

SUMMARY REPORT

# No Shame in Justice

Addressing stigma against survivors  
to end sexual violence in conflict zones

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# Stigma: a barrier to recovery and ending impunity – an introduction

Sexual violence in conflict destroys lives and does not discriminate. Women, men, girls and boys can all be survivors.

Nor does the violence end when the sound of gunfire stops. The legacy of war can be one of insecurity and lawlessness; leaving communities ever more vulnerable to crimes that take place in the shadows. Perpetrators are as likely to be civilians as they are combatants.

Such harrowing violence is a global issue; with a high number of incidents reported in recent conflict zones such as Afghanistan, Syria and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). According to one United Nations (UN) estimate, between 200,000-400,000 women and girls have been raped in the DRC alone since 1998<sup>i</sup>.

Under-reporting of such crimes is rife. The stigma survivors face from within their own communities hinders recovery and is the main reason they decide to remain silent. Until stigma is addressed, survivors can never fully move on with their lives. It also encourages impunity as it deters survivors from coming forward to bring the perpetrators of sexual violence to justice.

## Stigmatised for somebody else's crime

The word stigma is an ancient Greek term for a mark that was cut or burnt into the skin of criminals, slaves or traitors; a mark that would identify them as 'immoral' to the wider community.

Whilst sexual violence survivors may not be physically branded in the 21st century, their new position as 'other' in society is often far more painful. From being ostracised by their own family to becoming a social and economic outcast within the local community, the impact on a survivor's life can be as catastrophic as the attack itself.

## The cost-benefit analysis – the impact of stigma on justice

For many survivors, the heavy social, psychological and economic costs of reporting a sexually violent crime far outweigh the benefits of seeing their attacker brought to justice. Add to this a distinct lack of confidence in the police and judiciary, and a survivor's internal cost-benefit analysis has only one conclusion – 'I will remain silent.' However, in remaining silent, recovery is made impossible.

Increasingly, policy-makers have made prosecuting perpetrators a priority. Whilst bringing an end to impunity is essential, reporting a crime should change a survivor's life for the better; not for the worse.

This report highlights why policy-makers need to see the process of reporting sexual violence through the eyes of a survivor (their cost-benefit analysis) and must prioritise breaking down the stigma and gender inequalities which prove to be the biggest barriers to seeking justice – and perpetrators going unpunished.

## Millions of children abused across the globe

Estimates suggest that nearly 30 million children living in conflict-torn countries have been or will be sexually abused before their 18th birthday<sup>ii</sup>. Sadly, even this estimate is likely to be a conservative one. Whilst data-gathering by researchers and policy-makers increasingly acknowledges that children account for a significant proportion of the total number; previously published figures relating to sexual violence systematically failed to distinguish between adult females and those aged under 18.

Child survivors, like adults, inevitably face stigma. The stigma placed upon them is highly destructive and can bring young lives to a standstill before they have even fully begun.

## The 'invisible' male survivors

The majority of sexual violence survivors are female but assaults on men and boys are far from rare. Despite this, males are even less likely to report the crimes committed against them because of the stigma they will undoubtedly face. Deep-seated taboos around homosexuality frequently make identification as a survivor unthinkable. Shockingly, 63 countries worldwide recognise only females as victims of rape<sup>10</sup>.

## Children born of rape

The specialist needs of children born of rape, believed to total more than 100,000, also commonly go unrecognised. Indeed, the stigma attached to their conception leaves life-long effects on these children, with many abandoned or viewed with suspicion or hostility by the communities to which they 'return.' It is both telling and heart-breaking that those conceived of rape during the Rwandan genocide of 1994 are known both to their mothers and wider community as 'children of bad memories.'



Pictured left: 14 year-old rape victim with her newborn baby at a hospital, Goma, DRC. World Vision has given medical supplies to the hospital and supports shelter, counseling, and skill training programmes for women and girls who are victims of sexual violence.

