



# WEAPON OF WAR

**SEXUAL VIOLENCE  
AGAINST CHILDREN  
IN CONFLICT**

 Save the Children



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This report includes details of sexual violence against children of all ages, and may be particularly distressing to some.

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Most importantly, we would like to thank the children who shared their testimonies and hopes with us – some of which are included in the report.

**Some names in this report have been changed to protect identities and are marked with \*.**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**G**lobally, 426 million children live in conflict zones today. We estimate that a staggering 72 million of them, or one in six, live 50 kilometres or closer to conflicts where armed groups or forces have perpetrated sexual violence against children during the last year. This report presents the very first quantitative analysis of the risk of sexual violence against children in conflict for the period 1990–2019.

Worldwide, people of all genders and all ages experience sexual violence, which is fundamentally rooted in unequal power dynamics. For children, their age and gender play a significant role in their vulnerability, placing adolescent girls at particularly high risk of sexual violence in conflict settings.

Our analysis shows that the number of children at risk of sexual violence committed by conflict actors is almost ten times higher today than in 1990. The number of children at risk fluctuates from one year to another, but the upward trend is very clear. In the most recent years we also see that a bigger share of armed actors who commit sexual violence in conflict also perpetrate it against children.

The countries with the highest share of children living in conflict zones with reports of sexual violence perpetrated by conflict actors against children include Colombia (with 24% of all children in the country facing this risk), Iraq (with 49% of all children at risk), Somalia (56%), South Sudan (19%), Syria (48%) and Yemen (83%).

The alarming findings of this report have far-reaching implications. These range from the devastating consequences that sexual violence has for children, their communities and societies at large, to the lack of funding to address the issue. The report flags remaining data gaps, shortcomings in child-centred and gender-responsive service delivery, and impunity for these crimes. Our findings also show the urgency of the broader call for gender equality and child rights, including increased focus on girls' empowerment initiatives, recognising that girls are disproportionately affected.

Sexual violence in conflict is a weapon, whether it is used tactically or opportunistically. While children face increasing risk of sexual violence in conflict, the international community struggles to adequately address this human rights violation. The scale and gravity of sexual violence against children in armed conflict call for immediate and concerted action by the UN, states, donors, the humanitarian community, researchers and civil society to meet their obligations to ensure children are safe from harm.

We need to: strengthen data collection on sexual violence against children in conflict, put children at the centre of international action against this violation, address the underlying root causes and drivers of sexual violence against children, and end impunity for this egregious act. ●



## FOREWORD

In one wing of Panzi Hospital, there is a room with cartoons of Mickey Mouse and Pluto chasing butterflies on the wall next to an examination table. You might think you had found your way to the paediatric department – but you'd actually be standing in the middle of our ward devoted entirely to treating survivors of sexual violence, and in this room, child survivors in particular.

I first opened Panzi Hospital in 1999 with the intention to build a centre of excellence for maternal health in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I had witnessed too many women die in childbirth in our community of Bukavu in the South Kivu Province, and I wanted them to have a safe place to deliver.

I never could have imagined that some of my first patients would not be labouring mothers and their newborn babies, but babies that had instead been raped. As the Second Congo War waged on and sexual violence became a commonly-used weapon of war, I became increasingly horrified at the brutality that our patients – young and old – endured.

There are many reasons why sexual violence is used as a tactical strategy in conflict: it displaces and intimidates vulnerable populations; it destroys families and entire communities; and it threatens prospects to lasting peace. When these wars are waged on the bodies of children, the effects are even more dire.

As you will read in this report, more than 72 million children in the world today are living in proximity to armed groups that use sexual violence against minors – and this number has increased nearly tenfold since 1990. This is simply and utterly unacceptable. The international community can and must do more: by devoting financial resources to data collection and direct services, by championing justice mechanisms that will end impunity, and by putting the needs of child survivors front and centre of programmes designed to address sexual violence in conflict.

The following report cites sobering data about the harsh realities so many of our world's most innocent souls face every day. As you read it, I hope that you will keep in mind the youngest survivor I have ever treated, who was only six months old when she was assaulted. Think of her, and the thousands of children who suffer in silence, and then act: with your advocacy, with your funds, and with your dedication to end impunity and rape as a weapon of war. We owe it to them, these children who cannot act on their own behalf.

Sincerely,  
**Dr Denis Mukwege**

*2018 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate,  
Founder and Chief Medical Officer, Panzi Hospital,  
Democratic Republic of Congo*





**Dr Denis Mukwege** with women at Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

PHOTO: TORLEIF SVENSSON /  
DR DENIS MUKWEGE FOUNDATION

# NEW DATA AND A NEW ANGLE: THE RISK OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN CONFLICT

**W**hen perpetrated by parties to conflict, rape and other forms of sexual violence are one of the ‘six grave violations’ against children in conflict that the UN monitors and reports on an ongoing basis. Together with killing and maiming, forced recruitment, and others, sexual violence is prioritised as an area of focus due to its particularly egregious nature and the severity of its consequences for children.

Since 2006, more than 20,000 incidents of conflict-related sexual violence were verified by the UN’s Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on grave violations against children. The most recent annual report of the UN Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict identified 749 verified cases of sexual violence against children in 2019, acknowledging that this violation continues to be vastly underreported.<sup>1</sup> During the last decade, the annual Secretary-General’s Reports on Sexual Violence in Conflict also documented cases of this brutal violation, including against children.<sup>2</sup>

Existing mechanisms play a crucial role in verifying cases and bringing to the fore violence that, despite attention and rhetoric, has failed to be adequately addressed and eradicated. Nonetheless, sexual violence remains difficult to document and its prevalence hard to ascertain due to numerous challenges: insufficient access and reporting mechanisms, stigma and fear of retaliation, lack of support networks and adequate services, as well as general under-reporting, which is also the case outside conflict settings. Even in peaceful contexts, it is estimated that approximately 80% of rapes and sexual assaults go unreported.<sup>3</sup> These challenges are exacerbated for cases involving children. Hence, the number of verified incidents of sexual violence against children in conflict is likely to represent only the tip of the iceberg.

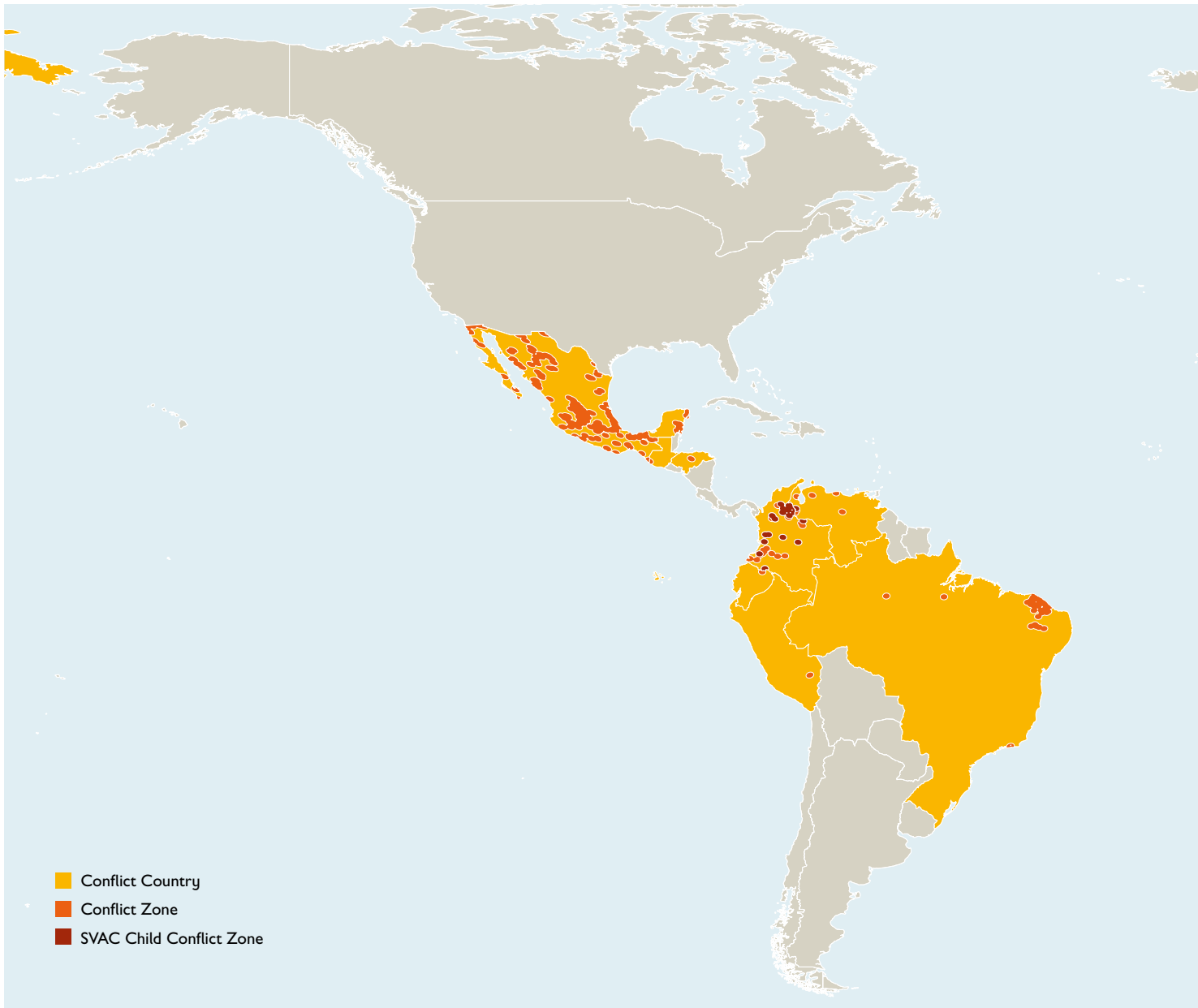
This report seeks to present a compelling new angle on the issue by estimating how many children are at risk of sexual violence committed by conflict actors. In cooperation with the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) we have calculated how many children live 50km or closer to armed conflicts where at least one conflict actor has been reported to perpetrate sexual violence against children in a given year.<sup>4</sup> For the first time, we approach this from a global perspective, and estimate the number of children at risk in all armed conflicts in the world.<sup>5</sup> This research relies on the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC) Dataset,<sup>6</sup> which is based on reports by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the US State Department, as well as subnational data on armed conflict events from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program Georeferenced Event Dataset (UCDP-GED), and population estimates from the UN Population Prospects. The data gathered covers 30 years, since 1990.

In the datasets used, the term sexual violence is defined as rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced sterilisation, forced abortion, sexual mutilation, sexual abuse and sexual torture.<sup>7</sup> It covers violence perpetrated by armed conflict actors, including armed forces, law enforcement and non-state armed groups, but does not account for domestic abuse or sexual violence committed by criminal gangs or peacekeepers.<sup>8</sup> In the chapter ‘Research implications’, we also discuss sexual violence in conflict in broader terms, beyond incidents committed by armed actors, yet still occurring in a conflict setting, and often driven by the impacts of conflict. This broader definition, which goes beyond what is included in the dataset, incorporates child, early and forced marriage in conflict zones. Sexual violence is one form of gender-based violence (GBV).<sup>9</sup> ●



**16-year-old Shadibabiran\* from Myanmar:** “The military came to our village. They started firing at people and my mother was shot in the ankle. Then they asked all the adolescent girls to stand up and asked us where our parents were. I told them that my father died 15 years ago. They didn’t believe me and then some soldiers took me and two other girls into a house. They hit me in the face with a gun, kicked me in my chest and stamped on my arms and legs. Then I was raped by three soldiers. They raped me for about two hours and at some stage I fainted. They broke one of my ribs when they kicked me in the chest. It was very painful and I could hardly breathe. I still have difficulty breathing, but I haven’t been to a doctor, as I feel too ashamed.”

