



WOMEN
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EUROPE

Preventing and responding to gender-based violence during the war and in post-war settings

Experiences and recommendations
of women's NGOs

TOOLKIT

IMPRINT

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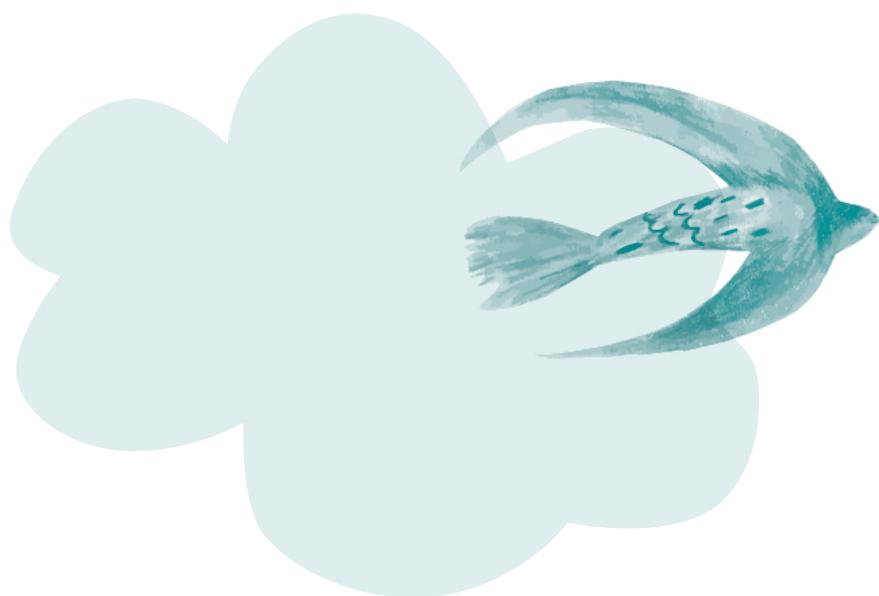
Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) takes on many forms during conflicts and has devastating consequences for the survivors, families, communities, and the prospect of building lasting peace. During conflicts, women, girls, and vulnerable groups are especially targeted, with rape and sexual violence being used as a tactic of war and with higher risks of human trafficking, domestic violence (DV), exploitation, and sexual slavery. In post-conflict settings, GBV also increases significantly, as participation in conflicts and exposure to war trauma directly correlate with an increase in the intensity of domestic violence. Therefore, effective prevention and multi-sectoral response mechanisms are key to reducing the risks mentioned above.

WAVE (Women Against Violence Europe) launched this project in collaboration with OSCE to improve the support to survivors of violence and civil society organizations (CSOs) in conflict and post-conflict areas. Based on the expertise of women's organizations, this toolkit not only presents the harm and challenges posed by conflicts but also documents promising first-hand practices with concrete examples from four WAVE members, including their initiatives and recommendations as women's organizations who experience and have experienced war.

The WAVE members involved in the project are the Sexual Assault Crisis Center (Yerevan, Armenia), Women Fund Sukhumi (Kutaisi and Tbilisi, Georgia), Foundation United Women Banja Luka (Banja Luka, Bosnia & Herzegovina), and Centre "Women's Perspectives" (Lviv, Ukraine). According to their experiences in conflict and post-conflict settings, the authors present their strategies related to different conflict stages: (1) during the war and emergency response settings, shared by the Ukrainian and Armenian partners, (2) protracted conflict, described by the Georgian partner, and (3) post-war and long-term perspective, based on the experience of the partner from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The primary target group of this toolkit is women's specialist services (WSS) and CSOs involved in supporting women survivors in conflict and post-conflict settings. However, this toolkit is also directed at local authorities, professional entities, decision-makers, and peacebuilders to better understand the specific needs of survivors and women's organizations and implement adequate and gender-sensitive policies and responses.



1 Country-specific background: the role of women during the war

The women's organizations involved in the creation of this toolkit are based in Armenia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Georgia, and Ukraine. The authors refer to their own experiences in terms of prevention of and response to gender-based violence during the war and post-war settings. This chapter aims to provide the reader with brief country profiles that summarize the main facts in terms of conflict, including the role of women during and after the war. This will help contextualize the experiences and strategies shared by each country.

Armenia

Population	2,959,694
Female population	1,562,689
Member of Council of Europe (year)	2001
Member of European Union (year)	No
Member of United Nations (year)	1992
CEDAW ratified (year)	1993
CEDAW optional protocol ratified (year)	2006
Istanbul Convention signed (year)	2018
Istanbul Convention ratified (year)	No

On September 27, 2020, a major military escalation started between Azerbaijanis and Armenians, lasting for 44 days. The root cause of the Armenian-Azerbaijan war in 2020 dates back to the late 80s as a consequence of the ethnic and territorial struggle involving Armenia and Azerbaijan in the background of the processes of the Soviet Union's collapse. The first Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) war took place from 1988–1994, followed by regular ceasefire violations until Autumn 2020 when the full-scale war erupted. Finally, on November 10, 2020, Armenia and Azerbaijan declared a ceasefire with the mediation of Russia, which was followed by peacekeeping troops of the Russian Federation being deployed along the line of conflict in NK.

During the 44-day war, schools, kindergartens, and hospitals, as well as objects critical for the survival of the population of Nagorno-Karabakh were targeted, including a highway, central marketplace, an electric power station, food stores, and stockpiles. As a result, around 90,000 residents of NK (predominantly women) were displaced, lost their homes and property, and as a consequence, thousands of women's and girls' rights to education, social security, and sexual and reproductive health were grossly violated. Additionally, women and girls of NK were settled into inadequate facilities that would not guarantee their protection from sexual abuse.

Women, however, were not present in the negotiation processes that led to the ceasefire, and no woman was engaged in the peace agreement meetings. There was a lack of reflection on a governmental level on how the 44-day war affected women, as most of the services (especially psychological support), at least during the initial stage right after the war, were directed towards the wounded soldiers of war. Furthermore, psychological support was provided mostly by women professionals in the field, and mental health issues and transgenerational trauma among women became more acute. Women from CSOs and especially women in frontline professions, who before the war were enthusiastically engaged in activism and peacebuilding, had to self-mobilize and support each other in the post-war period in Armenia to not face the risk of burnout and be able to continue their activities.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Population	3,492,01812
Female population	1,962,04013
Member of Council of Europe (year)	2002
Member of European Union (year)	No
Member of United Nations (year)	1992
CEDAW ratified (year)	1993
CEDAW optional protocol ratified (year)	2002
Istanbul Convention signed (year)	2013
Istanbul Convention ratified (year)	2013

In 1992, a war broke out in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the bloodiest conflict on European soil since the end of World War II, in which more than 100,000 people lost their lives. The consequences of the war were camps for women and the elderly, mass violence and killings, rapes, destroyed cultural monuments, burned religious buildings, destroyed and burned homes, and a million refugees. Emotions and war traumas arising from past terrible events (including genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing) were suppressed.

Accumulated trauma, the transgenerational transmission of conflict, and repressed truth are some of the factors which led to this armed conflict.

The armed conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina was stopped with the signature of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, which divided Bosnia and Herzegovina into two parts, the Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska. Twenty-seven years after the signing of the Agreement, there has been no new armed conflict on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but there is no common understanding of what happened, no common recognition of the causes, number of victims, consequences, and official start date of the conflict. The divisive political rhetoric used by political elites, especially during pre-election campaigns, continuous to date and has a negative effect on community relations.

In matters of war, peace, and security of Bosnia and Herzegovina, only male voices were heard. No women were present at the signing of the Dayton Agreement. Women are mostly mentioned in the context of war when it comes to the number of raped persons. Reports from international actors in BiH between 1992 and 1995 estimate that 20,000 to 50,000 women, girls, boys, and men were raped. In other circumstances, women are rarely mentioned.

Georgia

Population	3,716,858
Female population	1,926,579
Member of Council of Europe (year)	1999
Member of European Union (year)	No
Member of United Nations (year)	1992
CEDAW ratified (year)	1994
CEDAW optional protocol ratified (year)	2002
Istanbul Convention signed (year)	2014
Istanbul Convention ratified (year)	2017

The collapse of the Soviet Union and Georgia's post-independence transition was characterized by sharp economic decline, destroyed industry, massive unemployment, and a series of ethnic conflicts that had a tremendous impact on women's life. The military conflicts in Georgia over the two regions of South Ossetia (1990-1991) and Abkhazia (1992-1993), both bordering Russia, resulted in the massive internal displacement of more than 300,000 persons. The second massive displacement happened after the Georgia-Russia war in 2008, which led to the displacement of more than 192,000 people, of whom approximately 20,000 could not return to their places of origin due to Russian military presence and the destruction of their villages and households.¹ Currently, there are 283,271 registered internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Georgia, constituting approximately 8% of the general population (90,156 households),² making it one of the world's highest incidences of internal displacement relative to its overall population. Demographic figures indicate that 55% of IDPs are women, 9% are children under the age of 18, and 13% are persons over 65 years old.³

Thousands of people were killed due to the conflicts and war in Georgia. Rape was widespread in the Abkhazian conflict, as soldiers from both sides used sexual violence as a tool of ethnic cleansing. While the conflicts and the war in Georgia were relatively short, their impact on internally displaced women and their families has been devastating and long-lasting. Causes for psychosocial stress were both conflict-and post-conflict-related. Much of the distress can be attributed to the loss of close family members, loss of homes and property, bombings, and the violence that occurred during the war.⁴ In addition, the protracted period of displacement, deepening economic troubles, and devastating living conditions of people living in IDP resettlement centers, exacerbated the situation. The trauma inflicted by the conflict and persistently poor social conditions is directly correlated with domestic violence, which is exacerbated by a lack of proper protection mechanisms, psychological rehabilitation, and other services.

Internally displaced women remain very much disconnected from the political processes of post-conflict Georgia. Likewise, no conflict-affected women currently participate in the existing political negotiations process. In general, only two out of 12 representatives of Georgia in the Geneva International Discussions are women.⁵ Today, the role of women in the political scene corresponds neither to their numerical strength nor their leadership potential in the socio-political life of the country.

1 World Bank (2016). *Georgia Transitioning from Status to Needs Based Assistance for IDPs. A Poverty and Social Impact Analysis*. Report No: ACS16557. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/493981468030331770/pdf/IDP-PSIA-Georgia-revised-Feb-2016.pdf>

2 Bolkvadze, T., Danish Refugee Council (2019). *Coordination and Participation in Georgia – what worked and what didn't*. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2020/downloads/background_papers/2020-IDMC-GRID-background-georgia.pdf

3 World Bank (2016). *Georgia Transitioning from Status to Needs Based Assistance for IDPs. A Poverty and Social Impact Analysis*. Report No: ACS16557. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/493981468030331770/pdf/IDP-PSIA-Georgia-revised-Feb-2016.pdf>

4 Kharashvili, J. (1995). *Psychosocial Examination of IDP Children and Women- Victims of Military Conflicts on the Territory of the Republic of Georgia*. Oxfam, Tbilisi, Georgia.

5 The Geneva International Discussions were launched in Geneva, Switzerland, in October 2008, in order to address the consequences of the 2008 August war in Georgia. See: <https://smr.gov.ge/en/page/26/geneva-international-discussions>

Ukraine

Population	41,732,779
Female population	22,389,339
Member of Council of Europe (year)	1995
Member of European Union (year)	No
Member of United Nations (year)	1945
CEDAW ratified (year)	1981
CEDAW optional protocol ratified (year)	2003
Istanbul Convention signed (year)	2011
Istanbul Convention ratified (year)	2022

The crisis in and around Ukraine started in 2014, with the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the conflict in eastern Ukraine. While the security situation continued to deteriorate in Donbas, on 24 February 2022 the Russian Federation started full-scale military actions and the invasion of Ukraine.

Since the start of the crisis in 2014, there was a significant increase in the role of women in the Ukrainian army, including access to positions previously reserved only for men, and the total number of women who have joined the Ukrainian Armed Forces has more than doubled.⁶ However, discrimination and harassment remained severe problems in the Ukrainian military. Furthermore, with Russia's aggression in 2022, access to services and justice for women living in Ukraine who suffer from GBV became much more difficult. Due to the fact that the need to accommodate internally displaced women with children in shelters has significantly increased, almost all places in specialized shelters for victims of domestic violence have been given to IDPs. Many non-specialized institutions (schools, kindergartens, stadiums, etc.) have been converted into shelters and people often live in one large common space for several months, leading to an increase in the number of conflicts between residents and incidents of domestic violence in such shelters. Unfortunately, the administration of these institutions does not have the capacity to respond adequately to such incidents. In addition, gross human rights violations such as sexual violence are widespread, especially in occupied territories, but it is still difficult to count the number of cases and document the allegations of violence.

Women make up the vast majority of IDPs who moved to the western and central regions of Ukraine from the front-line areas. Many of these women are coming from marginalized or low-income communities, have children with disabilities, and take care of older parents who have health problems. Women make up the vast majority of volunteers who help and support those in need on the front. Women collect funds, buy necessary products, clothes, and often military equipment, and take care of the wounded. It is also women who mainly helped IDPs leave the occupied and front-line territories and moved them to safer territories of Ukraine. In addition, women support IDPs, help them find shelter, cook food and collect everything they need. This is often carried out in addition to their main job as well as care work and other daily responsibilities. Women and children also make up the vast majority of refugees leaving Ukraine. They face similar challenges to IDPs, including an increased risk of trafficking.

6 Rzegocki, S. and James, N.S. (2022). *Ukraine's Women at War*. Accessed October 14, 2022. Ukraine's Women at War - CEPA

2 International Legal Framework

This chapter summarizes the international normative framework related to violence against women and girls in conflict-affected settings and includes a review of international legal frameworks emerging from the Security Council and the international humanitarian community. Each state has the primary responsibility to ensure the protection of its citizens, however, when they are unable or unwilling to uphold their commitments and duties, the international community must intervene and use all appropriate international legal instruments to protect the population from the consequences of war.

In times of conflict, the following distinct and complementary bodies of international law provide solid legal and operational legal frameworks to protect women and girls:

- **International humanitarian law;**
- **International human rights law;**
- **International criminal law.**

International legal frameworks can be distinguished considering two elements: “**hard law**”, which is legally binding for States (e.g., international human rights treaties and conventions, UN Security Council resolutions), and “**soft law**”, which is non-binding and reflects the political and significant moral commitment of States (e.g., action plans, declarations).⁷

■ International Humanitarian Law

Violence against women (VAW) during armed conflict is a violation of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). **The 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols**⁸ have provisions that address non-discrimination.⁹ This means that female civilians and combatants who are no longer participating in hostilities must be provided the same protections as men under international humanitarian law. In addition, specific protections are provided for women prisoners of war such as the provision for separate detention quarters for female detainees (PI, art 75, para 5). The needs of expectant mothers and mothers with young children, especially nursing mothers, requiring particular care are also stipulated in the Convention (C IV, art 89; PI Art 76, para 2).

Rape and other forms of sexual violence against women are prohibited under International Humanitarian Law and could constitute a war crime. The Fourth Geneva Convention for protection of the Civilian Persons in times of war states: “Women shall be especially protected against any attack on their honor, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault” (C IV, Art 27).

