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Combating Conflict Related Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys: Challenges and Opportunities

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Summary

The Fieldwork Note provides reflections on the various challenges implicated in research and programming involving Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) against men and boys and highlights concrete recommendations to address these challenges in practice. The Note builds on research conducted by MEAC in Colombia with the Nasa Indigenous community of Northern Cauca,¹ as well as on interviews with 18 experts on the topic. These research projects evidenced that despite growing evidence of the existence and prevalence of CRSV against men and boys, the issue remains under-investigated, and this group is largely overlooked in programming initiatives.

As identified by practitioners and experts working in this field (in Colombian and beyond), the Note examines factors that contribute to the knowledge gap on CRSV against men and boys and the challenges faced when working with male survivors. Although some challenges may also arise in work involving female survivors, the primary focus of the Note is on male survivors, given the critical gap in research in this area. The Note adopts a broad definition of CRSV that encompasses multiple conflict settings (e.g., internal, and international armed conflicts, post-conflict environments, urban conflict, etc.), a range of sexual violence acts (e.g., rape, sexual torture, genital violence, etc.), and perpetrators (e.g., illegal armed groups, state security forces, etc.). It also considers how intersecting identity markers—such as sexual orientation, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status—shape the experiences of men and boys affected by CRSV. The Note highlights ways to address the challenges identified with assessing and addressing CRSV against men and boys. With proper contextualization, the recommendations presented in this Note may prove useful for international actors aiming to adopt more inclusive approaches and strengthen support for male survivors² in their own settings.

Following a brief introduction, the Note provides background on the topic, highlights key reflections on the challenges practitioners face when working with male survivors of CRSV, and offers concrete recommendations to address these challenges in practice, before concluding with a short summary.

¹ Ángela Aguirre, Ángela Gómez, Juanita Vélez, Sofía Rivas, Dr Siobhan O'Neil, 'Sexual Violence and the Struggle for Justice: The Involvement of Nasa Indigenous Survivors in Armed Groups in Northern Cauca', Findings Report 38, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024.

² This report employs the term "survivor" rather than "victim" of CRSV to emphasize resilience, strength, and empowerment, in contrast to the negative connotations and stigma often associated with the term "victim". However, it is important to note that many individuals—particularly in Latin American countries—may still prefer the term "victim" as it is legally recognized designation in many contexts.

Background

Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV)

The United Nations (UN) defines Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) as “rape, sexual slavery, and forced prostitution, directly or indirectly linked to a conflict. This violence can also include forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity, affecting women, men, girls, or boys”.³ Although women and girls are disproportionately affected by this form of violence, men and boys can also be victims.⁴ CRSV against men and boys has been documented in over 40 conflict contexts since the 1990s.⁵ Moreover, even though the UN’s definition does not mention them explicitly, non-binary and gender-diverse individuals may also experience sexual violence during conflict.⁶ While the majority of perpetrators of CRSV are men, evidence indicates that women have also been involved in committing such crimes.⁷ Broadly speaking, the nature, driving forces, and prevalence of CRSV may vary due to several factors, including the conflict environment, social and economic conditions, the political landscape, and cultural understandings of sexual violence itself.⁸

The literature suggests that CRSV is used by armed groups for different reasons. This form of violence is predominantly used as a strategy to terrorize and demobilize civilian populations, as well as to establish legitimacy and territorial control.⁹ Feminist scholars further argue that CRSV can also serve to reinforce and sustain unequal gender norms and inequalities.¹⁰ Perpetrators often use sexual violence to assert control and power, while aiming to humiliate victims and their communities. In patriarchal contexts, instances of CRSV against men and

³ [Handbook for United Nations Field Missions on Preventing and Responding to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence](#) (United Nations publication, 2020).

⁴ Chris Dolan, Maria Eriksson Baaz, and Maria Stern, “[What is sexual about conflict-related sexual violence? Stories from men and women survivors](#)”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 5 (September 2020), pp. 1151–1168

⁵ All Survivors Project (ASP), “[All Survivors Project submission to the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment: Thematic report on crimes of sexual torture](#)”, 23 April 2024.

⁶ Ligia Kiss and others, “[Male and LGBT survivors of sexual violence in conflict situations: A realist review of health interventions in low-and middle-income countries](#)”, *Conflict and Health*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (February 2020).

⁷ Independent Commission for Aid Act, “[Conflict-related sexual violence and sexual exploitation and abuse](#)”, 30 September 2020.

⁸ Sarah Solangon and Preeti Patel, “[Sexual violence against men in countries affected by armed conflict](#)”, *Conflict, Security & Development*, Vol. 12, No. 44 (September 2012), pp. 417–442; Heleen Touquet and Philipp Schulz, “[Male survivors of CRSV, masculinities, and peacebuilding](#)”, *Routledge Handbook of Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding* (Oxfordshire, United Kingdom, Routledge, 2025).

⁹ Paul Kirby, “[How is rape a weapon of war? Feminist International Relations, modes of critical explanation and the study of wartime sexual violence](#)”, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 19, No.4 (February 2012), pp. 797–821; Sara Meger, “[Toward a feminist political economy of wartime sexual violence: The case of the Democratic Republic of Congo](#)”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 17, No.3 (December 2014), pp. 416–434.