PHOTO: MARIA DE LA GUARDIA / SAVE THE CHILDREN



## HOW MANY CHILDREN ARE AT RISK OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT?

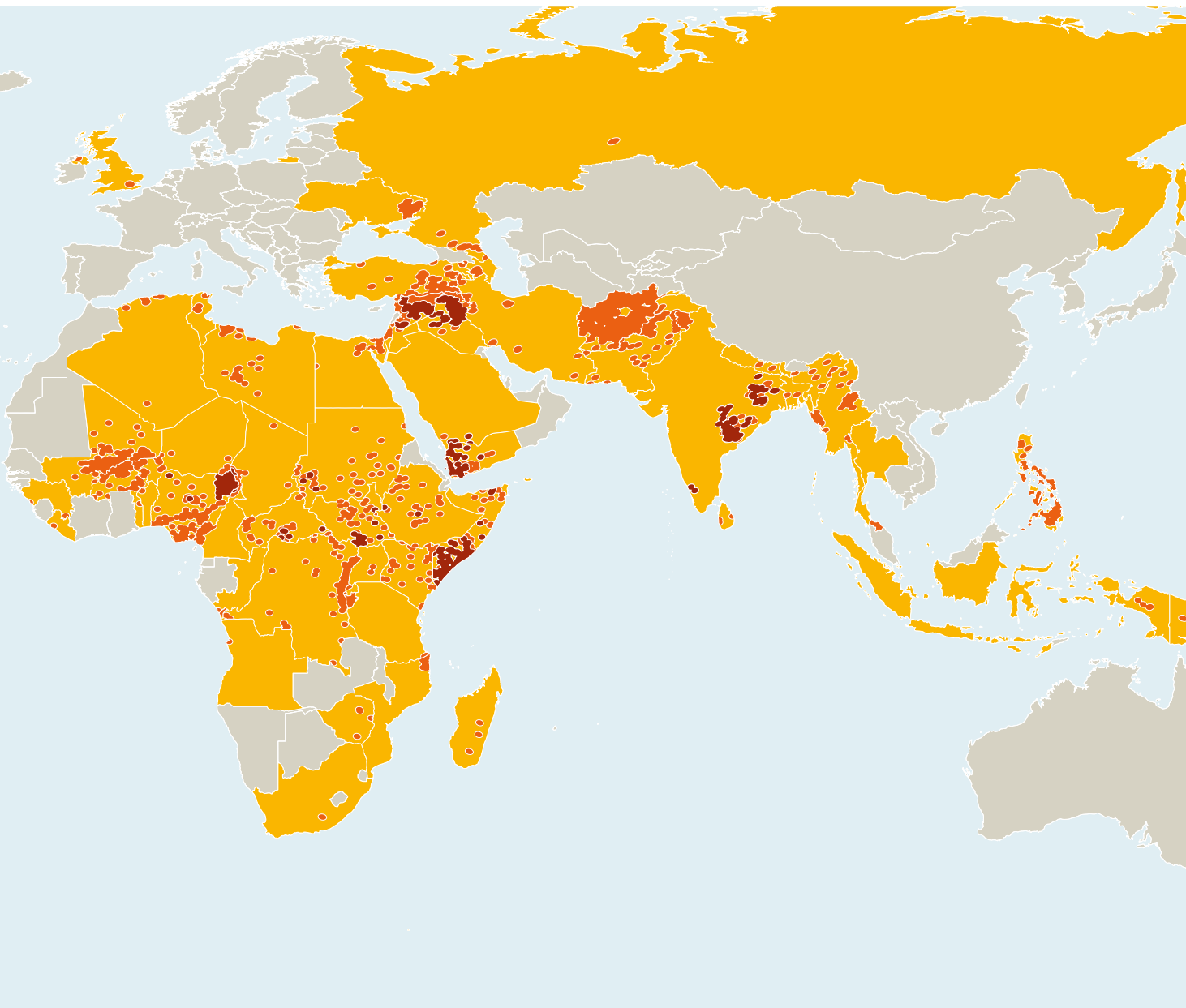
Almost 1 in 3 children in the world (31%), or approximately 834 million children, live in a conflict-affected country where one or more of the conflict actors committed sexual violence against children in 2019.

Of the 54 active conflicts, 22 (41%) involve reported sexual violence against civilians. 15 involve actors explicitly reported to have perpetrated sexual violence against children. This means that in almost 70% of conflicts where sexual violence against civilians is committed, the violence is perpetrated against children as well.

Worldwide almost half a billion (426 million) chil-

dren live in conflict zones, that is within 50 km or closer to an ongoing conflict. And approximately **72 million children live in a conflict zone where there were reports of sexual violence perpetrated by conflict actors against children** in 2019, and can therefore be considered at risk of conflict-related sexual violence.

Gender disaggregation of data in the reports by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the US State Department on which the SVAC Dataset is based is inconsistent, constituting a serious limitation of the tool.<sup>10</sup>



**FIGURE 1**

**Conflict-affected countries, conflict zones, and conflict zones with sexual violence against children, 2019<sup>17</sup>**

### **Why conflict actors perpetrate sexual violence against children**

Sexual violence against children, like all sexual violence across contexts, is fundamentally rooted in unequal power dynamics and is driven by harmful gender norms.

In conflict contexts, it can be used by armed forces and groups as a weapon of war – a tactic to terrorise civilians. It is used to spread fear and intimidation in pursuit of military or political objectives, such as

taking control over a population, a territory or natural resources. It might be aimed at ethnic cleansing, forcibly displacing or humiliating an ethnic group, or fracturing families and whole communities. It might also be a strategy to punish civilians, for example for suspected support of opposing forces and to destabilise these forces by targeting their communities of origin.<sup>11</sup>

Research shows that non-state armed groups recruiting children are associated with higher levels of sexual violence and points to sexual violence as a form of socialisation within an armed group, a tool for

building group cohesion and bonds of loyalty.<sup>12</sup> Some studies also find that non-state armed groups trained by states are more likely to commit sexual violence, showing how sexual violence can spread among armed actors as a ‘practice’, something normalised and tolerated.<sup>13</sup>

In other cases, sexual violence by armed forces and groups is not directly ordered, encouraged or tolerated by the commanders, but festers as a result of the general collapse of law and order. For instance, research on sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeeping missions finds a strong association between the practice and disciplinary breakdowns.<sup>14</sup>

Research on sentencing judgments of perpetrators of sexual violence by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia distinguishes at least three narratives: those of the chivalrous, the opportunistic and the remorseful perpetrator.<sup>15</sup> The defence strategy of a “chivalrous perpetrator” involves a claim that acts of sexual violence were committed to protect younger, defenceless civilians and that these acts form part of a normalised military behaviour. These constructions were strongly opposed by the judges and the prosecutors, marking an end of the era of tacit acceptance and omission of sexual violence in the international and domestic prosecution of war crimes.<sup>16</sup>

## Hot spots

The map in Figure 1 shows countries with armed conflict (marked in yellow), overlaid with conflict zones (50km buffer zones, orange), and the conflict zones with reported sexual violence against children committed by conflict actors (dark red) in 2019. In Iraq, Somalia, Syria and Yemen, significant areas of the country are geographical hotspots for risk of sexual violence against children.

Figure 2 shows that the Middle East is the region in which a child has the highest probability of living in a conflict zone with reported sexual violence committed against children by conflict actors, with 16% of children at risk. This is markedly higher than for other regions; the corresponding figure for Asia is 3%, for Africa 2.3%, for Europe 2.1% and for the Americas 1.3%.

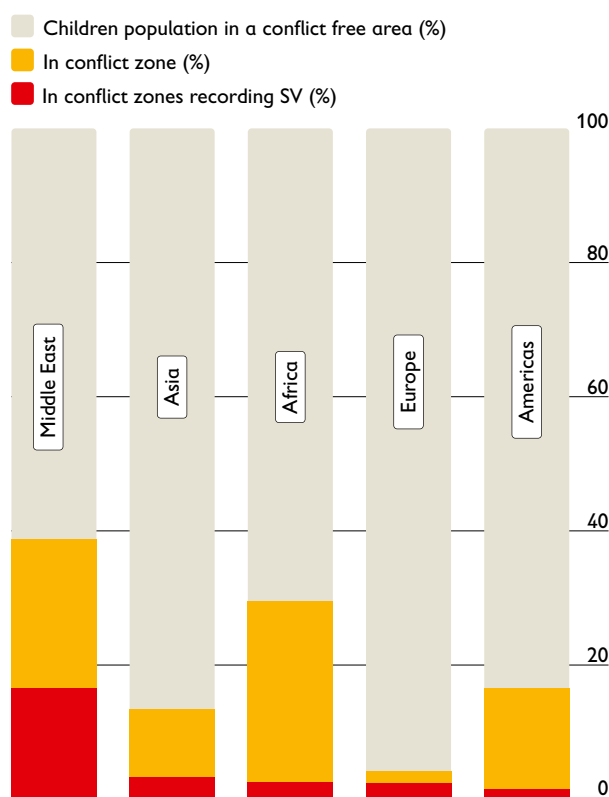
Table 1 indicates the countries where the largest proportion of children are at risk of conflict-related sexual violence. In 2019 the countries topping this depressing statistic were Colombia, Iraq, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen. In Syria, almost 50% of the children were at risk in 2019, down from 100% in 2015. As the reporting varies significantly from year to year, the ranking changes accordingly, too. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where the annual UN Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) reports normally verify most cases of sexual violence against children,<sup>18</sup> was not included in the SVAC

ranking in 2019. However, in 2018 DRC had the fifth biggest share of children at risk of conflict-related sexual violence according to SVAC data, with 18% of all children at risk. The last column of Table 1 shows in absolute numbers how many children are at risk of sexual violence in conflict in each of the worst-performing countries. ●

Country	Share of total child population at risk	Number of children at risk
Colombia	23.84%	3.3 million
Iraq	48.73%	8.5 million
Somalia	56.35%	4.6 million
South Sudan	19.28%	1 million
Syria	47.71%	3 million
Yemen	83.47%	11.1 million

**TABLE 1**  
Child population at risk of sexual violence in conflict (%) – the worst-performing countries in 2019.<sup>19</sup>

SOURCE: UCDP GED DATABASE AND SVAC DATASET



**FIGURE 2**  
Child population at risk of sexual violence (SV) in conflict per region of the world (%)

# WHAT ARE THE MAIN TRENDS DURING THE LAST 30 YEARS?

Figure 3 shows the trend in number of children living in zones with reported sexual violence perpetrated by conflict actors against children over time (red). There is a clear upward trend over the entire time period. Whereas 8.5 million children lived within 50km of reported sexual violence against children in 1990, as many as 72 million children were at risk in 2019. That is almost ten times as many.<sup>20</sup>

**The number of children at risk of sexual violence in conflict has increased nearly tenfold since 1990 and then stabilised at this historically high level in the last seven years.**