7 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2008). *Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls*, p. 333. <https://www.unhcr.org/47c-fad542.html>

8 The Geneva Conventions (1949). <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-0173.pdf>. Protocols additional to the Geneva Conventions (1949). https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/icrc_002_0321.pdf

9 Articles 12 of the First and Second Conventions, 16 of the Third Convention, 27 of the Fourth Convention and Article 75 of Additional Protocol I and Article 4 of Additional Protocol II (referred to below as C.I, C.II, C.III, C.IV, PI and P.II)

■ International human rights law

International human rights law is a set of international rules that reinforce the rights and dignity of all human beings – women, men, and children – without discrimination. It evolved following the adoption of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) and is now supported by several universal and regional legal instruments.

The major international human rights instruments related to GBV and VAW in conflict and post-conflict settings are the following:

- **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)**¹⁰ continues to be the most widely ratified fundamental human rights treaty that addresses the rights of women and the responsibilities of states towards ensuring them, including their right to be free from violence. CEDAW is relevant to the fight to end violence against women, including addressing sexual and gender-based violence during times of conflict.
- **CEDAW General Recommendation No. 19: Violence against Women**,¹¹ adopted at the Eleventh Session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, in 1992, stipulates that - “Wars, armed conflicts and the occupation of territories often lead to increased prostitution, trafficking in women and sexual assault of women, which require specific protective and punitive measures” (Art 6.16).
- The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women decided at its forty-seventh session, in 2010, under article 21 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, to adopt **General Recommendation No. 30 on Women in Conflict Prevention, Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations**.¹² Protection of women’s human rights, advancing substantive gender equality before, during, and after conflict, and ensuring that women’s diverse experiences are fully integrated into all peacebuilding, peacemaking, and reconstruction processes are important objectives of the Convention.
- **The Beijing Platform for Action 1995** – The Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, adopted unanimously by 189 countries at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, is considered to be the most comprehensive global policy framework for the rights of women. It recognizes women’s rights as human rights and sets out a comprehensive roadmap for achieving equality between women and men, with concrete measures and measurable outcomes across a range of issues affecting women and girls. These outcomes are divided into 12 interrelated areas, including violence against women and girls, armed conflict, promotion of the advancement of women, and women’s human rights. The Action Plan’s Strategic objective D urges states to take integrated measures to prevent and eliminate violence against women, especially those affected by war; Strategic objective E encourages “to respect fully the norms of international humanitarian law in armed conflicts and take all measures required for the protection of women and children, in particular against rape, forced prostitution and any other form of indecent assault.”¹³

10 Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (1979). <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cedaw.pdf>

11 CEDAW General Recommendation No. 19: Violence against Women (1992). [https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/f8d998/pdf/&ved=2ahUKE-wi4r8KY2dX#:~:text=Specific%20recommendations&text=\(b\)%20States%20parties%20should%20ensure,should%20be%20provided%20for%20victims](https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/f8d998/pdf/&ved=2ahUKE-wi4r8KY2dX#:~:text=Specific%20recommendations&text=(b)%20States%20parties%20should%20ensure,should%20be%20provided%20for%20victims)

12 General Recommendation No. 30 on Women in Conflict Prevention, Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (2013). <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/CEDAW/GComments/CE-DAW.C.CG.30.pdf>

13 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995). pp. 60. <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20E.pdf>

- **UN Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace, and Security** – since 2000, the Security Council has adopted 10 resolutions on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS): Security Council Resolutions (SCR) 1325 (2000), 1820 (2008), 1888 (2008), 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2122 (2013), 2242 (2015), 2467 (2019), and 2493 (2019). They aimed at strengthening women’s participation in decision-making, conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and post-conflict recovery, as well as preventing and stopping gender-based and sexual violence in conflict. These resolutions¹⁴ (especially SCR 1325, SCR 1820, and SCR 1888) which for the first time acknowledged that sexual violence, when widespread, systematic, or used as a tactic of war, constitutes a threat against international peace and security, have formed the basis of many national policies and action plans in conflict-affected settings.

 - **UN Security Council Resolution 1325** adopted on October 31, 2000, addressed the disproportionate and unique impact of armed conflict on women. It recognizes the undervalued and under-utilized contributions women make to conflict prevention, peacekeeping, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding. And it stresses the importance of women’s equal and full participation as active agents in peace and security.
 - **UN Security Council Resolution 1820** adopted on June 19, 2008, recognizes sexual violence as a weapon and tactic of war. It notes that rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute a war crime, a crime against humanity, or a constitutive act concerning genocide. It calls for the provision of specific training for troops on preventing and responding to sexual violence and to deploy women in peace operations.
 - **UN Security Council Resolution 1888** adopted on September 30, 2009, reiterates that sexual violence exacerbates armed conflict and impedes international peace and security. It calls for leadership to address conflict-related sexual violence and for the deployment of a Team of Experts where cases of sexual violence occur.

- **The UN World Summit 2005** – Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) - The United Nations Millennium Declaration, signed in September 2000, commits world leaders to combat poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation, and discrimination against women. The MDGs set several strong references to ending violence against women and the girl child in situations of armed conflict – “We strongly condemn all violations on the human rights of women and girls in situations of armed conflict and the use of sexual exploitation, violence and abuse, and we commit ourselves to elaborating and implementing strategies to report on, prevent and punish gender-based violence.”¹⁵

- **Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (The Istanbul Convention)**¹⁶, adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in April 2011, is a ground-breaking, legally binding international treaty to eradicate violence against women and domestic violence. The Convention – which emerged from the Council of Europe’s work to monitor violence against women and girls, identify gaps in legislation, and find best practices – covers a broad range of measures, including obligations ranging from awareness-raising and data collection to legal measures on criminalizing different forms of violence. The Istanbul Convention applies in times of peace and situations of armed conflict (Art 2.2) and recognizes the ongoing human rights violations during armed conflicts that affect the civilian population, especially women, in the form of widespread or systematic rape and sexual violence and the potential for increased gender-based violence both during and after conflicts (Preamble).

14 Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (n.d.) *About Women, Peace And Security in the Security Council*. Accessed October 3, 2022. <https://www.peacewomen.org/security-council/WPS-in-SC-Council>

15 United Nations General Assembly (2005). A/RES/60/1, p.26. World Summit Outcome. https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_60_1.pdf

16 Council of Europe (2011). *Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*. <https://rm.coe.int/168008482e>

■ International Criminal Law

International criminal law relates to crimes such as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. The Rome Statute of 1998, establishing the permanent International Criminal Court (ICC), includes rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, and other forms of sexual violence of comparable gravity, as crimes against humanity (Art 7.1.g) and war crimes (Art 8.2.e).¹⁷

Despite the significant increase in legal protection of women during armed conflicts under international law, women continue to experience violations and abuses of their human rights. Sexual violence is still widespread in most conflict-affected areas. Accountability of perpetrators and access to justice for survivors remains extremely limited. Women continue to be underrepresented in decision-making positions, security and peacekeeping forces, and political and peace processes overall.¹⁸ Implementation of the rules set by the member states in the international legal documents varies and is hugely influenced by domestic political support, societal attitudes, civil society engagement, and budgetary support. One of the strong mechanisms for implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda and translation of the normative standards into actions to be implemented on the ground are National Action Plans (NAPs) on UNSCR 1325. However, adequate financing for the implementation of NAPs and the WPS agenda, in general, remains a significant challenge. Only 35 countries (36%) out of 103, which have adopted National Action Plans to implement UNSCR 1325 have allocated budgets for the implementation of NAPs.¹⁹ Thus, it is crucially important to develop clear strategies and address this challenge.



17 United Nations (1998). *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*. Rome. <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/RS-Eng.pdf>

18 Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (2017). *No Money, No NAP: Manual for Costing and Budgeting National Action Plans on UNSCR 1325*, p.14. New York, United States. https://gnwp.org/wp-content/uploads/GNWPCostingBudgetingManual_Eng_4web.pdf

19 Women's International League for Peace & Freedom. National Action Plans: at a Glance. Accessed September 8, 2022. <https://1325naps.peacewomen.org/>

3 Key Actors Responsible for the Protection of Women and Girls During and After the War

Key actors responsible for protecting women and girls during and after the war are **governmental bodies, public institutions, and civil society organizations** authorized to implement measures and policies aimed at preventing and eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls within the systemic response of one country.

The war experiences in Bosnia and Herzegovina have shown that **the formal protection system is insufficient**. If women report GBV during the conflict, they are standing against patriarchal norms, against stereotypical expectations of women and men's roles in society. They often accuse men who are perpetrators of other war crimes and are sometimes considered heroes in their local community. Because of that, and because of the lack of women's recognition, we can consider reporting GBV during conflict more than reporting a criminal offense: it represents a political intervention, a call for the responsibility of those that abused political and social momentum and committed a crime against women.

In addition to the institutional framework, the response to gender-based and domestic violence during and after the war also requires developing a **women's solidarity network**, that will work towards establishing a social climate in which women are protected from visible and invisible violence and violation of their fundamental human rights. Protection of women from violence has to include responses adjusted to the social and cultural context in which the violence occurs. It should consider various forms of violence, including violence in the name of rights, customs, and religion, and various forms of discrimination against women during and after the war. It is also important to consider the character and duration of the war, the social and historical context of the area where the war is taking place, as well as the political and legal arrangement and organization of the system in the country.

During and after the war, it is of particular importance to involve responsible actors, such as governmental bodies, national, regional, and local councils and administrations, state institutions for human rights protection, and civil society organizations in the processes of **developing and implementing protection measures for women and girls, based on current needs** and principles of protection grounded on democracy and respecting fundamental human rights. Key responsible actors should assess the needs of survivors in light of all relevant war and post-war circumstances for decisions to be appropriate. The approach should be based on ensuring the prevention of repeated violence, protection of survivors from secondary victimization, prosecution of criminal offenses, and reparations.

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention)²⁰ chapter related to *Protection and Support* to victims of violence, emphasizes that all forms of violence covered within the scope of the Convention do not cease during armed conflict or period of occupation. Continuation of applicability of the Convention during armed conflict is ensured, in addition to the principles of international humanitarian law and international criminal law. Provisions of the Istanbul Convention recognize key actors and principles of support and protection by **obliging member states to protect women and girls from violence during and after the war and ensure mutual cooperation and coordination in providing support and protection to victims and witnesses of all forms of violence**. The following mechanisms are especially emphasized: judiciary, public prosecutors, law enforcement bodies, local and regional authorities, non-governmental organizations, and other relevant organizations. The Istanbul Convention clarifies that the list of actors that can be involved in support and protection is open, in order to enable cooperation with any other organization considered relevant by the country member. The term "mechanism" relates to any formal or informal structure, such as agreed protocols, roundtables, or any other method that enables the cooperation of a larger number of experts using a standardized approach. It does not require establishing an official body or institution.

20 Council of Europe (2011). *Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*. <https://rm.coe.int/168008482e>

The importance of the possibility of **referring survivors to specialized support services, i.e., a women's shelter or rape and sexual violence crisis center**, often operated by non-governmental organizations, is also emphasized. These services will provide support to the victim by ensuring health protection, collecting forensic data if needed, psychological and legal counseling, and undertaking further steps, such as working with the judiciary.

Victims of sexual violence (SV) should receive special attention when it comes to supporting and protection, especially in proceedings before judicial institutions where they appear as witnesses. According to the European Court of Human Rights, victims have a greater need for protection due to stigmatization in society, and testimonies are often painful and retraumatizing for them. Survivors of SV and in general women who are suffering from GBV during a war need to get sensitive protection from key actors. This support cannot depend on the readiness of a victim to report violence to the formal institutions and be a witness in the process. Key actors need to be ready to protect and support women if they are asking for help under any circumstance.

Judicial institutions are important actors to ensure sanctioning of war crime perpetrators, which represents some sort of moral victory and satisfaction of justice for survivors, but also to prevent the repetition of violence against women and girls. This returns the self-confidence of survivors, increases possibilities for more productive involvement in social life, and creates preconditions for a life free from any fear and pressure. This is especially important to survivors that have an important role in prosecuting perpetrators and suspects of war crimes. To make the process as efficient and effective as possible, the survivors need support in access to justice. Various forms of support to survivors of any form of abuse are necessary activities for all segments of society.



4 The impact of the war on women and girls

Consequences of war on women and girls and the intersecting dimensions of VAW

War and conflicts affect women, men, boys, and girls differently. They may vary in cause and scale, but the effects of conflict on women have similarities around the world. The negative impact of conflict on gender relations and women, in particular, has been widely recognized. The current war in Ukraine has also proved to hurt women and girls more than other populations both in the short and long term.²¹ Women and girls suffer not only from the immediate effects of war and conflicts but also from their by-products.

During the war, women take all risks and responsibilities to rescue their children and families and are forced to flee their homes, separating them from their support networks. According to UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, **more than half of the planet's 80 million displaced people are women and children**, a situation that increases the risk of gender-based violence, including sexual violence. UN findings suggest that at least one in five women refugees in complex humanitarian settings has experienced sexual violence; however, the real numbers are most likely higher since the data on sexual and gender-based violence in humanitarian contexts remain underreported.²² In conflict settings, women frequently travel long distances for food, water, firewood, and medical care to take care of their families, which increases the risks of attacks, exposure to sexual violence, or injury from land mines.

Gender-based violence and war are undeniably interlinked, with women and children being exposed to physical, sexual, verbal, and psychological abuse in times of conflict. According to the UNHCR, in 2020, 87% of women in Afghanistan had experienced at least one form of GBV, and 62% had experienced psychological, physical, and sexual abuse.²³ During a conflict, when formal health and psychosocial services are often severely compromised, and community support systems are weak, the consequences of violence can be even more devastating for women. Rape and sexual violence against women have also been recognized as a military tactic and weapon of war, as explained in the following sub-chapter.

Increased vulnerability of women and children: as the men are away fighting, often killed or disappearing during conflicts, women are the sole responsible persons for taking care of the household, earning a livelihood, being active outside the home, and stepping into new positions to survive. They fight for jobs and to get money, which leads to internal and external migration, where women tend to occupy jobs within the informal sector without any social protection, making them even more vulnerable. This also increases the risks of human trafficking. Furthermore, this harms the children that are left without sufficient parental care, which influences their school performance and psychological state.²⁴

Connections between conflict and human trafficking: people attempting to escape a war zone and fleeing their homes are extremely vulnerable and at much higher risk of human trafficking. Those whose identity and travel documents have been left in conflict zones or have been confiscated and lost while traveling on overcrowded transportation or staying in collective holding points/refugee camps, can too easily become victims of trafficking. Refugees and displaced people are at risk of being subjected to forced labor and forced prostitution, organ trafficking, etc.

21 Machani, A. (2022). *The War in Ukraine Will Hurt Women and Children Most*. World Politics Review. Accessed September 8, 2022. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/30381/for-children-and-women-war-s-impact-is-disproportionately-high>

22 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2019). *Global Humanitarian Overview*, p.17. <https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/GHO2019.pdf>

23 Cone, D. (2021). *Afghan Women and Girls Under Immediate Threat: The Responsibility to Protect and Assist Is just Beginning*, p.9. Refugees International. <https://bit.ly/30msCAB>

24 Gassmann, F., Siegel, M., Vanore, M., Waidler, J. (2017). *Unpacking the Relationship between Parental Migration and Child well-Being*. Springer. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s12187-017-9461-z.pdf>

In addition, **being a woman or girl intersects with other factors of risk, such as age, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, and ethnicity**, where exposure to violence and level of vulnerability can be even greater.