¹⁰ Sarah Solangon and Preeti Patel, “[Sexual violence against men in countries affected by armed conflict](#)”, *Conflict, Security & Development*, Vol. 12, No.4 (September 2013), pp. 417–442; Jelke Boesten, “[Of exceptions and continuities: Theory and methodology in research on conflict-related sexual violence](#)”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 19, No.4 (October 2017), pp. 506–519.

boys often aim to “feminize”¹¹ the male body, leading to a combination of physical, psychological, social, and economic consequences that impact survivors’ masculine status and legitimacy.¹² Sexual violence may also be used to punish perceived transgressions of gender or sexual norms, particularly targeting gay men or men perceived as insufficiently masculine.¹³ Furthermore, in addition to being used as a deliberate military strategy, CRSV may also occur when perpetrators take advantage of a breakdown in law and order during armed conflict to commit acts sexual violence for their own advantage and gratification.¹⁴ Class, race, ethnicity, and political affiliation can also intersect, with sexual violence deployed to weaken and marginalize men from specific groups.

All survivors of CRSV experience social, economic, physical, and/or psychological consequences,¹⁵ however, specific symptoms and responses to treatment may differ based on gender and other intersecting identities, including race, ethnicity, class, or sexual orientation.¹⁶ In the case of male survivors, physical consequences may include “anal fissures and fistulae, rectal bleeding, fecal and urine incontinence, groin pain, genital scarring, castration and swollen and painful testicles, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs)”.¹⁷ Mental health effects include “suicidal thoughts and attempts, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, auditory hallucinations, memory loss, and sleeping disorders”.¹⁸ Fear of stigma and social exclusion often discourages disclosure, further exacerbating emotional and psychological distress.¹⁹ Marginalization from families and communities, combined with the physical and psychological impacts of CRSV, can further undermine survivors’ economic stability and livelihood.²⁰

¹¹ Henri Myrtilinen and Philipp Schulz caution against the uncritical use of this concept, as it can inadvertently reinforce misogynistic, heteronormative, and homophobic discourses. When left unchallenged, it assumes that womanhood is inherently associated with weakness and inferiority, while manhood is equated with power and superiority. See: Henri Myrtilinen and Philipp Schulz, “[Broadening the scope but reasserting male privilege? Potential patriarchal pitfalls of inclusive approaches to gender-based violence](#)”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2023), pp. 393-413.

¹² Remi Kodamaya and Fukita Sato, “[Taking male victims seriously: Toward a deeper understanding of the interrelations between wartime sexual violence and patriarchy](#)”, *Hitotsubashi Journal of Social Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (January 2022), pp. 1–18.

¹³ All Survivors Project (ASP), “[The Health of Male and LGBT Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence](#)”, 2020.

¹⁴ Ela Stachow, “[Conflict-related sexual violence: A review](#)”, *BMJ Military Health*, Vol. 166, No. 3 (2020), pp. 183-187.

¹⁵ Ligia Kiss and others, “[Male and LGBT survivors of sexual violence in conflict situations: A realist review of health interventions in low-and middle-income countries](#)”, *Conflict and Health*, Vol. 14, No.1 (February 2020), p. 11.

¹⁶ All Survivors Project (ASP), “[Enhancing survivor-centered healthcare for male victims of CRSV in Colombia](#)”, September 2023.

¹⁷ Tosin Olaluwoye and others, “[Sexual violence against men in conflict and post-conflict settings: A qualitative research methodology](#)”, *American Journal of Men’s Health*, Vol. 16, No.2 (March 2022), pp. 1-10.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Eugene Kinyanda, “[War related sexual violence and it’s medical and psychological consequences in Kitgum, Northern Uganda: a cross-sectional study](#)”, *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (December 2010).

²⁰ All Survivors Project (ASP), “[Briefing on conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys prepared for Colombia’s Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition Commission](#)”, December 2020.

International Developments and Policy

Historically, international developments and policy on CRSV focused exclusively on women and girls, leaving male survivors largely overlooked. It is only in the 1990s, with the Rome Statute and the creation of the International Criminal Court, that gender mainstreaming efforts gradually expanded to include men and boys in CRSV discourse.²¹ For the first time, the Statute conceptualized CRSV in gender-neutral terms, acknowledging that these abuses occur against all individuals, regardless of sex or gender. Subsequently, Security Council Resolutions, such as the Resolution 2106 (2013)²² and Resolution 2467 (2019),²³ explicitly acknowledged men and boys as CRSV survivors, calling on Member States to protect and support them while ensuring accountability for these crimes.²⁴ Additionally, specific fora - such as the 2013 UN forum organized by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict (SRSG-SVC)²⁵ - have also called for deepening the global understanding of CRSV against men and boys.

Despite CRSV being framed in gender-neutral terms in international legal and policy documents, in practice, gender-based violence continues to be equated almost exclusively with women's experiences.²⁶ This reductionist view reinforces the stereotypical depiction of men exclusively as perpetrators and women as victims in times of conflict,²⁷ contributing to the systemic invisibility of male survivors and impeding the appropriate scaled and tailored prevention efforts and victim support.

