

Journey of a survivor



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EVERY CHILD FREE FROM FEAR

Journey of a survivor

INTRODUCTION

When you put aside the horrific experiences survivors of sexual violence may share with you, you notice something striking. You notice that the experiences are all different; that the feelings and reactions to their assaults are all different.

This is because survivors are all different.

Survivors are grandmothers and mothers. They are middle-aged men and teenage boys and girls. They're also tiny children just leaving their mothers' arms, taking their first steps in the world. They can be anyone.

Cover image A scene from a mural that adorns the memorial to the pupils kidnapped by the Lord Resistance Army on October 10, 1996. 139 girls were taken from St Mary's Girls College in Aboke, north Uganda. 30 were held captive for years. Some escaped or were rescued but many remain missing, some feared killed.

Below (left) Children being fed at the Mama Masika shelter for rape victims and their families in Minova, DRC. The shelter has served over 7000 men, women and kids raped in the DRC conflict in the past 11 years. (right) A survivor sits with her child.



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THE NUMBERS THAT SHAME US ALL

While women and girls make up the majority of survivors, large numbers of men and boys are also affected. In our lifetimes, millions of women, children and men have been raped and sexually assaulted during conflicts.

Accessing data about the numbers of individuals affected is problematic because the crime goes largely unreported. It's difficult to know the exact figures, but estimates¹ suggest that:

- At least 200,000 women and girls have been raped in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since 1998. In the first half of 2013, 705 cases of sexual violence were reported in North Kivu province alone; the survivors included 288 children and 43 men
- In the former Yugoslavia, from 1992 to 1995, up to 60,000 people were raped
- The vast majority of the more than 100,000 estimated girl child soldiers in the world are subjected to sexual violence, many of them giving birth to children as a result
- Between 100,000 and 250,000 women and girls were raped during the three months of genocide in Rwanda in 1994
- Despite a gap in data about the numbers of men and boys affected, we do know that from DRC to Central America and from the Caucasus to Cambodia sexual violence against men and boys is common, just largely unreported

Experiences of rape and other forms of sexual violence are different, too. Girl soldiers are made to have sex with their commanders. Boys held in detention camps are sexually assaulted. Women and girls are raped by their neighbours and other community members and loving fathers are forced at gunpoint to rape their wives and daughters.

In the chaos of conflict, rapists and aggressors are not just soldiers. They can also be peacekeepers, doctors and teachers, family members, friends and neighbours. They can be almost anyone.

¹UN Background Information on Sexual Violence Used as a Tool of War; UN; 'Bosnia War Rapes Must Be Prosecuted', Washington Post, 26 November 2010; Sexual violence on the rise in DRC's North Kivu, UNHCR, Briefing Notes, 30 July 2013

The terror of sexual violence can be unimaginable, but the trauma associated with it doesn't have to be unbearable. Individuals who have suffered the most unthinkable sexual crimes can go on a journey from "victim" – feeling powerless and dehumanised – to "survivor" – strong and rebuilding their lives. Because we believe and hope that all victims, with the right support, can become survivors, we use the term survivor throughout this publication. To respect their privacy, the names of all of the individuals quoted have been changed.

By listening to the individual experiences of survivors – whether they are a forty-year-old woman, a nine-year-old girl, or a seventy-year-old man – and responding to their personal short-and long-term needs with specific treatment and care plans can enable survivors of sexual violence to rejoin their families and communities and live normal lives.

By sharing the stories of adults and children who have been affected by sexual violence, Journey of a Survivor considers some of the best ways to meet the needs of survivors on their journeys to recovery. It also looks at how – through prevention and protection strategies – sexual violence can be stopped from happening in the first place.