Being a female adolescent or child increases the risks of violence during crises like armed conflict. Due to their age and gender, girls can be exploited, harassed, and abused by family members, military, armed groups, police, peacekeeping forces, and humanitarian aid workers.²⁵ Furthermore, during the armed conflict, community support and protection structures are considerably weakened, and the vulnerability of girls is significantly increased by:

- **Lack of access to school and education:** At the onset of a crisis, girls are the first in their communities to leave school and the last to return when it ends. During violent conflicts, “girls are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys”. Within refugee and host communities, the financial burden of displacement means that families are sometimes more likely to pay for their son’s education than their daughter’s.²⁶
- **Early marriages:** Due to the destroyed economy, poverty, and hunger brought on by the war, girls may be married off at an early age by their parents to acquire dowry or just to free themselves from an additional mouth to feed.²⁷ More than half of the 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriage are fragile or affected by conflict.²⁸ Girls who marry before 18 are more likely to leave school and experience domestic violence or may face substantially higher risks of dying from complications during pregnancy and childbirth.²⁹
- **Increased domestic responsibilities:** “Adolescent girls and female children may take over increased domestic responsibility during the crisis, taking care of younger siblings, managing households if parents are absent or they are killed during wartime.”³⁰

Older women may also encounter an increased risk of violence during conflict and crisis settings. In addition to age, lack of mobility, and weak health, they could face:

- **Higher risk of poverty:** Due to inability to work or disrupted pension schemes.
- **Health and nutrition needs:** As health and other social services are disrupted, they may be given secondary consideration to younger people in terms of proper nutrition, healthcare, and shelter.
- **Being alone and unprotected:** Older people often remain at home in times of war. Some stay as they do not want to be a burden to their families or simply because they want to protect their homes. Remaining alone, they might face risks of abuse, including sexual violence from the combatants, local gangs, or aggressive community members, among others. Sexual violence against older women is prevalent but continues to be largely ignored due to erroneous assumptions that sexuality and sexual violence disappear with age.³¹

25 Siddiqi, A. (2012). *Missing the Emergency: Shifting the Paradigm for Relief to Adolescent Girls*. The Coalition for Adolescent Girls. Youth Power. <https://www.youthpower.org/sites/default/files/YouthPower/files/resources/1-Missing-the-Emergency-Shifting-Paradigm-on-Adolescent-Girls.pdf>

26 Simpson, G. (2018). *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security*, p.92. UNFPA and PBSO. <https://www.youth4peace.info/system/files/2018-10/youth-web-english.pdf>

27 Human Rights Watch (2016). *Ending Child Marriage: Meeting the Global Development Goals' Promise to Girls*. Accessed September 8, 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/africa#55d888>

28 Statista (2021). *Countries with the highest child marriage rate as of 2021*. Statista Research Department. Accessed September 8, 2022. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1226532/countries-with-the-highest-child-marriage-rate/#:~:text=Niger%20has%20the%20highest%20child,63%20percent%20to%2068%20percent>

29 Equal Everywhere (2022). *5 Ways Conflict Prevents Girls and Women From Being Equal Everywhere*. United Nations Foundation. Accessed September 8, 2022. https://equaleverywhere.org/story/5-ways-conflict-prevents-girls-and-women-from-being-equal-everywhere/?utm_source=LinkedIn&utm_medium=Organic&utm_campaign=EqualEverywherehttps://www.unhcr.org/be/wp-content/uploads/sites/46/2020/07/Global-Trends-Report-2019.pdf

30 Siddiqi, A. (2012). *Missing the Emergency: Shifting the Paradigm for Relief to Adolescent Girls*. The Coalition for Adolescent Girls. <https://www.youthpower.org/sites/default/files/YouthPower/files/resources/1-Missing-the-Emergency-Shifting-Paradigm-on-Adolescent-Girls.pdf>

31 The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2022). *UN experts urge States to address violence, abuse and neglect of older women*. UN. Accessed September 8, 2022. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/taxonomy/term/824>

- **Isolation:** Older people are often unable to flee from conflict and may be left alone without family or “lose their family members during the war, so that support systems they often relied on before conflict may no longer be available to them.”³² They remain isolated and cut off from support, including access to medicine and food.

Girls and women with disabilities also face an increased risk of abuse during war and conflicts. The World Health Organization estimates that 15% of any population is made up of persons with disabilities. An estimated 12.4 million of the 82.4 million people who were forcibly displaced globally at the end of 2020 were persons with disabilities.³³ The conflict itself may render more women mentally and physically disabled due to war-related stress and trauma, atrocities they face, or as a result of landmines, gunshot wounds, fires, and bomb attacks. Conflicts often exacerbate existing problems for women with disabilities, who may lack access to community or familial support, education, or health care, that they relied on before the war.

Women and girls with disabilities could face the following challenges during conflicts:

- **Limited mobility.** Limited mobility can result in an inability to escape dangerous situations, and hence, women and girls with disabilities can be more at risk of sexual violence and rape.³⁴ They can also be restricted to access to basic services such as shelter, food, water, sanitation, hygiene products, and medical care.³⁵
- Although all women suffer during the conflict, women with disabilities are generally “**more vulnerable to physical, psychological, sexual or financial violence, neglect, entrapment, and degradation**”, since they may be less able to escape conflict and defend themselves, or unable to access reporting and justice mechanisms.³⁶

Armed conflict strongly impacts the rights and safety of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI+) people. During armed conflict, LGBTI+ persons are often among the least protected of all groups and “face additional perils created by the violent environment and breakdown of the law and order”³⁷. According to UNHCR, LGBTI+ individuals face: “discrimination, harassment, abuse, bullying, physical, emotional and sexual violence, including murder, rape, torture, and psychiatric and psychological so-called ‘conversion therapies’”.³⁸ Based on the experience of NGOs supporting survivors, the following risks are common in conflict areas:

32 HelpAge International (2022). *Ukraine: Older people face abandonment and isolation as conflict with Russia intensifies*. Accessed September 8, 2022. <https://www.helpage.org/newsroom/latest-news/ukraine-older-people-face-abandonment-and-isolation-as-conflict-with-russia-intensifies/>

33 Migration Data Portal (2022). *Disability and human mobility*. Accessed September 8, 2022. <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/disability-and-human-mobility#foot>

34 United Nations Women (2013). *Violence against Women in Conflict, Post-conflict and Emergency Settings*. Accessed September 8, 2022. <https://endvawnow.org/en/articles/1483-introduction.html>

35 Women Enabled International (2021). *Rights of Women and Girls with Disabilities in Conflict and Humanitarian Emergencies*. Washington, USA. <https://womenenabled.org/wp-content/uploads/Women%20Enabled%20International%20-%20Rights%20of%20Women%20and%20Girls%20with%20Disabilities%20in%20Conflict%20and%20Humanitarian%20Emergencies%20-%20English.pdf>

36 Ortoleva, S. (2017). *Accounting for Women and Girls with Disabilities in Conflict and Crisis Situations: Recommendations for Action and Implementation*. Vol.42, No 4. Disability Rights Under Siege. American Bar Association. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/2016-17-vol-42/disability-rights-under-siege/accounting-for-women-and-girls-with-disabilities-in-conflict-and/#:~:text=Although%20all%20women%20suffer%20during,less%20access%20to%20reporting%20and

37 Margalit, A. (2018). *Still a blind spot: The protection of LGBT persons during armed conflict and other situations of violence*, p.238. International Review of the Red Cross. <https://www.corteidh.or.cr/tablas/r39345.pdf>

38 The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2021). *Global Roundtable LGBTIQ+ Persons in Forced Displacement and Statelessness: Protection and Solutions – Discussion Paper*. Geneva, Switzerland. <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/brochures/611e33704/2021-global-roundtable-lgbtiq-persons-forced-displacement-statelessness.html>

- As reported by CSOs from Ukraine, during the war access to **hormone replacement therapy and other medical treatments for LGBTI+ people was heavily restricted**.
- **Violence against LGBTI+ persons has also led to their displacement** – for instance, from the territory under armed groups' control in eastern Ukraine. Individuals were specifically targeted due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. They were forced to leave their homes after they had suffered intimidation and even death threats.³⁹ Moreover, due to documentation problems, **trans women and non-binary people cannot leave the country**, as they are registered as “male” at birth. In some instances, they are even excluded from evacuation and emergency responses.
- **Social and economic marginalization** exacerbated by the conflict may force LGBTI+ people into sexual exploitation, where they face increased risk of abuse and violence – often at the hands of police or military who have detained them.⁴⁰
- There is a **lack of access to gender-segregated shelters, bathrooms, health, and other facilities** in times of war, and those who do not fit into normative male/female genders or those who are not legally or publicly recognized as their identified gender, are excluded from the different facilities. For instance, transgender women who are not perceived by the public as women can be denied access to a safe shelter with other women and might be forced to share a shelter with men. This increases their risk of assault, harassment, and abuse.⁴¹

To prevent and adequately respond to GBV during war and conflict, it is crucial to understand how it impacts groups differently according to their gender, race, age, and disabilities, among other factors.

Typical forms of gender-based violence during and after the war

The term gender-based violence applies to violence perpetrated against women and girls, but also to certain forms of violence against men and boys, as well as against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex persons that is “driven by a desire to punish those seen as defying gender norms.”⁴²

The most common examples of GBV are sexual and domestic violence, sexual exploitation and trafficking, forced marriage and pregnancy, and traditional practices that cause harm, such as female genital mutilation, honor killings, and widow inheritance.⁴³ This chapter focuses on some of the most recurrent forms of GBV during and after conflict.

39 Bond, K., Vlasova, A. (2017). *Gay and displaced on the frontlines of Ukraine's conflict*. UNHCR, Donetsk. Accessed September 8, 2022. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2017/9/597ef1fc4/gay-displaced-frontlines-ukraines-conflict.html>

40 McMillan, K., Worth, K. (2011). *Sex Workers and HIV Prevention in Fiji – after the Fiji Crimes Decree 2009*. International HIV Research Group, UNSW, Sydney, Australia. <https://www.aidsdatahub.org/sites/default/files/resource/sex-workers-and-hiv-prevention-fiji-2009.pdf>

41 Knight, K., Sollom, R. (2012). *Making disaster risk reduction and relief programmes LGBTI-inclusive: examples from Nepal*. Issue 55. Humanitarian Exchange Magazine. Accessed September 8, 2022. <https://odihpn.org/publication/making-disaster-risk-reduction-and-relief-programmes-lgbti-inclusive-examples-from-nepal/>

42 The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2011). *Discriminatory laws and practices and acts of violence against individuals based on their sexual orientation and gender identity: report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/719193/files/A_HRC_19_41-EN.pdf?ln=en

43 GBV AoR (2010). *Handbook for Coordinating Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings*. UNHCR. <https://cms.emergency.unhcr.org/documents/11982/51689/Gender-based+Violence+Area+of+Responsibility+Working+Group%2C+Handbook+for+Coordinating+Gender-based+Violence+Interventions+in+Humanitarian+Settings%2C+2010/b16ef95e-b68f-432e-a79e-84ef91773ba7>

■ Domestic violence during and after the war

War circumstances are not seen as a cause of domestic violence, but **participation in war conflicts and exposure to war trauma can be a "trigger" for violent episodes and contribute to increasing the intensity and scale of domestic violence.** Some of the factors contributing to the increase in domestic violence during the war are fear and uncertainty; socio-economic instability; disruption of established family dynamics and relationships; increased alcohol and drug use; easy access to different types of weapons; occurrence of posttraumatic stress syndrome; and the context of civil wars in which men are involved predominantly and are unprepared for the experiences of war.

It is common practice during the war for men to return directly to their homes from the front, carrying all the experiences of armed conflict and war trauma with them. Their actions in the war and their contribution to defending the family and homeland are glorified, and tolerance for aggressive behavior, emotional manipulation, and blackmail increase. They often become more aggressive by appropriating a greater right to rule over mothers, wives, and sisters, which contributes to the unequal distribution of power within the family and deepens the causes of domestic and gender-based violence. Women return to the traditional role of caregivers of children, the elderly, and the infirm, and they are valued by the amount of burden borne by the family. Due to the lack of total absence of special rehabilitation and reintegration strategies, women must take care of the combatant family members who might have either psychological or physical traumas resulting from armed conflict.

During the war, there is often also political propaganda aimed directly at the family, primarily women. This propaganda calls for an increase in birth rates in favor of the so-called fatherland, which puts violent families at increased risk of sexual violence and marital rape, and hinders women's access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, such as safe contraception and abortion.

■ Sexual violence as a weapon of war

We see sexual violence in conflict through a gendered lens. That means we understand that by 'weaponizing' gendered roles, populations are more vulnerable to sexual violence as a weapon of war, and it is more likely that this type of violence will be committed.⁴⁴

– Mukwege Foundation

Under international law and in the work of the UN, eight different forms of conflict-related sexual violence are distinguished:

- rape
- sexual slavery
- prostitution
- forced pregnancy
- forced abortion
- enforced sterilization
- forced marriage
- and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity.

44 Dr. Denis Mukwege Foundation (n.d.). *Forms of sexual violence*. Accessed September 8, 2022. <https://www.mukwegefoundation.org/the-problem/rape-as-a-weapon-of-war/forms-sexual-violence/>

Moreover, conflict-related sexual violence can be an aspect of other crimes, such as human trafficking, when committed during the war and for the purpose of sexual exploitation.⁴⁵

All the abuses mentioned above are designed to humiliate and destroy the sexual identity and autonomy of the victim, to destroy the social fabric of families and communities. The victims of wartime sexual violence are mostly women and girls. Even if sexualized violence during war and conflict is used against men too, this is still perpetrated by men and is an expression of dominance and disproportionate power exercised in patriarchal societies. Men also rape boys and other men in order to symbolically and physically 'emasculate' them.⁴⁶

Feminist academics were the pioneers who viewed sexual violence as a form of social power that is characterized by the dynamics of gender, and a political act that is forced into the public sphere. Feminist scholars, instead of placing GBV within the realm of hidden private life, showed the connections between sexual violence and the history of war and claimed that rape is a political form of aggression, and a weapon of war.⁴⁷

■ “Rape is cheaper than bullets”⁴⁸

Rape has been committed against women and girls for as long as humans have inhabited the earth. Those acts have been cited in historical documents, including various religious works, depicted in sculptures and art pieces. However, what is new is its systematic and institutionalized use in wars. The statistics are shocking: In Rwanda, between 100,000 and 250,000 women were raped during the three-month genocide in 1994; more than 60,000 women were raped during the civil war in Sierra Leone (1991–2002); over 40,000 in Liberia (1989–2003); up to 60,000 in the former Yugoslavia (1992–1995); and at least 200,000 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) since 1998.⁴⁹ In 2010, The Journal of the American Medical Association released a study arguing that close to 40% of the women in DRC have been raped at least once in their lifetime, while in 2011, the New York Times published that every minute one woman was raped in DRC.⁵⁰

This proves the status of wartime sexual violence as social behavior, which is structural, persistent, and functional. As Skjelsbæk puts it, “it is too widespread, too frequent and seemingly too calculated and effective not to be part of a larger political scheme and hence a weapon of war.”⁵¹ So frequent that the phrase “rape is cheaper than bullets” has been circulated even among academics and professional circles to express the instrumental nature of wartime rape used by warring parties.⁵²

During the ongoing war in Ukraine, there have already been numerous registered cases of rape of Ukrainian women and girls by Russian troops. Gang rapes, assaults taking place at gunpoint, and rapes committed in front of children are among the testimonies collected by investigators.

