Strengthening Reintegration\(^1\) Support to Boys Formerly Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups who are Victims/Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

Concept Note

Background

Insufficient recognition of the extent of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) against boys has resulted in a lack of gender-inclusive/informed prevention, justice and health responses to this phenomenon globally. While there is no doubt that girls are disproportionately affected and that sexual violence against girls has yet to be fully documented or adequately responded to, work by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (OSRSG CAAC), All Survivors Project (ASP) and others, indicates that CRSV against boys too often remains unreported as well.\(^2\)

The lack of systematic documentation of CRSV against boys combined with legal, cultural and social barriers to disclosure by boys of experiences of CRSV, has many negative consequences. Amongst others, their rights, needs and wishes are not sufficiently factored into the design and implementation of prevention measures and protection responses. As a result, boys are unable to access safe, timely, gender-sensitive, disability-inclusive, age-appropriate and survivor-centred medical care and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), or justice for the violations and abuses committed against them. Ultimately, the social and economic harm suffered by their families and communities can undermine long-term peace and security.

In relation to children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG), available information shows that while boys are not affected by CRSV in the same numbers as girls, who are often – although not exclusively - recruited for sexual purposes, there are many factors of potential

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\(^1\) In line with the Paris Principles ‘reintegration’ is defined in this project as “the process through which children transition into civil society and enter meaningful roles and identities as civilians who are accepted by their families and communities in a context of local and national reconciliation.” However, the project recognises that terminology varies across countries and that in Colombia in particular this is referred to as ‘restoration of rights’ of children as “the restoration of their dignity and integrity as subjects and of their capacity to effectively exercise the rights that have been violated”. For more information see Law 1098 of 2006 which establishes the Code of Childhood and Adolescence in Colombia.

vulnerability for boys. For example, boys may be subjected to sexual violence to pressure them to join armed groups and as a form of punishment if they refuse to do so. They also may be recruited specifically for sexual purposes. In some contexts, boys may be subjected to CRSV as part of initiation ceremonies and be forced to take part in or witness sexual violence by their fellow combatants against others. Boys who have been captured and detained because they belong, or are suspected of belonging, to opposing armed forces and groups, may also be subjected to sexual violence in detention settings. Diversity factors such as sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, race, ethnicity, ability/disability, socio-economic status and/or migratory status may increase the risks/vulnerability of individual children.

Boys rarely report experiences of CRSV and when they do it may be many years after the event. For example, in Colombia, past research by ASP conducted among adult male victims/survivors of CRSV has found that a significant number experienced CRSV as children but had never disclosed this violence to the authorities or service providers – in at least two cases involving Afro-Colombian boys, the incident of CRSV appeared to have been related to their recruitment and use by a non-state armed group.

Consistent with this information, research published by the OSRSG CAAC on boys associated with armed forces and armed groups in the Central African Republic (CAR), carried out in 2022 by ASP with the support of Plan International as a national partner, found that although CRSV against boys is not widely documented, child protection practitioners believed it to be widespread including in the context of boys’ association with armed forces and armed groups. Research findings pointed to the need for increased funding, capacity and expertise to ensure that CAAFAG reintegration programmes and associated responses effectively address the rights and needs of all children affected by CRSV, irrespective of their gender. At the same time, the findings highlighted how a lack of information, combined with victim blaming, gender stereotyping and stigma means that the possibility that boys may also have experienced CRSV is not considered in the design and implementation of reintegration processes and other responses.

In November 2022, the OSRSG CAAC, ASP and the Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination (LISD) organised a two-day workshop at Princeton University on “Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

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2 For details of secondary sources on CRSV against boys associated with armed forces or armed groups, see ASP, Checklist on Preventing and Addressing Conflict-related Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys, 10 December 2019, footnotes 135, 136 and 137.
3 For details of secondary sources on CRSV against boys associated with armed forces or armed groups, see ASP, Checklist on Preventing and Addressing Conflict-related Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys, 10 December 2019, footnotes 135, 136 and 137.
4 According to the 2019, UN Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty boys make up the vast majority of child detainees in both conflict and non-conflict settings. For further information on CRSV against boys detained in conflict-settings see OSRSG CAAC, Strengthening Responses to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence Against Boys Deprived of their Liberty in Situations of Armed Conflict, 12 December 2022.
5 The research was carried out to support a submission to Colombia’s Special Jurisdiction for Peace. For details see Laying Down Arms, Reclaiming Souls: Sexual Violence against Men and Boys in the Context of the Armed Conflict in Colombia, 19 June 2022.
against Boys: From Recognition to Response” for policy makers, the United Nations and I/NGO practitioners, donors and other experts. In June 2023, ASP presented the research findings and recommendations on boys associated with armed forces and armed groups in the CAR to members of the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (Alliance CPHA).

Objectives

The OSRSG CAAC, LISD and ASP will host a convening in Bogota on 4th December 2023 to discuss early findings from research conducted by ASP as an implementing partner of the OSRSG CAAC in Colombia and Nigeria, and the outcomes and findings from the research conducted in the CAR. While these contexts are dissimilar in terms of political, social and economic development, which informs the way in which transition from conflict and reintegration programming has developed, findings from these diverse contexts does provide learnings regarding the inclusion of gendered vulnerabilities and harms in CAAFAG programming.

The overall aim of the discussions and participation of child protection actors, gender-based violence (GBV) practitioners, CAAFAG reintegration experts, donors and academics will be to:

- Encourage exchanges on a shared and improved understanding of the needs of boy victims/survivors of CRSV formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups, and the barriers they face in accessing and receiving appropriate support.
- Identify challenges, opportunities and good practice in the way in which CAAFAG reintegration processes and associated services support boy victims/survivors of CRSV, and develop practical recommendations for addressing CRSV within CAAFAG reintegration programmes.
- Contribute to the integration of boys into global responses to CRSV against CAAFAG.

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