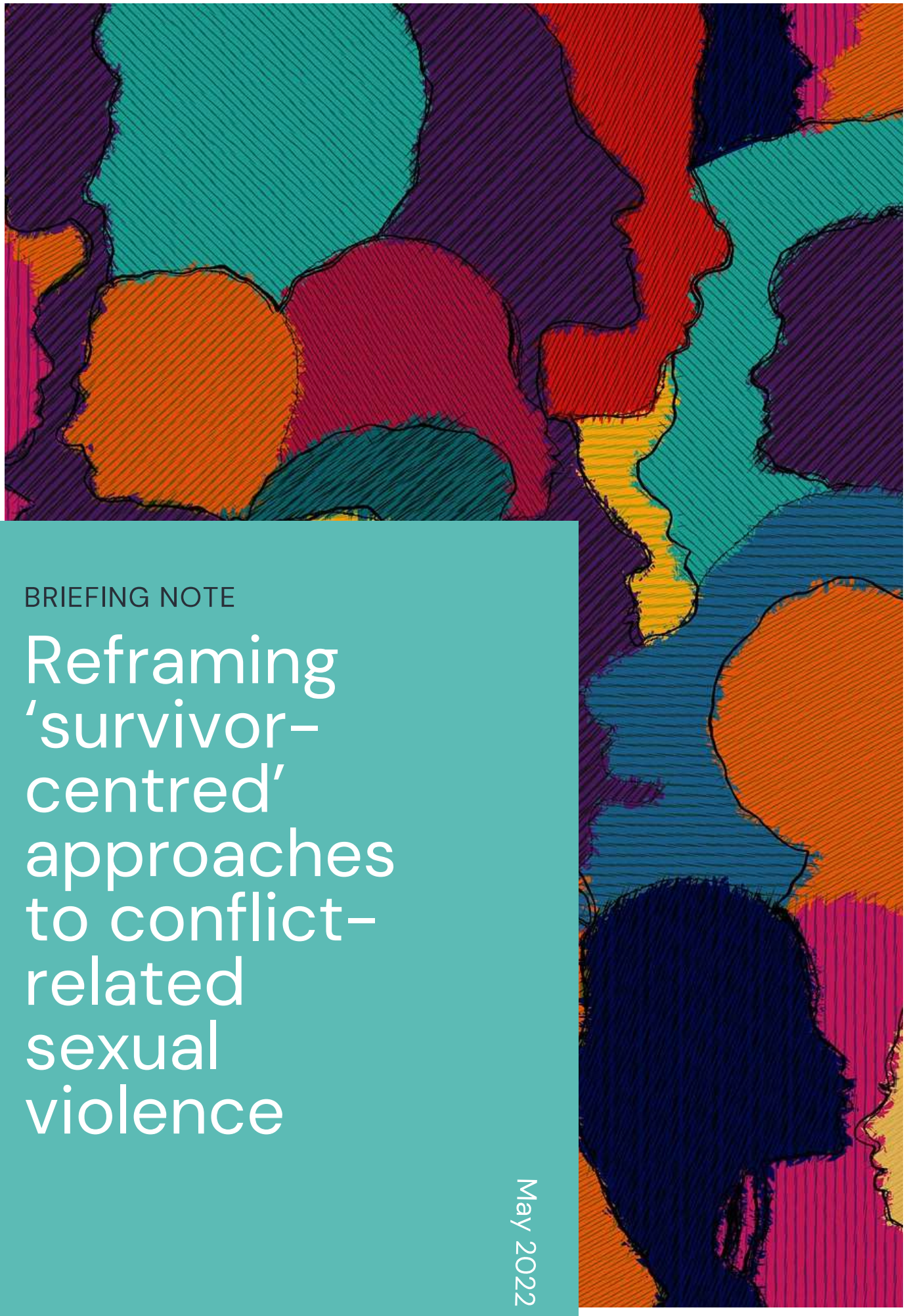

BRIEFING NOTE

Reframing 'survivor-centred' approaches to conflict-related sexual violence

May 2022

Reframing 'survivor-centred' approaches to conflict-related sexual violence

Executive summary

- **We need a new way of thinking about support for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. Comprehensive interventions must not only consider the needs of the individual, but also the social ecologies and networks that support resilience and more sustainable long-term solutions.**
- **A full evidence-based review should be conducted into how governments, intergovernmental organisations and NGOs provide truly holistic support for survivors.**
- **Existing codes and protocols should be amended to reflect the importance of sustaining and strengthening survivors' social ecologies.**
- **The above recommendations should be supported with a new framework for evaluating the efficacy of survivor-centred CRSV projects in the context of strengthening social ecologies.**

Background

At the international policy level, there is a growing emphasis on the need for a 'survivor-centred approach' to dealing with conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) – terminology that the United Nations Security Council itself adopted in **resolution 2467** (2019) as part of its Women, Peace and Security agenda.

Given that survivors of CRSV have historically been neglected and marginalised, the idea of centring these women and men is unquestionably a step forward. It is striking, however, that there has been very little critical discussion regarding a survivor-centred approach – and some of its limitations. Besides practical issues relating to operationalisation, there are three significant issues with the basic idea of a survivor-centred approach to CRSV.

First, current discourse and interventions are heavily focused on providing what survivors lack – e.g., medical, legal, economic and psychological support. The problem is that this emphasis on deficits can potentially perpetuate a cycle of reliance and dependency on NGOs and outside actors. This is detrimental to survivors in the long term.

Second, discussions regarding the need for a survivor-centred approach to CRSV frequently overlook the fact that survivors often have valuable resources in their lives, including faith and spirituality, families, NGOs or women's associations and particular places. These resources underscore the importance of survivors' **social ecologies** – meaning everything that they have around them (spiritually, emotionally, physically, practically). 