

Conflict-related sexual violence & humanitarian action

Summary report

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Chatham House Rule

Summary

*This KUNO session focused on conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and the need for survivor-centred humanitarian responses. The discussion showed how conflict-related sexual violence is increasingly used as a weapon of war, while humanitarian systems are simultaneously weakening. Speakers **Malala Mojwok** (National Coordinator, SUNS South Sudan & member of SEMA), **Hala Alkarib** (Director, Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA) Network), **Ruth Kauffman** (Médecins Sans Frontières), and **Apolline Pierson** (Voice Team Leader, Mukwege Foundation) talked about the severe barriers survivors face, including limited access to care. They also discussed funding cuts, particularly to gender-based violence programming. Ongoing challenges within humanitarian systems, such as inefficient referral mechanisms and insufficient long-term support, also undermine prevention and response to CRSV. Moderated by **Dominique Vidale-Plaza** (Director of Care and Country Programmes, Mukwege Foundation), the session emphasised the need for holistic, survivor-centred, and sustained interventions to address both the immediate and lasting harms experienced by survivors.*



Aisha, 35, has been displaced multiple times by the conflict in North Darfur.*

Survivor network (South Sudan)

The meeting started with an introduction of the Survivors Network of South Sudan (SUNS), which is a network representing 320 survivors of conflict-related sexual violence across South Sudan. The network has local groups across the country that facilitate access to medical and psychosocial support for survivors, conduct awareness-raising activities, and carry out advocacy to ensure survivors are heard. Through the survivor network, victims get the chance to participate in the transitional justice process and learn about their rights. In South Sudan, women often were not allowed to speak openly about rape

and sexual abuse, so SUNS brought community leaders together to inform them about these issues. The network also supports children born out of conflict-related sexual violence. The network also offers socioeconomic support, as survivors are often pushed out of their social networks and communities and need financial support to survive.

In every country, it is important to work with survivor networks because survivors do not want others speaking about their situation without them. In South Sudan, SUNS also contributes to providing statistics on conflict-related sexual violence and survivors.

Sexual violence as political violence

The work on protection and prevention in Sudan is shaped by the daily experiences of women across the region, including their efforts to push back against violence and imagine a better future despite everything they have lived through. Conflict-related sexual violence must be understood not as an isolated act, but as a violation of survivors and their communities, and therefore as a form of political violence and an instrument of power. Many of the existing response frameworks are inefficient because they are largely framed by Western institutions, while victims and affected communities are too often excluded from shaping prevention and response mechanisms. As a result, these approaches often fail to recognise the wider structures that sustain sexual violence, including colonial and post-colonial crises, resource extraction, land grabbing, heteropatriarchal legacies, and the role of the state in maintaining the conditions in which this violence takes place. Sexual violence remains in the background of political and economic discussions when it should be central, especially because sexual violence is often directly tied to the silencing of women, the stripping of communities' agency, and the punishment of those who resist repression, protest, or challenge exploitation.

Response limitations

The limitations of humanitarian intervention models are that they can be slow to respond and often overlook serious consequences, while broader support for women, girls and survivors remains severely under-resourced. Prevention and response efforts in Africa need to be analysed by looking more critically at the political economy of how knowledge on sexual violence is produced, why cycles of violence continue, and why sexual violence is still treated separately from wider humanitarian crises and political repression. When this happens, response efforts become foreign to local communities, who won't engage. By contrast, even small efforts to engage communities can lead to meaningful support for victims and stronger approaches to prevention. Existing inefficient methods often assume communities are unable to act, which strips them of agency, disconnects survivors from their support systems, and weakens collective memory, even though memory is essential for understanding sexual violence as a crime and building a demand for justice. Strategies informed by victims and their communities are important, including collective truth-telling, engagement with men, and forms of healing and justice that recognise that trauma and mental health affect not only individual survivors, but entire communities.