According to Kateryna Cherepakha, who is the president of La Strada Ukraine NGO that supports survivors of

45 Dr. Denis Mukwege Foundation (n.d.). *Forms of sexual violence*. Accessed September 8, 2022. <https://www.mukwegefoundation.org/the-problem/rape-as-a-weapon-of-war/forms-sexual-violence/>

46 Medica Mondiale (n.d.). *Sexualised wartime violence*. Accessed September 8, 2022. <https://medicamondiale.org/en/violence-against-women/sexualised-wartime-violence>

47 Kirby, P. (2012). *How is rape a weapon of war? Feminist International Relations, modes of critical explanation and the study of wartime sexual violence*. Vol 19. European Journal of International Relations.

48 The phrase is an increasingly common one and has been used by Amnesty International's campaign Rape is cheaper than bullets. Accessed October 3, 2022. <https://politicaladvertising.co.uk/2009/02/27/amnesty-rape-is-cheaper-than-a-bullet/>

49 United Nations Action and the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict (2014). *Background note: Sexual Violence: a Tool of War*. Department of Public Information. <https://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/rwanda/assets/pdf/Backgroundunder%20Sexual%20Violence%202014.pdf>

50 Rubin, R. (2019). *For Nobel Peace Prize Winner Dr Denis Mukwege, His Patients Motivate and Inspire*, pp. 19-21. Vol. 321 No.1. American Medical Association, United States.

51 Kirby, P. (2012). *How is rape a weapon of war? Feminist International Relations, modes of critical explanation and the study of wartime sexual violence*. Vol 19 No.4. European Journal of International.

52 Ibid.

trafficking, there have been several calls to their emergency hotline from women and girl survivors of wartime sexual violence who were seeking assistance. Unfortunately, not in all cases has it been possible to help the survivors physically because of the ongoing fighting.⁵³

In the document, “UN Action Against Sexual Violence,” the United Nations asserts that **“Rape committed during the war is often intended to terrorize the population, break up families, destroy communities, and, in some instances, change the ethnic makeup of the next generation. Sometimes it is also used to deliberately infect women with HIV or render women from the targeted community incapable of bearing children.”**⁵⁴

Thus, the issue of wartime rape cannot be defined as a “women’s problem” and cannot be considered to be an almost inevitable “side-effect” of the war, as it was used to be perceived before the twentieth century.

What remains disturbingly worrying is the impunity of wartime rape, even though the UN Security Council Resolution 1820 adopted on June 19, 2008, recognizes sexual violence as a weapon of war and notes that rape is a war crime.

Often, rapists as well as those that encourage mass rapes are state actors and not likely to be punished. For example, during the 1990s in Guatemala, 200,000 people were killed and countless rapes were registered as a result of ethnic cleansing campaigns against indigenous peoples. Similarly, during the conflict in Bosnia & Herzegovina, ‘rape camps’ were established where women and girls were raped for weeks at a time. In each of those cases, impunity was a significant reason for its widespread use. Amnesty International argues that most perpetrators act with impunity, making prosecution and legal action nearly impossible.⁵⁵

■ Sexual violence by peacekeepers during missions

Vinnitsia is a town in west-central Ukraine. During the recent war in Ukraine, a teacher from this town reported to the police about a rape attempt initiated by a member of the territorial defense services. According to her report, the member of the defense services dragged her into the school library and tried to rape her. The man was arrested.⁵⁶

No matter how irrational and contradicting it is, gender-based violence and sexual assault during wartime and after the war are not only committed by an opposing warring party but also by members of state defense services and peacekeepers. In the reported case in the Ukrainian town, the perpetrator was not a Russian soldier but someone in a position where his responsibility was to protect the locals and Ukrainian residents from attacks.

Since 2004, the majority of reports and allegations of sexual violence and abuse in conflict-affected areas by those called to protect the local population in various countries, have been against United Nations peacekeepers. Mainly women, girls, and boys have been the target of sexual violence and sexual offenses. According to an investigation by the Associated Press in 2017, between 2004 and 2016, the United Nations received about 2000 allegations of sexual violence and offense against its peacekeepers as perpetrators of those acts.⁵⁷

Different reasons have been defined to explain why rape occurs: factors creating a tendency or a desire to rape, factors reducing internal hindrances or social inhibitions against acting out the desire to rape, and factors reducing

53 McKernan, B. (2022). *Rape as a weapon: huge scale of sexual violence inflicted in Ukraine emerges*. The Guardian. Accessed 8, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/03/all-wars-are-like-this-used-as-a-weapon-of-war-in-ukraine>

54 Peltola, L. (2018). *Rape as a Weapon of War and Genocide: An Examination of its Historical and Contemporary Tactical Uses, Effects on Victims and Societies and Psychological Explanations*. CMC Senior Theses. http://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses/1965

55 Amnesty International (1993). *Bosnia-Herzegovina: Rape and sexual abuse by armed forces*. 63/01/91. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/EUR63/001/1993/en/>

56 McKernan, B. (2022). *Rape as a weapon: huge scale of sexual violence inflicted in Ukraine emerges*. The Guardian. Accessed 8, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/03/all-wars-are-like-this-used-as-a-weapon-of-war-in-ukraine>

57 Essa, A. (2017). *Why do some peacekeepers rape?* The full report. Al Jazeera. Accessed September 8, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2017/8/10/why-do-some-peacekeepers-rape-the-full-report>

the victim's ability to resist or avoid rape. Based on this understanding, it is easy to see why the peacekeeping context, where there is an interplay of power dynamics, can generate an environment for sexual violence and rape. Research has also validated this theory, showing that UN peacekeeping missions can increase criminal violence (especially organized crime) in conflict-affected areas by exploiting the power and conditions in which they operate as stabilizers.⁵⁸

Crimes for which peacekeepers have been accused up until now range from trading “sex for food” and trafficking in women to rape at gunpoint, torture, and murder.⁵⁹

Unfortunately, there have been many cases when peacekeepers, accused of sexual violence and other war crimes perpetuated in post-conflict countries, have been allowed to continue their deployment in conditions of impunity. Many of the crimes committed by peacekeepers remain undetected and unpunished. It was only in 2004 that the UN Secretary-General recognized the extent of the problem. Since then, despite the recommendations issued by the UN Secretary-General to eliminate sexual violence and rape by peacekeepers during their missions, the number of cases of sexual exploitation, offense, and violence has increased over the years.⁶⁰

The UN responses to sex crimes have largely been devised internally with little external input from those affected by the crime – the victims. The UN describes the offenses as “sexual exploitation and abuse,” rather than labeling the offenses as rape and sex crimes that must be punished.⁶¹ The UN has recently placed a focus on the role of female peacekeepers in an attempt both to address the status of women and to mitigate the number of cases of sexual violence during peacekeeping.

Female peacekeepers are seen as being able to increase ‘civilized’ behavior during missions, as they are believed to be better behaved and able to influence their male counterparts to do the same.⁶² The UN’s response to solving the problem of sexual violence and rape by peacekeepers is unfortunate, as the language used suggests that men are not completely responsible for their actions and women have a role to play in limiting male tendencies for aggressive, irresponsible, criminal behavior, and acts such as rape and sexual violence.⁶³ These approaches adopted by the UN are biased and unreasonable since women are either marginalized or mythicized as a magical tool for mediation in war, and thus fail to address the sexual violence and rape committed by peacekeepers during missions.

Sexual violence and rape during and after wars need to be classified as conflict-related crimes and addressed under the UN human rights due diligence policy that requires all security sectors to promote and encourage respect for international humanitarian, human rights, and refugee law. Special institutional interventions recognizing local populations’ human rights need to be designed by the UN to address this problem.

58 Kiggins, S. (2019). *Peacekeeping missions can actually increase criminal violence, research finds*. Phys. Accessed September 8, 2022. <https://phys.org/news/2019-08-peacekeeping-missions-criminal-violence.html>

59 Simic, O. (2016). *Policing the Peacekeepers: Disrupting UN Responses to ‘Crises’ Over Sexual Offence Allegations*. Political Science, Journal of International Peacekeeping. https://brill.com/view/journals/joup/20/1-2/article-p69_6.xml

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 Hernandez, B.N. (2020). *Sexual Abuse in UN Peacekeeping: The Problem of Viewing Women as a ‘Quick Fix’*. E-International Relations. Accessed September 8, 2022. <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/02/20/sexual-abuse-in-un-peacekeeping-the-problem-of-viewing-women-as-a-quick-fix/>

63 Ibid.

5 Debunking myths about women in war

■ The nature of myths

Myths are widely held but false ideas that create a coherent picture linking present societal structures with the past, the divine (supernatural), and moral geography.⁶⁴

Major characteristics of myths are endurance and resistance to modification, even when some facts and figures contradict those myths. In war or armed conflict situations, involved parties construct their worldviews and function as warring units also based on the myths present in their societies on the level of a dominant discourse.

Myths about women in war are gendered and thus promote particular ideas about femininity and masculinity that create a gender hierarchy. In that gender hierarchy in a given society, authority and power are granted to those that exhibit valued masculine traits, thus legitimizing the use of violence by men.⁶⁵



MYTH 1: Women are only victims of the conflict, not actors

“ It is true that in the past, few women ever fought. But it is also true that few men did. The proportion of males in any society who actually serve is tiny, as is the proportion of soldiers in any army who actually fight.”
– Gerard J. DeGroot⁶⁶

Throughout history, women’s participation in wars has been limited and has remained unrecognized because of the widely spread myth that “Men fight, women do not – with few exceptions.” Even though there are more and more countries where the number of women soldiers is increasing and highly technological weaponry is used more often than brute strength of soldiers of any gender, this myth persists.⁶⁷

This myth is reinforced by stereotypes about gender roles, which see women as being genetically programmed as caretakers, being peaceful and motherly figures, while aggression, courage, and proneness to violence are attributed to men. Subsequently, war is considered to be a man’s business, forgetting the role women play during and after conflicts.

TRUTH: Participation of women during and after conflicts is multifaceted.

According to the United Nations Security Council resolutions on Women, Peace, and Security, women are considered to be the vast majority of those adversely affected by armed conflict. Nevertheless, women and girls are not only victims of conflict and instability but are **powerful and active agents of change**. Despite the traditional roles ascribed to women, in the absence of their male partners who have enrolled as combatants, disappeared, or have been killed on the battlefield, women take on new positions and responsibilities as the main family breadwinner, considered typically as a male role, thus securing basic resources for the survival of their families. Women are also spearheading civil society and reconciliation activities aimed at **building the capacity of individuals and communities to participate in conflict transformation and peacebuilding, as well as facilitating the space for negotiations through advocacy**. These experiences have helped many women to challenge traditional gender roles and become more influential in society. The personal experiences of women have been the entry point for

64 United Nations Women (2020). *Conflicting identities: The nexus between masculinities femininities and violent extremism in Asia*. UNDP and UN Women. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/03/conflicting-identities-the-nexus-between-masculinities-femininities-and-violent-extremism-in-asia>

65 Ibid.

66 DeGroot, G. (2001). *A few good women: Gender stereotypes, the military and peacekeeping*. Routledge.

67 Ibid.

dialogue and confidence-building activities between conflict-divided societies.⁶⁸ Women are very much involved in building peace and security in their societies, but mostly work behind the scenes and get far less recognition than men. **The grassroots peace efforts undertaken by the women require much greater recognition** by the national governments and the international community.

For what concerns their direct involvement in the war, women have been performing support functions (such as nursing, cooking, carrying water, and removing the wounded) throughout the history of warfare. However, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the support functions women habitually performed were taken over by men soldiers. And while a woman who performed support functions was never recognized or called a soldier, men doing the same functions were labeled as such. This distinction has continued to the present day: the man who serves in any military unit far from the frontline has little difficulty proving his right to be called a soldier. In contrast, the woman who serves as a nurse at an emergency department during the war must continually question her identity both during the war and after it. Moreover, some women can be part of a war culture and use violence themselves. They become members of armed movements or take part in guerrilla groups such as in Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, the Maoist People's Liberation Army in Nepal,⁶⁹ or the many women fighting for the Ukrainian army in 2022.

On the wider societal level, women's perceived passivity is used by nationalist groups to construct militarist discourses, which present women as a vulnerable symbol of national identity in need of protection.⁷⁰ As a result, women are not seen as active subjects before, during, or after the war, neither in prevention and combat nor in peace negotiation processes.



MYTH 2: Women talk only about “women’s issues”

Women are frequently seen as depoliticized subjects, a homogeneous group with a single voice that is usually asked to talk about “women’s issues”. In contrast, men are never asked to comment only on “men’s issues”. The term “women’s issues” typically refers to problems such as sexual and reproductive health, child-care leave, domestic violence, equal pay for equal work, marital law, social welfare policies, education, and women’s struggles for equal rights. However, it is important to understand that this term perpetuates the misconception that these topics are relevant only to women and can be addressed in isolation.⁷¹ All these issues have an impact on all gender and population groups, not only on women.

TRUTH: There are no issues that can be isolated and called “women's issues” or “not women's issues”

Women often experience things differently from men, leading them to have unique perspectives and priorities. However, the division between “women’s issues” and “other issues” strengthens a false male-female binary where issues seen to be important to women are not seen as important to men, which in male-dominated political strata frequently leaves most of them unaddressed. Furthermore, such division deepens gender stereotypes. Attributing women only to “women’s issues” limits women’s participation in political spaces and formal negotiations and excludes them from discussions regarding national security, conflict resolution, demilitarization, and other political issues that concern not only men but women and other genders.

68 Cardenas, M.L. (2019). *Women to Women Diplomacy in Georgia: A Peacebuilding Strategy in Frozen Conflict*. Vol. 21. No. 3. Civil Wars.

69 Gunda-Werner-Institute (n.d.) *Stereotyped Gender Images in War and Peace*. Heinrich Böll Stiftung. <https://www.gwi-boell.de/en/presse/presse-1906.html>

70 Ibid.

71 Bjertén-Günther, E., Jung, Y., Poutanen, J., Grundström, S., Ristimäki, M. (2018). *Beyond “Women’s Issues” and Smoky Rooms: Debunking the Myths About Gender in Peace Mediation*. Center on International Cooperation, New York University. Accessed October 3, 2022. <https://cic.nyu.edu/publications/beyond-womens-issues-and-smoky-rooms-Debunking-Myths-About-Gender-in-Peace-Mediation>



MYTH 3: Women consent to sexual intercourse during a conflict

The issue of voluntary and informed consent to sexual intercourse is a complex one and a subject of manipulation in peacetime, even more during a conflict. The myth about the victim's consent to undesired sexual intercourse at the time of conflict (and beyond) is grounded in perfidious and preconceived notions rooted in discriminatory, gender-determined, religious and cultural norms, and it implies that victims (women in particular) lie about sexual violence and that they are responsible for sexual violence because of the way they act. The myth about consent to sexual intercourse shifts responsibility away from the perpetrator to the victim of sexual violence. If there are no physical signs of resistance, such as injuries on the victim's body, it is often believed she gave voluntary consent to the sexual intercourse and that the intercourse was desired by both parties.

