
- These Wilton Park discussions and expert reflections will feed into the draft concept note for the international PSVI conference scheduled from 28-30 November 2022, which will be shared further by the FCDO with key stakeholders including survivor networks.

**Catherine Dunmore**

Wilton Park | May 2022

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