In recent years, there has also been resistance to allocating greater attention and resources to male survivors of CRSV. Some feminist scholars and activists—who have fought for decades to bring attention to violence against women and girls—express concern that a focus on men and boys may divert already limited resources from female survivors, who remain disproportionately affected by CRSV.²⁸ While men and boys may constitute a smaller

²¹ All Survivors Project (ASP), "[Briefing on conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys prepared for Colombia's Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition Commission](#)", December 2020.

²² UN Security Council, "[Resolution 2106](#)", United Nations, 24 June 2013, SRES/2106.

²³ UN Security Council, "[Resolution 2467](#)", United Nations, 23 April 2019, S/RES/2467.

²⁴ Karen Engle, "[The Grip of Sexual Violence: Reading UN Security Council Resolutions on Human Security](#)", In *Rethinking Peacekeeping, Gender Equality and Collective Security*, edited by G. Heathcote & D. Otto, (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

²⁵ In 2013, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict (SRSG-SVC) hosted the first-ever UN forum dedicated to male survivors of CRSV. This historic gathering brought together international activists, researchers, academics, UN entities, and survivors to deepen the global understanding of CRSV against men and boys.

²⁶ Ellen Anna Philo Gorris, "[Invisible victims? Where are male victims of conflict-related sexual violence in international law and policy?](#)", *European Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (October 2015), pp. 412–42

²⁷ Sarah Solangon and Preeti Patel, "[Sexual violence against men in countries affected by armed conflict](#)", *Conflict, Security & Development*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (September 2012), pp. 417–442.

²⁸ Robert O'Mochain, "[Male directed sexual violence in conflict: A challenge for gender studies](#)", *Masculinities & Social Change*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (February 2018), pp. 1–23; Natalia Linos, "[Rethinking gender-based violence during war: Is violence against civilian men a problem worth addressing?](#)", *Social Science & Medicine*, Vol. 68, No. 8 (April 2009), 1548–1551.

proportion of CRSV survivors, this perspective implicitly creates hierarchies among victim categories, forcing male survivors to compete for recognition and support.²⁹ Such dynamics contribute to the continued marginalization of male victims in the international arena, limiting advocacy, funding, and programming for this group.³⁰ Ultimately, the lack of awareness and acknowledgement of male survivors generally hinders inclusive, comprehensive approaches to conflict prevention and peacebuilding

CRSV against men and boys remains an under-reported and under-investigated issue. This is due not only to the inherent difficulties of collecting information on sensitive issues in conflict settings but also to the unique challenges of documenting the experiences of this particularly vulnerable population. Yet, little is known about the specific challenges faced by researchers and practitioners working with this survivor population. Understanding these challenges is essential, as they not only shape the production of knowledge on CRSV against men and boys but also influence the development of adequate support mechanisms that contribute to survivors' access to justice, care, and long-term recovery.

Methodology

The insights presented in this Note are based on findings from multiple research projects and extensive desk research. Specifically, they draw from challenges identified by the MEAC team during a study on the linkages between sexual violence and armed group recruitment in the Nasa Indigenous community of Northern Cauca, Colombia.³¹ They are also informed by 18 online interviews conducted between June and August 2025 with various experts on the topic, including academics, researchers, practitioners, and humanitarian professionals.³² These research projects show that despite growing evidence of the existence and prevalence of CRSV against men and boys, the issue remains under-investigated and this group remains largely overlooked in programming initiatives. This Note therefore aims to highlight key challenges and offer practical suggestions for practitioners to adopt more inclusive approaches and strengthen support for male survivors.

While the original focus of the research was on Colombia - given that MEAC operates in this region - it also draws on insights from other conflict contexts, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda, Haiti, Sri Lanka, and Kosovo. Despite each conflict context having its own particularities and challenges, a common thread across all cases is the continued

²⁹ MEAC interview with an expert working with CRSV male survivors (June 2024-August 2025).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ángela Aguirre, Ángela Gómez, Juanita Vélez, Sofía Rivas, Dr Siobhan O'Neil, 'Sexual Violence and the Struggle for Justice: The Involvement of Nasa Indigenous Survivors in Armed Groups in Northern Cauca', Findings Report 38, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024.

³² To protect participants' anonymity, no identifying details about their profiles or organizations are disclosed.

struggle of researchers and practitioners with ethical, cultural, and financial barriers that hinder the development of effective assessments, programming, and policy initiatives on this issue.

Reflections

This section outlines the following challenges that contribute to the knowledge gap on – and thus the response to - CRSV against men and boys. While many of these challenges impede an effective response to CRSV against women and girls, the Note focuses on the particular challenges associated with identifying and supporting male survivors. The section offers concrete recommendations on how to practically address these various challenges. It is important to note that this guidance is not comprehensive as these recommendations would need to be adapted for different conflict contexts. Nevertheless, these recommendations may generally help practitioners seeking to reinforce their support for male CRSV survivors across different conflict settings.