TRUTH: Several circumstances during a conflict put women and their safety at risk, that do not allow them to express their consent, and that make it easier for perpetrators to justify sexual violence

It is important to understand all the circumstances, influences, and phenomena bringing women and girls into an unfavorable position during conflict and undermining their right to express consent and to live a life free from violence.

- War and the circumstances it entails are violent and deepen the victim's helpless position in relation to the perpetrators;
- There are frequent threats, blackmail, and attacks by perpetrators that do not necessarily have physical manifestations: during the war, rapists often use blackmail and threats to force victims into sexual intercourse without physical resistance. Oftentimes, perpetrators threaten women who have children that if they do not consent to the intercourse, they will rape their minor daughters, that they will hurt/kill the closest members of their families, that they will rape them in front of their children, in front of their partner or other close relatives and friends;
- The psychological trauma caused by sexual assault and violence may lead to physiological processes in the victim's system, blocking their physical reaction during sexual assault;
- Numerous circumstances make women more exposed, such as service and care activities during the war, distribution of humanitarian aid, nursing the soldiers, etc.;
- Systemic sexual abuse, rape, and other forms of sexual violence against women and girls are an instrument for achieving military and political goals – trials at national and international war crimes courts have proved that mass rape is part of a military strategy. The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the Hague Tribunal, was the first international tribunal to classify sexual abuse and rape of women, men, and children as a crime against humanity, in the cases of the prosecution of crimes committed during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina;
- Rapists usually coerce other men into raping and abusing women and girls against their own will. Coercion is manifested by threats, blackmail, and physical abuse.

Particularly dangerous is the impact of the myth about consent to sexual intercourse during the prosecution of crimes of sexual violence, where members of the judicial community make decisions about punishing the perpetrators and exercising the rights of victims.⁷²

72 TRIAL (2018). *Myths about rape at trials for wartime sexual violence, shifting the burden from the survivors to the perpetrators*. <https://trial.ba/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/20180112-TRIAL-Rape-Myths-BHS-WEB.pdf>

6 Strategies used by women NGOs to prevent and respond to gender-based violence in conflict situations

During the war and emergency responses

Ukraine

Emergency response strategies to support the survivors of GBV during the war from the experience of the Center "Women's Perspectives", Lviv, Ukraine

This subchapter suggests strategies, which women's rights organizations and other civil society organizations use for supporting the survivors of GBV during the war. These strategies are based on the experiences of the NGO Center "Women's perspectives" and other women's rights organizations located in Ukraine that mobilized their resources during the full-scale invasion of Russian armed forces into the territory of Ukraine. The Center "Women's Perspectives" is a non-governmental organization that has been working for the protection of women's rights in Ukraine for 24 years. The office of the organization is located in Lviv, in the western part of Ukraine.

■ Strategies during the deployment of large-scale military operations

The activity of women's human rights organizations and activist groups during the first weeks of the war depends very much on their location in relation to the front lines of war, the distance from strategic objects, vulnerability to shelling, and the main routes of the IDP movement.

The Center "Women's Perspectives" is located in the city that had the largest concentration of IDPs in Ukraine in the first weeks of the war. Many of them wanted to go to Europe, and many stayed in Lviv and the region.

Under these conditions, the organization began to open shelters for women and children. One of them was opened near the main railway station in the first days of the war, where it was possible to stay for a few days to decide regarding further actions. Meals and psychological crisis support were provided there. In addition, for women who decided to stay in Lviv, the "Women's Perspectives" Center opened six more shelters for women with children. To enable people to prepare their food, kitchens have been equipped with the necessary appliances and continuously replenished with basic necessary food products, cooking utensils, and more.

➔ To provide an **opportunity to meet basic needs** (through shelters, heating places, etc.) where people can access food, shelter, medical and psychological assistance.

From the early days, the Women's Perspectives Center, together with the WAVE Network, has developed short, simple information materials on where internally displaced women can go in different countries in order to avoid dangerous situations such as being exposed to scamming or human trafficking. The materials contained the main phone numbers of helplines, contacts of women's organizations, Ukrainian-speaking psychologists, etc. in the Ukrainian language.

- To quickly **organize informational materials about the risks of violation of women's rights** (human trafficking, labor and sexual exploitation, abducted children, etc.)

During the first few months, the vast majority of places in shelters in Lviv as well as other cities and villages in the western part of Ukraine were occupied by quite mobile and capable IDPs. People with reduced mobility and with additional vulnerabilities were left in very difficult circumstances. For them, it is necessary to create specialized places, which shall be reserved for particularly vulnerable groups (sedentary women, women aged 75+), and should not be occupied by other survivors. With the intensification of hostilities, the number of exacerbations of mental disorders has increased significantly. Internally displaced women who have mental health issues, or whose children have these issues, find themselves in a very vulnerable situation, and the available shelters categorically refuse to provide them with a place to stay. The situation becomes more complicated if these women are subjected to domestic violence from their family members.

- It is necessary to **create separate places reserved for the accommodation and special assistance of women who were raped in the war, women with reduced mobility (including those over 75 years old), women with disabilities, women with many children, and other women with vulnerabilities.**

- It is necessary to create **specialized shelters for women (including women with children) who have mental health issues and experience domestic violence.** Medical support must be provided in the shelter.

- It is necessary to **restore the subjectivity of and give space for the expression of self-determination to women affected by the war and create conditions for the survivors to take responsibility for their lives and self-care** (information about available humanitarian programs, programs for children's education and leisure, secondary medical and legal assistance, solutions to domestic violence, employment, volunteering, etc.).

With the beginning of the liberation of the previously occupied territories, it came to light that the invading forces had committed heinous crimes, including the rape of women and children.

- It is important to create the **possibility of confidential access to medical (including safe anonymous abortion), psychological and legal services for survivors of war rape.**

- It is important to **establish direct contacts and enable escorting of particularly vulnerable victims to safe conditions** in Europe to partner organizations (such as Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Austria, and Hungary), as their subsequent rehabilitation in these countries proved to be very successful.

Due to the fact that many families live together in non-specialized shelters (schools, stadiums, kindergartens, dormitories, etc.), requests from victims of domestic violence in temporary shelters began to increase after several months of the war. Therefore, it is important to increase the capacity of volunteers and the administration of non-specialized shelters to respond to complaints from victims of domestic violence.

- ➔ To offer **training on the specifics of domestic violence for volunteers and the administration of non-specialized shelters** in the region, as training on the identification of victims of domestic violence proved to be very efficient.

Due to the increased number of GBV, including domestic violence by military personnel returning from the war, it is important to prepare for an increase of GBV victims after the return of people employed in the army.

- ➔ It is necessary to **carry out information campaigns and to increase the number of places in the shelters for survivors with children, as well as significant coordination of all involved services and structures for a quality response to cases of domestic violence.**

- ➔ **Joint multidisciplinary case studies for representatives of all involved relevant structures** have proven to be successful. This involves materials designed by support services, video recordings with body cameras that can be analyzed together, role-playing games, and the development of strategies to solve specific cases. This approach helps and increases the effectiveness of the response, including the future response.

Due to the increased workload for workers and volunteers of feminist and women's organizations and groups, the possibility of secondary traumatization when you work and sympathize with many survivors, and also due to the dangers to life associated with frequent shelling, there is a great danger of burnout for many activists.

- ➔ It is necessary to **foresee and implement (including in project applications) at the level of organizations and individual levels, formal and informal practices of burnout prevention**, informing about the trauma of war and self-assistance, mental health, and professional assistance to activists if necessary.

It is very important to organize a space and safe opportunities for feminist support, solidarity, reflection, communication and strategizing, and networking between activists both within the country and abroad. Similar meetings of regular solidarity with Ukrainian members have been and are being held by the WAVE network every 2/3 weeks at the time this toolkit is written. This allows activists to feel part of a global movement and to feel its support.

- ➔ It is necessary to **initiate and support regular online and offline meetings for activists and feminists.** This is important for reflection on new challenges, solidarity, and support.



Armenia

This subchapter suggests strategies that can be used by women's rights organizations and other civil society organizations for supporting the survivors of GBV during and right after wars. The strategies are based on the experiences of the Sexual Assault Crisis Center (SACC) NGO and other women's rights organizations located in the Republic of Armenia (RA), which mobilized their resources during the last conflict in which Armenia was involved in 2020. Information has been compiled into a subchapter based on interviews with women activists working in the field of GBV prevention and response. The subchapter also includes information about the Sexual Assault Crisis Center NGO.

The "Sexual Assault Crisis Center" NGO is a feminist organization that aims to prevent and combat sexual violence and sexism in Armenia. The NGO started its activities in 2008 by establishing a helpline response to the cases of sexual violence against women as a typical and one of the most violent forms of GBV. This has been the main direction and reason for starting activities in Armenia by the SACC. The NGO has adopted an approach of actively working in the field especially in times of crisis and in emergencies like war.

In 2020 the Sexual Assault Crisis Center together with other women's rights organizations that form the Coalition to Stop Violence against Women in Armenia started actively supporting women survivors that had fled NK during the Nagorno-Karabakh war. The strategies are divided into 3 main stages based on the collected data: a) mobilization, b) active intervention and support, and c) stabilization and rehabilitation stages.

■ a. Strategies during the Mobilization Stage

An outbreak of any war can be very unexpected for the general public. During the first month of the war, the Sexual Assault Crisis Center's activities were almost stopped, and the staff was in shock and in a crisis too. It required some time for the staff to restart and redirect its activities based on the urgent needs of the survivors of war.

➔ Considering the time needed to recover from the initial shock right after the outbreak of war.

The time needed to recuperate from the shock right after an outbreak of war can be very subjective and will depend on various factors. However, taking into account that individuals as well as an NGO as a unit will require some time to recover from the shock, can help to act more realistically in times of crisis and emergency.

started to be more active when the first shock was over, and I finally realized that I had lost my home and the city. Only then did I start to think about the actions I could take to support others. Only then we contacted the IDPs and asked them about their needs, from where our support started. So, our actions started when we accepted our losses.

During a war, events are changing very rapidly, so time is needed until you gather information about the IDPs and make a database until you inform them about the existence of the NGO and the services it provides.

– *Head of an NGO in the field of women's rights protection*

After the freeze response and initial shock, the Coalition to Stop Violence against Women was formed in 2010 after the femicide of 20-years old Z. Petrosyan. The incident left several organizations concerned with the issue of violence against women and domestic violence, and they decided to found the Coalition. Currently, the Coalition has 11 members that are NGOs working in the field of promotion and protection of human rights in Armenia.⁷³

73 Coalition to stop violence against women (n.d.). *Activities*. Accessed September 8, 2022. *Activities* – Coalition to Stop Violence against Women (coalitionagainstviolence.org)

➔ **Being part of something bigger. Connecting and collaborating with other women’s rights organizations through coalitions and networks both locally and internationally.**

Being a member of a local coalition and/or an international network is a great opportunity to voice the issues of GBV survivors of war, and to reach the international community for support. Additionally, it will help an NGO and its staff to join forces and share responsibilities with other women’s rights organizations while reaching out to the survivors of war. This will help to prevent burnout of the staff and activists in the field, and thus provide quality support in the long run.

■ **b. Strategies during Active Intervention and Support Stage**

Although all member organizations of the Coalition to Stop Violence against Women are specialized in the field of GBV prevention and response in Armenia, during the war the resources of the NGOs were redirected towards the fulfillment of the basic human needs of the women survivors of war. The most urgent biological and physiological needs were divided between the NGOs, and each NGO took the responsibility to respond to one specific type of need of the survivors. The SACC together with the Women’s Resource Center took the responsibility for the provision of hygienic products to the women survivors of war. Those needs were identified based on the collaboration between the Coalition and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of the RA.

As a result of queries and back-and-forth communication it became clear that, unfortunately, the provision of hygienic products had not been considered by the State and had not been included in the package of support, as the State had put its focus on the provision of food and shelter. Thus, the needs of women were not fully considered and fulfilled by the State. Specifically, the provision of menstrual pads and underwear to the women survivors of the war was completely ignored by the State.

➔ **Gender-sensitive humanitarian support: considering the needs for menstrual hygiene (and hygiene in general) as basic human needs and include it in the package of rapid humanitarian support. Include condoms and contraceptives in the package.**

The very real problems of menstruating girls and women in war zones are bound to be ignored in many countries all over the world when the lens through which humanitarian support is provided is patriarchal and lacks gender sensitivity.

Organization and distribution of support packages in Armenia



The emergency support packages did not include condoms or contraceptives. While the menstrual pads provided were not enough, as there were families with 3 menstruating women, the provided menstrual pads were enough only for one or two members of the family. The issue is that the beneficiaries talked about the scarcity of menstrual pads, but they did not talk about the absence of condoms and contraceptives inside the support packages. We as CSOs voiced the issue, as during the war we saw an increase in cases of domestic violence... It is a well-known fact that after wars there is a boom in births in many cases, which, however, does not mean that all children born are wanted. Oftentimes, they are born as a result of sexual violence and marital rape. That's why it is important to include contraceptives inside support packages.

– *Head of an NGO in the field of women's rights protection*

During and right after a war it is expected to have a high number of both internally displaced people and refugees. Armenia was not an exception. The high number of displaced people resulted in the hectic provision of support and a period of chaos in the early stage of interventions. As a result, the SACC became one of the bridging NGOs between various State services and displaced people, who would approach the NGO for any type of support. During this process, the SACC was involved in referring, consulting, and directly helping the survivors of war while being in touch and collaborating with State institutions.

→ Collaborating and communicating with State Institutions.

During emergency situations, various State Institutions and Ministries are the most actively involved official parties. Hence, it is essential to communicate with the State about the services and interventions that as an NGO you intend to provide, to avoid duplication of services and waste of resources.

It is unrealistic to expect that during an outbreak of war there will be a strategy and a plan according to which every member of the society perfectly knows how to act and how to support other members in need. In 2020 when the war started there was no strategy or a plan of action designed by the State nor by any local or international institution in the Republic of Armenia. During and right after the war the SACC and other NGOs in the field conducted informal needs assessments while simultaneously providing support to meet the basic needs of GBV survivors. During those needs assessments, the beneficiaries voiced additional needs and issues, which had not been considered by the NGOs or the State before. They were then added to the list of interventions and support. The list was continuously updated.

→ Not expecting to work in conditions of a perfectly laid out plan until the end of an emergency situation such as war.

In times of crisis and emergency, it is good to have an emergency plan, but it is also true that the emergency plan during a war can change rapidly, sometimes within hours. Additionally, the plan of intervention will strongly depend on the newly identified needs of GBV survivors.

When we were in Shushi (a city in NK), people were coming out of the war zone, and the very first step was to accommodate those people in shelters, houses, hotels, and wherever possible. The frontline of the war was changing rapidly and every time there was a need to provide new accommodations. Only after that, the provision of clothes, hygienic products, food, medication, and social assistance was possible... There was no possibility of provision of psychological assistance during that early stage of the war as events were changing very quickly.