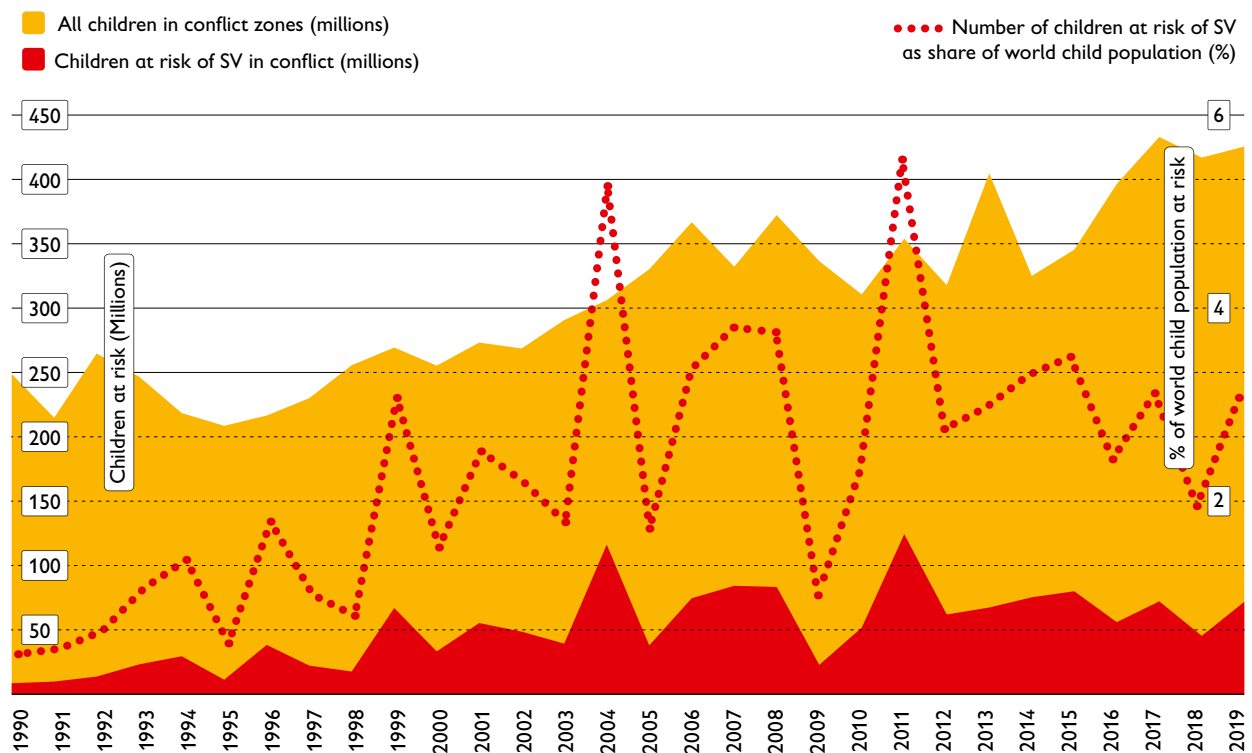
The dashed red line indicates the number of children at risk of sexual violence in conflict globally as a share of the total child population. While the line fluctuates quite a bit there is a clear increasing trend.

The spikes of 2004 and 2011 were not primarily driven by specific conflicts but occurred as some conflicts extended to more populous areas as well as due to varying reporting. Nonetheless, in 2004 the countries with the largest increase were Algeria, India and

Sudan, while in 2011 India, Nigeria, Sudan and Syria recorded the greatest spike.<sup>21</sup>

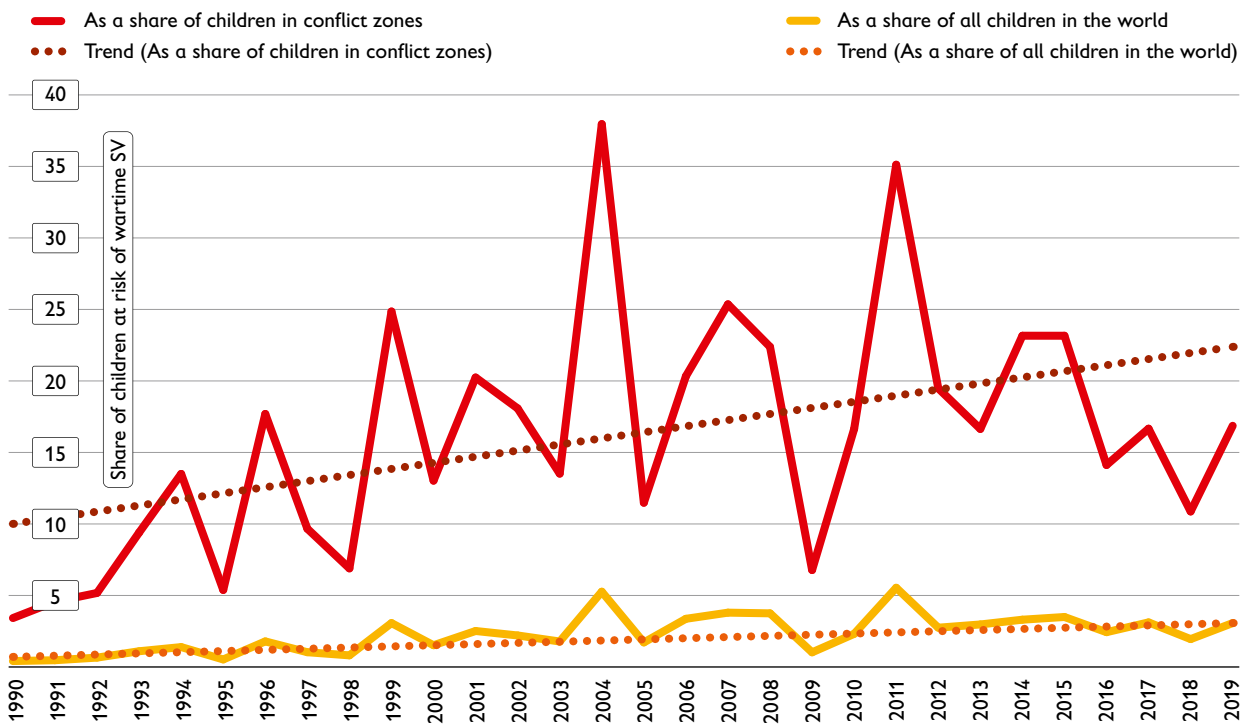
Figure 4 shows the number of children at risk of conflict-related sexual violence as a percentage of children living in conflict zones (red solid line) and of the global child population (yellow solid line). The two dotted lines represent consolidated trends for both numbers over time. In 2019, there were 426 million children living in conflict zones. 72 million, that is 1 in 6 of these children (or 17%) lived 50 km or closer to armed actors perpetrating sexual violence against children in conflict. This corresponds to 3.1% of all children in the world being at risk of conflict-related sexual violence.

While year-on-year changes make solid lines fluctuate, the dotted lines show an unmistakable upward trend. However, we also see that the percentage of children at risk as a share of children in conflict zones (continuous red line) has declined in the past four years.<sup>22</sup>



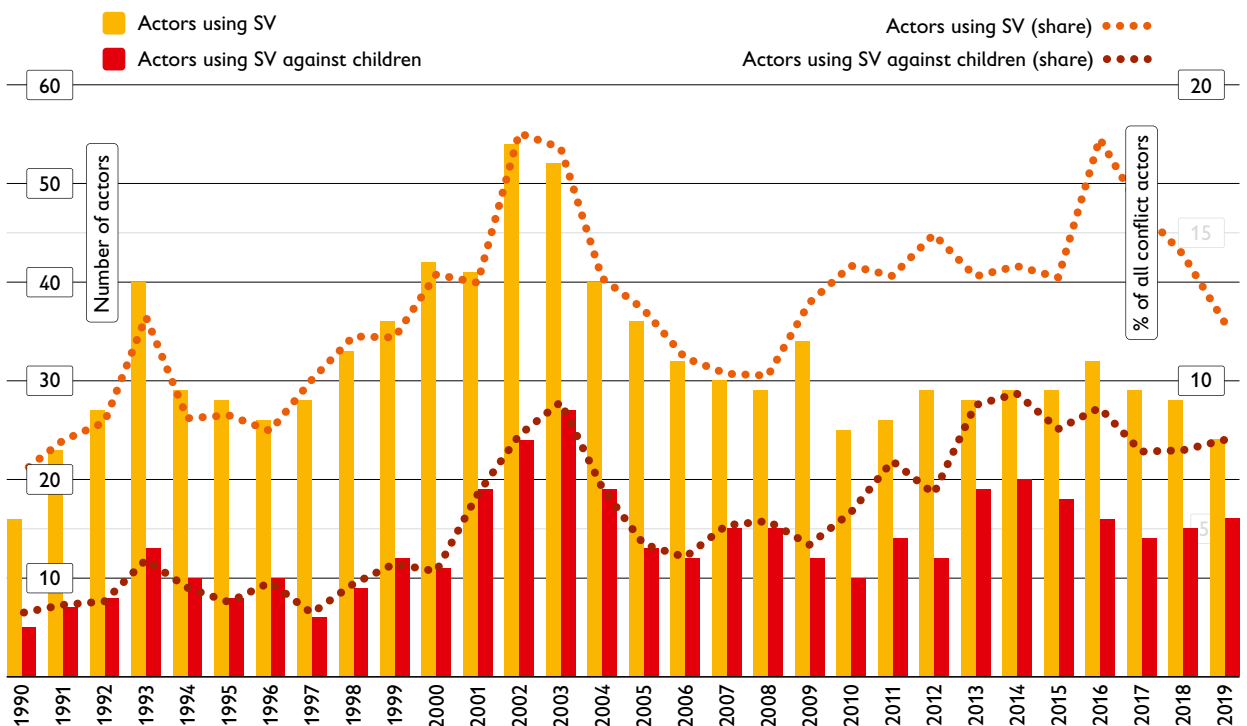
**FIGURE 3**  
Number of children at risk of sexual violence in conflict compared to children in conflict zones, 1990-2019

SOURCE: UCDP GED DATABASE AND SVAC DATASET



**FIGURE 4**  
**Children at risk of conflict-related sexual violence as a share of children in conflict zones and of all children in the world, 1990-2019**

SOURCE: UCDP GED DATABASE AND SVAC DATASET



**FIGURE 5**  
**Conflict actors reported as having committed sexual violence against children (absolute numbers and shares), 1989-2019. On the left: Number of actors. On the right: % of all conflict actors.**

SOURCE: UCDP/PRIO ARMED CONFLICT DATASET AND SVAC DATASET

## Data limitations and apparent stagnation in reporting

It is difficult to draw conclusions about data trends over time because the importance given to sexual violence against children in conflict and reporting practices are changing. Higher reported rates of violations could reflect not only increased prevalence but also greater effort and resources spent on documenting these violations. This means that the downward trend we observe in Figure 4 in the period 2015-2018 could point to a declining prioritisation in the reporting efforts underpinning the SVAC Dataset. Even though a decline in documented occurrence of sexual violence in conflict may appear positive at first glance, we are inclined to believe this is a case of diminishing prioritisation in light of less comprehensive and detailed reporting coming from a variety of sources. These trends are concerning.

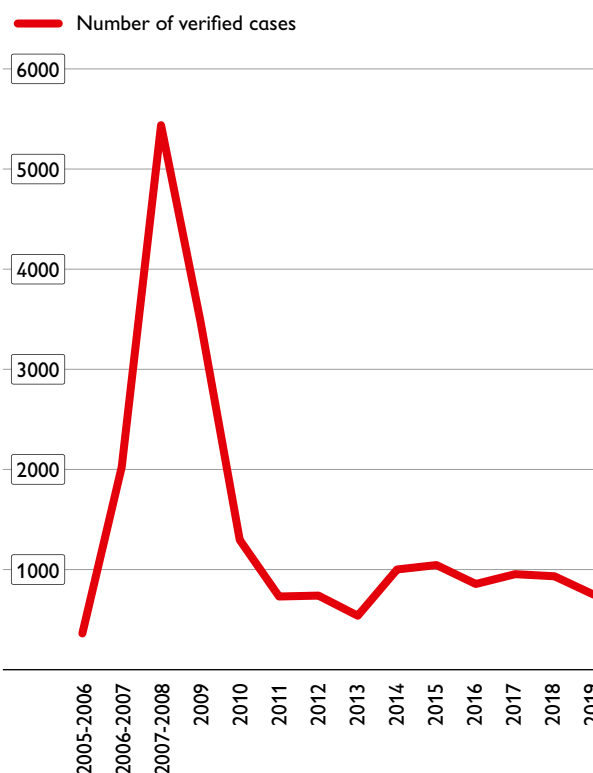
## Conflict actors

Another way to illustrate the trends over time is looking at the numbers and shares of conflict actors, that is armed forces and groups, reported as having committed sexual violence against children. From Figure 5 we see a spike around 2003 in the number of conflict actors perpetrating sexual violence against children (red bar) and in the percentage of such actors (dark red dotted line). After a few years of decline, the share increased again but has since stabilised.