“Sexual violence in conflict... knows no gender or age limits. Men and boys have been victims... I have met survivors as young as six months and women as old as 70.” **Zainab Bangura, UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict.**

“I had gone to fetch water. Some men approached us. The young girls I was with ran away but I was unable to run. They pushed me down and raped me.” **68-year-old female war refugee in Ugandaⁱⁱ**

“He used to threaten to kill me. I didn't know what he was trying to do. He continued the act two more times.” **Tara, 11, who was raped by a 42-year-old family friend during a time of conflict in Nepal**

“Men were forced to have sexual intercourse in front of the other inmates. This caused them great physical and psychological pain.” **Sudbin Music, secretary of the war victim's association Prijedor 92 Union, on sexual violence in men's camps during the Bosnia and Kosovo wars**

ⁱⁱThe Refugee Law Project (2014) From the Frying Pan into the Fire: Psychosocial challenges faced by vulnerable refugee women and girls in Kampala.



A Burmese survivor of sexual violence.

VOICES OF FEAR

Since conflict began decades ago in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the country, especially the eastern region, has become synonymous with atrocious levels of sexual violence.

During one of the world's most catastrophic humanitarian crises, hundreds of thousands of childhoods have been defined by the physical and psychological trauma of rape and sexual violence conducted on an epic scale.

For women, men and children, the fear of rape is very real. For some that fear is of being raped for the second time, the tenth time, of being gang raped or of rape never stopping.

The voices of children on this page bring to life vividly the impact that this fear has had. It has destroyed childhoods. It threatens the very fabric of society in DRC.

They also illustrate why the prevention of sexual violence during conflict is so important and why the protection of women, children and men from sexual violence is needed more than ever before.

“Rebels were looking for wives to take into the forest. I heard gunshots and fled with my mother. We heard the rebels were coming there so we fled again. I was ahead of my mum and they killed her. On the journey two armed men raped me and I became pregnant. I went immediately to the health centre. I was alone and displaced for two weeks. After two weeks there, the rebels arrived again, so I left with my little brother to stay with friends and have my baby. Eight months later, I fled fighting between rebels and the army. On the road, two armed men raped me again. I am terrified of walking along the roads because I don't want to be raped for the fifth time.” **Mapendo, 16**

“Living in the camp for a girl is not good, because when you do not have anything to eat, you can easily become a prostitute. To buy food I go to collect firewood in the bush. It is not good because sometimes they chase us. Some of us are caught and raped or wounded.” **Mariam, 14**

“We are afraid of rape because it is not by one person – it can be more than ten people or by armed men who have taken drugs, and we are just little girls.”
Zabibu, 14

“I am always afraid since I was raped. Every time I hear a loud noise, like a plate dropping, it grabs my heart. I am always afraid.” **Laini, 14**

“I'm always scared. I'm scared my grandmother will die in the war and I'll have to look after my little sister, who may get raped.” **Sadiki, 16**

JOURNEYS OF RECOVERY: FROM VICTIM TO SURVIVOR

What happens to someone after they have been sexually attacked – in both the short-and long-term – can affect the rest of their lives. Immediately after an assault, it can quite literally mean the difference between life and death. In the longer term, it can affect their ability to move on and enjoy a happy, fulfilled and safe life.

Making these outcomes as positive as possible depends on recognising the survivor as an individual: seeing them as a woman or a girl, a man or a boy who has been raped; a child born of rape; or as someone forced to rape or watch as others are sexually abused. All survivors have different experiences and different needs.

By responding to experiences of sexual violence individually with intelligent compassion, their journeys to recovery can be supported with specific measures that make the road to recovery more likely.

After their experience of sexual violence, the journeys of many survivors follow four interlinked pathways or routes.

I: Getting immediate medical help

Sexual violence is inhumane. It can kill, maim and infect with life-threatening diseases. It can incapacitate, cause infertility or pregnancy and a lifetime of chronic pain.

If not treated quickly, the physical consequences of sexual violence can be devastating. Medical help needs to be found as soon as possible after an attack, but there can be barriers to doing this.