Difficulties in Collecting Comprehensive Data

The under-reporting and under-investigation of CRSV against men and boys stem from a combination of conceptual, methodological, and epistemological challenges.³³ Researching sensitive topics such as sexual violence is inherently challenging, as it can be difficult to identify survivors that are willing to disclose their experiences, and there is a risk for those willing to participate in research that it could trigger distressing memories and emotions, exacerbating survivors' trauma associated with their experiences.³⁴ This is further complicated in conflict settings due to heightened stigma, insecurity, population displacement, weak institutions, and political instability.³⁵

There are also additional obstacles specific to male survivors. First, the lack of sustained international policy attention on CRSV against men and boys contributes to ongoing invisibility of victims. Deeply ingrained social norms surrounding masculinity deter men and boys from disclosing abuse and discourage governments from researching, acknowledging, or prioritizing their experiences.³⁶ Moreover, CRSV against men and boys is also frequently

³³ Heleen Touquet and Philipp Schulz, "[Male survivors of CRSV, masculinities, and peacebuilding](#)", In *Routledge Handbook of Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding* (Oxfordshire, United Kingdom, Routledge Handbooks, 2025).

³⁴ Nathan Ford and others, "[Ethics of conducting research in conflict settings](#)", *Conflict and Health*, Vol. 3, No.1 (July 2009), p. 7; Jonathan Goodhand, "[Research in conflict zones: Ethics and accountability](#)", *Accountability*, Vol. 8, No.8 (January 2000), pp. 12-14.

³⁵ Kate Cronin-Furman and Mili Lake, "[Ethics abroad: Fieldwork in fragile and violent contexts](#)", *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 51, Vol. 3 (April 2018), pp. 607–614; Carlo Koos, "[Sexual violence in armed conflicts: Research progress and remaining gaps](#)", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No.9 (May 2017), pp. 1935–1951.

³⁶ MEAC interviews with experts working with CRSV male survivors in Colombia (June 2024-August 2025).

framed exclusively as torture, restricting recognition of survivors and narrowing their access to necessary care and support.³⁷ Definitional and conceptual limitations are compounded by a lack of funding, capacity, and resources allocated to research and assessments on the topic.³⁸

Methodological shortcomings further reinforce under-reporting. Research instruments are often designed only to capture women's experiences, thus systematically underestimating the scale of CRSV against men and boys. Evidence suggests that when screening also explicitly asks men and boys about sexual violence, prevalence rates are significantly higher than previously assumed. For example, a 2010 survey in Eastern DRC found that when survey questions captured men's experiences, 23.6 per cent of respondents reported sexual violence, 64.5 per cent of which was linked to conflict.³⁹ Altogether, these factors hinder the availability and reliability of data on CRSV against men and boys, thus preventing an accurate understanding of the true scope and magnitude of this phenomenon.⁴⁰

Recommendations

A crucial step in raising awareness of CRSV against men and boys, and in improving support for survivors, is the collection of accurate and inclusive data. To this end,⁴¹

- Data collection instruments must be gender-sensitive, ensuring flexibility to accommodate the specific circumstances and needs of male survivors. Concretely, research and assessments must explicitly allow for disclosure of sexual violence by all genders, including those experiences of men and boys.
- Practitioners should adhere to research and sector best practices to ensure ethical data collection and collaborate with local stakeholders to ensure tools are culturally appropriate, respectful, and contextually relevant.⁴²
- Survivors should be meaningfully included in the design and implementation of initiatives to ensure that instruments and programs reflect their lived realities.
- Given the sensitivity of the topic, research and assessments must avoid re-traumatization. Engagement should be ethical, gradual, sensitive to survivors' healing

³⁷ Marysia Zalewski and others, [Sexual Violence Against Men in Global Politics](#) (London, Routledge, 2018).

³⁸ Sarah Chynoweth and others, ["Characteristics and impacts of sexual violence against men and boys in conflict and displacement: A multi-country exploratory study"](#), *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Vol. 37, No.9–10 (May 2022), pp. 7470–7501.

³⁹ Kristen Johnson and others, ["Association of Sexual Violence and Human Rights Violations With Physical and Mental Health in Territories of the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo"](#), *JAMA*, Vol. 304, No. 5, pp. 553–562.

⁴⁰ Heleen Touquet and Philipp Schulz, ["Male survivors of CRSV, masculinities, and peacebuilding"](#), In *Routledge Handbook of Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding* (Oxfordshire, United Kingdom, Routledge Handbooks, 2025).

⁴¹ MEAC interview with an expert working with CRSV male survivors (June 2024–August 2025).

⁴² A participatory approach encourages collaborative knowledge production, reduces hierarchical power dynamics, and minimizes harm and the potential for extractive practices.

journeys, and complemented by effective psychosocial support tailored to the needs of men and boys, who may process trauma and seek help differently than women.

- Research and assessment must avoid extractive practices. This may include regular follow-up visits or sharing findings with survivors and their communities to close the feedback loop.