# Stigma

Post-traumatic stress disorder, severe depression, crippling anxiety and deep shame can all be suffered by survivors of conflict-related sexual violence and many contemplate suicide. In addition to the psychological scars and their physical wounds, survivors must endure the relentless stigma their families and communities – and even the survivors themselves – may attach to the sexual crimes they have suffered.

## What is stigma and what is its impact on survivors?

Victim-blaming, spousal abandonment, isolation, physical abuse, exclusion from public life and economic security all arise as a result of stigma. Worst case scenarios include acid attacks, imprisonment for adultery or even being raped again by authorities as ‘punishment’.

Yet, despite the stigmatisation of sexual violence survivors being a global phenomenon and one which is largely responsible for under-reporting of attacks, it has until recently been absent from policy debates.

## Different types of stigma

### Self-imposed stigma

This is the guilt and shame that survivors place upon themselves. In 2011, for example, research by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative revealed that one in ten females in the DRC (where civil wars and unrest have raged since 1996) believed that their being raped was a punishment from God<sup>iv</sup>.

### Familial stigma

Some societies believe it is impossible for rape to lead to conception. Often, women and girls who conceive as a result of an attack are not believed by their families. Juvenile mothers of children born through rape lose their ‘child status’ and the parental support that goes with it. The husbands of female survivors face pressure from friends and family to leave their wives whilst children who saw their mother being raped may later blame her for not stopping the attack.

Tragically, some families make a calculated economic decision to ostracise a survivor who, unable to work post-trauma and in need of costly therapies or drugs, becomes too big a financial burden.

### Community stigma

This form of stigma is connected to deep-rooted societal and cultural beliefs. It mainly relates to the victim-blaming of female survivors; ‘she was dressed inappropriately’ or is guilty of marital infidelity. In communities where sex before marriage is reviled, female victims of rape are seen as no longer marriageable and pre-existing engagements are broken off. Mothers of children born of rape may be forced to marry any man willing to accept them, leaving them vulnerable to even further abuse.



Additionally, the breakdown of family networks and loss of fathers and brothers in conflict mean girls often find themselves cast in new community roles; looking after other children or having to go out to work. This societal shift increases their vulnerability, and they can face a stigma-laden backlash from locals for failure to conform to their traditional roles.

### Stigma by association

The fear of contracting HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) from survivors is another reason why communities shun them and reassurances that they pose no threat are largely ignored. Girls in one community explained: "Some teachers will say to students, "you see that girl... she has this problem (she has been raped) ... you should not talk to her or you will get sick."

### Stigma has no age restriction

Stigma is as cruel to children as it is to adults and darkens what could be bright futures for young victims across the globe. Often young survivors are ostracised at school, the fear being they may 'taint' other pupils. A child born of rape can be similarly shunned. Teachers and classmates fear them, worried they have inherited their father's violent nature (particularly adolescent boys), and locals often perceive them as 'evil' and likely to cause trouble.

### 'Children of bad memories'

Indeed, the stigma felt by mothers of children born of rape is immense and the reason why so many of these babies are abandoned. Figures for these are inevitably vague, but it is thought that the number could, today, total more than 100,000. These children are amongst the most hidden, and yet vulnerable to stigma. Whilst the violence itself was not perpetrated against them, the stigma attached to their conception reverberates throughout their lives and, as such, they need specialist resources and care.

A mother who keeps her child may be viewed by her community as 'siding with the enemy' and returning home with a constant reminder of war. A child born of rape, who does not appear to hold any hostility toward his/her father, is held in high suspicion. Boys in particular, faced with community-based stigma on their mother's side, may return to their father's family. But in some cases, paternal relatives are equally mistrusting and unaccepting of the child. It is both telling and heart-breaking that those conceived through rape during the Rwandan genocide of 1994 are known to both their mothers and wider community as 'children of bad memories.'