- Survivors may be unaware that medical help could save their lives or reduce future suffering
- Survivors may feel too ashamed to seek medical help or ask others to help them
- Survivors may fear that medical staff will mistreat them and pass their personal details on to their families and communities
- Medical services can be inaccessible – they may be dangerous to reach, too far away or not functioning properly

For survivors who do find medical assistance, care needs to take into account their gender and age. Women and men, boys and girls suffer the physical effects of sexual violence differently and need specialised treatment. They can be further supported by being offered privacy during examinations and treatments, and being treated by a health worker they feel comfortable with. Depending on the wishes of the survivor;

this could be a man or a woman, someone older or younger, or someone of the same religion

Once specialised medical help has been sourced, care needs to be sensitive and compassionate. As well as physical trauma and shock, individuals may feel ashamed about what has happened to them, and be fearful for their very survival.

Confidentiality is key in encouraging victims to seek help and feel safe while they receive treatment. Medical services need to guarantee that victims' details will not be passed onto the police, other agencies or community members without express permission.

Passing on information can put survivors at risk*, not just from ongoing violence by the perpetrator, but also from their family and community. Where stigma associated with sexual violence is especially strong, families and communities may reject the survivor, leaving them with no shelter or support, or decide that the survivor should be physically "punished" for bringing shame on them. Children born of rape and their mothers are especially vulnerable from community exclusion and violence, including infanticide.

**See pages 13-14 for information about protecting survivors from further assault.*

2: Getting long-term psychosocial support

Sexual violence often leaves behind physical scars which can fade in time. But the scars inside, the mental ones that can't be seen, are often the ones that hurt victims the most and are hardest to heal.

Psychological trauma after rape and other sexual attacks can last a lifetime, which is why psychological support must be there for as long as the survivor needs it, be it months, years or decades.

Some survivors may feel an overriding sense of shame or self-disgust that can destroy their self-esteem and confidence. Depression can damage relationships causing isolation and loneliness that can lead to self-harm and even suicide.

Without long-term psychological support, victims can live a life half lived, never reaching their potential. Which is why helping survivors learn how to come to terms with what has happened them, helping them to trust again and move forward is vital.

Just like medical help, emotional support needs to reflect the gender, age, faith and ability of the survivor. It needs to be personalised and meet the specific needs of what survivors feel work best for them.

For example, some survivors may prefer one-on-one counselling while others may

find sharing their experiences within a group setting with other survivors helps them feel less alone: to know that others have suffered and are recovering from sexual violence, too.

In Uganda, 150 men raped by soldiers as a form of subjugation have found support in a men's group, established by the Refugee Law Project, called Men of Hope. Sharing their experiences together, men in the group have found the strength to help beat the stigma of male rape and to actively lobby for better social services to support their physical and psychological recoveries.

“At night I am disturbed because I see things like snakes, cows and other animals. I am absent minded in class. Sometimes I walk aimlessly without knowing. I have tried to commit suicide.” **Stephanie, from central Africa, who has been raped by soldiers and a fellow refugee and had a baby conceived in rape by the age of 15, describes the effects her experiences have had on her mind.**ⁱⁱⁱ

“I have developed post-traumatic stress and have depression. I also have nightmares and intense feelings of shame and guilt. Even though my family have supported me, I distrust people and feel disconnected from my society. I have received various psychological and psychiatric treatments, but can no longer afford any more. I think the government should help with the costs of psychological support to demonstrate that sexual violence is a real war crime.” **Aferdita, 43, from Kosovo, who was systematically beaten and raped by soldiers at a rape camp during the war there.**^{iv}

“Although we are still struggling, we are hoping that something good will come. That is why we put the white flower on the forehead. Flowers smell so good, they are beautiful and so people love them. We want to be those flowers.” **Anonymous girl soldier, repeatedly raped over a period of years during the conflict in Uganda, describing why she had placed a flower on a mask created during a group therapy session.**

ⁱⁱⁱThe Refugee Law Project (2014) From the Frying Pan into the Fire: Psychosocial challenges faced by vulnerable refugee women and girls inKampala.