We also see that from 2013 onwards, the difference between the yellow bars (actors committing sexual violence) and red bars (actors committing sexual violence against children) becomes smaller, indicating that in the last seven years **a larger share of the actors perpetrating sexual violence in general have also committed it against children.**<sup>23</sup>

## Sexual violence against children in CAAC data

In 2005, the UN started reporting verified incidents of grave violations against children in conflict, including rape and other forms of sexual violence committed by armed forces and groups. Since then, along with other grave violations against children, cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence have been documented in several conflict situations. But due to vast underreporting and the complexity of the UN verification process, the number of verified cases of this grave violation is likely to represent only a fraction of total incidents. In 2009, the Security Council added rape and other sexual violence against children as an additional trigger for listing parties to conflict in the



**FIGURE 6**  
Trends in sexual violence against children according to CAAC data

Secretary-General's Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict.<sup>24</sup>

Looking back at trends since 2005, there was a surge between 2007-2008, corresponding to large-scale documentation of mass sexual violence in DRC. DRC accounts for as much as 72% of the verified cases of sexual violence against children in the 2008 report and almost half of the total cases recorded globally since 2005.

In the last four years, the reporting stabilised at approximately 870 cases per year. The latest annual report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict shows that 749 cases of sexual violence against children were verified in 2019, 98% of them committed against girls. Cases of sexual violence were documented in 13 out of 19 conflict situations covered by the report and the cases attributed to state actors almost doubled from 2018. The highest number of verified violations in 2019 occurred, as has been the trend since reporting started in 2005, in the DRC. In 2019 alone, 249 cases were reported there – one-third of the verified cases across all conflict situations. Without exception, the reported cases in DRC involved girls, some of whom were used for sexual slavery. Somalia had the second highest number of verified cases of sexual violence in 2019, with 227 violations, all of them committed against girls.<sup>25</sup> ●

# RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS: HOW CAN WE PROTECT CHILDREN?

The findings of this report have far-reaching implications. These include the devastating consequences that sexual violence has for children, their communities and societies at large; the lack of funding to address the issue; remaining data gaps; shortcomings in child-centred and gender-responsive service delivery and the culture of impunity for these crimes.

Our findings matter also as a broader call for gender equality and child rights. Several studies show a strong correlation between gender inequality and conflict. They conclude that low human rights standards in a country, including gender inequality and the existence of child rights violations, increase the likelihood of militarised and violent interstate disputes.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, gender and power inequalities in pre-conflict settings shape risks of sexual violence in times of conflict.<sup>27</sup>

This report clearly shows that sexual violence against children in conflict needs further research, increased attention, and immediate action by the international community.

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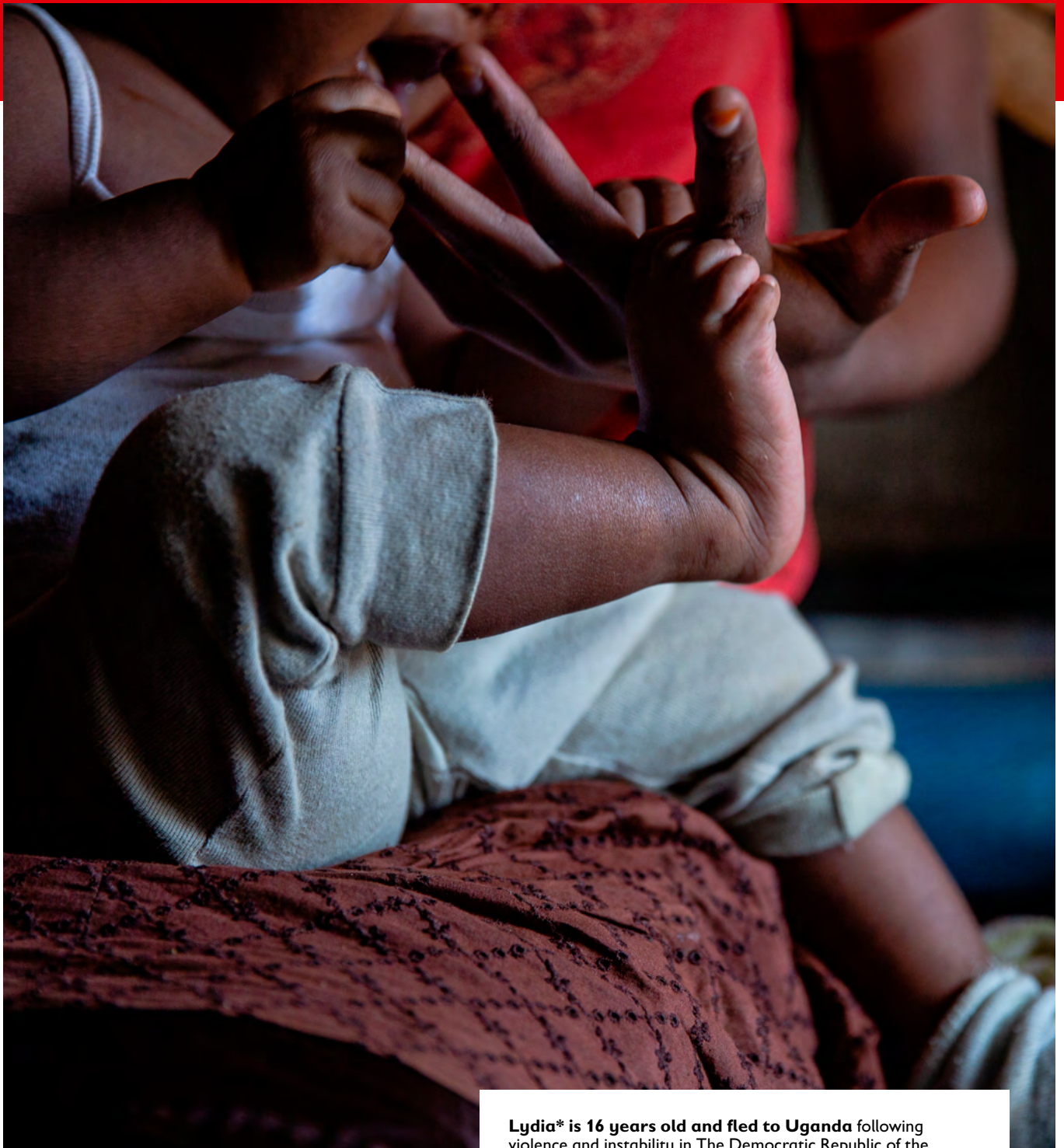
## Underreporting and other data gaps

While PRIO's novel dataset constitutes a ground-breaking effort to advance our understanding of conflict-related sexual violence against children, much remains to be done to understand the full extent of this grave violation. A multitude of factors prevent us from forming more than a patchy picture, with the COVID-19 pandemic now posing additional barriers, whether from a financial or logistical perspective. Several gaps stem from a lack of quality data.

Sexual violence against children – even more in conflict settings – is historically plagued by underreporting, as a large body of evidence reveals.<sup>28</sup> This is driven by several factors.<sup>29</sup> Stigmatisation plays a

pivotal role: gender norms such as harmful concepts of honour and purity for girls, distorted ideas of masculinity for boys, and the flawed principle of guilt by association discourage children from reporting abuse.<sup>30</sup> After surviving a traumatising event and finding themselves in a situation of extreme vulnerability, survivors must also often cope with the fear – or more often reality – of not being believed, or of being ridiculed and even ostracised. Even if they wanted to report the violence, many survivors would not know how, as information on services or how to access them may not be readily available. Even where services are available, there may be multiple barriers to accessing them, including lack of age-appropriate and gender-responsive processes and a child and youth focus.<sup>31</sup> The fear of reprisals is another contributing factor, especially relevant in conflict settings. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Virginia Gamba, summarises it well: “the fear of stigma and retaliation, involvement of powerful perpetrators and lack of services for survivors” discourage children from reporting.<sup>32</sup> Weaknesses in reporting at the country level exacerbate the situation.

This is closely linked to mis-categorisation, which occurs when an instance of conflict-related sexual violence against a child is not recognised as such. Girls and boys in conflict zones face a disproportionate risk of mis-categorisation for several reasons. Older adolescent girls, as well as married girls, and girls who are pregnant or mothers, risk being categorised as women in data collection. There is an abundance of reporting that simply refers to women and girls as one homogenous group, without reference to age distinctions, ignoring the distinct rights and needs of child survivors. Often service providers who address the sexual and reproductive health needs of survivors do not disaggregate by age in their own reporting.<sup>33</sup>



**Lydia\* is 16 years old and fled to Uganda** following violence and instability in The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Raped by rebels, she fell pregnant and has a six-month-old son, Bintu\*. After the violent assault she experienced, Lydia\* never wants to return to DRC. Cradling little Bintu\* in her slim arms, she says she wants to become a hairdresser and see her son go to school and be “clever in class”.

PHOTO: ESTHER RUTH MBABAZI / SAVE THE CHILDREN

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## Sexual violence suffered by boys might be categorised more generally as “torture, inhumane acts or cruel treatment”, without recognising sexual violence as a specific violation on its own

The rise in child marriages associated with a conflict setting means that sexual violence could slip under the radar when it is perpetrated by an intimate partner.<sup>34</sup> And whether a child marriage perpetrated by an armed actor is framed and reported on as a marriage or sexual slavery is rarely clear or consistent and is entirely context specific.<sup>35</sup> This blurs the lines on whether data is collected at all in the case of sexual violence perpetrated by an armed actor who claims to have married his victim.

Sexual violence suffered by boys might be categorised more generally as “torture, inhumane acts or cruel treatment”,<sup>36</sup> without recognising sexual violence as a specific violation on its own. Additionally, a bias exists insofar as sexual violence in conflict is sometimes assumed to concern only girls, so that data documenting sexual violence against boys is scarce.

It is advisable not to limit data collection to combatant-perpetrated sexual violence, but to investigate domestic sexual violence perpetrated in wartime by family members and acquaintances, which research shows to be more pervasive than violence perpetrated by combatants.<sup>37</sup> While the SVAC Dataset takes us

further than other tools when it comes to geographical coverage and its angle on prevalence, it does not address this as it is limited to sexual violence committed by conflict actors.

Finally, the quantity and quality of data collection efforts are inadequate at best, often due to funding constraints. Data is not consistently disaggregated by sex, and hardly ever disaggregated by gender,<sup>38</sup> age or disability, and younger children are underrepresented among respondents. Even when data is disaggregated by age, the disaggregation rarely extends to the level of age groups 10-14 and 15-19, leaving the specific risks of adolescents invisible. This critically impairs the design – and consequently the impact – of policy and programme responses, and undermines accountability.

It is paramount that the UN-led Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) encompassing sexual violence and other grave violations against children in conflict is further strengthened when it comes to age and gender disaggregation, and that it has the necessary financial and human resources to fulfil its critical functions.