The shadow cast by rape is a long one. Many young people born of rape give up on education and try to find work, but prospects are limited. Their futures, without the right interventions, are bleak.

### Male-specific stigma

It is not only domestic laws (which fail to recognise male victims) that stop men reporting sexual crimes, stigma plays a fundamental role too. And although its impact on male victims is not well documented, stigma nevertheless devastates their lives. In many societies, men and boys sexually assaulted by other males are considered to have lost their masculinity, and homosexuality is an enormous, engrained taboo.

In a study of male survivors in the DRC, both shame and fear of running into their attackers forced many to give up work. A male small business owner, for example, may find that locals no longer want to buy goods from him. In communities where men are 'breadwinners,' male survivors can find that they lose their customary role in society - just as counterpart female survivors are rendered incapable of being 'mothers/caregivers' by society - as a result of stigmatisation.

Whilst some men do seek treatment for physical injury (rupture of rectum, abscesses, STIs and incontinence) under the guise of 'everyday' health issues (for example, haemorrhoids), the psychological damage, a direct result of stigma, remains an open wound indefinitely.

### Forever tainted

Stigma has no regard for age or for gender. Until it is challenged head-on, few can escape it. Worse still, the stigma attached to survivors has a great propensity to snowball. Those who find that they are no longer marriageable or employable are likely to descend into poverty and become forced to live on hand outs, which itself only causes further stigmatisation.

# Sexual violence: the everyday reality of conflict – a background

Conflict-related sexual violence is committed by armed forces, government officials, police, civilians and humanitarian personnel. Attacks take place in the home, on the street, at checkpoints, in detention centres and even in places of supposed refuge, such as community centres or places of worship. This life-shattering violence takes many forms, including rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, castration, genital mutilation and deliberate infection with HIV/AIDS.

When the gunfire ceases and tenuous peace agreements are played out, the attacks continue as communities struggle to re-establish a lawful normality destroyed by war.

## *“Rape is cheaper than bullets” – sexual violence as a weapon of war*

Sexual violence in armed conflict is prolific but dehumanising the enemy in this way is by no means a contemporary weapon of war. Such devastating tactics can be traced back to war-torn ancient Persia and Egypt. The motive behind the violence is rarely sexual gratification. Perpetrators use sexual force to clear populations, punish or humiliate the enemy, or even to dilute the bloodline of a specific ethnic group.

These violent crimes are not restricted to conflicts involving non-professional forces in war zones where chaos rules. For members of professional armies with degradation in mind, sexual violence can be the method of choice as reports relating to tactics used by personnel from the USA's Central Intelligence Agency in the detention camp in Guantanamo Bay bear witness. Sexual violence in detention settings is rarely recorded because the mostly male victims, if they choose to seek justice at all, will testify to abuse and torture, but not rape.