^{iv} Case Study provided by the Kosovo Rehabilitative Centre for Torture Victims (March 2014).

3: Getting the right kind of justice and legal support

For many survivors of sexual violence, seeing their attacker being convicted in court can help with their recovery. With successful prosecution, many survivors feel that once the offence against them has been officially recognised as a serious crime, there is a sense of closure to their ordeal, which enables them to move on with their lives.

Unfortunately, even during peacetime and more acutely during times of conflict, many courts do not deal with sexual violence seriously or effectively, often letting perpetrators walk away free. This may be a result of systems breaking down during conflict or reflect cultural norms that are already in place.

Just getting a case to court can be difficult. Survivors often feel that their case is not taken seriously by either the police or prosecution service. They are often kept out of the loop on progress with their case and find it a struggle to access information.

TAKING SEX CRIMES SERIOUSLY

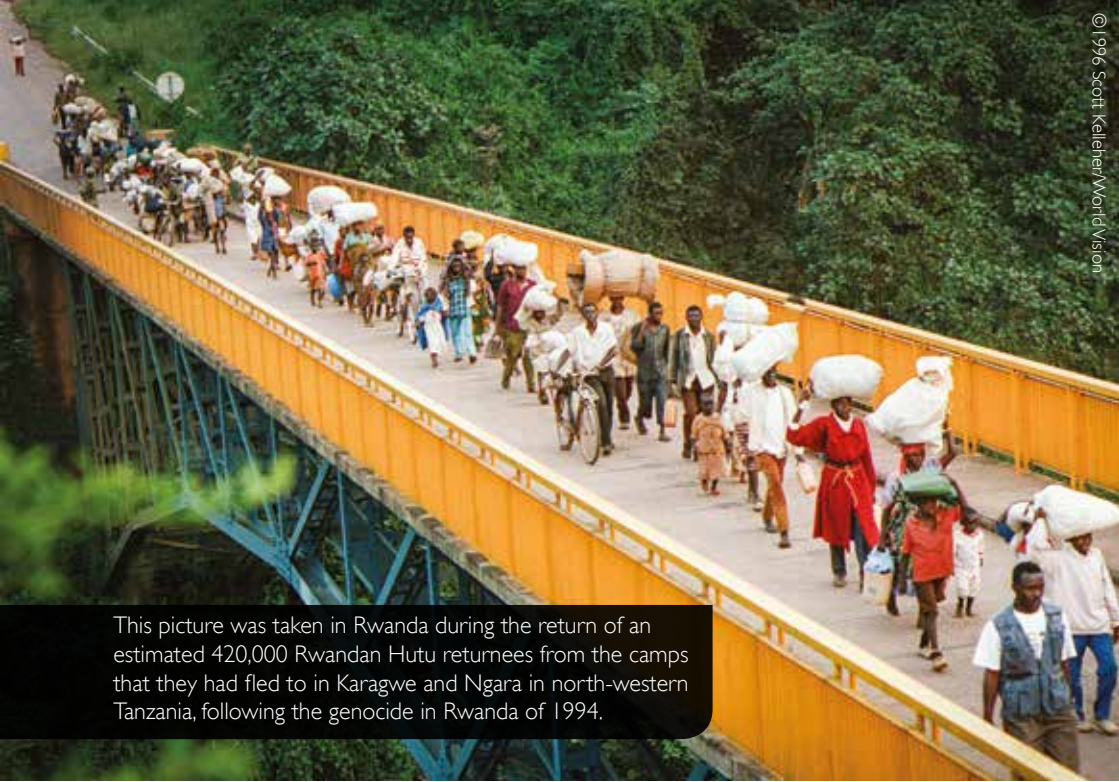
Acknowledging that survivors of sexual violence may have difficulties bringing their case to court, some countries, including Rwanda and East Timor, have developed specialised units within the police to improve responses. Staff are specifically trained to support women and girls who have been raped and assaulted, working with them sensitively and in their best interests.