Community Stigmatization and Marginalization

A key barrier that prevents male survivors from disclosing their experiences (and thus, efforts to quantify them) and accessing comprehensive support has to do with the stigma attached to sexual violence against men and boys. This stigma often leads to shame, social rejection, and isolation from survivors' families and communities.⁴³ While all survivors of CRSV may face stigmatization, men and boys experience specific forms shaped by homophobia and traditional ideals of masculinity.⁴⁴ These dynamics are fuelled by dominant narratives that associate victimhood exclusively to women, denying the prevalence of sexual violence against men and boys.⁴⁵ During conflict, armed groups further entrench heteronormative and militarized masculinities, leaving little space for alternative masculinities and punishing men who appear to transgress socially prescribed gender roles, including male survivors of CRSV.⁴⁶

Male survivors risk being labelled with traits stereotypically associated with women, such as weakness and vulnerability.⁴⁷ This labelling can lead to physical, psychosocial, social, and/or economic consequences that may strip them of their perceived masculinity, ultimately reducing their status and legitimacy within their communities.⁴⁸ In Uganda, for example, male survivors are often left by their wives as they are accused of having “turn into women” and deemed unfit to fulfil the role of head of the home and family.⁴⁹ Survivors may internalize this “feminization,”⁵⁰ profoundly affecting their self-perception, gender identity, and sexuality.

⁴³ Sara Meger, “[Toward a feminist political economy of wartime sexual violence: The case of the Democratic Republic of Congo](#)”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (August 2014), pp. 416–434.

⁴⁴ Heleen Touquet and Philipp Schulz, “[Male survivors of CRSV, masculinities, and peacebuilding](#)”, In *Routledge Handbook of Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding* (Oxfordshire, United Kingdom, Routledge Handbooks, 2025).

⁴⁵ MEAC interview with an expert working with CRSV male survivors (June 2024–August 2025).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Remi Kodamaya and Fukita Sato, “[Taking male victims seriously: Toward a deeper understanding of the interrelations between wartime sexual violence and patriarchy](#)”, *Hitotsubashi Journal of Social Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (January 2022), pp. 1–18.

⁴⁸ MEAC interview with an expert working with CRSV male survivors (June 2024–August 2025).

⁴⁹ Sara Meger, “[Toward a feminist political economy of wartime sexual violence: The case of the Democratic Republic of Congo](#)”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (August 2014), pp. 416–434.

⁵⁰ Henri Myrntinen and Philipp Schulz caution against the uncritical use of this concept, as it can inadvertently reinforce misogynistic, heteronormative, and homophobic discourses. See: Henri Myrntinen and Philipp Schulz, “[Broadening the scope but reasserting male privilege? Potential patriarchal pitfalls of inclusive approaches to gender-based violence](#)”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2023), pp. 393–413.

While the stigmatization of male survivors is commonplace, the nature and intensity of that stigma varies widely across contexts. Any strategy aiming to tackle stigma against male survivors of CRSV must therefore account for local nuances. For example, in countries where homosexuality is criminalized, male survivors may face heightened legal liability and marginalization, forcing many to remain silent.⁵¹ Stigma also differs depending on the type of abuse (e.g., rape, genital torture, forced nudity), the survivor's age or sexual orientation, and the identity of the perpetrator, among other determining factors.⁵²

This concern about stigma and fear can lead to reluctance to acknowledge their experience, something that is particularly strong among male survivors in many contexts.⁵³ This reluctance has a knock-on effect that undermines effective documentation of CRSV against men and boys. The invisibility of male survivors creates three interrelated challenges for policymakers and practitioners working in the field. First, there is a severe lack of data on male survivors of CRSV, which obscures the true scope of the problem and contributes to the idea that CRSV against men and boys is non-existent.⁵⁴ Second, since there is little data to substantiate the existence of CRSV against men and boys, very little attention, funds and resources are allocated to support this survivor population.⁵⁵ Even when there are services or programmes that could be used to support male survivors, their invisibility presents significant challenges in identifying and reaching this population, further contributing to their exclusion and marginalization.⁵⁶ Together, these challenges prevent practitioners from understanding survivors' needs, locating them, and providing appropriate care.⁵⁷

Recommendations

To address stigma, a cultural shift is needed to increase survivors' visibility, strengthen research and programming, and ultimately, to ensure better support. Concretely, it is key to:⁵⁸

- Raise awareness on the nature, scope, and unique impacts of CRSV against men and boys. Awareness raising should acknowledge the diversity of survivors, including men from LGBTQI+ and ethnic minority groups, such as Indigenous or Afro-Colombian

⁵¹ MEAC interview with an expert working with CRSV male survivors (June 2024-August 2025).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Heleen Touquet and Philipp Schulz, "[Male survivors of CRSV, masculinities, and peacebuilding](#)", In *Routledge Handbook of Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding* (Oxfordshire, United Kingdom, Routledge Handbooks, 2025).

⁵⁴ MEAC interview with an expert working with CRSV male survivors (June 2024-August 2025).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Rebecca Campbell and others, "[Training interviewers for research on sexual violence: A qualitative study of rape survivors' recommendations for interview practice](#)", *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 15, No. 5 (January 2009), pp.595–617.

⁵⁸ MEAC interview with an expert working with CRSV male survivors (June 2024-August 2025).

communities in Colombia. As highlighted by an interviewee, “acknowledging the problem is the first step in preventing and addressing it.”⁵⁹

- Dismantle harmful stereotypes that portray men only as perpetrators of CRSV in times of conflict as these prevent the collection of data on the issue and restrict survivors’ access to comprehensive support.
- Actively involve survivors, their families, and their communities in awareness raising campaigns to reduce stigma effectively.