## CHILD MARRIAGE – PARTNERING WITH RESEARCHERS TO FIGHT DATA GAPS AND FIND SOLUTIONS

A growing body of research shows that child, early and forced marriage tends to increase in conflict settings.<sup>39</sup> Nine of the ten countries with the highest prevalence rate of child, early and forced marriage are classified as fragile or conflict affected. In some contexts, girls may be married as a perceived protective and pre-emptive measure, due to fears associated with armed actors and the sexual violence they perpetrate. Yet, there remain significant data gaps when it comes to prevalence of child marriage and an urgent need for more research

on why it happens and which measures can prevent it.<sup>40</sup> Save the Children is partnering with the Human Rights Center at the University of California, Berkeley School of Law, to conduct research including a review of child marriage and prevention and response interventions; a multi-country study in humanitarian contexts to identify child marriage drivers, decision-making factors, and solutions; and a co-designed intervention with girls themselves to be piloted in a humanitarian context.<sup>41</sup>

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## Impact of sexual violence on children and need for comprehensive child-centred responses

*I can't forget what happened. My head is full of these things – what happened to my friends, my family. It's not peaceful in my head.*

**Aissatou\*, 15, Mali<sup>42</sup>**

Sexual violence is far from being a temporally discrete trauma. Individual survivors can suffer from a wide range of physical, psychological, social and economic consequences – many of which persist for decades. The brutality of sexual violence frequently causes serious physical injuries and the consequences might be particularly severe for children as their bodies are not fully developed. Girls might suffer uterine prolapses, fistula and other injuries to the reproductive system and face complications and even death due to pregnancy at too early an age, as well as risks associated with unsafe abortions. All children face risks of urological and anal damage and exposure to sexually transmitted diseases that, if left untreated, can cause lasting harm and even death.

The psychological consequences for child survivors of sexual violence include post-traumatic stress disorder, somatic disorders, intense feelings of rage and shame, depression, self-blame and memory loss. In many post-conflict areas, the social impacts of sexual violence cannot be overstated. Survivors – girls, as well as boys (who may be even less likely to report the violence because of hostility around homosexual acts) – can face stigma that forces them out of their families, isolates them from their communities and leaves them to deal with their physical and psychological trauma alone. Survivors often live with stigma and distress for many years, if not the rest of their lives. Boys who suffer sexual violence may feel emasculated; girls may perceive themselves or be perceived to be dishonoured and impure.<sup>43</sup>

Sexual violence can also affect children's social development by depriving them of the environment and the means to fully develop their potential. They may normalise the use of violence within relationships, exposing them to the risk of re-victimisation. Sexual violence also has long-term ramifications for the economic futures of girl survivors. In areas where gender norms and limited economic opportunities may make marriage the most accessible route to social acceptance and financial security, abandonment and the loss of their marriage prospects can result in a lifetime of poverty.<sup>44</sup>

All these severe impacts must be better addressed. Child survivors need age-appropriate and gender-responsive programmes and services that meet their needs. All too often, children and adolescents fall between two inter-agency coordination mechanisms wit-

hin the protection cluster – the gender-based violence (GBV) area of responsibility and the child protection area of responsibility.<sup>45</sup> It is crucial that the two areas continue to build on the positive collaboration established to ensure that child survivors receive comprehensive child-focused, gender-responsive, specialist support.

To deliver comprehensive, child-focused and gender-responsive services and information to child survivors of sexual violence, service providers must:

- ensure children have safe access to shelter, education, water and sanitation
- invest in appropriate GBV services and information, sexual and reproductive health services and information as well as mental health and psychosocial support services and robust child protection services, ensuring appropriate activities and care for all children regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression and sexual characteristics
- support community-based child protection systems that link to child-friendly and gender-responsive health and legal services where provisions are made to ensure safe and confidential reporting for children
- develop referral pathways and provide support for service providers to ensure they meet the needs of children.<sup>46</sup>

Whole communities, their social bonds and value systems might be negatively affected or even destroyed by sexual violence in conflict. Research shows that sexual violence can both drive conflicts at the outset and threaten the prospects of sustainable post-conflict peace.<sup>47</sup> Therefore empowering both child survivors and their communities, and advocating for more political will, and financial and technical resources to tackle this problem, is of paramount importance.

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## Vulnerabilities differ, so do needs

*The specific needs of girls cannot be overlooked. Too often, they are hidden victims of conflict who suffer stigma, rejection by their families and communities, in addition to psychological and physical consequences of sexual violence and other abuse. Equally, boys may need specialized programs – so our call is for gender sensitive programming to tailor assistance most appropriately to meet the needs of the children.*

**Virginia Gamba, UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict<sup>48</sup>**

According to Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) data for 2019, 98% of verified cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence were committed against girls.<sup>49</sup> Research shows that especially adolescent girls are vulnerable to sexual violence during conflict

and forced displacement.<sup>50</sup> But while girls are disproportionately affected by sexual violence, boys are not exempt from such abuse. The majority of cases reported in Afghanistan in 2019, for example, relate to boys (13 cases, vs. 5 cases against girls). This may be partly due to underreporting of attacks on girls but is also attributable to the prevalence of the *Bacha Bazi* practice, where boys are sexually exploited and enslaved by men in power. Sexual violence has been strategically perpetrated against boys in conflicts in the Central African Republic, DRC, South Sudan and Syria. Cases include rape, gang rape, forced nudity, and other forms of inhuman or degrading treatment which often occur while boys are held in detention. Boys face reporting barriers because of the stigma related to perceived emasculation. In some countries, the existing legal framework and generalised homophobia further impair reporting by male survivors.<sup>51</sup> Like sexual violence against girls, this violation against boys functions to masculinise and empower the perpetrator and feminise, conquer or humiliate the survivors and their communities.<sup>52</sup>

Actual or perceived non-conforming **sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE)** may aggravate children's vulnerability and exposure to sexual violence in conflict. In recent years, we have seen an increase in the number of reports of conflict-related sexual violence targeting persons on the basis of their actual or perceived non-conforming SOGIE in Colombia, Syria and Myanmar.<sup>53</sup> This increase is probably partly due to rising awareness and strengthened documentation efforts. While important progress has been made with respect to the protection of LGBTQI people under human rights law, a similar effort is largely absent from the international humanitarian law discourse.<sup>54</sup>

Worldwide, one in ten children has a **disability** – and the proportion is even higher in areas with armed conflict or disasters.<sup>55</sup> Children and adolescents with disabilities are three to four times more likely to experience physical and sexual violence than other children,<sup>56</sup> and this vulnerability is heightened in humanitarian crises and in conflict.<sup>57</sup> Most vulnerable to violence are children on the autism spectrum, as well as those with hearing, visual, psychosocial or intellectual disabilities. Perpetrators may target them because their impairments hamper their ability to disclose abusive experiences. Research shows that about 50% of girls and boys who are deaf have been sexually abused compared to 25% of girls and 10% of boys who are hearing.<sup>58</sup> The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which applies also during armed conflict, affirms that all persons with disabilities, including children, should enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms and should be protected from “all forms of exploitation, violence and abuse, including their gender-based aspects”. As a positive development, the first ever UN Security Council Resolution on protection of persons with disabilities in conflict (2475) from 2019, urges all parties to armed conflict to protect civilians

from sexual violence and prevent it from happening.<sup>59</sup>

Also, **children on the move**, including those internally displaced and refugee children, as well as unaccompanied minors and **children in detention**, are at particular risk of sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict settings.<sup>60</sup>

It is important to recognise and address appropriately children's different vulnerabilities and needs according to their gender, age, disability, actual or perceived sexual orientation, and other relevant factors, such as poverty, for both prevention, mitigation and response purposes. Child protection services must be fully funded and supported to become more holistic, age- and gender-responsive, and better able to address children's needs and experiences, including the gendered nature of the violence they may have experienced.

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### Shortcomings of accountability

Rape and other forms of sexual violence against children are prohibited by most national laws as well as by international human rights law, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and international humanitarian law. When committed on a large scale or systematically during conflict, such conduct may amount to a crime against humanity and genocide in addition to constituting a war crime. Sexual violence in conflict may also constitute torture under the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.<sup>61</sup>

And yet rape and other forms of sexual violence are seldom prosecuted, and perpetrators rarely face any legal or disciplinary consequences for their crimes. As a result, a culture of impunity is entrenched, emboldening the perpetrators and perpetuating vicious cycles of sexual violence.<sup>62</sup>

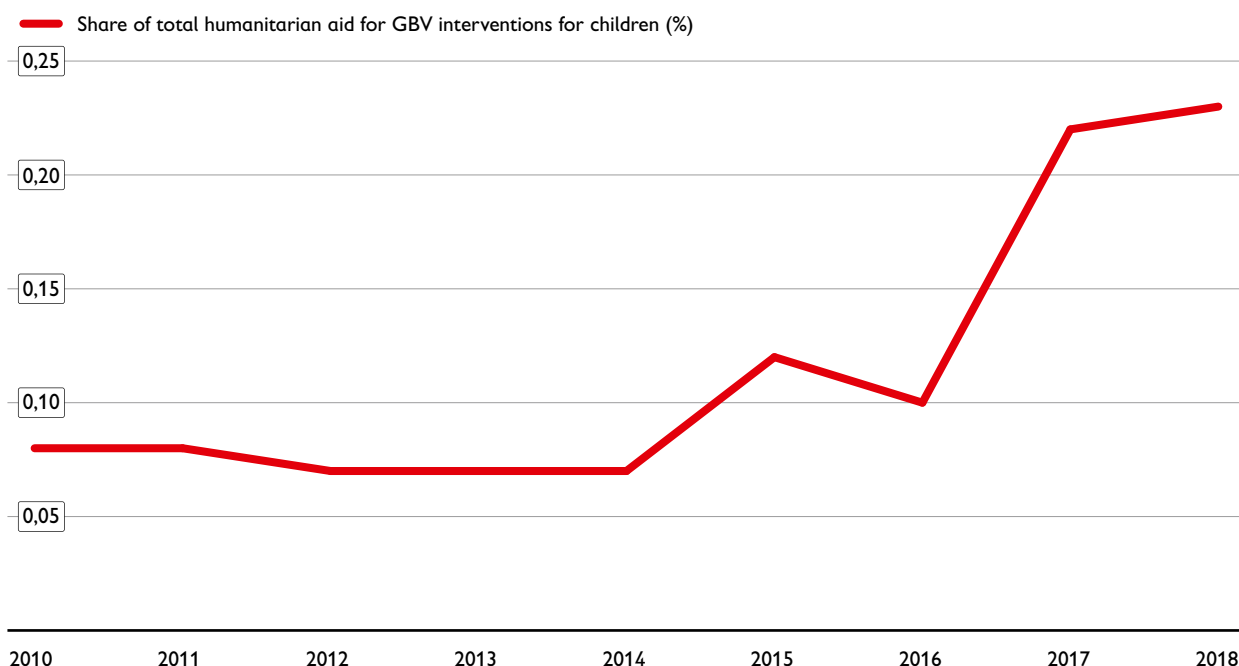
This problem is particularly acute in the case of children. As an overall group – recognising the differences according to age and gender – accountability mechanisms too often fail to effectively investigate and prosecute crimes and serious violations against children. This includes, but is not exclusive to, sexual violence, and is due to a number of factors.<sup>63</sup>

Too often the attitudes of courts, tribunals and mechanisms fall short in considering children. This extends both to the impact of certain acts and crimes on children, and to how children have been targeted or victims of crimes. This can be due to apathy, competing priorities or simply a lack of expertise that may extend to a perception that children are not credible witnesses or complainants. Courts, governments and institutions may see sexual violence as an inevitable by-product of conflict, and underlying gender inequalities can mean that judicial mechanisms do not prioritise sexual violence generally, and particularly as it relates to children. Both crimes against children and sexual violence can be underreported and less



**Rehim\*, 15, is from DRC, but now lives in Kyaka II refugee settlement in Uganda.** She loves knitting. Five years ago, rebels attacked her family's home. They killed her father. Her mother fled with her other children, taking refuge in a church, but Rehim\* was abducted. She was missing for a year before managing to escape while her captors were sleeping. When she remembers what she's been through, Rehim says she feels sad and cries. She has ongoing urinary problems and abdominal pain, due to internal damage, which doctors believe has been caused by the rape(s).

