

## **Contribution for the report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education on safety as an element of the right to education and a precondition for its full realization**

### ***Safety in education as a form of reparation for children affected by conflict-related sexual violence***

#### **Introduction**

1. GSF was established in 2019 by Denis Mukwege and Nadia Murad, Nobel Peace Prize laureates 2018. Its mission is to enhance access to reparations for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence around the globe and ensure they receive comprehensive reparative measures in the interim. GSF's work is grounded in its unique co-creation model and survivor-centric approach.<sup>1</sup>
2. This contribution focuses on safety as a core element of education as a form of reparation for children affected by conflict-related sexual violence,<sup>2</sup> although some considerations are relevant for other children affected by crises and conflicts globally. This submission draws on GSF's project work, its Global Reparation Study<sup>3</sup> and additional research.

#### **I. Education as a form of reparation**

3. Conflict is widely recognised as one of the biggest factors disrupting children's access to education globally. For children affected by sexual violence in war the challenges are further exacerbated. The impact of sexual violence on children is profound, long-lasting, and multidimensional. It extends beyond the immediate physical harm; sexual violence causes long-lasting emotional and psychological distress, hampers their social integration, and jeopardises their overall well-being.<sup>4</sup> Due to societal shame and discriminatory norms, child victims are often stigmatised, ostracised and revictimised by their communities.

---

<sup>1</sup> GSF, 'Annual Report 2023' (2024), [https://www.globalsurvivorsfund.org/fileadmin/uploads/gsf/Documents/Resources/Reports/AR\\_2023\\_ENG\\_web\\_double\\_pages.pdf](https://www.globalsurvivorsfund.org/fileadmin/uploads/gsf/Documents/Resources/Reports/AR_2023_ENG_web_double_pages.pdf) and GSF, 'Strategic Plan 2024-2030' (2024), [https://www.globalsurvivorsfund.org/fileadmin/uploads/gsf/Documents/Resources/Reports/Strategic\\_plan\\_24-30\\_web\\_DP.pdf](https://www.globalsurvivorsfund.org/fileadmin/uploads/gsf/Documents/Resources/Reports/Strategic_plan_24-30_web_DP.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Children affected by conflict-related sexual violence represent a diverse and largely invisible community that includes children who were victimised, children born of rape, children who have witnessed sexual violence, and children whose caregivers have suffered sexual violence.

<sup>3</sup> Global Reparations Studies accessible here: <https://www.globalsurvivorsfund.org/how-we-work/know/>.

<sup>4</sup> GSF, Briefing on reparation for children born of conflict-related sexual violence, exploring survivor's perspectives from the Global Reparations Study (2024), [https://www.globalsurvivorsfund.org/fileadmin/uploads/gsf/Documents/Resources/Policy\\_Briefs/Briefing\\_on\\_children\\_born\\_of\\_CRSV\\_web\\_Final.pdf](https://www.globalsurvivorsfund.org/fileadmin/uploads/gsf/Documents/Resources/Policy_Briefs/Briefing_on_children_born_of_CRSV_web_Final.pdf)

4. These challenges severely disrupt the education of children affected by conflict-related sexual violence. They often dropout from school due to unwanted pregnancy, the bullying, stigmatisation, fear, and depression they experience. For children who return from captivity or displacement, years of missed schooling frequently result in age gaps, with their age no longer matching their educational grade level. For children born of conflict-related sexual violence, specific additional challenges to access education can arise from a lack of legal identity and nationality, rights often denied to them. This leads to extreme poverty and exposes them to further violations, including sexual exploitation or recruitment by armed groups.
5. While education could be an essential element in their healing process, it is incredibly difficult for children and young people affected by conflict-related sexual violence to simply return to school and resume their studies. For them to re-enter the education system, significant efforts are needed to overcome the many obstacles they face.
6. Under international law, all victims of gross violations of international human rights law and serious violations of international humanitarian law, including conflict-related sexual violence, have a right to adequate, effective and prompt reparation, which includes restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition<sup>5</sup>. The right to reparation of children was further recognised by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its General Comment No.5 in line with Article 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which states that *"where rights are found to have been breached, there should be appropriate reparation, including compensation, and, where needed, measures to promote physical and psychological recovery, rehabilitation and reintegration"*.<sup>6</sup>
7. From GSF work around the world, it emerges that education-related measures are frequently mentioned by victims and survivors as a critical need and a desired form of reparation for them and their children. As mentioned by a survivor from Nepal, *"we need immediate support for our children's education. Children are the future of our country."*<sup>7</sup> Education as a form of reparations is not only a mean to acquire knowledge but offers a pathway from trauma to recovery, economic empowerment, reintegration and recognition.
8. Education is also essential to long-term peacebuilding. Many victims who drop out of school are isolated and stigmatised, leaving them vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups. Investing in education breaks this cycle, reintegrating children into society and opening doors to economic opportunities that can secure a brighter future.