Security Risks

Security challenges also contribute to the knowledge gap on CRSV against men and boys. While security concerns in conflict settings affect all survivors regardless of gender, male survivors can face unique risks that must be taken into account to ensure comprehensive and tailored support.

Security risks can vary greatly from context to context. Survivors in ongoing armed conflicts, such as Colombia, generally face greater risks than those in post-conflict settings like the former Yugoslavia.⁶⁰ In addition, in contexts where homosexuality is criminalized, as is the case in Uganda, disclosure of abuse can result in imprisonment, contributing greatly to survivors’ vulnerability.⁶¹ Many also experience overlapping forms of violence—including forced displacement, economic hardship, and community exclusion—which further complicates their security situation and poses additional challenges for protection.⁶²

The identity of perpetrators is another crucial factor. When perpetrators belong to state security forces like the police or military, or to armed groups with perceived links to the state, such as paramilitary groups, survivors may face pressure, intimidation, or threats to prevent disclosure. Disclosure is also fraught with risks in areas controlled by non-state armed groups, where reporting can be interpreted as collaboration with state authorities. In many conflict contexts, survivors must continue living alongside their perpetrators, risking retaliation if they speak out.⁶³ Overall, there is a lack of protection measures dedicated to male survivors, in part due to the widespread perception that this population does not require such protection and the subsequent underfunding of the issue. This leaves male survivors highly vulnerable and discourages them from seeking help or participating in research and programming, further contributing to the underreporting and marginalization of this population.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ MEAC interview with an expert working with CRSV male survivors (June 2024-August 2025).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Recommendations

Given these security challenges, experts working in the field must implement rigorous protection strategies that allow survivors to disclose their experiences and seek support safely.

Said strategies may include:⁶⁵

- Ensuring safe, voluntary, anonymized, and confidential consultations on available resources and reporting options, while offering follow up support to survivors while they navigate these services.
- Equipping survivors who choose to go public with concrete tools to safeguard themselves, including techniques on how to best handle communications, specific guidance on avoiding certain spaces and individuals, and referral contacts for additional support.
- Considering the security of survivors' families and social networks, as they may also face threats and reprisals as a result of the survivors going public.
- Regularly following-up on survivors' safety – even after the intervention in question has ended - is essential to ensuring lasting protection.

Barriers in Survivors' Access to Justice

Although international law formally recognizes all survivors of CRSV,⁶⁶ these commitments often fail to translate into domestic law and practice.⁶⁷ Deeply ingrained stigma around male victimization is often reflected in policies and institutions, preventing inclusive support and justice pathways.⁶⁸

According to participants, a significant barrier to justice is due to the absence of national legal frameworks recognizing male survivors. If there are limited pathways to justice for female survivors, the situation tends to be even worse for men and boys.⁶⁹ This is especially true in countries where homosexuality is criminalized and where male survivors of CRSV are neither legally nor publicly recognized. In such contexts, disclosure can expose male survivors to prosecution and imprisonment under laws targeting same-sex relations.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ MEAC interview with an expert working with CRSV male survivors (June 2024-August 2025).

⁶⁶ Karen Engle, "[The Grip of Sexual Violence: Reading UN Security Council Resolutions on Human Security](#)", In *Rethinking Peacekeeping, Gender Equality and Collective Security*, edited by G. Heathcote & D. Otto, (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁶⁷ MEAC interview with an expert working with CRSV male survivors (June 2024-August 2025).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

In other contexts, justice systems recognize only certain forms of CRSV against men and boys—such as rape—while excluding acts like sexual torture.⁷¹ This is problematic as those sexual acts that fall outside of those publicly recognized categories are often unaddressed by the criminal justice system, leaving many survivors without recognition or reparations.⁷² In the case of sexual torture occurring in detention centres, these violations tend to be categorized solely as “torture,” denying the sexual dimension of these crimes, and undermining both survivor recognition and healing.⁷³ This issue demands increased attention given how widespread these practices are in certain contexts, such as in Syria, Sri Lanka or Ukraine, “where thousands of men and boys detained by the state have been subjected to sexual violence”.⁷⁴ As highlighted by an interviewee, refugee survivors face additional barriers to justice, as they must navigate foreign legal systems in contexts where they lack legal status and protection.⁷⁵

Even in countries in which male survivors are publicly and legally recognized, such as Colombia, numerous barriers persist to accessing justice.⁷⁶ Deep-rooted stigma and shame surrounding male victimization continue to deter many survivors to come forward. For those who do come forward,⁷⁷ they often face denial, stigmatization, and re-victimization from legal professionals.⁷⁸ These systemic challenges foster a culture of impunity around these crimes and contribute to the invisibility of this survivor population.

Recommendations

To address these challenges, it is key to implement measures that allow survivors to access justice, hold perpetrators accountable, and ensure adequate reparations for these crimes. Specifically, it is key to ensure:⁷⁹

⁷¹ Marysia Zalewski and others, *Sexual Violence Against Men in Global Politics* (London, Routledge, 2018).

⁷² MEAC interview with an expert working with CRSV male survivors (June 2024-August 2025).

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ All Survivors Project (ASP), “[All Survivors Project submission to the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment: Thematic report on crimes of sexual torture](#)”, 23 April 2024.

