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# “Empowering children to talk about it“

Sexualized violence against  
children in Ukraine

# Acknowledgement



We would like to express our gratitude to all interviewees for their openness. Despite the difficult circumstances of the Russian war against Ukraine, it was mainly due to them that we were able to gather a great amount of information in a short time. In many conversations, we felt the urgent hope that Ukraine and especially the fate of the children will not be forgotten. We hope to contribute to this goal with our publication and the subsequent discussions.

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Photo: Oleksii Mazurchuk

Photo: Christiane Dase

# Executive Summary

Sexualized violence against children in Ukraine constitutes one of the most serious violations of children's rights. The effects on the victims and their families are multifaceted, ranging from physical injuries to long-term emotional pain and developmental impairments.

The study is based on interviews with scholars, employees of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government institutions. These are recognized experts who make a significant contribution to the issue of sexualized violence in Ukraine. The study is linked to a child rights perspective, highlighting that in addition to the four core principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, there are further obligations specifically related to sexualized violence, such as protection against physical or mental violence (Article 19) and sexual exploitation (Article 34).

## **General sexualized violence and conflict-related sexualized violence**

In 2023, 915 cases of general sexualized violence against children in Ukraine were reported, and since February 2022, thirteen cases of conflict-related sexualized violence by Russian soldiers have been registered.

## **Due to the following problems, a high number of unreported cases are expected:**

- Lack of data from Ukrainian provinces near the frontlines and from regions occupied by Russia.
- Children and their parents living in liberated areas do not report cases of sexualized violence because they fear that Russian soldiers might return.
- Affected children potentially face stigmatization and victimblaming, such as being accused of collaborating with the enemy.
- Due to a lack of awareness, affected children may not realize they have experienced sexualized violence or may blame themselves for it.

Lack of trust in state institutions, insensitivity of investigators, inadequate victim protection measures, and lack of state compensation have so far hindered investigations and prosecution processes.

## **Promising Solutions**

The newly established Department for Conflict-Related Cases of Sexualized Violence by the Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office and new investigation guidelines within a survivor-centred approach are bold steps in the right direction.

Ukrainian and international organizations play an essential role in providing psychosocial, psychological, medical, and legal assistance to affected children. Existing initiatives, such as child-friendly spaces, provide valuable support to survivors. However, due to the ongoing war, these are not accessible to all children in Ukraine. Additionally, some parents prohibit or ignore these support services. There is also a lack of trained psychotherapists specialized in war trauma.

Existing approaches to support children who have experienced sexualized violence should be further developed and sustainably financed. The upcoming Ukraine Recovery Conference in June 2024 provides an opportunity to focus on the perspectives of affected Ukrainian children and existing positive practices.



# Foreword



What had been looming in Ukraine since the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014 became a reality on February 24, 2022. Russia launched a large-scale war of aggression. For many children, this meant the beginning of a life filled with great uncertainty: bomb alerts, air raid shelters, and destruction became omnipresent for them. Many fled with their families or unaccompanied to neighbouring or even distant countries, trying to build a new home there. Others still live in Ukrainian territories near the frontlines. All these children share the constant danger of experiencing sexualized violence.

Sexualized violence is among the worst consequences of the war Russia imposed on Ukraine. From all previous armed conflicts, we know that sexualized violence against civilians is used to inflict maximum harm and demonstrate power. We are still at the beginning of addressing the consequences for children in Ukraine.

It was quickly evident for Kindernothilfe that together with our partners, we would support young people and their families in Kherson, Kharkiv, and other Ukrainian regions, as well as in neighbouring countries such as Romania and Moldova. Together with the „Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft,“ we quickly and unbureaucratically enabled safe spaces, winter aid, educational programmes, and food distributions. The focus of our work is on protecting children in armed conflict. Sexualized violence is one of the six most serious violations of children's rights. Alongside abductions, sexualized violence is the second child rights issue on which Kindernothilfe, together with Ukrainian civil society, is advocating ahead of the Ukraine Reconstruction Conference on June 11-12, 2024.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is clear: No form of violence against children should be tolerated. Our efforts for implementation must not cease until we have achieved a future in which young people no longer fear soldiers entering their homes and experiencing sexualized violence against themselves or their family members.

As a children's rights organization, it is our duty not to look away but to offer help where it is most needed. Together with our partner organizations on the ground, we advocate for ensuring that especially the children who have experienced or are still experiencing violence are provided for and supported.

*Katrin Weidemann*

# Introduction

According to the United Nations (UN), sexualized violence is one of the six most severe violations of children's rights in armed conflicts and violates obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, international humanitarian law, and international criminal law. This study examines the challenges faced by children below the age of 18 years who have suffered from sexualized violence in Ukraine and explores approaches to prosecute perpetrators and support survivors. Sexualized violence plays a central role in all armed conflicts, causing immeasurable suffering.

This survey should be seen in the context of current efforts to rebuild Ukraine. Despite ongoing hostilities, reconstruction activities are already underway. Children are the primary victims of the conflict in Ukraine. It is particularly remarkable that their perspective on reconstruction, which is also tied to shaping future scenarios, has so far played no significant role. Likewise, Ukrainian civil society organizations have been allowed only as observers on the sidelines. However, it is their needs, priorities, and visions that should guide the sustainable reconstruction of Ukraine. The slogan used for Ukrainian recovery, „Build back better,“ will only succeed if people, especially children, in Ukraine can participate. Undoubtedly, it is important to rebuild roads, bridges, and buildings. However, only with an intact social infrastructure can Ukrainians process their experiences. Accordingly, this study also provides recommendations on how comprehensive and inclusive reconstruction can be planned and implemented in the context of sexualized violence.