PHOTO: ESTHER RUTH MBABAZI / SAVE THE CHILDREN



**FIGURE 7**  
**Funding for GBV programmes for children as a percentage of total humanitarian aid**

SOURCE: ANALYSIS BY SAVE THE CHILDREN BASED ON UN-OCHA FINANCIAL TRACKING SERVICE DATABASE.

visible than other types of crimes, and certainly when it comes to international courts, tribunals and investigations have, historically, lacked profile and priority.

States have – to date – failed to prioritise accountability for crimes against children. While in recent years – particularly as a result of the work of UN Women among others – more funding has gone towards investigating and prosecuting sexual violence, we are yet to see the same transformation for children. While some of the attitudinal barriers are similar, they are not the same and the substance of what to investigate and prosecute relating to children, as well as how to do that, is distinct from sexual violence more broadly. Currently, states and donors do not create the financial or political incentives to enable accountability for crimes against children. Until this is the case, there will continue to be gaps in efforts to secure accountability for sexual violence against children as a distinct group.

Finally, there are a range of technical gaps relating to accountability for crimes against children – ranging from how national and international mechanisms work together, to the level of expertise within investigative mechanisms and judicial structures regarding how to effectively investigate crimes against children. Prosecutors may be reluctant to use children’s testimony, and the lack of protection pathways and referrals may act as barriers to engaging children in judicial processes. Further still, more capacity and confidence in building crime bases as they relate to children ahead of prosecution is required.<sup>64</sup>

### Lack of funding

Figure 7 provides an overview of funding for GBV programmes for children in humanitarian action since 2010. It is based on our analysis of data sourced from the UN-OCHA Financial Tracking Service database. This is the most comprehensive public data source on humanitarian funding currently available, but it has important limitations, the most important one being that it relies on voluntary reporting from donors and recipient organisations. It therefore does not capture all humanitarian funding.

Our analysis shows that funding for GBV programmes for children represented on average only 0.12% of total annual humanitarian aid in the 2010-2018 period. We do see a positive trend over that period, with the share slowly increasing and reaching 0.23% in 2018, which is partly due to the increased visibility of the problem. But given the magnitude of GBV against children in conflict and in humanitarian crises in general, more funds are urgently needed to adequately prevent and respond to the needs of child survivors. This means increasing flexible and long-term funding, including for mental health and psychosocial support to survivors, gender-responsive child protection and GBV services; as well as delivering on the promise of localisation and investment in women-led and women’s rights organisations.

# SUPPORTING CHILDREN BORN OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT

*Children born of sexual violence suffer as a result of their mothers' own stigmatization, social exclusion, and discrimination. They are at risk of infanticide, abuse, abandonment, rejection, marginalization and severe human rights violations. (...) This is an emergency because lives are at stake: stigma can not only scar, it can kill.*

**Pramila Patten,  
Special Representative  
of the Secretary-General  
on Sexual Violence in Conflict**<sup>65</sup>

The protection needs of children born of sexual violence in conflict have long been overlooked despite the severe and even life-threatening risk of stigmatization, rejection and discrimination that these children face.<sup>66</sup> In the last few years, more research has been geared to gathering best practice and lessons learned.

In post-conflict northern Uganda, where 8,000 children are estimated to have been born as a result of wartime rape, a community-based organisation composed of survivors of forced marriage and sexual violence in conflict collectively seeks justice for their children in a process referred to as child tracing. The Women's Advocacy Network brings together



Claudine, a victim of sexual violence with her daughter Princess at Save the Children's Livelihood Centre in Mahama Camp for Burundi refugees, Rwanda.

PHOTO: JORDI MATAS / SAVE THE CHILDREN

different survivor groups to help identify, in a sensitive and careful way, the paternal side of a child's family. The group also mediates conflict and works to transform painful relationships to secure a future for their children and reach justice and reconciliation in divided communities.<sup>67</sup>

Other promising practices from different geographical contexts include:

- economic empowerment of mothers, preceded by psychosocial and health support
- holistic responses for children, with special attention given to their right to education
- community sensitisation and stigma reduction<sup>68</sup>
- post-conflict transitional justice mechanisms, including reparations.<sup>69</sup>

## Best practices

### Save the Children's mentoring programme on GBV in humanitarian crises

At Save the Children, we have rolled out a mentoring programme on sexual and gender-based violence against children in humanitarian crises. Mentors support country offices in their provision of holistic quality responses for survivors by directly reaching frontline case workers with mentoring support. Specific focus is given to building child protection case managers' competencies and skills in response to GBV; increasing access to adolescent sexual and reproductive health services within our health responses; increasing the capacity of teachers in the reduction of school-related GBV; providing mental health and psychosocial support; and investing in the empowerment of children, including children with disabilities and children of diverse sexual orientation,

gender identity and expression. We also focus on local actors and remote ways of working in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Mentors support a review of country programmes' gaps and needs; the findings are fed into a wider feedback mechanism to inform support with technical guidance, tools and funding.

### Strengthening the response through partnerships

The Child and Adolescent Survivor Initiative (CASI) is a partnership between The Global Child Protection Area of Responsibility, the Global GBV Area of Responsibility, the International Rescue Committee and Norwegian Capacity (NORCAP).<sup>70</sup> CASI is providing technical support to country coordination and response interventions. CASI aims to improve the quality of and access to services for child and adolescent survivors of sexual abuse in emergencies. During the CASI pilot in Iraq, Niger, Sudan, and Myanmar in 2018, each country developed their inter-sector

coordination and technical capacity to better respond to child survivors. The CASI learning programme currently underway in South Sudan works to strengthen case management capacity and leadership of national and international NGOs working with child survivors. In Kenya and the Philippines, CASI is piloting participatory action research involving adolescents in identifying factors that affect their access to services and helping them meaningfully engage with services to address the gaps.

In Myanmar, CASI sparked a peer-to-peer support network in two separate conflicts, in Rakhine and Shan states. Save the Children staff members were trained in caring for child survivors of sexual violence, coaching and supervision skills which were embedded in both strengthened response to survivors and continuous, hands-on support to our case managers in the field.

### **Mitigating the risk of sexual violence**

In Nigeria, Save the Children conducts community sessions to identify locations where sexual violence is likely to occur. Men, women, boys and girls work in separate groups, identify risky places and come up with mitigation measures. The involvement of men and boys in the mitigation design is key. Mitigation measures include men accompanying boys and girls when going to fetch firewood in the bush, and parents and caregivers avoiding sending children to risky areas. We also raise awareness among local authorities, religious leaders and communities on prevention and response to sexual violence.

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## **Emerging solutions**

### **Collaboration between UN agendas**

The creation in 2009 of the Office of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General (SRSG) on Sexual Violence in Conflict – under the Women, Peace and Security Agenda of the Security Council – has been a key step in bringing visibility to the issue and energy to tackle it. Collaboration and alignment between the SRSGs on Children and Armed Conflict and Sexual Violence in Conflict is both mandated by the Security Council and crucial to addressing crimes of sexual violence perpetrated against children in conflict. The development of a robust legislative framework in the UN Security Council, through a set of unanimously adopted resolutions, has given the Office of the Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict effective tools to drive the mandate on the ground. One of them was the establishment of the UN Team of Experts on the Rule of Law and Sexual Violence in Conflict, mandated by the UN Security Council to assist national authorities in strengthening the rule of law to ensure criminal accountability for perpetrators of conflict-related sexual violence. The Special Representative also chairs the UN Action

Against Sexual Violence in Conflict initiative which unites the work of 15 United Nations entities with the goal of ending sexual violence in conflict.

### **Increased accountability for sexual violence**

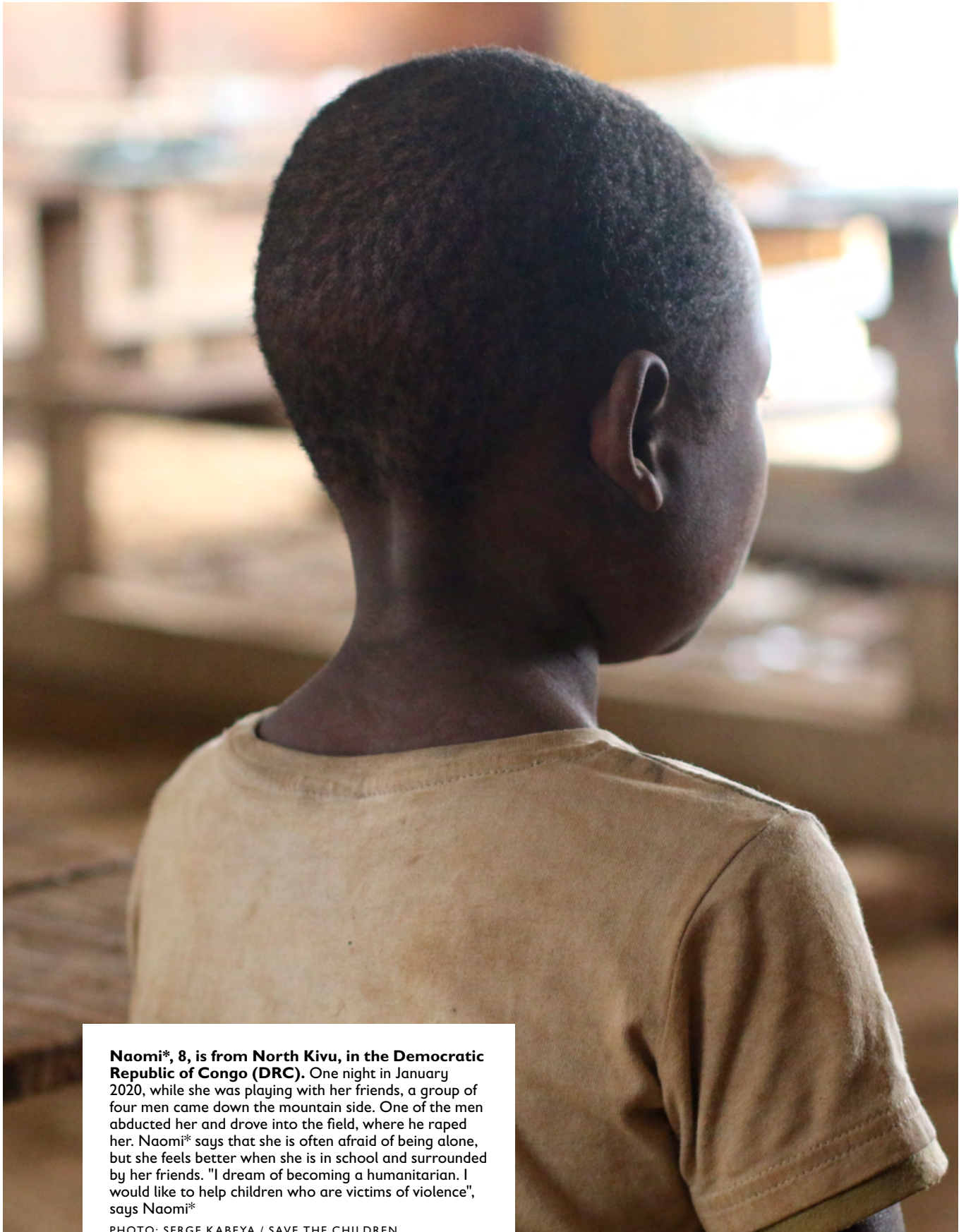
*While the Office can only bring a select number of cases, each of those cases can have a significant deterrent impact; by changing the behaviour and choices of political and military leaders around the world.*

**Mrs Fatou Bensouda, Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC)**<sup>71</sup>

While there are important differences between crimes against children – including but not limited to sexual violence – and those against adults, the progress in securing greater accountability for sexual violence overall should offer both concrete lessons and cause for optimism. Particularly over recent decades, the failure to address sexual violence in high profile cases has led to efforts to give sexual violence greater prominence within international accountability. This is particularly evident in how, following the omission of sexual violence in the ICC's first ever conviction, of Thomas Lubanga, a war criminal from DRC sentenced in 2012, the ICC developed a policy on sexual and gender based-crimes.<sup>72</sup> It is also manifested by the role of UN Women in providing resource and leadership on investigating gender-based violence, and the creation of expert rosters to support investigative mechanisms.