Facing these issues may put off many survivors seeking justice against their attacker. The following protection issues can also deter victims from seeking prosecution:

- Lack of witness protection schemes: victims may fear their aggressor will try to physically harm them to stop them testifying
- Their case will be public knowledge and they may face being ostracised by their community because of the stigma associated with sexual violence. Their sexual past may also be made public and the victim made to feel like they are the one on trial
- Mistreatment by the police and other legal agencies.

Survivors will again need specialised and personalised support to overcome any obstacles to pursue justice through the legal system; children in particular need specialised support in a process they will find scary and intimidating. Of course, these barriers themselves need to be challenged in the long term by changing attitudes towards sexual violence and putting in new frameworks at government and local level to support new initiatives.

For some survivors, 'justice' may not first and foremost involve prosecution of the perpetrator. Even with support, some may decide that they do not want to be



This picture was taken in Rwanda during the return of an estimated 420,000 Rwandan Hutu returnees from the camps that they had fled to in Karagwe and Ngara in north-western Tanzania, following the genocide in Rwanda of 1994.

involved in a case in the formal courts - either because of lack of confidence in existing legal frameworks or their own personal views. They may or may not see community-level customary or traditional courts as a more viable alternative – although caution should be taken to ensure that these systems focus on justice for the survivor (rather than, as may be the case, ‘justice’ for a family that feels the perpetrator should compensate the family for the insult and shame brought by the rape).

In some countries like Bosnia, Sierra Leone and Rwanda the post-conflict transitional justice process embraces various measures to redress human rights abuses such as sexual violence. In addition to criminal prosecutions for war crimes, these may include truth commissions or reparations programmes. Transitional justice measures, whether within a country or through an international tribunal like the International Criminal Court, provide an opportunity for survivors to know the truth, see perpetrators punished, have their own innocence proclaimed, and receive reparations. Reparations may include, for example, compensation paid directly to the survivor; a public apology or official commemoration of all survivors in the country, rehabilitation or other support to survivors and children born of rape, or strengthening of laws and protection systems.

For some survivors, taking no action may be the right thing for them to do. The long-term needs of the survivor need to be put at the heart of decision-making. Crucially, survivors must be supported to decide for themselves what course of action to take, fully informed and without pressure.

“I would have wanted my abuser to face justice but I do not even know if he is dead or alive. Even if I sued him, I am already wounded and it can never take away what happened to me. I just choose to forgive him but I cannot forget what was done to me and how it affected my life.” Sarah, now 32, who was abducted and trained as a girl soldier while being repeatedly raped during conflict in Uganda

“Had our law and order been strong enough to provide appropriate punishment for the crime, the criminal wouldn't have escaped as easily as he did. I wish the country would make the law and order strong enough.” Grandmother whose 11-year-old granddaughter was raped during conflict in Nepal

“I realise that I have a responsibility to care and protect children in my village. I feel have to speak on behalf of them and raise awareness to create a safe environment for the children of my community.” Shova Rai, member of a village Child Protection Committee in east Nepal where cases of sexual violence are now reported to the authorities and acted upon, with many children seeing their attackers being prosecuted, helping them overcome their trauma



Angela from Watye Ki Gen (We Have Hope) in northern Uganda, documents the stigma faced by the children whose mothers are former child captives of the Lord Resistance Army. 'I want to judge and make sure justice is served,' says the 10 year old son of a survivor of sexual violence, who was abused after being kidnapped.

PROTECTION FROM SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Of course, a world without sexual violence is the ideal, but while it still happens, adopting measures that best protect women, girls, boys and men from being assaulted is as important as providing support to survivors.

Protecting the most vulnerable

In the chaos of conflict when protection mechanisms and safety nets are weakened, already vulnerable members of society, particularly women and children, become more vulnerable.

Those at greater risk include widows and female heads of households, child soldiers, orphans and children born of rape, as well as people already stigmatised because of sexual violence committed against them.