## What does sexualized violence mean?

There is no uniform definition of sexualized violence. Therefore, the following is an approximation to the terminology. Sexualized violence occurs when:

- One or more persons impose sexualized actions or content on another person from a position of power.
- Direct, verbal, or physical as well as indirect, non-verbal, or digital actions are carried out against the will of the affected person.

Sexualized violence takes many different forms, including „sending photos or videos with sexual content, insults with sexual connotations, or physical assaults up to verbally or physically forced rape.“

Victims, especially children, are often unaware that they are experiencing sexualized violence. Furthermore, it is based on patriarchal structures and notions of masculinity that idealize aggressive behaviour. This is particularly exploited in military contexts when rape is used as a means to create collective images of the enemy.

Since Ukraine is in an armed conflict, this study also adopts a conflict-related definition of sexualized violence. The UN provides a definition that acknowledges that perpetrators and victims are usually affiliated with different sides of the conflict lines. This definition encompasses various areas such as forced pregnancies, sexual slavery, or forced nudity. In armed conflicts, the risk for children to be affected by sexualized violence increases significantly. This is due to many



Photo: Jakob Studnar

factors, including the general societal crisis mode, lowered inhibitions, and displacement movements.

The risk of sexualized violence in the digital realm increases both in armed conflicts and in refugee contexts. An important factor here is the loss of supportive and protective societal structures, such as integration into the neighbourhood, school, or extended family. Furthermore, forms of sexualized violence may be disseminated on the internet, resulting in children being exposed to more violent images.

Victims of sexualized violence can be persons of all genders, as well as their family members (especially children), partners, and other individuals dependent on them. Survivors of sexualized violence are best supported when their needs are placed at the centre and their rights are safeguarded (survivor-centred approach).

## Effects of Sexualized Violence

Sexualized violence has far-reaching effects on survivors

and their families, often manifesting over long periods, especially when timely psychotherapeutic support is not available. The effects range from immediate physical injuries to psychological consequences such as anxiety or flashbacks, to long-term impairments such as sleep disturbances, diminished self-esteem, post-traumatic stress disorder, and developmental impairments.

## Sexualized Violence as a Tactic in Armed Conflicts

Sexualized violence is frequently employed as a tactic in armed conflicts. According to researchers Robert Nagel and Ana Lejava from the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, it is assumed that there are no instructions within the Russian military to prohibit sexualized violence against civilians. At least strategically, it is assumed that Russian soldiers are allowed to act as they please. This tactic is used in Ukraine to terrorize and subdue the Ukrainian population. Furthermore, Russian troops have also employed sexualized violence as a war tactic in past armed conflicts.

# Methodology



Between December 2023 and January 2024, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 experts, primarily via video calls, lasting one to one and a half hours each. After transcription, a qualitative content analysis was performed. The following individuals were interviewed as part of this study:

- Dr Kateryna Busol, Associate Professor, National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Ukraine
- Daria Chekalova, Deputy Director, NGO Girls, Ukraine
- Olha Demyanko and Kateryna Sydorчук, both Project Managers, NGO Girls, Ukraine
- Dr Marta Havryshko, Visiting Assistant Professor, Clark University, USA
- Khrystyna Kit, Chairwoman of Ukrainian Women Lawyers Association (JurFem), Ukraine
- Yuliia Matviichuk, Advocacy Coordinator, and Oksana Kuiantseva, Board Member, East-SOS, Ukraine
- Dr Robert Nagel, Fellow, Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, USA; and Ana Lejava, Policy Associate, Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, USA
- Prof. Dr. Ingvill Constanze Ødegaard, Managing Director and Chairwoman, The Children Born of War Project, Norway/Germany
- Lea Peters, Advisor, ECPAT, Germany

- Olha Poliakova, Head of NGO Gender Stream, and Rina Rybalko, International Communication and Logistics Specialist, NGO Gender Stream, Ukraine
- Kateryna Rashevskaya, Legal Expert, Regional Center for Human Rights, Ukraine
- Prof. Dr. Caterina Rohde-Abuba, Professor of Sociology, Berlin School of Economics and Law, Germany
- Anna Sosonska, Prosecutor and Acting Head of the CRSV Division, Office of the Prosecutor General, Ukraine
- Vira Stadnyk, Communication Manager, NGO SylNi, Ukraine
- Anastasiia Stepula, Advocacy Advisor, Ukrainian Child Rights Network, Ukraine

The interviewees are scholars, employees of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government institutions. They were selected because they conduct research in a relevant area, support affected individuals, or make significant contributions to the topic of sexualized violence in Ukraine. The interviews provide deep insights into the current state of developments regarding the handling of sexualized violence against children in Ukraine. Furthermore, the study follows an intersectional approach and focuses on different vulnerable groups, including girls, boys, children with disabilities, or queer children and adolescents.



# Children's Rights Perspective

A human rights and, above all, a children's rights perspective is crucial because it ensures that children and adolescents are understood first and foremost as rights holders whose rights must be respected, protected, and ensured. Duty bearers are always the state parties or governmental officials. On the one hand, this means that young people must be protected from sexualized violence, threats, and harm. On the other hand, a comprehensive understanding of the best interests of the child must serve as a guiding principle. Even in crisis intervention, such as addressing experiences of sexualized violence, the question arises: How can the best interests of the child be assessed and considered? What matters is not solely what adults perceive as best for the child, but rather taking into account the solutions that affected young people themselves develop.