---

<sup>5</sup> [UN Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law](#), (2005).

<sup>6</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.5 General measures of implementation of the convention on the rights of the child (2003)

<sup>7</sup> Elena Naughton and Dr. Susan Risal, 'Nepal Study on the Status of and Opportunities for Reparations for Victims and Survivors of Conflict-related Sexual Violence', (Conflict Victim Women's National Network, Global Survivors Fund, International Center for Transitional Justice and Nagarik Aawaz, June 2022), (GRS Nepal), p. 66, [https://www.globalsurvivorsfund.org/fileadmin/uploads/gsf/Documents/Resources/Global\\_Reparation\\_Studies/GSF\\_Report\\_Nepal\\_EN\\_June2022\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.globalsurvivorsfund.org/fileadmin/uploads/gsf/Documents/Resources/Global_Reparation_Studies/GSF_Report_Nepal_EN_June2022_WEB.pdf).

9. Effective education-focused reparation requires trauma-responsive approaches, flexible, accessible and inclusive learning environments, financial support and engagement with caregivers and communities.

*"I stopped being a teenager and became a mother. [...] we could no longer study. [...] I know that if I hadn't had to become a single mother when I was a child, I would have been able to study. [...] I could be someone today. I could have prepared myself to get a job." A Columbian survivor of conflict-related sexual violence<sup>8</sup>*

## **II. Safety in education as a form of reparation**

10. Safety is a cornerstone of education as a form of reparation and a critical precondition for its full realisation. For children affected by conflict-related sexual violence, safety in education takes on a multidimensional significance. Beyond physical safety, it encompasses emotional and psychological safety as well as social safety, offering pathways to healing, dignity, and inclusion. It is critical to create an environment that protect them from harm, acknowledges their unique vulnerabilities, and supports their healing and development. Without safety, the foundational conditions for children's entry or re-entry in the education system are compromised, undermining not only educational outcomes but also broader efforts to achieve reparation.
11. Education as a form of reparation can only be achieved when the educational environment is responsive to their unique needs and provides the following elements of safety, which are interlinked and mutually reinforcing:

### **a. Physical safety:**

12. Children affected by conflict-related sexual violence often face bullying, stigmatisation and discrimination. Schools and educational spaces must therefore guarantee protection from all violence, harassment, and bullying. This includes implementing preventive measures to reduce the risk of further harm or re-victimisation, adopting clear anti-violence and anti-bullying policies, establishing alert systems for reporting incidents, and fostering school-wide campaigns to combat biases and stereotypes associated with sexual violence (*see infra*). Additionally, teachers must be trained to recognise and address bullying.
13. Because children affected by conflict-related sexual violence are more at risk of recruitment by armed groups, schools must also act as zones of peace. This requires raising awareness about the dangers of recruitment.

### **b. Emotional and psychological safety:**

---

<sup>8</sup> Clara Sandoval Villalba and others, 'Study on the situation and opportunities of the right to reparation for victims and survivors of conflict-related sexual and reproductive violence in Colombia', (Asociación de Mujeres Afrodescendientes del Norte del Cauca, Caribe Afirmativo, Genfami and Global Survivors Fund, June 2022), p. 37, [https://www.globalsurvivorsfund.org/fileadmin/uploads/gsf/Documents/Resources/Global\\_Reparation\\_Studies/GSFReportColombia\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.globalsurvivorsfund.org/fileadmin/uploads/gsf/Documents/Resources/Global_Reparation_Studies/GSFReportColombia_ENG.pdf)

14. For children affected by conflict-related sexual violence, it is crucial to provide trauma-responsive education, prioritising emotional safety and fostering an environment where children feel valued, supported, and understood. Trauma-responsive education recognises the profound intersections between learning and healing, creating spaces where children can rebuild trust, and resilience. This involves addressing stigmatisation, providing access to mental health support, including counsellors trained in trauma, and training teachers to recognise and respond to trauma with sensitivity.
15. A supportive school environment helps rebuild shattered self-esteem, offers a safe space for emotional recovery and provides a sense of belonging, something desperately needed after a person has been cut off from their communities by stigma and trauma.