2019 marked the ICC's first ever conviction of sexual slavery of children, in the case against Bosco Ntaganda from the DRC. The conviction of Ntabo Ntaberi Sheka for war crimes of rape, sexual slavery, child recruitment and murder in the DRC by the Cour Militaire Opérationnelle of North Kivu in November 2020 was a significant step in the fight against impunity. In February 2021, the ICC declared Dominic Ongwen, a former commander of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including forced marriage, torture, rape, sexual slavery and enslavement of women and girls.<sup>73</sup> It was the first case before the ICC to include charges of forced pregnancy and forced marriage.<sup>74</sup>

The political momentum behind tackling sexual violence generally, although not specifically relating to children, has led to the creation of national initiatives, for instance the UK government's Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative, which aims to raise awareness of the extent of sexual violence in situations of armed conflict and rally global action to end it. One key contribution of this initiative has been the development of an international protocol on the documentation and investigation of sexual violence in conflict, which includes important guidance specifically on sexual violence against children. Another example is the Netherlands'



**Naomi\*, 8, is from North Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).** One night in January 2020, while she was playing with her friends, a group of four men came down the mountain side. One of the men abducted her and drove into the field, where he raped her. Naomi\* says that she is often afraid of being alone, but she feels better when she is in school and surrounded by her friends. "I dream of becoming a humanitarian. I would like to help children who are victims of violence", says Naomi\*

PHOTO: SERGE KABEYA / SAVE THE CHILDREN

decision to intervene in an ongoing case at the International Court of Justice (Gambia vs Myanmar) specifically on how sexual violence should be a criterion in the court's deliberations regarding allegations of genocide against the Rohingya.<sup>75</sup>

In addition, UN Security Council Resolution 2467 (2019) is a powerful instrument for strengthening justice and accountability and has a strong focus on children facing the risk of sexual violence in conflict and on children born as a result of this violence. While there is still a long way to go to ensure consistency and quality in securing accountability for sexual violence overall, this should offer encouragement.

### **Call to Action**

Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies (Call to Action) is a multi-stakeholder initiative launched in 2013 to fundamentally transform the way gender-based violence is addressed in humanitarian emergencies. The aim is to drive change and foster accountability so that every humanitarian effort, from the earliest stage of a crisis, includes the policies, systems and mechanisms to mitigate gender-based violence risks, especially violence against women and girls, and to provide safe and comprehensive services to those affected by gender-based violence. The Call to Action is composed of three Working Groups (States and Donors; International Organisations; and NGOs, including Save the Children), a Steering Committee and a Lead overseeing the whole process. All partners formally endorse the Call to Action goal and its Road Map; report annually on progress towards commitments; and participate in Working Groups. In 2020, Save the Children submitted its commitments to the new 2021-25 Road Map.

### **Creating momentum – Nobel Peace Prize and Oslo Conference “Ending SGBV in Humanitarian Crises”**

*The only prize in the world that can restore our dignity is justice and the prosecution of criminals.*

**Nadia Murad, Islamic State survivor,  
Nobel Peace Prize winner**

The 2018 Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Dr Denis Mukwege and Nadia Murad, for their contributions toward fighting sexual violence in conflict, created a unique momentum. Mukwege, a Congolese gynaecologist, developed a holistic model of treatment that emphasises four pillars of support: medical, psychosocial, socioeconomic and legal assistance, allowing survivors to heal, recover and reintegrate into their community. Murad, a Yazidi survivor of rape and captivity by ISIS, has spoken extensively about her experience, “refusing to accept the social codes that require women to remain silent and ashamed of the abuses to which they have been subjected”, in the words of the Norwegian Nobel Committee.<sup>76</sup>

A conference on Ending Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Humanitarian Crises, held in Oslo in May 2019 hosted by Norway together with several other governments, UN agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross, built on the momentum. The event successfully mobilised commitments to prevention, mitigation and response, as well as additional financial resources.<sup>77</sup> Progress on the commitments was tracked at the 75th Session of the UN General Assembly and will be further systematically monitored.

Save the Children has managed to increase the visibility of sexual violence against children in conflict in the framework of the conference and its aftermath. We have also submitted our commitments to bolster the protection of children and their rights in conflict, and to scale up our work to address social and gender norms that drive sexual and gender-based violence. Further, we have advocated for a stronger alignment and coordination across the Call to Action and Oslo conference follow-up which has now borne fruit.

### **Global Fund for Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence**

Launched in October 2019, the Global Survivors Fund (GSF) aims to ensure that survivors of conflict-related sexual violence have access to reparations and other forms of redress. By working with and for survivors, the GSF acts in situations where the states or other parties responsible for the violence are unable or unwilling to meet their responsibilities and provide reparations. The GSF advocates relevant stakeholders, primarily states and duty bearers as well as the international community, to develop and implement survivor-centred reparations programmes. It also guides states and civil society in providing advice and technical support in designing reparations programmes. Based in Geneva, it works globally and addresses a demand by survivors from several conflict-torn countries.<sup>78</sup>

### **Improving reporting and fighting impunity with technology**

Technology is increasingly becoming part of approaches that attempt to support survivors – driving better reporting and more action. The Primero CPIMS+ (Child Protection Information Management System) and GBVIMS+ (Gender-Based Violence Information Management System) databases are used in multiple humanitarian contexts to gather data on both incidents of violations against children and cases of GBV, including against children, to support effective case management. The tools enable aggregation and analysis of data, informing programme design and advocacy. The Primero platform is the result of a partnership between UNICEF and International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, Terre des Hommes, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the office of SRSG on Children and Armed Conflict.<sup>79</sup> The interoperability of both the Child Pro-

tection and Gender-based Violence modules is key to ensuring that children access age and gender-responsive protection and GBV services.

The French NGO We Are Not Weapons of War<sup>80</sup> has developed a mobile application which aims to improve and increase the reporting of sexual violence in conflict through the collection of reliable data. Similarly, the application developed by eyeWitness to Atrocities<sup>81</sup> attempts to help capture verifiable video and photo documentation of rights abuses – facilitating the use of this documentation by investigators, human rights defenders, journalists and activists.

### COVID-19 and gender-based violence: two parallel pandemics

*The risks of falling victim to sexual violence have not diminished in this crisis, but the possibility to seek assistance and redress has!*

**Remarks of the Senior Women Protection Advisor, Central African Republic<sup>82</sup>**

Despite the UN Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire during the COVID-19 pandemic, many conflicts are intensifying. 80% of protection clusters reported an increase in violence since the outbreak of the pandemic as of September 2020.<sup>83</sup> By August 2020, targeting of civilians by state forces was up by 30%, along with a marked rise in violent activity from non-state armed actors – a 70% increase in East and West Africa.<sup>84</sup> When it comes to gender-based violence, a pandemic in its own right, COVID-19 brought about a deadly combination of closer contact with abusers and fewer possibilities for immediate escape, reporting and redress. Also, prevention and care programmes have been disrupted due to COVID-19. As a result, UNFPA forecasts that by 2030, 2 million



**“We are children who stand against early marriage,”** sing Hiba\* and Rama\*. These two talented Syrian sisters are using rap music to spread a crucial message about girls' rights in Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan. PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

cases of female genital mutilation will have failed to be averted.<sup>85</sup> Save the Children's own projections show that by the end of 2024 the economic impacts of COVID-19 will put an additional 2.5 million girls at risk of child marriage, with the numbers likely to be an underestimate.<sup>86</sup>

#### Key steps to address GBV during COVID-19:

- increased investment and humanitarian action for age-responsive GBV prevention, mitigation and response efforts, and gender-responsive child protection, commensurate with extreme need
- creation of new options for safe and remote reporting and access<sup>87</sup>
- strengthening of data collection
- recognition and resourcing of GBV and child-protection service providers as essential workers. ●

## FROM THE FIELD: FIGHTING GBV DURING COVID-19

In Ethiopia, Save the Children is working in collaboration with UNICEF and government ministries to provide training for relevant staff from the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Ministry of Education, NGOs and other partners, on COVID-19 related increased child protection and GBV risks, and how to safely report concerns.

In Lebanon, Save the Children has adapted a remote case management approach to monitor protection cases, with psychosocial support sessions

planned throughout the lockdown. Save the Children teams continue to provide face-to-face support for girls who face protection risks such as child marriage, physical and emotional abuse, and child labour. These interventions happen through home visits or in partner centres, providing safe spaces while ensuring social distancing. High-risk GBV cases are also referred to specialist services, as Save the Children continues to raise awareness and share hotline numbers for partner organisations who support girls and women experiencing or at risk of GBV.<sup>88</sup>

# RECOMMENDATIONS

As the number of children at risk of sexual violence in conflict is on the rise, the need to better prevent, mitigate and respond to this problem is more urgent than ever. The following recommendations are aimed at the UN, states, donors, the humanitarian community, researchers, and civil society organisations.

We call on them to:



## 1. Put children at the centre of the international action against sexual violence in conflict

- **Boost tailored and targeted prevention efforts and deliver comprehensive child-centred services**, which take into consideration the age, gender, SOGIE and disability status of children impacted by conflict. Apply Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action<sup>89</sup> and the Inter-Agency Minimum Standards for Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies Programming.<sup>90</sup>
- **Make gender-responsive programming a minimum standard and shift to gender-transformative programming whenever possible** to address the root cause of gender inequality and discrimination underlying the disproportionate effect conflict has on women and girls, while noting that conflict-related sexual violence is often a manifestation of pre-conflict gender inequalities, and that impunity for sexual violence during conflict may perpetuate ongoing cycles of sexual violence.
- **Substantially increase investment in the prevention, mitigation and response** to gender-based violence faced by children in humanitarian settings, increasing flexible and long-term funding and equitably prioritising gender-responsive child protection funding, funding for GBV services, mental health and psychosocial support, and sexual and

reproductive health services and information for survivors. More funds should be channelled directly to local women-led and women's rights organisations.

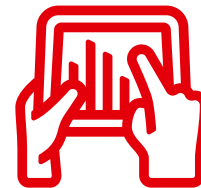
- **Act to address immediate and ongoing risks of gender-based violence exacerbated by COVID-19** by recognising gender-based violence, child protection and sexual and reproductive health services and information as essential services, including social service providers, shelters, and adolescent girl-friendly safe spaces, which must be maintained and adapted during the pandemic. These services must be fully resourced, including with personal protective equipment and training to operate safely.
- **Ensure sufficient dedicated resourcing across UN peacekeeping and political missions** to allow for the inclusion of an adequate number of qualified Child Protection Advisor, Child Protection Officer and Women Protection Advisors posts.
- **Empower children and their communities**, supporting child-led groups, youth and girl leaders and increasing children's voice and participation, supporting parents and caregivers, and ensuring communities have a safe way to earn a living in times of crisis. Systematically support the inclusion of children in peace-making and peace-building efforts.



## 2. End impunity for sexual violence against children in conflict

- **Support international mechanisms to prosecute sexual violence** and other violations of children's rights in conflict, including through resourcing dedicated gender-responsive, child-specific expertise in international investigations and through support for the International Criminal Court and ad hoc judicial mechanisms.