## Sexualized Violence in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

For a children's rights perspective, the four core principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) play a central role: the right to non-discrimination (Article 2), the right to the best interests of the child as a primary consideration (Article 3), the right to life and development of the child (Article 6), and the right to participation (Article 12). Additionally, there are specific clauses related to children affected by violence, including sexualized violence. These include protection from physical or mental violence (Article 19), protection from sexual exploitation (Article 34), and the promotion of recovery for children who have experienced violence (Article 39). The General Comments of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child contribute significantly to the understanding of the individual articles of the UNCRC.



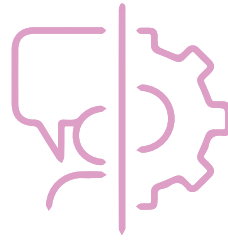
**The UN Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict**, as part of a working group of the UN Security Council since 2005, documents the six most serious violations of children's rights: 1. Killing and maiming of children, 2. Recruitment of children, 3. Sexualized violence against children, 4. Abduction of children, 5. Attacks on schools and hospitals, 6. Prevention of humanitarian aid for children (Source: [childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/six-grave-violations](https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/six-grave-violations)).

Regarding the recovery of Ukraine, the right of children to be heard is of crucial importance. From a children's rights perspective, they must be extensively involved in all decisions that affect them, including the planning of the reconstruction of Ukraine. Young people must be included when crucial

decisions are made for the country's future. In this light, numerous resolutions of the UN Security Council have repeatedly emphasized that children and adolescents must be actively involved in reconstruction efforts. This particularly applies to young people from minority groups in society.



# Results and Analysis



The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, established by the UN Human Rights Council on March 4, 2022, has presented evidence of Russian war crimes, including sexualized violence against children. In its first report (October 2022), the commission documented cases of rape: „The victims were between 4 and over 80 years old. The perpetrators raped the women and girls either in their homes or abducted them and raped them in uninhabited shelters.“

## Known cases and current figures

For example, the commission describes the rape of a four-year-old girl from the province of Kyiv by a Russian soldier who had previously committed acts of sexualized violence against the child's parents with another soldier. Another case is mentioned that took place in the province of Chernihiv, where Russian soldiers occupied a house for several days in March 2022. During this time, the commander of the unit repeatedly raped a 16-year-old girl and threatened to kill family members who tried to protect her. It is also described how a four-year-old girl had to listen to her mother's screams while she was being raped in the next room. In its second report (March 2023), the commission mentions that a 17-year-old boy was forced by the Russian military to undress and remain naked for a long time. The Commission's current report (October 2023) documents the case of a 16-year-old girl in the Kherson province who was raped by Russian soldiers during a house search.

The „One in Five“ campaign of the Council of Europe (2015) states that one in five children in Europe is affected by sexualized violence. In the context of the Russian war of aggression, it can be assumed that the number of children affected in Ukraine is significantly higher. **In the year 2023, 915 cases of general sexualized violence against children were registered in Ukraine.** Since the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office has also reported **thirteen cases of conflict-related sexualized violence by Russian soldiers against children.** However, these are only the cases in which an investigation was initiated. Anna Sosonska, responsible for conflict-related sexualized violence at the Ukrainian General Prosecutor's Office, emphasized in the interview that currently, further child survivors and their legal guardians are considering reporting sexualized violence perpetrated by Russian soldiers. The interviewed experts unanimously assume that there is an immensely high number

of unreported cases in Ukraine. They attribute this to the lack of data from Ukrainian provinces near the frontlines and from the areas occupied by Russia. Additionally, survivors from liberated territories fear that Russian soldiers might return, which is why they refrain from reporting cases of sexualized violence. Furthermore, the interviewees mention two additional reasons for the high number of unreported cases: societal stigmatization of survivors of sexualized violence and lack of trust in state authorities and investigation procedures.

## Reasons for underreporting of sexualized violence

### Stigmatization

All interviewees from Ukraine refer to patriarchal structures in Ukrainian society. This prevents girls and women affected by sexualized violence from speaking out about their experiences, especially in rural areas. A Ukrainian expert stated: „In a village community, everyone knows everyone. I grew up in the countryside, I know how much the social status of girls and women depends on their sexuality.“ Often, victim blaming takes place. For fear of stigmatization, some parents decide not to address the experienced violence and deny their children access to psychosocial support services. Furthermore, family or community members often accuse girls and young women affected by conflict-related sexualized violence of collaborating with the enemy.

This narrative was also fueled by the government. The Ukrainian Ministry of Digital Transformation developed the „Diia“ app with the chatbot „eWoroh“ (Ukrainian: E-Enemy), which collects information about collaborators. To raise awareness about the chatbot, the developers of the app published received messages, including the example of a young woman who became pregnant by a Russian soldier. Numerous Ukrainian NGOs strongly criticized this, as the woman was criminalized even though she may have become pregnant against her will. The developers subsequently deleted the post and publicly apologized.