'Centring' survivors risks marginalising the social ecologies that are such a crucial part of these individuals' lives – and which can support them in dealing with their experiences and moving forward. It is also essential to recognise some of the ways that survivors themselves often support and give back to their social ecologies – e.g., through caring practices, leadership work and advocacy.

Third, CRSV and war/armed conflict more broadly necessarily affect survivors' social ecologies, from families and communities to relationships and the environment. Hence, a 'survivor-centred approach' to CRSV is not a comprehensive approach. Per **Mertens and Pardy**, 'addressing individual needs can only ever be a partial response because the community and eco-systems they are part of are crucial in addressing the collective trauma of sexual violence.'

This policy brief – which draws on the findings of a **five-year research study** focused on Bosnia-Herzegovina, Colombia and Uganda – is not advocating the abandonment of a survivor-centred approach. Rather, it is calling for a new way of thinking about survivor-centred support for survivors of CRSV – one that recognises the importance not just of survivors themselves (and their needs), but also of the social ecologies with which their lives are deeply interconnected. This is where resilience fits in.

Interestingly, resilience has received very little attention in the context of CRSV, and references to it often reflect the common idea of individuals 'bouncing back' from adversity. However, such individual-centred approaches to resilience – which emphasise strength, courage, determination, etc. – are out of step with much of the resilience literature. Scholarship increasingly understands resilience as a relational and interactive process between individuals and their social ecologies. In short, individuals do not show resilience in isolation. They do so through the connections that they have with their social ecologies – and with the support and protective resources that these social ecologies actively provide.

The crucial point is that it is essential to support not only survivors of CRSV but also, as much as possible, to strengthen and invest in their social ecologies (e.g., their children, their communities, the organisations they lead or are involved in, the natural environment). In other words, survivor-centred approaches alone are not enough. What is needed are social-ecological approaches that potentially foster resilience and provide more sustainable long-term responses to the challenges of CRSV.