- **Develop and use national systems** – such as sequestering property, freezing bank accounts and imposing travel bans – to take action against individual perpetrators of violations of children’s rights in conflict while avoiding negative impact on principled humanitarian efforts; and resource national crime agencies to investigate grave violations of children’s rights in third countries and to prosecute through national courts.
- **Support complete, accurate and impartial listing of perpetrators** of rape and other forms of sexual violence in conflict in the annexes of the UN Secretary-General’s annual reports on children and armed conflict and ensure their delisting only when parties to conflict have ceased to commit those grave violations and / or have complied with UN-agreed action plans, as defined by the criteria for delisting set forth in the 2010 annual report (A/73/907-S/2010/181), pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 1882 (2009).
- Encourage the UN General Assembly to **establish a standing impartial, independent and international mechanism that can be activated to collect, consolidate, preserve and analyse evidence** of sexual violence and other violations of international humanitarian law and human rights violations and abuses in conflict settings, notably children’s rights.
- **Support children to raise complaints of violations** of their rights in conflict directly – in Africa through the complaints procedure of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child – and globally by committing to sign and ratify the third Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which enables children to hold parties to the Convention to account for failing to uphold their rights.
- **Strengthen national laws and policies** relevant to rape and other forms of sexual violence and make sure they are enforced. Ensure that international criminal law is incorporated into national law as codified in the Rome Statute.
- For members of the Security Council: **refrain from impeding UN action against perpetrators** of grave violations of children’s rights in conflict



### 3. Strengthen and coordinate data collection on sexual violence against children in conflict

- **Strengthen and adequately finance collection of data** on sexual violence and other grave violations perpetrated against children by armed forces and groups, disaggregated by age, gender and disability and in accordance with survivor-centred monitoring, reporting and verification protocols; and step up analysis efforts to effectively inform targeted action for children in conflict, policy decisions and advocacy.
- **Support the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) on Children and Armed Conflict as well as the Office of the SRSG on Sexual Violence in Conflict** financially and diplomatically to ensure that data collection through their mechanisms is disaggregated by age, gender and disability.
- **Encourage information sharing and synergies between different UN mechanisms** informing the work of the UN Security Council on sexual violence against children in conflict, including Human Rights Council mechanisms, special mandate holders and sanctions regimes wherever possible.
- Recognise the need for increased data on rights violations perpetrated against children by family, community members or acquaintances in conflict and displacement settings. Specific focus should be given within initiatives of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee to **address data gaps on child marriage in humanitarian settings**.
- **Ensure data collection is ethical, safe, responsible, child-friendly** and shaped by considerations around the psychological well-being of respondents, adhering to the best international practices<sup>91</sup> and the Inter-Agency Minimum Standards on Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies Programming.<sup>92</sup> ●

# APPENDIX 1: NUMBER OF CONFLICTS WITH REPORTED SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN PER YEAR

The table shows the numbers of conflicts where no sexual violence was reported, conflicts that had reports of sexual violence, and conflicts with reported sexual violence against children.

Year	# Conflicts with no reported sexual violence	# Conflicts with reported sexual violence	# Conflicts with reported sexual violence against children
1990	31	18	6
1991	31	22	7
1992	27	23	7
1993	16	27	12
1994	23	25	9
1995	18	24	8
1996	16	25	9
1997	16	23	7
1998	14	26	9
1999	16	24	10
2000	10	28	10
2001	12	27	14
2002	3	30	14
2003	4	29	15
2004	6	27	14
2005	10	23	11
2006	9	24	10
2007	14	21	13
2008	18	20	10
2009	16	21	8
2010	12	19	8
2011	15	23	13
2012	9	24	10
2013	17	20	14
2014	22	22	17
2015	29	23	15
2016	26	28	14
2017	26	25	14
2018	26	26	15
2019	32	22	15

SOURCE: UCDP/PRIO ARMED CONFLICT DATASET AND SVAC DATASET

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## APPENDIX 2: ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS REPORT

**CAAC:** Children and Armed Conflict

**CASI:** The Child and Adolescent Survivor Initiative

**CRSV:** Conflict Related Sexual Violence

**DRC:** Democratic Republic of Congo

**GBV:** Gender-Based Violence, the term includes sexual violence

**ICC:** International Criminal Court

**LGBTQI:** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex

**MRM:** Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on grave violations against children in conflict

**PRIO:** Peace Research Institute Oslo

**SGBV:** Sexual and Gender Based Violence

**SOGIE:** Sexual orientation, gender identity and expression

**SRSB:** Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General

**SV:** Sexual Violence

**SVAC:** Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict

**UCDP GED:** Uppsala Conflict Data Program's Georeferenced Event Dataset

**UN:** United Nations

**UNHCR:** United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

**UNFPA:** United Nations Population Fund

**UNICEF:** United Nations Children's Fund

**UN-OCHA:** United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

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## APPENDIX 3: DEFINITIONS USED IN THIS REPORT

**Children:** we use the definition from the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, which defines children as individuals under the age of 18 years.

**Children at risk of sexual violence in conflict:** children living 50km or closer to an armed conflict where conflict actors have perpetrated sexual violence against children in a given year.

**Conflict/armed conflict:** we use the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCPD) definition, according to which conflict is when armed force is used by an organised actor against another organised actor or against civilians, resulting in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year. The definition includes three types of conflict:

- State-based conflict takes place between two states (inter-state conflict), or between one state and one or more rebel groups (civil conflict).
- Non-state conflict is fought between two organised, armed actors, of which neither is the government of a state.
- One-sided violence is perpetrated by an organised armed group, either a state's military forces or an armed group, against civilians.

**Conflict incident:** a lethal incident, either a violent clash between two armed groups or an attack on civilians by a group or groups, at a given time and place. Conflicts usually consist of multiple conflict events.

**Conflict zone:** an area within the borders of a country and within 50km from where one or more conflict incidents takes place in a given year.

**Gender:** the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for a person, often based on their sex.

**Gender expression:** external manifestations of gender, expressed through one's name, pronouns, clothing, haircut, behaviour, voice or body characteristics. Society identifies these cues as masculine and feminine, although what is considered masculine and feminine changes over time and varies by culture.

**Gender identity:** each person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with their sex assigned at birth.

**Gender-based violence:** an umbrella term for multiple forms of violence directed at an individual based on their biological sex, gender identity or perceived lack of adherence to socially defined norms of masculinity and femininity. It includes sexual violence, alongside physical, economic and emotional violence. Violence against people based on their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression is a form of gender-based violence.

**Gender responsive:** when the different needs, abilities, and opportunities of boys and girls, and men and women, are identified, considered and accounted for. Save the Children believes all our work should be gender responsive as a minimum standard.

**Gender transformative:** when we use a gender responsive approach and promote gender equality, while working with key stakeholders to identify, address and positively transform the root causes of gender inequality.

**Sexual violence in conflict/conflict-related sexual violence:** In the datasets used, the term sexual violence refers to rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced sterilisation, forced abortion, sexual mutilation, sexual abuse and sexual torture, perpetrated by armed conflict actors. In the chapter 'Research implications' and in the recommendations we discuss sexual violence in conflict in broader terms, not only when it is perpetrated by armed actors but whenever it is directly or indirectly linked to a conflict. This broader definition includes child, early and forced marriage.

# ENDNOTES

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- 2 The UN Security Council Resolution 1888 (2009) established the Office of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General (SRSG) on Sexual Violence in Conflict. See also the Section 'Emerging solutions'.
- 3 Meaning, not reported to the police. In the US, for example, '23% of incidents of rape or sexual assault were reported to police in 2016. R E Morgan and G Kena, 2016, 'Criminal Victimization, 2016: Revised', US Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin. <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv16.pdf>; An extensive survey in the EU found that only 13% of women on average reported the most serious incident of non-partner violence to the police. FRA – European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014, Violence against women: an EU-wide survey Main results [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2014-vaw-survey-main-results-apr14\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2014-vaw-survey-main-results-apr14_en.pdf). UN Women estimates that worldwide, less than 40% of women who experience violence seek help of any sort. In the majority of countries with available data, of women who do seek help, most look to family and friends and very few to formal institutions, such as police and health services. Less than 10% of those seeking help appealed to the police. UN Women, 'Facts and figures: Ending violence against women' <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>
- 4 We recognise that other factors also contribute to increasing children's vulnerability to sexual violence in conflict. See the section 'Vulnerabilities differ, so do needs'.
- 5 Unlike UN reports, which cover a limited number of conflicts. This report uses the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) definition of conflict. Conflict/armed conflict: when armed force is used by an organised actor against another organised actor or against civilians, resulting in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year. See Appendix 3 for more definitions.
- 6 Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict, <http://www.sexualviolencedata.org/dataset/> The dataset previously only covered the period until 2015 and was updated with data on 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 for this report.
- 7 In this respect the dataset follows the definitions of the International Criminal Court, and specifically on sexual torture and sexual mutilation, the definitions by E Wood, 2009, 'Armed Groups and Sexual Violence: When Is Wartime Rape Rare?' Politics & Society <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0032329208329755>; Whether a child marriage perpetrated by an armed actor is framed and reported as a marriage or sexual slavery is rarely clear or consistent and is entirely context specific, see also 'Data gaps'.
- 8 See the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict Data Project Coding and Instruction Manual November 2019 for more methodological details <http://www.sexualviolencedata.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/SVAC-2.0-Coding-Manual-FINAL.pdf> Since 2005, the UN has investigated more than 2,000 allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers and civilian mission personnel, hundreds of them against children. See: Child Rights International Network, 'Sexual abuse by UN peacekeepers – Timeline' <https://home.crin.org/un-peacekeepers-timeline> According to UN data released in February 2020, allegations rose 43% from 2018 to 2019, despite the ongoing efforts to address the problem. United States Institute of Peace, 2020, Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by Male Peacekeepers, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/09/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-male-peacekeepers>
- 9 See Appendix 3 for definitions.
- 10 References to sexual violence against girls are more common than explicit notions of such violence against boys in the reports on which the SVAC Dataset is based and some of the reports document a higher prevalence of sexual violence against girls. That said, lack of consistent gender disaggregation of the sources, which this report strongly advocates for,

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  - 16 H Nichols Haddad, 2011, 'Mobilizing the Will to Prosecute: Crimes of Rape at the Yugoslav and Rwandan Tribunals', *Human Rights Review* volume 12, 109–132. See also the subchapter 'Increased accountability for sexual violence' of our report.
  - 17 Conflict incidents against members of the coalition fighting ISIS are included, therefore some European countries are marked.
  - 18 See the section 'Sexual violence against children in CAAC data'.
  - 19 In alphabetical order.
  - 20 We need to bear in mind that increased awareness of the need to specify whether children were targeted might account for some of this trend.
  - 21 This trend coincides with other country-specific analyses, such as those recorded in the National Report on Sexual Violence in Conflict in Colombia, where the period 2000-2005 records as many as 45.7% of all verified cases of sexual violence by conflict actors since 1980s, with a second peak corresponding to the interval 2011-2014. Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2017, *The war inscribed in the body*. [http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/informes-accesibles/guerra-inscrita-en-el-cuerpo\\_accesible.pdf](http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/informes-accesibles/guerra-inscrita-en-el-cuerpo_accesible.pdf)
  - 22 But we also observe an increase between 2018 and 2019.
  - 23 See also Appendix 1 for numbers of conflicts with reported sexual violence and sexual violence against children in the last 30 years.
  - 24 See the UNSC Resolution 1882, 2009, <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/SC-RESOLUTION1882-2009.pdf>
  - 25 Save the Children, November 2020, *Stop the War on Children, Killed and Maimed: A Generation of Violations against Children in Conflict*. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/killed-and-maimed-generation-violations-against-children>
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