### Education and Access to Information

One interviewee criticizes: „The problem also lies within Ukraine's education system. In some schools, there are posters titled ‚How girls should behave to not provoke boys.‘ In Ukrainian schools, we lack proper sex education. Topics



Photo: Christian Nusch

like sexuality and consent are highly taboo.“ Survivors and their surroundings often do not realize that they have experienced sexualized violence. An expert adds: „When affected children hear about the atrocities of Bucha, they think that what happened to them wasn't that bad.“ Another expert adds: „If you look at our newspapers or other media, we do not find enough information about sexualized violence, its scale, what to do in such situations, and where to get help.“ Many interviewees agree that governmental awareness campaigns about sexualized violence, consent, victim-blaming, and available support services are necessary – both as printed materials and through digital content on social media. Civil society actors in Ukraine like NGO Girls already offer educational workshops and materials for various target groups. Currently, they are working on a policy concept to introduce sex education widely in Ukrainian schools.

### **Masculinity Norms**

It is also difficult for affected boys in Ukraine to speak about experiences of sexualized violence. One Ukrainian expert attributes this to the myth that only gay men can be sexually abused: „We know cases of Ukrainian boys who were raped. They are ashamed; it's perceived as an attack on their masculinity. They lack space to talk about their experiences. Also, the media usually only talk about women and girls as victims because they are the usual victims.“

### **LGBTIQ Children and Adolescents**

LGBTIQ children and adolescents in Ukraine, who deviate from the societal norm into their gender identity, are particularly vulnerable to sexualized violence by Russian soldiers. An

expert reports a known case of „Corrective Rape,“ the rape of a queer person to change their sexual orientation. This violent practice is also known from other armed conflicts. When Ukrainian LGBTIQ children and adolescents are affected by sexualized violence, it is often especially difficult for them to speak about their experiences. This is especially true for rural areas, where they face a discriminatory environment and fear a forced coming out. If regional support programs for underage survivors exist, they are often not tailored to the specific needs of queer children and adolescents. An expert emphasizes that their organization has established special protection centres for queer survivors, as they have experienced discrimination in main protection centres.

### **Children with Disabilities**

It is to be assumed that children with disabilities in Ukraine are particularly vulnerable to experiencing sexualized violence. The frequent placement in overcrowded institutions and care homes, coupled with a lack of adequate support and staffing, creates an increased risk of sexualized violence. Existing barriers often prevent young people with disabilities from sharing their experiences and accessing support services. Moreover, the stigmatization of disabilities and the lack of accessibility in educational institutions and public places hinder inclusion. This makes victims vulnerable to abuse, as they often cannot rely on a supportive social environment.

### **Narrative of Heroic Defenders**

Two Ukrainian experts report that they know of individual cases of sexualized violence committed by Ukrainian soldiers. In their assessment, it is difficult for survivors to report these



Photo: Oleksii Mazurchuk

cases as they undermine the public perception of the Ukrainian military as heroic defenders. One interviewee criticizes: „Times of war favour conventional gender roles - including in the Ukrainian military. Toxic masculinity is on the rise in Ukraine: Many boys and men constantly feel the need to prove themselves and exert dominance – a direct consequence of which can be sexualized violence against women, children, LGBTIQ individuals, and other vulnerable groups.“

### **Difficult Investigation and Legal Proceedings**

According to a representative survey by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (December 2023), only 41% of Ukrainians trust the police, 12% trust the courts, and only 9% trust the prosecution. An expert states that many children affected by sexualized violence and their caregivers do not see benefits in engaging in criminal proceedings. The risk of experiencing victim-blaming from insensitive investigators and thus being retraumatized is too high. This is especially true for LGBTIQ children and adolescents. Accordingly, more female investigators and gender-sensitive training programs for lawyers, judges, prosecutors, and the police are urgently needed. It is also common for investigators to not pursue cases of general sexualized violence if victims cannot provide a medical report as evidence. In other cases, victims suffer from having to undergo multi-stage, lengthy investigation processes. Aspects of confidentiality are also essential, as children affected by sexualized violence are at risk of being stigmatized or subjected to Russian retaliation upon the disclosure of cases. One interviewee recounts: „Last year, we had a case of a girl who was sexually abused. We were contacted by the press and found that the victim's lawyers were 80% focused on protecting the girl from media frenzy.“

### **Structural Solutions by the Ukrainian Judiciary**

Against this backdrop, the Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office has made the groundbreaking decision to establish a special department for conflict-related cases of sexualized violence. With the assistance of a working group composed of Ukrainian and international experts, they have developed guidelines for investigative procedures with a survivor-centred approach, which places the specific needs of survivors at the forefront. Among other measures, survivors should be able to register under changed names. The guidelines, already being implemented in the pilot regions of Kharkiv and Kherson, apply only to conflict-related cases of sexualized violence but could serve as a blueprint for general cases of sexualized violence in the future.

Khrystyna Kit, who leads the working group with the Ukrainian Women Lawyers Association (JurFem), also reports on current plans to reform Ukrainian laws for better victim and witness protection: „We are engaged in advocacy efforts for the adoption of the law on compensation for victims of conflict-related sexualized violence, as well as for changes in criminal procedural legislation.“ The Ukrainian Prosecutor's Office also cooperates with the International Criminal Court to hold Russian perpetrators accountable. However, one interviewed legal expert sees the chances of success as rather low: „There are exceptions, but many Russian soldiers who have committed sexualized violence against children cannot be identified afterwards. Russian courts refuse to initiate criminal proceedings, leaving victims without compensation or punishment for the perpetrator.“

Currently, survivors of sexualized violence do not receive state compensation in Ukraine. According to one interviewee's assessment, this could lead affected children or their caregivers to decide against an investigation. However, Ukrainian authorities usually collaborate with social services or Ukrainian and international organizations to offer survivors legal, psychosocial, psychological, and financial support.