Also at risk are refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Without extensive lighting and extensive policing, many refugee and IDP camps, especially around their perimeters, can become hunting grounds for sexual predators. Collecting firewood and fetching water from outside of the camps or visiting distant latrines and communal washrooms puts women and girls at real risk of sexual violence.

Fear of sexual violence has made many families flee Syria, only to find that women and girls are still at risk from rape and assault where they settle. So great is the continued fear, that some parents feel it is safest for their young daughters to marry early – often with severe unintended consequences to their child's health and wellbeing.

Other refugee parents, who have left everything behind and struggle to make ends meet, may marry off their daughters early as a means of survival for the rest of the family. Unfortunately, these girls then suffer the psychological and physical impacts of forced sex and early pregnancy their bodies and minds are not ready for.

During times of conflict, adults and children may also find themselves “arrested” and placed in detention camps. These camps can pose significant risk of sexual violence, for children as well as adults. In Syria, for example, boys in detention camps are routinely raped and sexually tortured, often as a means to obtain information.⁹

However, there are effective measures that can be put in place to help reduce the risk of attack and help free women and children from the fear of rape and sexual violence.

- In refugee and internationally-displaced person (IDP) camps, child-friendly spaces are set up. These provide places where children can play safely and can learn ways to help protect themselves and other children from assault

⁹ UN (2013) Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council (A/67/845–S/2013/245), UN Children and Armed Conflict (2014) Information on Syrian Arab Republic.

- The infrastructure and planning of camps can take into account personal safety, as can the addition of more and better security patrols and lighting
- Establishing protection committees in communities can help identify children and women at risk, and put in place measures to provide them with greater support and protection. Each committee should develop its own protection policies specific to their community's needs in order to increase its effectiveness
- Activities that isolate women and children, making them more vulnerable to attack, can be reduced. For example, boreholes for water can be drilled closer to the community and providing fuel-efficient stoves can minimise trips to forests and fields to look for sticks and wood
- Existing formal protection frameworks and policies need to be strengthened to be made more effective and better serve the needs of women and children

Protecting survivors from further violence

All survivors of sexual violence must be protected from further assault – from the perpetrator who is being prosecuted and looking for revenge to “shamed” family and communities.

After an assault, risk awareness and risk reduction activities should be explored with survivors to help keep them safe. This may involve some survivors who are at risk from their families and communities being moved to new locations, where they will be helped with their housing and financial needs.

Survivors who would like to seek justice need to be made fully aware of the possible risks and be informed of any specific support, such as witness protection schemes, that is available to them.

“It is very hard to go outside because there are people watching. They follow you wherever you are going and then they kill you. Men do not go beyond the gate.”

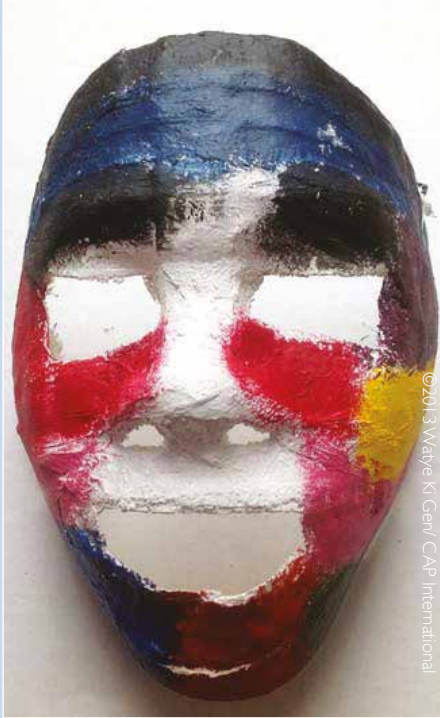
Wuor Khor, a 29-year-old man staying at a UN camp in Juba, South Sudan. As a consequence of men staying inside the camp, women and children fetch all the water and firewood from outside, putting them at greater risk of rape^{vi}