## Opportunistic attacks away from the battlefield

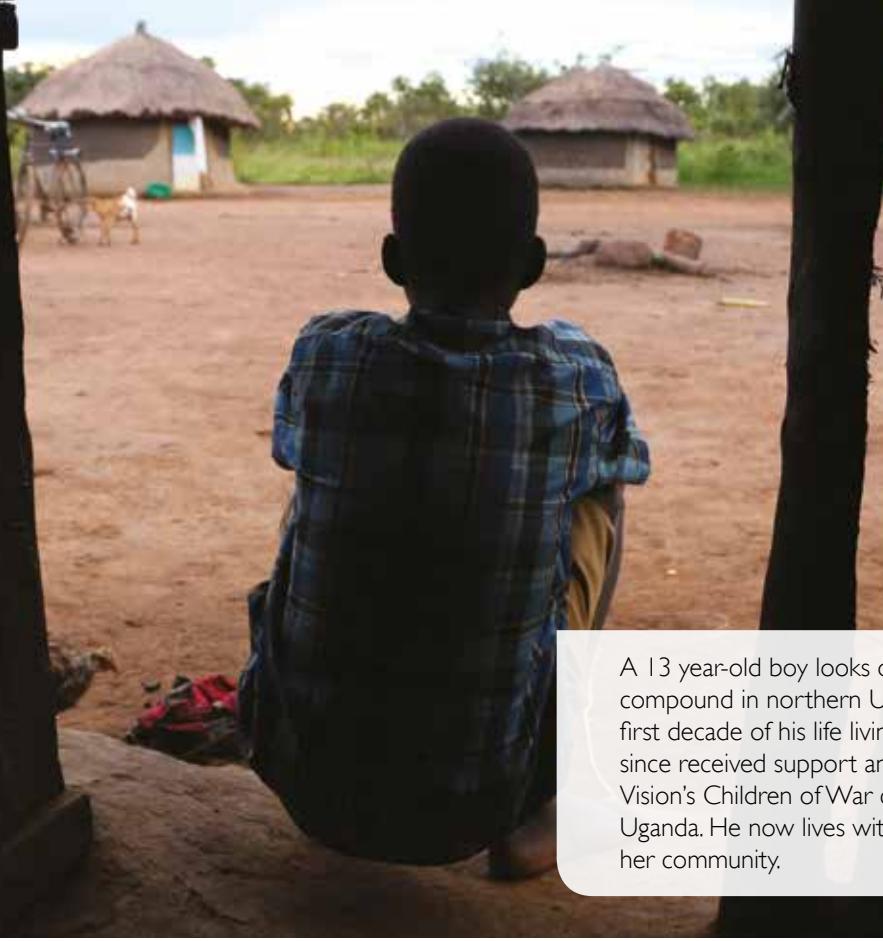
Most conflict-related sexual violence is perpetrated away from the battlefield by civilians known to the victims. A study of 440 child survivors in the DRC revealed that 74 per cent of attackers were known to the family and 81 per cent were civilians<sup>v</sup>. This is often because of pre-existing high levels of domestic and sexual violence during peacetime. And, as social structures crumble, law and order is lost and previously 'safe' spaces (for example, community meeting places) are destroyed, already elevated numbers of violent incidents soar.

## Attacked by those assigned to protect

Disturbingly, there have been repeated reports of rape and sexual abuse carried out by peacekeepers and humanitarian workers against the vulnerable communities they have been assigned to protect. Despite the release of a 2003 United Nations (UN) Bulletin dedicated to preventing and addressing sexual violence perpetrated by UN staff, the incidence of peacekeeper abuse remains high. Securing concrete evidence of such exploitative attacks is hindered by the fact that UN and allied force investigations are internal and take place 'behind closed doors'.

### CONFLICT-RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE – THE REALITY IN NUMBERS

- An estimated 100,000-250,000 women and girls raped during the three-month long Rwandan genocide in 1994<sup>vii</sup>
- 60,000 women and girls raped during the 1991-2001 Balkan conflict<sup>viii</sup>
- In civil war-torn Sierra Leone (1991-2002), more than 70 per cent of sexual violence cases seen by the International Rescue Committee were girls under 18 and more than 20 per cent of those were girls under 11<sup>ix</sup>
- In 2009 in Columbia, more than half the victims of sexual violence helped by the International Committee of the Red Cross were children<sup>x</sup>
- In a study of 6,000 male concentration camp inmates in the former Yugoslavia (1991-2001), 80 per cent reported having been raped<sup>xi</sup>
- 40 per cent of men and boys fleeing conflict in eastern DRC experienced sexual violence<sup>xii</sup>
- In 2014 alone, conflict-related sexual violence was reported in 19 different countries<sup>xiii</sup>.



A 13 year-old boy looks out onto his family's compound in northern Uganda. He spent the first decade of his life living in captivity but has since received support and counselling at World Vision's Children of War centre in northern Uganda. He now lives with his grandmother in her community.