### **Psychosocial, psychological, and medical support provided by NGOs**

Anna Sosonska of the Ukrainian General Prosecutor's Office emphasizes the crucial role of NGOs in providing individual assistance to survivors of sexualized violence. Affected individuals receive support to pursue their hobbies, such as cooking or language courses. Children in regions near the frontline of the war are allowed to attend holiday camps, where they can encounter a supportive environment with psychosocial guidance. There, they can temporarily escape their daily lives, which are overshadowed by the constant threat of Russian attacks, and interact with family members and other young people.

### **The Role of Caregivers**

It is worth noting that the Ukrainian government, in collaboration with UNICEF and HealthRight International, has established so-called Barnahus centres. These centres provide a safe, child-friendly environment where children affected by sexualized violence are interviewed only once during the investigative process. This comprehensive approach, accompanied by psychotherapeutic support, is currently practised in centres located in Vinnytsia, Ternopil, Chernivtsi, Zhytomyr, Kirovohrad, Kyiv, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Poltava, and Sumy. However, access to these services is limited for affected children in occupied or frontline areas.

However, caregivers sometimes do not grant permission for these services. A Ukrainian NGO provides the example of a father who denied his daughter participation in a holiday camp because she was supposed to do household chores for the family. The chances for affected children to receive support are often low if the caregivers are also the perpetrators. Therefore, NGO Girls advocates for an exception to the Ukrainian law, which requires individuals under sixteen to have parental consent to access psychological services in certain cases. To destigmatize psychotherapeutic support for young survivors, communication campaigns should highlight low-threshold services and raise awareness among parents about their benefits. Noteworthy is the state program „How Are You“ by Ukrainian First Lady Olena Zelenska on



Photo: Oleksii Mazurchuk



Photo: Oleksii Mazurchuk

mental health, which several interviewees commended. As sexualized violence against children often traumatizes other family members as well, one interviewee emphasizes the importance of involving them in psychotherapeutic services.

### **Trauma-Sensitive and Child-Centred Training**

Affected children are often exposed to multiple layers of stressors. Sexualized violence can occur in the context of other war crimes, such as the shelling of schools and hospitals, torture, or the abduction of Ukrainian children. Child-centred support should therefore be offered by psychotherapists trained in war trauma.

One interviewee stresses that Ukraine lacks specially trained professionals for this, although there are currently training programs conducted with the help of Israeli and American experts. Medical personnel should also be sensitized to the needs of affected children and, if necessary, provide services

such as post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) and emergency contraception. The interviewed experts disagree on the possible role of Ukrainian psychology students. On the one hand, they could help alleviate the shortage of personnel given the high demand for psychological support and be deployed ad hoc. On the other hand, organizations like the Ukrainian NGO Sylni only work with experienced psychotherapists who can offer therapy for several months to prevent possible retraumatization from short or unprofessional therapy approaches.

### **Support in Times of War**

NGO Girls reports on a girl who experienced sexualized violence near the war front: „Her place of residence is under constant attack. We couldn't find a mobile team willing to go there. Government authorities are no longer present; they were evacuated last year. However, the girl's family did not want to be evacuated to the nearest safe city, so we tried to provide online and cash assistance. Unfortunately, this is not enough - and there are many such cases.“ Furthermore, the expert emphasizes, „We need more child- and youth-friendly centres throughout Ukraine where children can open up to trained personnel. We must enable children affected by sexualized violence to talk about what has been done to them.“ Initiatives such as the aforementioned Barnahus model with interdisciplinary support services should therefore be further expanded in Ukraine.

### **Children Born of War**

Children born of war have most likely emerged in every armed conflict. This includes children born from the rape of women, but also those conceived in consensual relationships across conflict lines. Crucial is that the biological fathers are perceived by the majority of society as part of the conflict party. A grey area is the so-called „survival sex,“ where women consented to sexual acts to protect themselves or others from further harm.

### **Exclusion and Stigmatization**

In Ukraine, children of war and their mothers might face exclusion and stigmatization. For example, with the shifting frontlines, questions often arise about their national affiliation. Children fathered by Russian soldiers might be perceived as Russian rather than Ukrainian. Several interviewees point out that mothers could be seen as collaborators with the Russian side, having collaborated with the enemy. This often leads to exclusion and withdrawal of social and communal support for the mothers and children. Consequently, women may choose not to address the sexualized violence they experienced, hoping to keep the child's origin a secret. This likely predates the 2022 Russian army's invasion, extending back to the 2014 occupation of eastern Ukraine. Given that

interviewees are aware of existing cases of children of war, there is probably a significantly high number of unreported cases.

### **Challenges for Children and Mothers**

From past conflicts, it is known that these children and their mothers face many challenges. Mothers must process both the experienced sexualized violence and their pregnancy. According to Prof. Dr. Ingvill Constanze Ødegaard, safe spaces where women can receive support are necessary. These could be safe houses or apartments providing professional assistance and accommodation. However, this is often challenging amid armed conflict. Ødegaard emphasizes the importance of women having a genuine choice regarding whether to keep the child or not.