Some civilians needed special medication, other people had mobility issues, and the assistance to them was put in the first place.

Some people had issues with documentation, meaning that when they fled, they did not take their documents with them. During the early stage of the war, no one was talking about that issue but after the war, it became clear that many people did not even have a passport with them, for example.

– *Head of an NGO in the field of women's rights protection*

The SACC together with other NGOs reached out to the international and local donor community and asked to redirect funding to respond to the urgent needs of women survivors of war. Most of the funding was directed to the purchase of hygienic products (menstrual pads, underwear, soap) and even blankets, bed sheets, and mattresses, which could ensure some privacy in overcrowded shelters.

➔ Communicating openly the needs of GBV survivors with the donor community.

Many donors will agree to redirect the funding for the needs of GBV survivors as long as they keep being informed about the emergency, and as long as there is transparent reporting about the redirected expenditures.

International funding opportunities during war and emergencies can be scarce, compared to the needs of survivors. Thus it is useful to call local communities for support through social media. The SACC together with other NGOs actively used social media, and the locals responded immediately by donating hygienic products and formula milk for breastfeeding mothers, who physiologically were not able to breastfeed their newborns due to the huge stress.

➔ Using social media to increase fundraising or for asking direct support on behalf of the GBV survivors.

Nowadays, social media allows reaching out to both the local as well as the international community for fundraising and support. As long as confidentiality and anonymity of GBV survivors, unless consent is given to share names, are ensured, successful fundraising using social media is possible. There can be cases when countries will put restrictions on the usage of social media during a war, otherwise, it is a good tool for connecting and asking for support on behalf of the survivors of war.

■ c. Strategies during Stabilization and Rehabilitation Stage

The humanitarian aid packages for women survivors of the war that the SACC and other NGOs distributed included informational materials, flyers, and leaflets about all organizations and institutions, which provide various types of support to GBV survivors in the field. A few months after the war, when women survivors of the war were assessed to be in a more or less stabilized psychological state, the SACC started to hold individual informational sessions and thematic group meetings on the risks of GBV to the women living in shelters.

➔ Providing information on the risks and consequences of GBV to women survivors of war only when they are ready to listen and are open to information.

It is important to assess the needs of GBV survivors for psychological support alongside the provision of humanitarian aid. Survivors of war will more readily listen to information about the prevention and consequences of GBV, and where needed ask for advice when their psychological state is more or less stable. It is essential not to push

the survivors towards accepting consultancy or support if they do not feel ready to open up, which will naturally happen when their basic biological and physiological needs are met. However, continued needs assessments are necessary for organizing timely interventions in case of GBV.

Provision of any type of support to displaced people, who approach the NGO individually, can be hectic during emergencies, as there is a risk of providing double services, or including beneficiaries, who do not match the criteria. The SACC eventually decided to visit the shelters for women survivors of war directly. At that stage, the survivors were more or less in a stable psychological state and felt ready to accept gynecological and psychological services.

➔ **Meeting survivors of GBV in person, to offer both psychological and medical support in a safe environment.**

Meeting GBV survivors in their spaces especially when they have already lost their homes and have been displaced can be crucial for creating a rapport and trust. Through this approach, GBV survivors may feel safer and more open to receiving support from specialists due to a less triggering environment. When providing support (especially by a psychologist) in shelters it is essential to consider how dark or noisy the environment/room is, so as not to retraumatize the GBV survivor during the consultation session.

After the war, the SACC specialists started to receive invitations from international organizations to speak about the risks of GBV, specifically sexual violence, during wars, trafficking, and other risks of sexual exploitation of women.

➔ **Educating other NGOs and volunteers on the field about the risks and consequences of GBV during wars.**

During and right after the war many individuals, NGOs and CSOs will naturally want to mobilize around a common cause and provide support to survivors of war. However, not many of them will have knowledge of sexual violence and GBV. It is the task of women's rights organizations (especially those NGOs that have specialists trained in the field of GBV prevention and intervention) to train and educate those segments of society and charity organizations during and right after the war to extend the support network and reach out to more survivors of GBV. To do so, NGOs also need to be adequately supported and funded by the State, or if this is not possible, by international donors.



Protracted conflict

Georgia

Women Fund Sukhumi (WFS) is an organization of internally displaced women, established in 1997 and based in Kutaisi and Tbilisi, Georgia. It aims at promoting gender equality and the rights of internally displaced/conflict-affected women, empowering their role in political and social life, and involving them in decision-making processes concerning their lives and peaceful transformation of the conflicts in Georgia.

In situations where the government's policy was not responsive to the gender-specific needs of internally displaced women, the initial purpose of the organization was to address their immediate basic needs, including the provision of food, clothes, and household supplies. More than a thousand families were provided with assistance between 1997-2000. However, responding to the immediate basic needs of people through humanitarian actions cannot ensure long-term positive change in IDPs' lives. Over time, the directions and activities of WFS have evolved and transformed into a long-term strategy aiming at a positive impact on the lives and well-being of conflict-affected women.

Since 2001, social and political empowerment of women and youth became a priority of the organization to ensure their participation on all decision-making levels and public domains, so that they can influence and inform policies, and lead high-visibility advocacy initiatives for building peace and developing an equal and nonviolent society. WFS also started actively working with women survivors of violence to improve their situation, alleviate their suffering and develop a vision for change that will make a meaningful difference in their lives.

Nowadays, the main directions of the organization are the following: women's participation in peacebuilding; fighting domestic violence; mainstreaming Gender Equality in local and national policies; youth activism and empowerment.

■ Strategies of WFS to tackle gender-based violence in post-conflict settings

■ Situational analysis

For internally displaced and conflict-affected women in Georgia, the end to the conflict has not brought an end to violence against them. After displacement, homes became a new stage for violence, due to the many traumatized male former combatants, who for multiple reasons related to mental health problems stemming from conflict experiences and post-conflict adjustment difficulties, have been more likely to commit violence. In addition, in a situation of protracted and unresolved conflicts, IDPs live with uncertainty regarding the possibility to return to their homes, coupled with emotional distress, memories of the war, economic instability and difficulties, as well as precarious living conditions in dilapidated IDP settlements; as a result, stress became an everyday reality for many of them. In a post-conflict situation, where people are still living in a "no war nor peace" condition, levels of aggression and violent behavior are very common, which subsequently manifests in family conflicts and domestic violence against women.

After the ratification of the Istanbul convention in 2017, the government of Georgia has substantially stepped up its efforts to combat violence against women and girls. Georgia was the first country in the region to adopt a Law on Domestic Violence in 2006 and to ratify the Istanbul Convention which was followed by the adaptation of 29 national laws and legislative documents. VAW and DV have subsequently been criminalized. The Interagency Commission on Gender Equality, Violence against Women, and Domestic Violence (IAC) was established in 2017

within the government of Georgia, which is chaired by the Prime Minister's Advisor on Human Rights.

According to WFS's 2019 monitoring report, DV is still a complex and taboo issue for the conflict-affected population and IDPs, especially for those living close to the dividing line of the conflict. Although the majority of respondents (85%) admitted that violence is widely prevalent and an acute problem for women, it remains hidden and is thus an undisclosed personal tragedy for many women.⁷⁴ Georgian society is a traditional society with a deeply rooted notion of family as a private unit whose closed nature is considered sacred and everyone is obliged to uphold the family's honor, especially in rural and remote areas. Married women often live with their extended in-law families and in case of domestic violence or divorce have nowhere to go and often no way to make a living. This is especially true for internally displaced women, who lack secure housing and frequently live in overcrowded IDP settlements, sharing tiny apartments with other family members. This leads to an increase of applications to shelters, where women can stay with children for up to six months, but after this duration, they often become homeless, endangered, or forced to return to the violent environment of their abusive husbands, exposed to the risk of further victimization.

Since 2001, through many-faceted activities, WFS actively works on issues of violence against women, focusing on IDP and conflict-affected women living in remote areas and villages, especially those located close to conflict dividing lines – the so-called Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) with Georgia's Russian-occupied breakaway Abkhazia.

➔ **Identification and response to the cases of domestic violence.** Considering traditional and cultural norms where discussion of domestic violence is tabooed and perceived inadmissible, the identification of cases of violence remains a serious challenge. Thus, the early identification and response to DV should be a priority to ensure the provision of timely and proper support to survivors.

In the case of WFS, this is done through the combination of various strategies and tools:

■ Identification strategies:

- **Women's Support Centers (WSC)** – local women-led community hubs established by the WFS in 11 towns of western Georgia are the main source for identification and are responding to domestic violence cases at the community level. Each Center is represented by well-informed and trained women community leaders (Mobilizers) who are equipped with the necessary mediation and facilitation skills to communicate with various vulnerable groups within their communities. WSC explore and assess the situation on the ground, identify the urgent and topical gender-sensitive problems, including conflicts in families and DV, and refer survivors of DV to the relevant agencies and support services for assistance. They mobilize and inform citizens about legal protection mechanisms and existing support services for survivors, participate in the meetings of local government and advocate concerns of the local community to the local officials;
- **Information meetings with professional groups:** Information meetings and training provided to professional groups (such as teachers, caregivers, and medical personnel) create space for partnership, and significantly streamline and improve the process of identifying cases of violence;

⁷⁴ Women Fund Sukhumi (2019). *Compilation of the reports: Results of the Monitoring held by fund „Sukhumi“ in the Framework of „Gender-Responsive Early Warning System“*. WFS. <http://www.fsokhumi.ge/images/2020/4/pub/1/GREWS-eng.pdf>

- **Therapy sessions with psychologists:** Group or individual psychological therapy, including art therapy sessions enable women who have experienced abuse and/or domestic violence to open up and express their emotions as well as to develop beneficial coping and self-soothing skills. During the psychological sessions, women often become informants and help to identify "silent victims" from their circle of acquaintances;
- **Filling out anonymous questionnaires and referring to relevant specialized services:** To document and identify cases of violence, special anonymous questionnaires are disseminated within the communities. The completed questionnaires are sent to WFS' main office for further consideration. All questionnaires are reviewed and assessed by a psychologist, a lawyer, and a social worker, and work plans are elaborated. Women with complex and urgent cases are sent for rehabilitation to WFS's "Rehabilitation Center" or other specialized services operating in the country.
- **Community-based Gender Responsive Early Warning System (GREWS),** developed and launched by the WFS,⁷⁵ is a multidimensional and complex mechanism of conflict analysis and is used in all ongoing projects to monitor and assess the situation of internally displaced and conflict-affected women and girls, as well as potential women victims of domestic violence in locations with a low degree of human security and high risk of violence occurrence. It involves collecting information concerning potential conflicts and crises (in families, communities, etc.) by the community leaders. The data was systematized and analyzed taking into consideration the specific needs and interests of women and men. This information is used for a timely warning against the possible escalation of violence and instability, as well as developing relevant response strategies and undertaking evidence-based advocacy at the local, national and international levels. Different policy papers and analyses were published using the GREWS methodology, which is available on WFS's website.⁷⁶

■ Response strategies:

- **The "Rehabilitation Center" run by the organization** provides round-the-clock shelter for 14 to 20 days to survivors/potential victims, who do not have the official status of a victim due to their fear or uncertainty of reporting to the police and thus, are not entitled to state services. Women are assisted to apply for the victim status. During their stay in the "Rehabilitation Center", a psychologist, a lawyer and a social worker actively work with survivors and their children. When necessary, they are referred for consultations with other professionals and medical specialists. Survivors are helped to recover or obtain legal documents and assisted in receiving various social services at their place of residence provided either by the national and local government or civil society organizations. Survivors/potential victims of violence are also provided with various professional courses (accounting, sewing, computer and polymer clay courses, and basics on small business), grants for starting small businesses, or linked with potential employers for further employment and economic independence.

■ **did not even feel human anymore. The daily routine I was living in has driven me crazy. After the war in Abkhazia, the war has never finished in my life... I and my family were always fighting for survival... Now, every evening I was waiting to hear from my husband about what he was fighting for. I felt so depressed that I could not react to anything. The community leader [mobilizer of Fund "Sukhumi"] connected me with the Fund "Sukhumi", and that is how I ended up in the Rehabilitation Center. My children have never been elsewhere but home. Getting to the Rehabilitation Center was like going abroad for them. I got into an environment where for the first time I felt like a human, like a woman. For the first time, I wanted to apply make-up and nail polish.**

75 The community-based Gender Responsive Early Warning System was developed and piloted by the WFS with the financial support of Kvinna till Kvinna in 2018.

76 Woman Fund Sukhumi's official website. Accessed October 3, 2022. <http://www.fundsokhumi.ge/index.php/en/publications/gender-based-violence>



Work with a couple at Women Fund Sukhumi

It turned out I had many problems... a psychologist and a social worker were thinking and helping me to solve these problems. Professionals have been taking care of my children. After working with a psychologist, I felt relieved. Now, I want to erase from my mind 31 years full of pain and hardships, where there was not a single bright spot. For two weeks, I got back on my feet, reassessed my life, and looked at it differently. I learned a lot and now I'm not afraid of tomorrow.

– *Testimony of internally displaced woman, 36 years old*

- Work with couples – perpetrator behavioral change sessions at an early stage:** couples, experiencing family conflicts, identified during the meetings with psychologist and lawyer, or through anonymous questionnaires are offered special sessions. A special focus is put on men who are former combatants, with traumatic experiences and memories and strong emotions of anger, who use violence at home and in their community. The IDP and other conflict-affected men, who have never been provided with specialized rehabilitation after the war, in most cases are not able to manage their emotions, since they are supposed (or taught) to be “tough and strong”. Thus, these men tend to cope by hiding and avoiding such feelings whilst this tendency becomes explosive when unveiled in intimate partner relations. Such couples are supported by a multidisciplinary team (psychologist, conflict resolution specialist, and lawyer). Women and men are provided with either individual consultations or joint therapy where they discuss their problems. During the sessions, the work is directed toward improving communication between couples, analyzing their problems, and eliminating the risks of conflict. Sometimes when a psychologist identifies the negative impact of the parents’ relationship on children, work with the family is carried out simultaneously by different specialists - a psychologist, who works with the child, a conflict resolution specialist – with the parents.

For 30 years, we have been living in exile and in an uncertain situation, with three generations living together in one small apartment... all kinds of conditions leading to a conflict are present in such a family. One day, I got to a meeting of the Fund “Sukhumi”. When the conflict specialist was talking about how a crisis is created in a family, I thought she was talking about me. I was very scared. What I thought was a simple argument in my family turned out to be a risk of conflict eruption. I said to myself: ‘we lost everything in Abkhazia... I do not want to lose my family now. I have to save it’. At the meeting, I was offered to see a psychologist. It was not easy, it was very difficult for me, I felt embarrassed... I thought about it for a month and finally decided to have a

telephone conversation. It was easier for me. Later, we planned a face-to-face meeting, and I got involved in the sessions with my wife... the psychologist made an individual scheme for me: how to manage my emotions, and how to overcome stress. At the very first meeting, I felt I had to work on myself. I kept remembering the advice she gave me. To be honest, those meetings saved my family and my life. Instances of irreparable violence might have developed very easily in my family and I can imagine where I would have ended up.