## Gender inequality and female survivors

Both during periods of conflict and peace, the prevalence of sexual violence against women and girls is strongly linked to a female's perceived worth within a community. In communities where gender inequality already exists and sexual violence towards women and girls is common, conflict increases the frequency of attacks.

When a female's primary purpose within a community is seen to be wife, mother and caregiver, the physical and psychological effects of sexual violence can render her incapable of carrying out her designated 'role.' When this happens, her value within the community is all but lost.

Gender inequality, like stigma, resides at the heart of many communities and both detrimentally work together to hinder survivor recovery.

## Male survivors: unrecognised and ostracised

Although largely absent from news reports and public discourse, the number of men and boys sexually attacked during armed conflict is high with incidents documented in conflicts everywhere from Northern Ireland to Syria.

The failure of many justice systems to recognise male victims coupled with societal stigma means that reliable data is in desperately short supply.

For 90 per cent of male victims in active conflict zones, the protection offered to them by the law is non-existent. Uganda (where internal conflict took place during the 1990s to early 2000s) is one of 70 countries that criminalise same-sex acts (consensual or not) and reporting a same-sex crime can result in life imprisonment for the victim. The police response to reports from Ugandan male victims is: "*You are a man; you cannot be raped.*" With 28 countries recognising males as the only possible perpetrators of rape, females who attack men in these countries cannot be punished.

## Sexual violence against children

During the post-election crisis in Côte d'Ivoire between November 2010 and September 2011, juveniles accounted for just over half of reported sexual violence cases<sup>xv</sup>.

However, numbers are a challenge. Age-appropriate reporting mechanisms are only just coming into play, meaning that figures for juvenile survivors currently in circulation are moderate estimates at best.

Girls are most vulnerable of all to sexual violence as harrowingly illustrated by the plight of the Chibok girls kidnapped by Boko Haram militants in Nigeria in 2014. Cases of forced marriage (often perceived by families paradoxically as a means of 'protecting' young women from sexual attacks) and survival sex (young women exchanging sex for essential items or money) also rise during times of conflict, leaving them even more exposed to potential violence and, of course, stigma.

### Boys – the hidden victims

Reading the available data, however, you could be forgiven for assuming sexual violence against boys is rare, especially when it is viewed alongside data relating to women and girls. Unfortunately, it is merely the data that is scarce, not the violence itself.

Aside from the stigma attached to it - and partly because of it - a lack of tailored programming for male survivors plays a key role in under-reporting. Ironically, the lack of perceived demand is the reason so little male-orientated programming exists. Current programmes tend to be female-focussed (concentrating, for example, on reproductive health) or held at traditionally female locations such as maternity wards.

And so the cycle of silence continues and an invisible subset of survivors, struggling to find their place in society, is created.



A child looks on from the entrance to a Women Stand Up Together shelter in northeast DRC.

# The road to recovery: above and beyond prosecutions

The journey to recovery for all survivors is a complex one which requires a comprehensive response. Survivors are likely to need medical assistance, as well as vital psychosocial, education and/or livelihood support to help them rebuild their lives.

Accountability can play a big part in the recovery process too. However, only credible, empathetic law enforcement and judicial processes provide survivors with the opportunity to access meaningful justice.

International initiatives against sexual violence have tended to prioritise increased prosecutions, but this is only part of the solution. Unless investigative and judicial processes focus on the survivor's perspective and recovery needs, a survivor will inevitably ask, 'is the end result worth it?' Survivors conduct a mental cost-benefit analysis; the costs of reporting a sexual crime versus the perceived benefits. Invariably, the benefits of seeing their attacker punished do not outweigh the social, psychological and economic costs born of stigma attached to it.

## Demand for a justice system with 'teeth'

Field research conducted by World Vision in the DRC in 2015 suggests prioritising prosecutions over survivor needs can inadvertently impact negatively on their recovery and ultimately deter further survivors from coming forward. This in turn impacts negatively on prosecution rates.