Without support options and fearing community exclusion, they may not have the basis for a free decision. Another interviewee reports that women who survived sexualized violence often cannot focus on plans for they invest all resources into processing the experiences. Therefore, they sometimes realize very late that they became pregnant from rape. This taboo often creates significant psychological pressure for the mothers, leading to their children suffering from neglect or abuse. Hence, there's a need to sensitize psychotherapists and other professionals to recognize children of war and support them. Another issue arises if for their protection children are denied knowledge of their father's identity, highlighting the importance of a child's right to have a birth certificate in the face of these challenges.

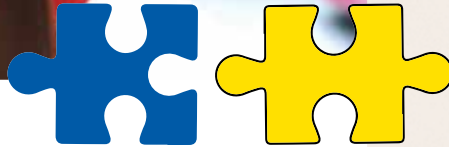
### **Bosnia and Herzegovina as a Role Model**

There are valuable solutions from past conflicts that could be applied to Ukraine. One interviewee pointed to developments for Bosnian children born of war, conceived during the conflict from 1992 to 1995 due to rape. Three decades after the war, Bosnia and Herzegovina passed a law in 2023 recognizing them as war victims. This long-awaited step means that children of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina now receive financial support for their education and are given preferential admission to state educational institutions. The law also provides stronger support to other civilian war victims, such as in medical treatment, which also benefits the mothers. In Bosnia, many children of war grew up in great poverty and social exclusion due to the stigma they and their mothers faced. They were often not included in humanitarian aid programs in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In light of the Bosnian experience, Ukrainian children of war and their specific needs must be included in plans for Ukraine's recovery.





Photo: Kindernoithilfe



## Conclusion

As demonstrated in the preceding discussion, there are pressing issues for children affected by sexualized violence in Ukraine. Addressing these requires a coordinated approach from various stakeholders in Ukraine. The establishment of a dedicated department within the Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office to address conflict-related sexualized violence with new guidelines for investigators is a sign that the extent of the problem has been recognized. The new focus on a survivor-centred approach is particularly important but should also apply to general cases of sexualized violence. Numerous positive examples of good practice from Ukrainian and international organizations are worth highlighting. They already provide valuable support to affected children in Ukraine.

With this study, Kindernoithilfe aims to bring the most serious violations of children's rights in Ukraine into focus. In the short term, the issue of sexualized violence should be included in the social dimension of the Ukraine Recovery Conference in Berlin. In the long term, Kindernoithilfe works with its partner organizations in Ukraine, Romania, and Moldova to implement a project and advocacy strategy that not only addresses these violations of children's rights but also strengthens existing solutions and works towards creating helpful and sustainable structures for those affected.

For Ukraine, the already ongoing recovery plays a central role. Alongside the focus on the economy and infrastructure, there should be a limelight on the social dimension as well. This study by Kindernoithilfe demonstrates how both issues - sexualized violence against children and reconstruction - are intertwined and how the support of survivors of sexualized violence must play a central role in reconstruction efforts. In particular, the participation of children must be given a central importance. They are the generations that will play a crucial role in shaping the future. Only then can the motto for the reconstruction of Ukraine - „Build back better“ - be more than just an empty phrase.



Photo: Oleksii Mazurchuk

# Recommendations



The preceding discussion highlights urgent areas where action is needed to improve the situation for children affected by sexualized violence in Ukraine. Kindernothilfe recommends:

**To the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the Federal Foreign Office (AA), the Donor Coordination Platform for Ukraine, the EU Ukraine Facility, and other actors in the international donor community to ensure financial support for existing initiatives by state and non-state, national, and international actors addressing sexualized violence in Ukraine. In particular, initiatives that:**

- Provide mobile teams of psychotherapists, lawyers, and social workers to individually support affected children in all regions of Ukraine.
- Operate child-friendly safe spaces where affected children receive psychotherapeutic support during investigative procedures.
- Train psychotherapists, lawyers, judges, prosecutors, medical personnel, and police in working with children traumatized by war and affected by sexualized violence to avoid retraumatization and stigmatization.
- Conduct communication and awareness-raising campaigns addressing mental health, victim blaming, critical masculinity, and sexualized violence, offering low-threshold support to children and their families.
- Provide specialized support for affected children and adolescents in the LGBTIQ community, such as separate safe spaces and therapy options provided by trained psychotherapists.

**To the organizers of the Ukraine Recovery Conference 2024:**

- Grant appropriate importance to the participation of children and young people in the social dimension of the URC24.
- Address the impact of sexualized violence against children and identify options for action within the framework of Ukraine's reconstruction, for example, through a panel discussion.
- Provide visibility to actors from Ukrainian civil society who support affected children psychologically, legally, and financially within the German Platform for Reconstruction of Ukraine.

**To the Ukrainian government:**

- Enact or amend laws to improve victim and witness protection and compensation for victims of conflict-related and general sexualized violence.

- Continue and expand state awareness campaigns on mental health, such as the „How Are You“ program by Ukrainian First Lady Olena Zelenska.
- Develop an educational policy concept to introduce comprehensive sex education in all Ukrainian schools.
- Introduce exceptions from parental permission to allow affected children below the age of 16 years to receive psychotherapeutic support services.
- Ensure that children born of war and their families are recognized as war victims and receive adequate support, including securing adequate living conditions and the best possible healthcare.
- Thoroughly involve Ukrainian civil society, particularly under the „social cohesion“ focus, in Ukraine's recovery efforts, ensuring comprehensive inclusion of children and their perspectives in the reconstruction process.