⁷⁵ Sarah K. Chynoweth and others, “[Characteristics and impacts of sexual violence against men and boys in conflict and displacement: A multi-country exploratory study](#)”, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Vol. 37, No.9–10 (2020), pp. 7470–7501.

⁷⁶ CRSV against men has been documented across all parties in the Colombian conflict, including guerrilla groups, paramilitaries, and state forces. The 2016 Peace Agreement between the Colombian Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) marked a milestone for the formal recognition of CRSV survivors, including men and LGBTQI+ individuals. Nevertheless, implementation has faced persistent challenges and security conditions remain volatile in much of the country. Colombia thus illustrates how, even in contexts where male survivors of CRSV have gained legal and public recognition, significant gaps remain in data collection, service provision, and sustained support for this population.

⁷⁷ Heleen Touquet and Philipp Schulz, “[Male survivors of CRSV, masculinities, and peacebuilding](#)”, In *Routledge Handbook of Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding* (Oxfordshire, United Kingdom, Routledge Handbooks, 2025)

⁷⁸ MEAC interview with an expert working with CRSV male survivors (June 2024-August 2025).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

- Sustained advocacy so that national laws and policies align with international standards that recognize all survivors of CRSV, including men and boys.
- A commitment to fight against anti-homosexuality laws, which in addition to promoting harmful narratives and violent behaviours, often directly prevent the legal recognition of male CRSV survivors and may even lead to their criminalization.
- Maintaining strict confidentiality and protection throughout the legal processes as fear of exposure remains a major barrier to seeking help.
- Increase awareness of available legal services, both among survivors themselves and among practitioners, researchers, and aid workers who engage with them.⁸⁰

Barriers in Survivors' Access to Medical and Psychosocial Support

The absence of adequate medical and psychosocial services for CRSV survivors, particularly for men and boys, impedes their access to essential sexual, reproductive, mental health and psychosocial care.⁸¹ Existing services are rarely gender-sensitive and are typically designed exclusively for women and girls.⁸² This gap in services not only leaves survivors unsupported but also obscures the true magnitude of the problem as there are few channels for male survivors to come forward.⁸³

Even where services for male survivors exist, the survivors are often unaware of their existence or consciously prefer not to access them.⁸⁴ As explained by an interviewee, existing services can be promoted in ways that discourage male survivors from seeking support. Advertising them explicitly as “services for male survivors of CRSV” risks deterring men from seeking help, as survivors may fear being identified, stigmatized within their communities, perceived as LGBTQI+, or may not even recognize themselves as survivors due to widespread misinformation and denial of the issue.⁸⁵ In other cases, the only tailored services available are located in large cities or private clinics, making them physically and financially inaccessible to most survivors.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ All Survivors Project (ASP), “[Enhancing Survivor-Centred Healthcare for Male Victims of Conflict Related Sexual Violence in Colombia](#)”, 19 September 2023.

⁸¹ MEAC interview with an expert working with CRSV male survivors (June 2024-August 2025).

⁸² All Survivors Project, “[The Health of Male and LGBT Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence](#)”, 2020.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ MEAC interview with an expert working with CRSV male survivors (June 2024-August 2025).

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

According to interviewees, when male survivors seek medical support, experiences with medical providers are frequently described as having been negative. In certain contexts, health professionals lack the knowledge and technical skills to engage ethically and sensitively with this population.⁸⁷ In practice, doctors and medical staff frequently fail to ask appropriate questions during consultations, lack the capacity to identify symptoms associated with male CRSV survivors, and may ultimately provide inadequate or inappropriate treatment. In addition, male survivors are often shamed and stigmatized by service providers who make homophobic assumptions, presuming that male survivors must be gay. Such assumptions can have devastating consequences in countries where homosexuality is criminalized, as service providers may be legally required to report survivors to authorities, resulting in arrests and imprisonment. In other cases, providers simply deny that such abuses could have occurred, blocking survivors from recognition and comprehensive care.⁸⁸ Overall, these barriers, coupled with the re-victimization and victim-blaming within these systems, discourage survivors from seeking care, reporting crimes against them, and reinforce survivors' marginalization.

Recommendations

To improve the quality and appropriateness of medical and psychosocial support to male CRSV survivors, it is key to:⁸⁹

- Ensure that services are trauma-informed, gender-sensitive, and LGBTQI+ inclusive.
- Provide accessible, anonymous, confidential, and safe healthcare support for all survivors of CRSV.
- Generate non-stigmatizing awareness campaigns and knowledge-sharing to ensure that survivors know such services exist and feel able to use them.

Lack of Expertise and Training

As highlighted above, the lack of specialized training and expertise among professionals (e.g., medical staff, legal experts, etc.) working with male survivors of CRSV represents a significant challenge to redressing the crimes against them and the physical and mental scars they may have left. Interviewees noted that most existing training programs focus almost exclusively on supporting women and girls, leaving professionals with little experience, knowledge, or practical skills to engage ethically and sensitively with men and boys.⁹⁰ The absence of trainings dedicated to engaging with male survivors specifically is due to the historical invisibility of this survivor population, coupled with the under-investigation and underfunding of

⁸⁷ MEAC interview with an expert working with CRSV male survivors (June 2024-August 2025).