Sudan: a war on people

In Sudan, sexual violence is not separate from the conflict but a defining part of it - in Sudan, there is a war on people and on women's bodies, alongside other abuses such as induced famine. In places such as El Fasher and

ZamZam, sexual violence was systematic during periods of intensified conflict, with most survivors attacked while trying to flee and often by multiple armed men. Even where active fighting has decreased, such as in South Darfur, new survivors continue to come forward each month, many assaulted by armed actors while carrying out daily activities necessary for survival, such as searching for food. The humanitarian response remains highly inadequate, and typical care models can themselves create barriers, for example, when mandatory reporting requirements expose survivors to further risk or community backlash. The broader and deeper problem of impunity was stressed, as well as the political inaction of the international community, including the failure to hold governments accountable for contributing to violence through arms trade. With funding cuts in the aid sector increasingly affecting women and protection mechanisms, there is even a stronger need to direct resources where they are most needed and under the control of those who can actually respond, especially local actors.

MSF released a report detailing widespread sexual violence across Darfur, Sudan: [“There is something that I want to tell you: Surviving the sexual violence crisis in Darfur.”](#)

Survivor-centred approaches

A new practical guide (by the Mukwege Foundation) on applying a survivor-centred approach was introduced. While a survivor-centred approach is commonly used, there is still no shared understanding of what it means in practice or how to implement it consistently. A survivor-centred approach means placing survivors of sexual and gender-based violence at the heart of all actions by prioritising their rights, needs, and choices, and by supporting them in regaining agency after violence has stripped both individuals and communities of it. This includes involving survivors from the start in programme design, supporting their leadership in advocacy and awareness raising, and recognising that many survivors want to help ensure that what happened to them does not happen to others. Survivors are often already supporting one another, formally or informally, even if this is not always recognised or is sometimes seen as a risk by humanitarian actors. The role of organisations should be to provide resources and strengthen this work in ways that are safe and non-retraumatising. It can be difficult for survivors to break the silence, which is why building networks is so important. Networks allow survivors to support one another, find ways forward, and access existing service points. The Mukwege Foundation currently supports 16 survivor networks globally, including networks such as SEMA. They have witnessed that investing in survivor networks early on, even in the middle of conflict, is essential in helping survivors speak out and take part in justice and peace processes. The guide was created to help bridge the gap between recognition of the survivor-centred approach and its uneven implementation, and it provides practical information, core principles, and examples drawn from lessons learned.

Responding to sexual violence in the DRC

A participant made a highly valued contribution to the meeting, explaining a programme by Cordaid that is implemented in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to address sexual violence in a context marked by a long cycle of violence and weak health and justice systems. The project focuses on both response and prevention, with the aim of fighting impunity, strengthening community cohesion, and improving access to healthcare. It includes a one-stop centre approach, case management, essential medicines supply chain, and strengthening the health system. A psychosocial assistant leads the system by

identifying survivors' needs and referring them to the appropriate services. While this system already existed, the renewed crisis since 2025 has created major challenges, particularly in eastern DRC, where collaboration with government bodies is no longer possible, even as cases of sexual violence have quadrupled. By working with experts instead, the organisation can redistribute medical supplies between health centres, source elements of PEP kits separately, and adjust transport in the field. They also use an app and a data bank to link services and support future court cases.

Community engagement

Engaging communities is key in responding to and preventing CRSV, but when they are divided by war, it is challenging. Understanding CRSV as a crime that affects not only individuals but also communities can help collective understanding and strengthen local support systems.

Early awareness and inclusive dialogue are essential for improving prevention and response. Stigma, silence, and the isolation of survivors often deepen community divisions.

Programmes should also include parallel healing processes involving survivors, community members, and local and religious leaders. Often, this requires initially working with communities through truth-telling. Although this approach takes time, it helps rebuild trust and break cycles of violence. These community-based early warning systems can further support prevention efforts.

Further key recommendations given by the speakers for humanitarian INGOs and donors

- Strengthen survivor networks and view survivors as experts and not just beneficiaries
- On the ground, utilise existing survivor networks
- Tailor your programs to the needs of the survivors, and provide relevant training such as case management
- Survivors who are activists often do unpaid work. When they are invited to speak at a conference or meeting, make it a standard practice to provide them with a stipend or ask them what they need.
- Reconsider some of the reporting requirements; many survivor networks are grassroots and may need a different approach that aligns with their capacity.
- Donors must provide sustained, flexible and sustained funding and respond more rapidly. While recognising that continued impunity reflects a broader failure to protect civilians. The scale and pattern of CRSV show a profound global failure of the protection of civilians in all its forms.

Picture: MSF, Cindy Gonzalez