**To the German Federal Public Prosecutor General at the Federal Court of Justice:**

- Thoroughly examine and, if necessary, prosecute cases of sexualized violence in Ukraine based on the principle of universal jurisdiction under the International Criminal Code.
- Continue to ensure that Germany fulfils its responsibility in implementing the principle of universal jurisdiction, especially in prosecuting crimes related to sexualized violence.

**To (international) non-governmental organizations active in Ukraine:**

- Network and conduct joint advocacy efforts by children's rights organizations on the issue of sexualized violence against children.
- Collaboratively build knowledge pools with best practice example to make local successes applicable nationwide.
- Pursue intersectional approaches to identify the needs of children from societal minorities who have experienced sexualized violence.

**To actors in EU-Ukraine accession negotiations:**

- Ensure that Ukrainian civil society, particularly children, are involved in developing priorities for Ukraine's reconstruction within the framework of EU accession negotiations. Specifically, prioritize and assess the needs of survivors of sexualized violence and children in general.

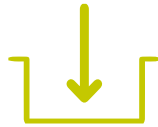


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# Endnotes



- <sup>1</sup> cf. ECPAT (2016), pp. 12ff.; Rabe, Heike (2017); Rohde-Abuba, Caterina / Kreuzer, Kristina (2022), p.7
- <sup>2</sup> Rohde-Abuba, Caterina / Kreuzer, Kristina (2022), ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> UN, Office of the High Commissioner (2022), p. 10. Definition of conflict-related sexual violence: "CRSV refers to incidents or patterns of rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization and other forms of sexual violence of comparable gravity (forced nudity, forced marriage, forced conjugation, forced abortion, indecent assault, trafficking, inappropriate medical examinations) against women, men, girls, and boys. Such incidents or patterns occur in conflict or post-conflict settings or other situations of concern (e.g., political strife). They may have a direct or indirect nexus with the conflict or political strife itself, i.e. a temporal, geographical, or causal link. The link with the conflict may be evident in the profile and motivations of the perpetrator(s), the profile of the victim(s), the climate of impunity/weakened state capacity, cross-border dimensions, or the fact that it violates the terms of a ceasefire agreement. The term also encompasses trafficking in persons when committed in situations of conflict for the purpose of sexual violence/exploitation."
- <sup>4</sup> ibid. p. 10.
- <sup>5</sup> UN, Security Council (2019): Para. 16.
- <sup>6</sup> For a detailed analysis of the effects, see: Zimmermann, Peter (2010), pp. 62ff.
- <sup>7</sup> UN, Security Council (2022), p. 1.
- <sup>8</sup> UN, Committee on the Rights of the Child (2011), Para. 3f.
- <sup>9</sup> see, inter alia, UN Security Council resolutions, Res. 1325 (2000), Res. 2250 (2015), Res. 2535 (2020).
- <sup>10</sup> UN, Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine (2022), p. 16.
- <sup>11</sup> ibid. pp. 16-17.
- <sup>12</sup> ibid. p. 17.
- <sup>13</sup> ibid. p. 18.
- <sup>14</sup> UN, Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine (2023 a), p. 12.
- <sup>15</sup> UN, Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine (2023 b), p. 14.
- <sup>16</sup> Council of Europe (2015): ONE in FIVE.
- <sup>17</sup> Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine, Uniform Report on Criminal Offenses for January - December 2023. Excel p. 7.
- <sup>18</sup> According to Anna Sosonska, Prosecutor and Acting Head of the CRSV Division in Ukraine's Office of the Prosecutor General (As of January 31, 2024).
- <sup>19</sup> Havryshko, Marta (2023).
- <sup>20</sup> Doan-Minh, Sarah (2019).
- <sup>21</sup> Philips, Sarah (2019).
- <sup>22</sup> Human Rights Watch (2023).
- <sup>23</sup> Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (2023).
- <sup>24</sup> Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine (n.d.).
- <sup>25</sup> Siehe Ukrainian Government (2023).
- <sup>26</sup> UNICEF (2022).
- <sup>27</sup> Official Website of the President of Ukraine (2023).
- <sup>28</sup> Trial International (2023).
- <sup>29</sup> Carpenter, Charli et al. (n.d.), p.5.

# Kindernothilfe in Ukraine



Since the start of the Russian war of aggression on February 24, 2022, millions of children and their families have had to flee Ukraine. In March 2022, Kindernothilfe, supported by the „Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft“ began collaborating with project partners initially in Moldova and Romania, and since the fall of 2022, also in Ukraine itself. The support was tailored to the most urgent needs - from food supply to school materials or winter assistance such as heating facilities, to safer places where psychosocial support for children can be provided. In total, in 2022 and 2023, 21,994 children and their families were reached in Ukraine through 12 projects. Kindernothilfe invested €1,545,607 in 2022 and €2,692,004 in 2023. In addition to project work, advocacy with partner organizations is an important part of realizing the rights of Ukrainian children. The six most severe violations of children's rights in armed conflicts also play an important role here. Following the start of advocacy work for the repatriation of abducted Ukrainian children, sexualized violence has become our second focus area.