During the 2013-14 Minova trials in which 39 members of the military were tried for mass rape in eastern DRC, survivors recalled not being listened to, believed or afforded confidentiality during the prosecution process.

Furthermore, the 18-month trial found only two of the implicated soldiers guilty. Supporters of international justice hailed the prosecutions a 'victory.' Victims' advocates, however, saw it a disaster for the global movement to end sexual violence in conflict. The fact that 37 walked free served only to strengthen community feeling that the survivors were not telling the truth and such knee-jerk stigmatisation (not to mention reports of perpetrators bribing their way out of a conviction and corruption amongst judges) perpetuated the vicious cycle of non-reporting.

In some conflict-affected communities, of course, police and courts may be non-existent. Many of those that do exist are incapable or unwilling to carry out investigations into sexual assaults. In these cases, reporting sexual violence will appear pointless. Additionally, there is often an inherent mistrust of the authorities and judicial processes. In interviews, some survivors from Minova and Goma in eastern DRC said: "why would a victim go to the police? They are the first ones committing rape."

## Local and global changes give new hope to survivors

### Action on the ground in the DRC

Things are changing, albeit slowly. In 2009, the UN, in conjunction with the Congolese Government, developed the Comprehensive Strategy on Combatting Sexual Violence in the DRC, which creates a common framework for action in the country. The strategy aims to strengthen prevention, protection and responses to sexual violence through four strategic components: combating impunity; prevention and protection; security sector reform and support for survivors. Prosecutions against members of the military have increased. But whilst these are welcome developments on the ground in the DRC, as the Minova trials show, rushed or imperfect justice is counterproductive. There is still much work to be done.

### Increased international commitment to change

The international community's commitment to addressing sexual violence in conflict zones is strengthening too. A dedicated Office of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict began work in 2010 and now issues annual reports documenting conflict-related sexual violence. In 2013, the UK Government's Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict brought this global issue firmly into the spotlight and precipitated the Global Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict (2013) and a Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict (2014). Internationally, such prioritisation and consistency is something to be extremely optimistic about. However, the shift in focus, away from 'prosecution as ultimate deterrent' towards a more survivor-centred approach, is still a work in progress.

### New conversation needed about sexual violence

Without credible, accessible and survivor-sensitive justice systems combined with an end to stigma, the high costs of reporting will continue to far outweigh the benefits, and victims will choose to remain half-living in the shadows. Therefore, an altogether new conversation about sexual violence during conflict must dominate local and global action; one in which the survivor's voice and the stigma they face can be heard above and beyond talk of prosecutions. It is this urgent shift in dialogue that dominates World Vision's recommendations for addressing sexual violence and stigma in conflict zones.

# Conclusion and recommendations

Sexual violence as a tactic or consequence of conflict can be traced back to the beginning of recorded history. Bringing an end to this abhorrent wartime practice is paramount, but no easy or speedy undertaking. However, progress can be achieved swiftly when it comes to shortening the long shadow that conflict-related sexual violence casts over the lives of civilians. This requires investment in strategies that address stigma and support survivors.

Stigma is the greatest barrier to securing real justice for survivors and only when it is confronted and eradicated through dedicated and collaborative efforts (as outlined in the recommendations below) will survivors stop merely surviving and start living again.

## General recommendations

- **End sexual violence for all** – women, girls, men and boys. Policies and programmes must clearly acknowledge that sexual violence does not just affect adult females.
- **Make sexual violence unacceptable to everyone, everywhere** – work to change attitudes toward entrenched gendered roles and empower community members to strive for equality.
- **Ensure justice for all by ending impunity and addressing stigma** – perpetrators must fear recrimination. Improved legal systems are part of the answer; but not enough on their own; obstacles to justice – most notably stigma – must be removed and survivor's perspective prioritised.
- **Make children a priority in initiatives to end sexual violence** – prevention and response initiatives must make child protection paramount and recognise the specific needs of child survivors.
- **Give survivors a meaningful role in prevention, protection and response initiatives** – support must be based on a survivor's needs, not what others think they need; from medical and legal support through to assistance with livelihoods and education.
- **Take a comprehensive approach to ending sexual violence** – long-term investment is required in projects which seek to prevent, protect and respond, particularly in humanitarian situations.