“Marrying Sheereen would be our survival. I spend my days sleeping or dwelling on our worries. I don't like my life anymore.” **Syrian refugee Amira, who fears having to arrange a marriage for her 12-year-old daughter Sheereen in order to better provide for her four other children**

“We are afraid to go to the bathroom and wash because children can't wash privately. We are afraid of sexual violence.” **Syrian father based in a refugee camp in Jordan^{vii}**

^{vi} Staziuso, J. (2013) Fear pulses through crowded South Sudan refugee camp. Associated Press available at: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/fear-pulses-through-crowded-s-sudan-refugee-camp>

^{vii} War Child (2013) Double Catastrophe:Voices From A War On Childhood



At the Watye Ki Gen centre in northern Uganda, masks are decorated during a counselling workshop for female returnees, previously abducted by the Lord Resistance Army. The masks symbolise their feelings about time spent in the bush, as well as their present situation.

One survivor's description of her mask: My mask has mostly dark colours and that is for my feelings. The black and dark blue are for the dark time I was in – it was a dark place. As you can see from that colour I experienced a lot of pain.

The yellow is for the present situation I am in – at least there is some improvement from that time.

But the other colours are for my hard condition that I still have. I came back infected with HIV/AIDS. I have four children from the bush.

I am trying to look after them but life is not easy because I am doing this on my own. I have put white on different parts of my mask to show that I am struggling in many different ways. But I am hoping.

Source: Watye Ki Gen & CAP International

4: Getting community support

As survivors begin to physically and psychologically recover they may want to rejoin their families and communities. However, many return home to find they are no longer welcome there. Because of the stigma and taboos surrounding sexual violence, survivors – women, men and children – can find themselves isolated and excluded.

The effects of this can be devastating. Children can miss out on schooling; women and men can be excluded from training and work. Both children and adults can find themselves homeless and facing poverty, possibly resorting to prostitution to earn money. Spouses can find their marriages are over. In the worst cases, girls and women can be the victims of honour killings.

When this happens, support needs to be tailored and put in place for the long term.

- Children excluded from school should be provided with education delivered by supportive teachers, be able to play with other children and learn the skills they will need to earn an income in the future

- Both women and men – especially women with children born of rape – may need financial support in order to find shelter and buy food. Training and new livelihoods can be provided to help victims move on to support themselves
- Children and adults may need additional psychological support to cope with rejection from family and friends and access to ongoing medical care when needed

Running parallel to this support, attitudes* towards survivors of rape and sexual violence need to change. Raised awareness, education and discussion among community members about the stigma of sexual violence can help them understand that what happens to survivors – women, men or children – is not their fault. Communities can and should take the lead on this process.

* See also pages 17-18 about changing attitudes towards traditional gender roles.

“I received \$50 with which I started a small business growing and selling maize. I was then given \$100 to invest in it. My business grew fast and I have been able to build my own house.” **Safi, 39, who was rejected by her husband after being raped during conflict in eastern DRC**

“My father rejected me and my children. I wanted to get married again, but men do not want us with our children. I later got married but my husband does not like my children. He segregates them and does not support them in any way. We are stigmatised. My children and I do not feel safe because in the community we are not loved.” **Margaret from northern Uganda describing how she was received after returning home with two children born of rape. Abducted as a 12 year-old, Margaret was raped for years by both soldiers and medical staff**

“My sister and I do not feel protected because we know that people hate us and do not want us in the community but we have nowhere else to go. We fear that they might harm us in any possible way. Our mothers should have been supported and empowered with skills or start-up capital to be able to generate income and look after us. Government should enact laws to protect us from stigmatization and let us to education.” **Peace, aged 17, a child born of rape during conflict**

“I would be grateful if someone could help me for a job. I want to continue my study in my own effort.” **Girl victim of rape during conflict in Nepal**

PREVENTING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Stopping sexual violence from happening in the first place is vital. Imagine a world where millions of women, girls, men and boys are no longer raped or otherwise sexually violated. A world where women and children no longer fear gang rape or being forcibly made pregnant. A world where men and boys no longer scream out in the night after having horrific nightmares about being sexually assaulted or being forced to rape others.