You can find a map of Ukraine with the current frontline and shaded areas of previously occupied territories by Russia at: <https://liveuamap.com/de>



or here:

<https://interaktiv.tagesspiegel.de/lab/wie-weit-sind-die-soldaten-aktuelle-karte-der-russischen-invasion-in-der-ukraine/>

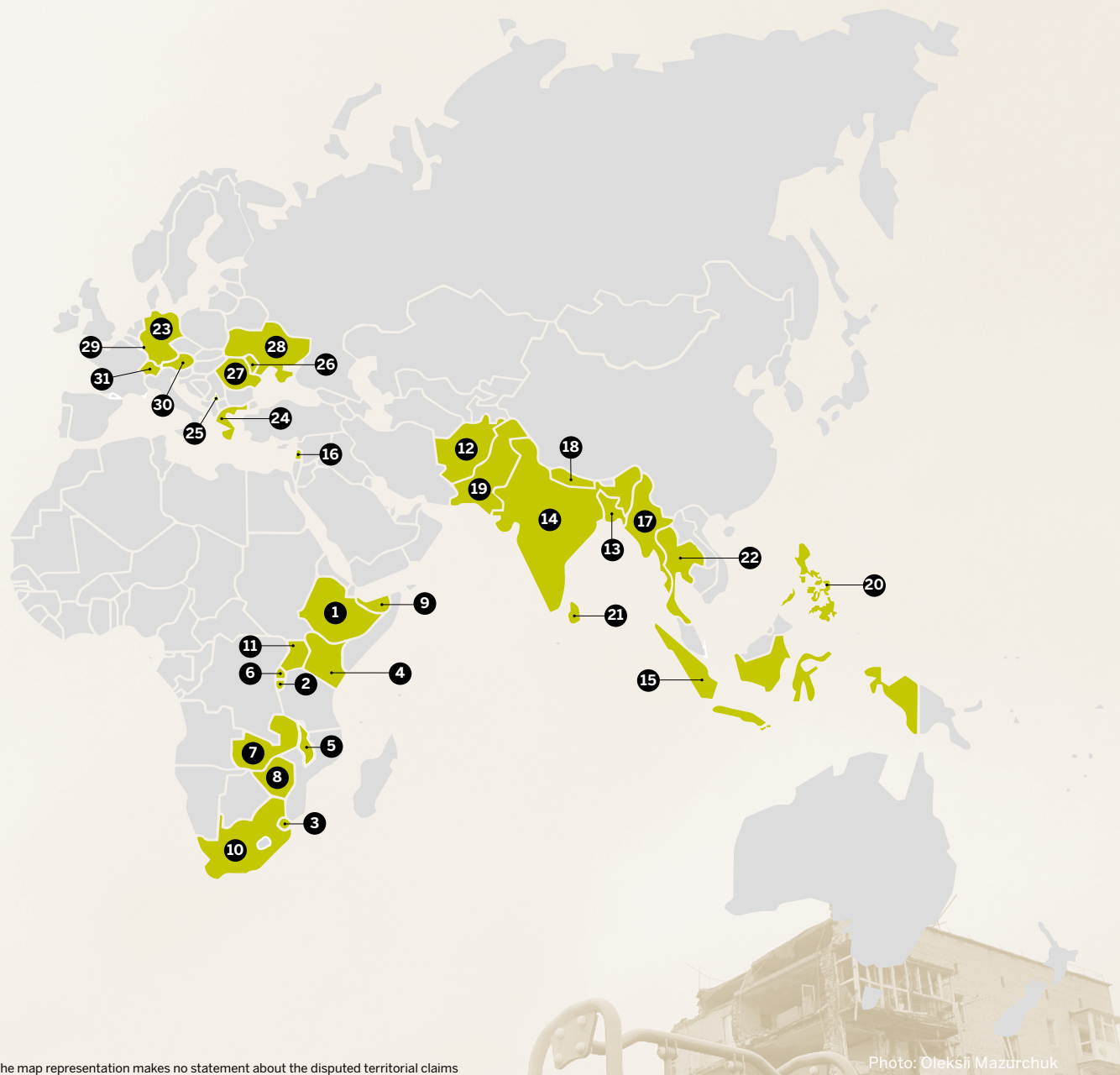


Countries in Africa	Countries in Asia	Countrys in Europe	Countries in South America
Country	Country	Country	Country
1 Ethiopia	12 Afghanistan	23 Germany	32 Bolivia
2 Burundi	13 Bangladesh	24 Greece	33 Brazil
3 Eswatini	14 India	25 Kosovo	34 Chile
4 Kenya	15 Indonesia	26 Republic of Moldova	35 Ecuador
5 Malawi	16 Lebanon	27 Romania	36 Guatemala
6 Rwanda	17 Myanmar	28 Ukraine	37 Haiti
7 Zambia	18 Nepal	29 Luxembourg	38 Honduras
8 Zimbabwe	19 Pakistan	30 Austria	39 Peru
9 Somaliland	20 Philippines	31 Switzerland	
10 South Africa	21 Sri Lanka		
11 Uganda	22 Thailand		

# The Work of Kindernothilfe at a Glance



For 65 years, Kindernothilfe has been advocating for children's rights worldwide. It is a recognized children's rights organization with ECOSOC consultative status at the United Nations. Currently (in 2022), it supports 2.1 million children through 523 projects in 36 project countries across Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Europe. In Europe, Kindernothilfe is present not only in Germany but also in Luxembourg, Austria, and Switzerland. Together with girls and boys, we work in 39 countries for a sustainable future without poverty, violence, and abuse. Because children need protection, support, and participation. In Germany, 216,600 donors support this work. Since 1992, Kindernothilfe has been awarded the DZI Donation Seal annually for verified integrity and donation-worthiness.



The map representation makes no statement about the disputed territorial claims

Photo: Oleksii Mazurchuk