– *Testimony of internally displaced woman, 36 years old*

➔ **Awareness raising and informing the population on DV.** Raising public awareness and promoting zero tolerance against violence against women is always an important strategy to challenge social norms, and change behaviors, beliefs, and structures that underpin the normalization of GBV. While general awareness campaigns can play a role in shifting deep-rooted perceptions around GBV, they also should focus more on advertising available services for GBV survivors as well as promoting prevention initiatives.

WFS employs numerous tools while undertaking **information and media campaigns** – social advertisements, TV and radio programs, street/forum theatres, public discussions, and training with different actors of the referral system and other social groups (i.e., police, teachers, doctors, social workers, local government officials, school students, community leaders, etc.), which facilitates open discussion within society and foster attitudinal change.

"**The Digital Resource Center for Survivors of Domestic Violence**"⁷⁷ (**Online platform**) was created by the WFS in 2022 to ensure easy access for DV survivors and any interested professionals to a wide range of information related to GBV/DV. The online platform is a comprehensive bank of information about all existing support services for survivors, provided either by the government of Georgia at the national and the local level, or by CSOs; information on legal protection mechanisms for survivors of violence, functions of referral system actors, national and international publications related to GBV (reports, analysis, surveys, etc.), mobile SOS applications and hotline numbers, success stories of women survivors are consolidated in the online platform. So far, 10 municipalities have integrated the Digital Resource Center on their websites. Numerous Facebook posts, news, and articles in online news agencies have been published, and personal success stories of domestic violence survivors have been produced and published in different blogs and spread through social media. **Media campaigns and information meetings** with different social and professional groups, coupled with detailed instructions on how to use the



Homepage of the Digital Resource Center for GBV Victims's Services

77 The Digital Resource Center for Survivors of Domestic Violence. Accessed October 3, 2022. <http://sofsokhumi.ge/>

platform and capacity building on digital literacy, and the provision of smartphones to vulnerable women easing their access to the website were employed to promote and accelerate visibility of the online platform.

When I looked through the website, I realized that I am not alone and women like me are protected by the Law. I know that there are plenty of state agencies and NGOs which could help me... I saw the success stories of women and was filled with hope that I could overcome all problems too. I never realized that before.

– *Woman survivor of domestic violence, 28 years old*

According to our beneficiaries, the webpage gives women great hope and assurance they are not alone, as they are protected and could be supported.

For some women, the website became even a tool to **restrain their partners from abusing behavior**.

I shared the site with my husband, showed different online apps and services that might protect me from him... I warned him that I'll immediately call the police by clicking the SOS button given on the website and it worked. He got scared and I think he will think twice before abusing me in any form again.

– *Woman survivor of violence, 38 years old*

➔ **Strengthening the role of Municipalities in preventing and responding to GBV/DV.** Crucial strategies to ensure proper responses to the plight of conflict-affected women are awareness raising by local authorities on issues of GBV/DV, the provision of methodological assistance in carrying out gender-sensitive needs-assessment, and advocacy for the integration of preventive measures and support services reflective of the needs of the conflict-affected population, including survivors of violence in the municipal programs and budgets.

The local governments in Georgia have legitimacy and responsibility to implement the National Action Plan on implementation of the UN Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace, and Security (NAP 1325), and thus are committed to ensuring internally displaced and conflict-affected women's meaningful participation in decision making, and their support in prevention and protection from VAW, which is a critical issue for post-conflict societies, especially for women in protracted displacement.

However, in most instances, local governments remain an untapped and inactive resource for addressing the needs of IDP and conflict-affected populations and providing relevant services to survivors of GBV.

WFS has actively contributed to establishing the **Gender Equality Machinery at the local level** and strengthening its capacity to respond to particular needs of conflict-affected women, including the provision of support services to survivors of GBV.

Establishing Gender Equality Councils at the municipalities: WFS established the first gender equality mainstreaming mechanism in four pilot municipalities in 2013.⁷⁸ The Gender Equality Councils (GEC) piloted in several municipalities brought about sensible changes in attitudes and understanding of local government officials towards the inclusion of women and marginalized groups, including IDPs in gender-responsive policy making. CSOs and women became actively involved in city councils' working meetings, where they share their concerns and

78 The first Municipal Gender Equality Councils were established in Kutaisi, Senaki, Ozurgeti and Batumi in 2013-2016 by the financial support of the UN Fund for Gender Equality.

proposed recommendations on how to address them; the gender-specific needs of the local population were assessed, and relevant strategies and gender action plans were developed with the subsequent allocation of funds for assisting survivors of violence in local budgets.

The pilot project, followed by wide-ranging advocacy campaigns undertaken by different women's CSOs resulted in the enactment of legislative amendments in relevant laws in 2016, which institutionalized **Gender Equality Councils (GEC)** As a result of the institutional development of GECs in target municipalities of WFS⁷⁹ and capacity building of local officials, including local MPs, members of GEC, mayors and their deputies, heads of social and legal departments of city halls and representatives of villages, the programs to support the DV survivors were introduced in most of the WFS's target municipalities. The programs encompass the provision of the following services to DV survivors: one-off cash assistance, medical treatment, renting apartments, various child care services, and co-financing small businesses.

Localizing Women, Peace, and Security Agenda in Local Policy-Making: Since 2018, the WFS is actively involved in the localization of the National Action Plan (NAP) UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in seventeen municipalities of Georgia,⁸⁰ aimed at enhancing the participation of internally displaced and conflict-affected women in the local decision-making processes. During the implementation process, the internally displaced and conflict-affected women and youth have been mobilized and capacitated; The concerns and needs of IDPs, conflict-affected women, and girls have been thoroughly studied and their solutions were advocated by addressing the relevant local government officials. As a result, municipal programs to strengthen these groups of people were developed and financial recourses for implementation were allocated in municipal budgets. These actions served to link the national policies with the specific needs and priorities of conflict-affected women and girls.

Establishing Local Interagency Commission on Prevention of VAW/DV and Protection to Victims of Violence: Since 2009, the WFS facilitates info-sharing and coordination meetings with all relevant actors of the referral system (i.e., police, social workers, municipality officials, doctors, teachers, etc.) to promote the information exchange between the entities responsible to prevent and respond GBV, to identify the weaknesses of the system and solve problems through the joint efforts.⁸¹ As a result of continuous work with the local officials, the WFS assisted in the establishment of Interagency Commissions in several municipalities⁸² to ensure the implementation of targeted and needs-based programs for survivors of VAW/DV and systematic and coordinated work on prevention and response to VAW/DV.



79 Target municipalities of WFS include Kutaisi, Tskhaltubo, Samtredia, Terjola, Tkibuli, Baghdati (imereti Region); Zugdidi, Senaki, Tsalenjikha, Poti (Samegrelo Region); Ozurgeti, Lanchkhuti, Chokhatauri (Guria Region); Kobuleti (Adjara Region).

80 The localisation project is implemented in partnership with UN Women (Georgia), by the coalition of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) - IDP Women's Association "Consent", Women's Information Center and Women Fund Sokhumi. The pilot project launched in 2018 was supported by the U.S. Department of State; which was followed by the complementary project in 2021, financed by the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) of the British Government. The project target municipalities are: Mtskheta, Dusheti, Kareli, Gori, Kaspi, Khashuri, Tetrtskaro, Gardabani, Tskaltubo, Kutaisi, Khoni, Sachkhere, Zugdidi, Tsalenjikha, Senaki, Oni and Mestia.

81 The activities are supported by the Bread for the World.

82 The WFS contributed to establishment of Interagency Commissions in Senaki, Baghdati municipalities in 2022.

Post-war and long-term strategies

Bosnia & Herzegovina

This chapter describes the operations and strategies of the United Women Foundation and other non-governmental organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) after the war. Even though violence against women is a phenomenon that goes beyond cultures or social systems, wartime and post-war circumstances demand adjustment of interventions and the creation of a model that will provide an efficient response to the needs of women and girls. Contents of the sub-chapter were written based on research of available literature from the United Women Foundation and interviews with female activists from other organizations, who still today actively fight against domestic violence and violence against women and take part in peace-building activities.

Experiences, strategies, and procedures of action of the United Women Foundation and other non-governmental organizations in BiH after the war could perhaps be used by some other non-governmental organizations and/or activists as an inspiration not to give up encouraging women, men, and the whole society to continuously resist violent policies, all forms of violence against women and girls, and strengthen women's autonomy in making decisions about themselves independently, under any kind of social or political circumstances.

■ About the United Women Foundation

The United Women Foundation is a non-governmental organization founded in 1996 in Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina right after the war (armed conflict) which ended in 1995.

A group of female activists from Banja Luka got together to provide support to women who had lost their homes in the war, helping them exercise their property rights. However, women started turning to the association for protection from various forms of violence they were subjected to. In the judicial system in BiH at the time, there was no institutional framework that would protect women and girls from domestic violence or gender-based violence, so the organization shifted its strategic action to create a response to violence, from the local, to entity, to the state level. It was clear from the get-go that that was impossible to achieve without any political influence, so the United Women Foundation started working with politically active women.

■ The social context in which non-governmental organizations developed action strategies after the war in BiH

After the war, women's rights activists from Bosnia and Herzegovina worked in a society where basic human rights such as the freedom of movement, personal and property safety, right to work, and right to one's own home were not guaranteed. The peace treaty Dayton Peace Agreement established peace and created a fragmented political structure in BiH. Political instability resumed through a continuous lack of consensus between the ruling parliamentary parties, which were ethnic, and that is why the influence of the international community in BiH was omnipresent. A high representative of the international community was appointed to oversee the implementation of the Dayton Agreement. The High Representative, thanks to the Bonn Powers, had the right to adopt laws and to replace public office holders who obstructed the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement.

The international community provided support to the non-governmental sector too, by funding the programs and projects whose goal was to establish democracy and enhance fundamental human rights.

The Swedish foundation Kvinna till Kvinna started its operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina to support women in conflict-affected areas. It supported also the United Women Foundation by funding direct support services, the first helpline in the Republika Srpska, and forming a free legal aid office for women. Today, the Swedish foundation

Kvinna till Kvinna, which launched its operations in BiH, supports over 140 non-governmental organizations in 20 countries affected by conflict around the world.

■ Long-term strategies of non-governmental organizations in BiH in fighting domestic and gender-based violence in post-war BiH

In post-war social circumstances, the only correct strategies of non-governmental organizations were those based on positive beliefs, strategies that carried capital for progress, and the creation of a society focusing on EU values.

The written strategic documents in BiH as we know them today emerged in the public and civil sectors only a decade and a half after the war, mainly around 2010. This goes for nearly all areas of public policies, not just for the prevention of gender-based violence or the building of peace. Our first strategic plan as an organization emerged as late as 2011, but I would not say that is the reason our operations were not logically or strategically oriented, particularly in the field of struggle for the prevention of gender-based violence.

– Radmila Žigić, Lara Foundation, Bijeljina

➔ The response of women's NGOs shall follow actual needs of women

During and after the war, women's non-governmental organizations in BiH were organized as a response to the actual needs visible in society. Responding to those needs meant setting up a system that protects the victims and punishes the perpetrators in response to GBV.

Also, it was very important to **establish a dialogue between women from all parts of BiH and between people from all ethnic groups**. Connecting with other women groups in BiH contributed to the prevention of women trafficking, better response to domestic violence, and work on peacebuilding.



Safe House in Banja Luka, 2003. Newly bought house, later adapted as shelter for women and children survivors of violence



Entity border of Republic of Srpska and Federation BiH, 1997. Activities of the United Women Foundation to improve the economic empowerment of women in rural areas.

Vive Women, a non-governmental organization from Tuzla, was founded in 1994, due to the war and during the war, with the support of three women, activists from Germany, who focused on healing trauma. The local association was established, and it formed a therapeutic center, a unit with 35 beds. Since 1994, we have been working exclusively in a closed center, a unit, where women and children affected by the war lived together with us. They lived, cooked, and took care of their children there. We tried to restore their sense of normalcy and show them that life was possible even in a war. After stabilizing, they would go into therapy for healing and overcoming trauma from different kinds of violence suffered during the war. From 1996 onwards, we changed our concept of operations, we became an open center for other persons, not just for those who were living there. We formed a team that paid visits to collective centers, which housed mostly women and children, and offered them help and support. At the same time, we started working with children in schools to prevent transgenerational trauma. It soon proved necessary to establish rights for victims of war, so together with other organizations, we started advocating the passing of norms, that is, laws.

— *Jasna Zečević, Vive Women Tuzla*

➔ **It is important to implement direct work with women and create strategies based on direct work experience**

The services for victims of domestic and gender-based violence that are currently active in BiH were not in place before the war. During and after the war, non-governmental organizations established the first support services for survivors of violence, a medical unit for survivors of sexual violence, helplines, free legal and psychological support, and a little later, safe houses. All services are free of charge for women and children and are provided by sensitized and trained staff.

Specialized services for women victims of GBV of the United Women Foundation are:

- Safe House for Women and Children Victims of Domestic Violence in Banja Luka, founded on the initiative of the United Women Foundation Banja Luka and opened on 12 February 2007.
- SOS hotline for victims of violence
- Legal counseling
- Psychological support
- Economic empowerment of women survivors of violence

In the period from 1996 until 2022, the United Women Foundation provided support to more than 10,000 women who had survived various types of violence. In the majority of cases, the support was continuous and encompassed legal and psychological counseling, as well as housing in the Safe House, and lasted from several months to several years. However, the support was sometimes one-off, in the form of an intervention and a response to violence, particularly concerning the SOS helpline. Women survivors of the war were also direct beneficiaries of services, through legal, psychological counseling, therapy, and economic empowerment. **Based on experiences in direct work**, the Foundation plans and carries out **public advocacy actions to improve laws and policies, media campaigns for the general population, and education of professionals who are part of the system's response against violence.**

Direct work with victims was a difficult, yet good strategic course that gave women's organizations in BiH power and credibility that helped us make the issue of protecting women from violence, primarily gender-based violence, a visible and important social problem. The context in which BiH found itself in the early 2000s was burdened by the consequences of war, political divisions, refugee return, unresolved war crimes. The country and its economy were devastated and to raise under such circumstances the issue of protecting a woman abused by her husband was just like going on a journey around the world on an inflatable boat. Our society is extremely patriarchal and violence against women and children was absolutely normalized.

– Radmila Žigić, Lara Foundation, Bijeljina

→ It is important to work with women who experienced sexual violence in war

The exact number of women raped during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina is unknown. However, some estimates indicate that between 20 and 50 thousand women, children, and men were raped or sexually abused during the war. One of the first non-governmental organizations to provide support to women raped during the war was Medica Zenica, a specialized women's organization providing support to women and children survivors of wartime rape or sexual violence, peacetime rape, and other forms of domestic and community violence.