## Recommendations for the Government of the United Kingdom

- **A survivor-centric approach** – for example, ensure that any justice reform is delivered parallel to educating survivors and communities in their legal rights and judicial processes ('legal literacy').
- **A cross-Whitehall approach to ending sexual violence** – greater coordination is required across UK governmental departments, particularly between the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and Department for International Development (DFID), to guarantee a joined-up approach to all interventions.
- **Government to remain at the forefront of changing attitudes** – working, for instance, alongside survivors and other key players, such as faith leaders to shift attitudes towards sexual violence and as part of broader social norm change.
- **Government to champion efforts that recognise and respond to the impact of sexual violence on children** – with violence against boys and children born of rape given increased emphasis.

A child at a Women Stand Up Together shelter in northeast DRC near Goma for abused women and girls. World Vision supported 10 of the 20 shelters where they receive psychosocial and emotional help, training in sewing, baking and handicraft-making.



# End notes

- <sup>i</sup> United Nations 'Background Information on Sexual Violence used as a Tool of War', available at <http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/rwanda/about/bgsexualviolence.shtml>
- <sup>ii</sup> Save the Children (2012) Hidden Survivors: Sexual Violence against Children in Conflict, available at [http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/Hidden\\_Survivors.pdf](http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/Hidden_Survivors.pdf)
- <sup>iii</sup> Dolan, C. (2014) 'Into the Mainstream: Addressing Sexual Violence Against Men & Boys in Conflict', Briefing Paper prepared for the Overseas Development Institute; co-sponsored by Refugee Law Project, Plan UK and War Child; available at <https://www.warchild.org.uk/sites/default/files/Into-the-Mainstream.pdf>
- <sup>iv</sup> Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (2011), 'A Patient Heart: Stigma, Acceptance and rejection around Conflict-Relates Sexual Violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo', Working Paper; available at <http://hhi.harvard.edu/publications/patient-heart-stigma-acceptance-and-rejection-around-conflict-related-sexual-violence>
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- <sup>vi</sup> United Nations Secretary General (2003) Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse' [ST/SGB/2003/13]
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- <sup>x</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xi</sup> McGinn T. et al (2004) 'Reproductive Health for Conflict-Affected People: Policies, Research, and Programs', Humanitarian Practice Network at the Overseas Development Institute, Network Paper No. 45
- <sup>xii</sup> Dolan, C. (2014) 'Into the Mainstream: Addressing Sexual Violence Against Men & Boys in Conflict', Briefing Paper prepared for the Overseas Development Institute; co-sponsored by Refugee Law Project, Plan UK and War Child; available at <https://www.warchild.org.uk/sites/default/files/Into-the-Mainstream.pdf>
- <sup>xiii</sup> United Nations Secretary General (2015) 'Report of the United Nations Secretary General on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence' [S/2015/203]
- <sup>xiv</sup> Dolan, C. (2014) 'Into the Mainstream: Addressing Sexual Violence Against Men & Boys in Conflict', Briefing Paper prepared for the Overseas Development Institute; co-sponsored by Refugee Law Project, Plan UK and War Child; available at <https://www.warchild.org.uk/sites/default/files/Into-the-Mainstream.pdf>
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*This paper provides an overview of findings from World Vision UK's research on the impact of stigma faced by survivors of sexual violence in conflict zones. For further information, please see the full research report available at <http://www.worldvision.org.uk/our-work/reports-papers-and-briefings/>*

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**Cover image:** Members of Watye Ki Gen convene at a meeting. Watye Ki Gen which means 'We Have Hope' is an organisation that supports female returnees previously abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda

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