A world free of sexual violence in wartime and in peace is possible. The long-term solution to help put a stop to sexual violence is to bring about large-scale and long-term changes in attitudes towards the roles women and men should play in society and rectify the unequal status of women.

Education and community dialogue can help challenge the discriminatory attitudes towards women and girls that undermine their status, neglect their rights and sanction sexual violence against them. The roles of men can also be considered. Communities can ask themselves questions like: does a man being sexually assaulted make him less of a man; why can't men cry in public; and does striking or raping a woman really make him more of a man? They can help communities transform perceptions about what being a man or being a woman means.

Understanding that everyone, women, men and children, have human rights, including the right to not be raped or sexually assaulted during either peace or wartime can also come about through education and community debate. Religious leaders, the military, with police services, judges and legislators should work together with communities to advance this dialogue.

At an individual level, women, girls, boys and men, need to learn about their rights. And they need to learn how to stand up for their rights and expect support when these rights are violated.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT

Sexual violence is both prevalent and tolerated to varying extents in most societies most of the time, even in the most peaceful.

It's more that in times of conflict, when law and order breaks down, when families and communities are under terrific stress and less able to protect their most vulnerable members – be they men, women, girls or boys – that existing levels of sexual violence become magnified, with perpetrators, from soldiers to civilians, feeling more confident of getting away with their crimes.

As change comes about, governments need to be ready to introduce new initiatives with strong new legal, medical and social service frameworks that remove impunity for perpetrators of sexual violence, and, in places where rape and sexual violence against men have not been recognised as crimes, new laws and support mechanisms should be introduced.

“We need to ensure women know their rights and advocate for them. Girls are not always treated like boys, they don’t always have access to education like boys do, but we want to teach women and communities that girls have the same rights as boys.” **Mamie Lofembo, World Vision coordinator at Wamama Simameni, a women’s project in DRC**

“Our play educates people in the community about sexual and domestic violence. Since we started performing it last year, we have seen a reduction of 40% in this type of violence.” **Paul, youth participant in World Vision’s Children as Peacebuilders project.**

“The community together with the Community Child Protection Committees played a big role in ensuring that none of us is physically and sexually abused.” **Maria, South Sudan**



Of the 8 million people displaced by Syria’s war, more than half are children. They arrive in neighbouring countries with little more than the clothes on their backs and memories of friends and home.

CONCLUSION

The transition from victim to survivor of rape and sexual violence during times of conflict is a long and complex one. For each individual, the journey to recovery is different, which is how it needs to be.

Support for victims works best when it is tailored to meet their specific needs, be they a child born of rape, an abducted child or a grown woman or man. By listening to what survivors have to say and responding compassionately and with specialised support – be it medical, psychological or legal – it is possible for survivors to recover and live the life they choose.

Just read what Sarah has to say.

“ I was a young girl when I was taken by soldiers. They raped me for years. After I got away, I had counselling and psychosocial support from World Vision. After two months, even though I had two children born of rape, I was selected to go back to school. At school no one knew I was an abducted child, so I did not face stigma. I finished secondary education and went on to study A-levels. After this I went to university where I graduated with a Bachelors of Arts in Development Studies.

“I now work with an organisation that supports mothers and their children born of rape. I am very appreciative to my parents who accepted me back and were understanding and have accepted my children as their own. I am now married and have another child. I have put my past behind me and I am focusing on building my family and supporting my children to go to school so that we can have a better life as a family.”

There are more Sarahs out there. There are men and children too, who with long-term support and changing attitudes can recover and heal from the sexual violence inflicted on them. All of them can find hope for the future, but we need to start listening properly to what they have to say and we need to start listening now.

World Vision is the world's largest international children's charity, working to bring real hope to millions of children in the world's hardest places. We work alongside communities in close to 100 countries to bring about long-term change.

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