After and during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, women's NGOs developed significant expertise in providing support to rape victims in the war. The specialized support for these victims, developed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, includes **long-term psychological counseling, legal counseling, and other types of support for survivors of rape during the war**. Organizations that were established during the war and that became experienced in assisting victims of rape and torture contributed to the development of the capacity of women's NGOs in BiH in a more general way, for example, **feminist principles of trauma support became more recognizable and helped women's NGOs whose work was aimed at supporting victims of all forms of violence against women.**⁸³

Medica Zenica as the first women's nongovernmental organization was established in 1993 during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Medica Zenica was the first women's therapy center and response by women for women and children who survived war trauma and violence. At that time our approach was "Learning by doing", developing a holistic and multidisciplinary approach. Respecting cultural values and needs of survivors and adapting the work to those. Individual needs should be respected. We explained it as "No copy/paste" but listening to the needs of survivors. 30 years after we started working, our beneficiaries, survivors of war-related sexual violence as well as domestic violence in peace-time clearly emphasize that Acceptance, Care, Trust, and listening to them without prejudice have been of major help for them.

– Dr. Sabiha Husić, director of "Medica" Zenica

→ Improving cooperation with decision-makers and institutions that are obliged to respond to violence against women and girls

Cooperation is also an important strategy for the prevention of gender-based violence. Regardless of the extent

83 Women Against Violence Europe (2021). *Promising practices of establishing and providing specialist support services for women experiencing sexual violence: A legal and practical overview for women's NGOs and policy makers in the Western Balkans and Turkey*. https://cssplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/WAVE_CSSP_Policypaper210917_web.pdf

to which violence in BiH was “normalized” for a while, some public services and their employees were aware of the problem but did not have the tools available to solve it. For instance, the police, social work centers, and even health institutions were facing similar situations: survivors turned to them, so they were aware that violence was occurring; however, they had limited possibilities to help because there was no legal framework for action. They were the NGOs’ first allies in the institutional sector when they conducted campaigns advocating for change and passing of laws.

Upon the initiative of non-governmental organizations, networks of institutions/organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina were formed as support to victims/witnesses of war torture and women victims of gender-based violence, defined as victim support. Local protocols were signed by institutions and non-governmental organizations to provide support to victims/witnesses in cases of war crimes, sexual violence, or other crimes of gender-based violence. The institutions that signed the local protocols on procedures and cooperation were the police, health institutions, judicial institutions, social welfare institutions, and non-governmental organizations, depending on the resources of the specific local community.

➔ **Continuous development of partnerships and solidarity with other non-governmental organizations through formal and informal networks to create conditions for efficiently advocating for the improvement of women's human rights.**

The exchange of experience was very significant to us, but the fact there were other women and women's groups working on the same issue made us stronger. That was how we were empowered, how we learned and created the space for joint action. It is important to keep in mind that in the first decade after the war, women's and non-governmental organizations, in general, were not well received, oftentimes they were stigmatized in politics. What we did was not always appreciated or considered important, and the fact that we received funding for operations from foreign funds was an argument for different political circles to label us as “foreign contractors” destroying national and sometimes even religious principles in society. In our communities we were isolated and lonely. Networking with other women's groups was a strategy that kept us alive, that is how we had a place where we belonged.

— Radmila Žigić, Lara Foundation, Bijeljina

■ Examples of networks and initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The following list presents some of the initiatives that were launched in Bosnia and Herzegovina after the war and could serve as inspiration for other countries and activists that faced or are facing conflict and aim to restore civil society initiatives and support survivors of GBV.

■ Safe Network

The Safe Network was founded in 2001 (as an informal network) and consisted of 32 nongovernmental organizations and government institutions across Bosnia and Herzegovina engaged in the issue of violence. The Safe Network has several strategic objectives, but its main goal is to strengthen the capacity of NGOs to be equal partners to the institutions in the work on GBV and to be involved in the work on government documents, strategic plans, and action plans in the area of GBV.

■ Peace with Women's Face⁸⁴

Peace with Women's Face is an initiative that, through a female activist movement, opens and conducts a process of facing the past and nurtures the culture of remembrance of achievements, experiences, and suffering of women, thus creating a society in which the woman is visible in public and political space and equally involved in creating lasting peace. Peace with Women's Face is a women's peace initiative comprised of 14 civil society organizations contributing to the culture of remembrance, the significance of preserving and promoting women's experiences and achievements and highlighting the importance of women's marking of public space.

■ Women Citizens for Constitutional Reform Initiative⁸⁵

Women Citizens for Constitutional Reform is an initiative promoting the idea of the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina ensuring greater protection of human rights and freedoms, with a special emphasis on the gender perspective. The initiative was formed by activists and organizations from the whole country, who aim to encourage all citizens to use their knowledge, energy, and readiness for mutual action and contribute to the fulfillment of the Initiative's objectives. The Women Citizens for Constitutional Reform Initiative is an informal group of 35 civil society organizations and activists continuously working on the notions of sex and gender, peace, freedom, and human rights.

■ Peace Building Network⁸⁶

Peace Building Network was founded to establish comprehensive actions to restore the quality of social and economic life in BiH, as well as to improve in the long run the ability of the whole BiH society to handle differences and conflicts in a constructive and non-violent manner, and thus create a framework for joint, coordinated action of an array of non-governmental organizations, local communities and self-governments, business sector, media, and state-run institutions.

➔ Using alternative strategies and models contributing to achieving truth and justice and observing women's human rights

Fighting violence against women and peace action are the political issues that usually generate resistance in the government and in the general population of deeply patriarchal and traditional societies, which is why it is necessary to seek alternative strategies for action, including unconventional ways of highlighting the violation of rights, but also demanding courage and determination.

84 Fondacija "Lara" Bijeljina's website. Accessed October 3, 2022. <http://www.fondacijalara.com/mir-sa-zenskim-licem>

85 Women Citizens for Constitutional Reform's website. Accessed October 3, 2022. <https://gradjankezaustavnepromjene.wordpress.com/>

86 See, for example, website Mreza Mira. Accessed October 3, 2022. <https://www.mreza-mira.net/>

Linking non-governmental organizations in BiH after the war required crossing the borders established at the entity level, which the public perceived as an act of betrayal, instead of a helping hand. Women in non-governmental organizations were among the first to cross those borders, forming formal and informal groups to develop ways of action.

The first time we crossed the entity borderline was in March 1996. There was a conference of BiH Women organized in Zenica. At the time, there was the entity boundary line in place. After that, we went to Bihać, where activists from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina gathered to reconcile and attract women to activism. Together with the OSCE Mission, we traveled throughout the country forming women's NGOs.
 – *Nada Golubović, peace activist from the United Women Foundation Banja Luka*

■ Women's Court as an alternative model of justice

The Court of Women is a place for women's voices, women's testimonies about their daily experiences of injustice suffered in the war and peacetime. In the courts of women, women testify about violence in the private and public scene, as well as about an organized resistance of women. The first Court of Women was organized in Lahore, Pakistan in 1992. So far, a total of 40 courts of women were held around the world, mostly in Asia and Africa. In late 2010, members of the initiative committee comprising Women to Women from Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Centre for Women's and Peace Education Anima from Kotor (Montenegro), Centre for Women's Studies, and Centre for Women Victims of War from Zagreb (Croatia), Kosovo Women's Network, Women's Studies and Women in Black from Belgrade (Serbia), launched an initiative to organize the Court of Women in former Yugoslavia.



7 Recommendations

The following list presents recommendations on how to improve the prevention of and response to GBV before, during, and after conflict. It is based on the experience and the strategies shared in the previous chapters, and it addresses both NGOs and local/national/international authorities.

- To insist that dealing with the issue of gender-based violence is not the sole **responsibility** of women's non-governmental organizations, but also of the system in which it occurs. Always call state institutions to account for the prevention, protection, and prosecution of violence against women.
- It is necessary to maintain and strengthen the organizing of women in societies that are facing a crisis, during, and after a conflict, particularly if women's participation is disproportionate or inadequate. Linkages and **networking** among women's organizations, especially networking with female politicians and female NGO activists, are the basis for incorporating women's priorities during and after the war into public policies.
- To realize that conflict leads to the escalation of gender-based violence of all types, such as sexual violence as well as domestic violence, femicide, or violence in public space, and to communicate it to women and movements in crisis areas. It is important to constantly **underline the risks women face** during and after conflict and to urge all institutional and extra-institutional mechanisms to act. **Prevention** of violence against women should be a part of all actions to thwart crises and conflicts, and the agenda of peace negotiations is obligatory.
- Local NGOs working in areas that are at high risk of a conflict are advised to negotiate with the **international donor community** to have the budget flexibility to move the financial resources towards humanitarian support and provision of first aid packages in case there is an outbreak of war.
- To consider and prioritize the **needs of women and girls with reduced mobility and with additional vulnerabilities** (for example, women with mental health issues, and women aged 75+). Reservation of shelters (or rooms in shelters) for women who have additional vulnerabilities is essential for ensuring the effective planning of social services and the just distribution of resources to GBV survivors during and after a war.
- **Non-governmental organizations must document their operations** after a conflict and keep records of all their activities and initiatives, thus contributing to building their credibility and creating opportunities for ensuring visibility of the issue of gender-based violence and its consequences on society.
- Not to limit the psychological assistance to GBV survivors after the war within certain project budgets. **Continued psychological assistance** to GBV survivors is essential for the prevention of PTSD and a full recovery, instead of having an intervention that is short-term and limited to a couple of counseling sessions.
- To invest in **housing and support for IDP collective centers**, as there is a potential link between housing challenges of IDPs living in overcrowded collective settlements and increased risk of GBV. It is important to consider GBV prevention and response strategies in designing housing solutions for these vulnerable groups. To provide women survivors of DV (especially internally displaced women, who lack secure housing), with the possibility to stay in social housing for a reasonable period until they will be sufficiently strong to continue living independently.
- NGOs should incorporate in their actions all the **risk factors that contribute to the prevalence of violence after conflict**. In societies that went through armed conflicts, it is very important to insist on the control of possession of various kinds of weapons because their presence contributes to the prevalence of brutal forms of violence as well as an increased risk of femicide.

- **To challenge social norms related to the acceptability and toleration of VAW/DV in post-conflict situations and to work on the stigma faced by survivors of conflict-related sexual violence** through comprehensive and long-term awareness-raising campaigns with women and men, girls and boys, including vulnerable groups, e.g. internally displaced and conflict-affected women, especially those living in rural areas and IDP settlements, those in challenging housing environments, and former combatants; invest in programming that focuses on educating men and women about laws and legislation regarding violence against women.

- To provide **psycho-social rehabilitation for the internally displaced and conflict-affected population**. It is important to carry out a thorough assessment of the effects of war and continuous/protracted post-conflict traumatization on the mental health of IDPs and conflict-affected women and men (with a special focus on survivors of violence and ex-combatants) and ensure the provision of appropriate psycho-social rehabilitation and healthcare programs.

- To focus more on **women's economic security** in GBV prevention and response efforts. Conflict-affected women lack economic opportunities for survival and continue to endure the emotional and physical scars of conflict, the heavy burden of care and dependency, and daily violence in their homes. While developing economic recovery programs in post-conflict settings it is important to ensure the involvement of conflict-affected women in the design, implementation, and review of economic empowerment programs. The diverse barriers that exist for internally displaced and conflict-affected women in accessing employment or other economic programs should be thoroughly assessed and addressed.

- To recognize **IDPs and conflict-affected people as a heterogeneous group** with special and diverse needs and consider their needs when developing policies and initiatives, with particular emphasis on women and girls.



Terminology

Domestic violence (DV)

Domestic violence (DV) means all acts of physical, sexual, coercive, psychological, or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim.⁸⁷

Gender-based violence (GBV)

Gender-based violence against women means violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately.⁸⁸ Gender-based violence is understood to be a form of discrimination and a violation of the fundamental freedoms of the victim and includes violence in close relationships, sexual violence (including rape, sexual assault, and harassment), trafficking in human beings, slavery, and different forms of harmful practices, such as forced marriages, female genital mutilation, and so-called ‘honor crimes’. Women victims of gender-based violence and their children often require special support and protection.⁸⁹

Internally displaced persons (IDPs)

According to the *United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, are “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border.”⁹⁰ This, however, is a descriptive definition, which does not confer a special legal status because IDPs, being inside their country, remain entitled to all the rights and guarantees as citizens and other habitual residents of their country. As

such, national authorities have the primary responsibility to prevent forced displacement and protect IDPs.

Survivor/victim

This toolkit uses the term “survivor” as a preferred term, to empower women by recognizing that the woman has survived the violence and is not defined by it. The term victim is a legal term, which means a natural person who has suffered harm (including physical, mental, or emotional harm or economic loss) that was directly caused by a criminal offense.⁹¹

War/Conflict

The terms ‘war’ and ‘conflict’ are used interchangeably in this toolkit and refer to armed conflict. In international law, there are two types of armed conflict: international and non-international armed conflict.⁹² An international armed conflict (IAC) occurs when there is a conflict between two or more States that use armed force against one another. In this case, International Humanitarian Law applies. However, today’s conflicts are primarily non-international armed conflicts (NIACs). NIACs are conflicts happening within the same state. In this case, armed actors are fighting against the state or themselves. For these conflicts to be considered NIACs, the non-governmental armed forces need to be organized and use force over a certain period.

Women’s centers

The term “women’s center” includes all women’s services providing non-residential specialist support to survivors, serving only or predominantly women survivors of violence and their children (if any). Women’s centers provide empowering short and long-term support, based on a gender-specific approach to

87 Article 3(b) of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention).

88 Ibid.

89 Recital 17, Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2001/220/JHA

90 UCHA (2001). *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*. United Nations. <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/199808-training-OCHA-guiding-principles-Eng2.pdf>

91 Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2001/220/JHA

92 Geneva Academy (2017). *International armed conflict*. Accessed October 3, 2022. <https://www.rulac.org/classification/international-armed-conflict#:~:text=An%20international%20armed%20conflict%20is%20an%20armed%20conflict,war%20is%20not%20recognized%20by%20one%20of%20them%E2%80%99>

violence and focusing on the human rights and safety of victims. The following services are subsumed under the term: women's counseling and women crises centers, supporting women survivors of all forms of gender-based violence; regional crises centers on domestic violence; pro-active intervention centers serving survivors as a follow-up to police interventions; specialist services for black, minority ethnic women, migrant and refugee women victims of violence; outreach services; services providing independent domestic or sexual violence advisors, and other newer types of services. These centers usually provide the following kind of support: information, advice, advocacy and counseling, practical support, court/police/social services accompaniment, pro-active support, outreach, and other services.

Women's shelters

Women's shelters are specialist support services for women survivors of violence and their children (if any) and ensure immediate access to safe accommodation. These provide empowering support, based on a gender-specific approach to violence and focusing on the human rights and safety of victims, therefore the functions of women's shelters go beyond providing an emergency safe place to stay. They also offer long-term support in order to provide women and their children, (if any), with the opportunity and resources necessary to resume their lives free from violence. Some examples of services provided by women-only shelters include counseling, legal advice, assistance throughout legal proceedings, support to enter/re-enter the labor market, and move-on support to find long-term accommodation after staying in the women's shelter.

Women's specialist support services (WSSS)

Women's specialist support services cater to the specific needs of survivors of gender-based violence. This term is used as a collective term covering all services supporting women survivors of violence and their children, such as women's helplines, women's shelters, women's centers, rape crisis, and sexual assault centers, specialized services for migrant and minority ethnic women, national women's helplines, outreach services, independent domestic violence advisors, intervention centers and others. Such services are often run by non-governmental organizations and are best ensured by women's organizations that apply a gender-specific approach and are based on feminist principles, putting the survivor and her needs at the center of all interventions.



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