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

this issue. This gap is concerning given the sensitive nature of the topic, the complexity of working in conflict settings, and the fact that survivors' needs vary significantly depending on sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other intersecting identities. One participant explained, as a result of the lack of specialized training, "myths and stereotypes are often reproduced, which also aggravate the impacts, and therefore this harms those... men who come forward".⁹¹

Recommendations

Strengthening training programs tailored to this survivor population is essential to foster a more inclusive, comprehensive, and non-stigmatizing approach.⁹² While the content may differ depending on the audience—researchers, practitioners, legal professionals, or healthcare workers—all bespoke training for practitioners on CRSV against men and boys should:⁹³

- Cover local context—cultural norms, social structures, gender roles, and conflict dynamics—to ensure that responses are ethical and culturally sensitive.
- Teach practitioners how to ask appropriate, non-judgmental questions that avoid shaming, re-traumatization, or victim-blaming.
- Help them identify sexual violence even in cases where male survivors may deny or minimize their experiences, or where the abuse is not immediately evident (e.g., sexual torture).⁹⁴
- Enhances familiarity with available referral pathways to connect survivors with necessary specialist medical and mental health support.

Mental Health and Emotional Distress

From a researcher or practitioner's perspective, working in this field often comes with significant emotional toll which can impact the collection of comprehensive data on the issue and the provision of quality of care to survivors if not adequately addressed. Repeated exposure to survivors' traumatic experiences—combined with the challenges of working within unstable conflict environments—can give rise to profound feelings of fear, anger, grief, and helplessness.⁹⁵ Although this psychological burden is not specific to working with male survivors, interviewees highlighted unique challenges involved in this line of work. One interviewee described how frustrating it can be to work with CRSV male survivors, given the widespread impunity surrounding their cases and the nearly total absence of support available

⁹¹ MEAC interview with an expert working with CRSV male survivors (June 2024-August 2025).

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Rachel Jewkes and others, "[Ethical and methodological issues in conducting research on gender-based violence in Southern Africa](#)", *Reproductive Health Matters*, Vol. 8, No.15 (May 2000), pp. 93–103.

to them in certain regions.⁹⁶ As one interviewee explained: “it is hard to see so many injustices and accept that a lot of cases will never get solved”.⁹⁷

Researchers and practitioners can also face criticism and stigmatization for dedicating resources to male survivors, as there is a perception that doing so diverts attention, funding, and services from women—who, statistically, are more frequently affected by this violence.⁹⁸ This tension, coupled with scarce resources, heightens the emotional burden of the work and contributes to high rates of burnout.⁹⁹ In some homophobic contexts, supporting male survivors may even expose professionals to direct security risks, including threats, forced relocation, or abandoning initiatives altogether—all of which further impact their mental health.¹⁰⁰

Despite these various challenges, the well-being of experts is rarely recognized, and the absence of measures to address their emotional distress is often overlooked in standard ethical guidelines for research and programming.¹⁰¹ This lack of support for practitioners is problematic, as their emotional well-being can directly impact their willingness to continue investigating CRSV and the quality of their work.

Recommendations

Interviewees highlighted several strategies to protect the mental health and wellbeing of experts working in the field and thus, to ensure the continuity and quality of efforts targeted towards all survivors of CRSV, including men and boys.¹⁰²

- It is key to raise awareness about the psychological demands of this work and adopt specific psychosocial strategies to support these professionals.
- One interviewee suggested requiring grant applications for research or programming in this area to include funding for staff psychosocial support.
- Providing an array of support options that practitioners can avail themselves of if they want to – whether individual counselling and peer support groups (in-person or online) - were highlighted as valuable spaces for sharing experiences and strengthening resilience.

⁹⁶ MEAC interview with an expert working with CRSV male survivors (June 2024-August 2025).

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Heleen Touquet and Philipp Schulz, “[Male survivors of CRSV, masculinities, and peacebuilding](#)”, In *Routledge Handbook of Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding* (Oxfordshire, United Kingdom, Routledge Handbooks, 2025)

⁹⁹ MEAC interview with an expert working with CRSV male survivors (June 2024-August 2025).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Rachel Jewkes and others, “[Ethical and methodological issues in conducting research on gender-based violence in Southern Africa](#)”, *Reproductive Health Matters*, Vol. 8, No.15 (May 2000), pp. 93–103.

¹⁰² MEAC interview with an expert working with CRSV male survivors (June 2024-August 2025).

Conclusion

This Fieldwork Note examines factors that contribute to the knowledge gap on CRSV against men and boys and the challenges faced when working with male survivors of CRSV across different conflict contexts. It also offers concrete recommendations to help navigate these challenges in practice. The recommendations provided herein were gathered from practitioners working in this field and they aim to increase visibility and outcomes for male survivors, who remain largely excluded from international and national policy debates, research, and programming initiatives on CRSV. Keep in mind that the recommendations may require adaptation to different conflict settings, and further bespoke, context-specific research and assessment is needed to develop locally specific, ethical, and effective approaches to supporting male (as well as female) survivors. Continued refinement of guidelines, alongside increased funding and institutional support is essential to enable researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to respond meaningfully to this often-overlooked population and to ensure their inclusion in peacebuilding and conflict prevention efforts.



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