Recommendations

1) Conduct a thorough evidence-based investigation into best sustainable practice for survivor-centred approaches

A comprehensive review of survivor-centred approaches should be undertaken to investigate the value of a more sustainable long-term way of thinking about CRSV. This review should include input from NGOs, governments, academia and in-country survivor groups.

A more effective and efficient use of resources will yield better outcomes for both survivors and donors – be they states or organisations. Because supportive social ecologies are essential for resilience, approaches to CRSV that invest in and build resources within these social ecologies will support more long-term and sustainable approaches.

With that in mind, more attention should be given to the resources that survivors have in their lives and to possible ways of strengthening, supporting and investing in these resources.

This could be done through a group of multidisciplinary experts from different international settings, with a core focus on:

- Responding to the urgent need for greater critical discussion about the nature of survivor-centred approaches, their limitations and their long-term sustainability.
- Overseeing detailed evaluations of survivor-centred approaches in practice. These in-depth analyses and investigations of survivor-centred approaches will help to identify important practical issues relating to implementation and will highlight what is truly delivered by the current 'norm' for CRSV responses.

2) Undertake a review of existing codes and protocols to ensure an appropriate understanding of, and focus on, social ecologies

UN Resolution 2467 includes some provisions that point to the importance of survivors' wider social ecologies. Point 16(c) is aimed at preventing the marginalisation of survivors and their families, as well as assisting the social and economic reintegration of survivors and their children. Point 17 refers to the importance of supporting civil society (local women-led organisations, religious and community leaders, youth-led organisations).

However, these points are not prominent enough, nor do they provide sufficient guidance on how such support could be implemented in different contexts (cultural, geographic or otherwise).

Survivors' needs, and the problems and challenges that they often continue to face, are intimately linked to, and shaped by, their wider social ecologies. Similarly, wider social-ecological harms can reinforce and exacerbate the harms done to survivors. It is important, therefore, to extend the concept of a survivor-centred approach beyond individual victimisation and harms. In practical terms, this means recognising the many and complex ways that CRSV affects family dynamics, community relationships, cultural practices, ways of life and natural resources.

Existing codes and protocols should be reviewed, and updated where appropriate, to acknowledge the importance of social ecologies and to provide guidance on how to develop interventions that practically address the significance of survivors' social ecologies. This should be overseen by a panel of experts from different backgrounds, countries and disciplines, and done so in a manner that understands the importance of context-specific implementation.

3) Develop a framework for evaluating future CRSV projects and how effectively they build resilience through social-ecological approaches

Proper evaluation of interventions to prevent sexual violence in conflict is difficult. In recent years, the chronic underreporting of CRSV, due to stigma, insecurity, fear of reprisals, and lack of services, has been compounded by COVID-19 containment measures.

However, evaluating the benefit of CRSV projects for survivors and their communities can be done by developing a consistent framework.

Per the above recommendations, this framework would need to be centred on asking the right questions of survivors and placing an emphasis on long-term resilience over reliance. This represents a shift away from asking survivors questions only or primarily about their problems, needs and priorities to also asking them questions about their social ecologies, and how these ecologies help to support and sustain them. This would give new and important insights into survivors' everyday lives.

Establishing a global framework for evaluating support for survivors of CRSV would allow for more effective analysis of existing interventions and facilitate the sharing of best practice between states and donor organisations.

About the author

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This briefing note is largely informed by a landmark five-year European Research Council (ERC) project, led by Professor Clark, entitled **A Comparative Study of Resilience in Survivors of War Rape and Sexual Violence: New Directions for Transitional Justice.**

Fieldwork was supported by the following organisations: Snaga Žene, the Centre for Democracy and Transitional Justice, and the Association of War Victims Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina; Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres, Profamilia, Colombia Diversa, Red de Mujeres Víctimas y Profesionales and Asociación El Meta con Mirada de Mujer in Colombia; and Facilitation for Peace and Development (FAPAD) and the Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) in Uganda.

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