### **c. Social safety:**

16. Addressing stigmatisation and discrimination at the community level, including in schools, is crucial to ensure respectful treatment of children affected by conflict-related sexual violence. Caregivers and communities must therefore be engaged to challenge discriminatory and stigmatising taboos and emphasise the importance of education as a neutral and protected space. Survivors themselves insist that without awareness campaigns, education in itself will not suffice to re-integrate their children. This was stressed by a survivor in Uganda who stated that *"if the government decides to give our children free education, that will still not be enough if there is stigma in schools because their fellow students will still be mocking them, at the end of the day they will fail to concentrate in class or even perform poorly and come back home eventually. So there is a need for sensitisation of teachers to ensure that children born from captivity feel welcomed in schools, give them guidance and counselling, talk to their fellow students not to stigmatise such students because it discourages, this will help them pursue their education"*.<sup>9</sup>

***"Educated people can help everyone. They can help their community; they can help the whole world. The help they can provide is very wide, unlike people who are uneducated. Educated people can help their family, their society, and their whole world. That's why education has so much value."* - A Syrian survivor of conflict-related sexual violence<sup>10</sup>**

### **III. Case study: Nigeria**

---

<sup>9</sup> Marianne Akumu and others, 'Uganda Study on Opportunities for Reparations for Survivors of Conflict-related Sexual Violence', (Global Survivors Fund, International Center for Transitional Justice and Women's Advocacy Network, May 2022), (GRS Uganda), p. [https://www.globalsurvivorsfund.org/fileadmin/uploads/gsf/Documents/Resources/Global\\_Reparation\\_Studies/GSF\\_Report\\_Uganda\\_EN\\_May2022\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.globalsurvivorsfund.org/fileadmin/uploads/gsf/Documents/Resources/Global_Reparation_Studies/GSF_Report_Uganda_EN_May2022_WEB.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Testimony from a survivor from Colombia collected as part of the GRS, [https://www.globalsurvivorsfund.org/fileadmin/uploads/gsf/Documents/Resources/Global\\_Reparation\\_Studies/GSF\\_Report\\_SYRIA\\_EN\\_Sept2023\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.globalsurvivorsfund.org/fileadmin/uploads/gsf/Documents/Resources/Global_Reparation_Studies/GSF_Report_SYRIA_EN_Sept2023_WEB.pdf).

17. Since 2009, Boko Haram has employed sexual violence as a weapon of war and used the kidnapping of young schoolgirls to propagate their extremist anti-western education rhetoric. Many were abducted from schools, from their parent's homes, from farms and markets, and other public places. In captivity they were subjected to rape, forced incest, forced marriages, forced pregnancies, sexual slavery, and other forms of conflict-related sexual violence. After escaping or being rescued, the women and girls are seen as tainted and often referred to as "Boko Haram wives". Their children, born to Boko Haram fighters, are cast off, not to be touched and not allowed to associate with other children, which has a devastating impact on their access education.
18. To address the dire needs of these women and their children, GSF and its in-country partner, the Neem Foundation are implementing an education as reparations project, as part of the broader [interim reparative measures](#) project in Nigeria. Through this initiative, 200 children affected by conflict-related sexual violence, between the ages of 8 and 16, now access trauma-informed education. Because, traditional age-based classroom structures don't adequately address the diverse learning needs of children affected by conflict-related sexual violence, who may have missed substantial periods of schooling and experience trauma that affects their ability to learn, trauma-informed education seeks to create a safe and supportive learning environment that promotes healing, resilience, and academic success. This involves providing a safe space for learning while simultaneously building trustworthiness, respect, and transparency. With this model, children feel valued, and teachers are sensitive to their cultural and gender differences, thereby creating a learning environment that highlights children's abilities to enable them regain competence and confidence.
19. The project also recognises that education and psychosocial support have a dynamic and mutually reinforcing relationship. Children have access to psychosocial support and therapeutic interventions to cope with traumatic experiences and build resilience. Psychosocial support is embedded in a curriculum which aligns personal values with learning objectives and break down complex topics into smaller, manageable chunks of information. Microlearning modules are used to present information in short, focused bursts to enhance retention.
20. Capacity strengthening for teachers is also an integral part of the project. Comprehensive training programmes are provided for teachers and counsellors, focusing on modern teaching methodologies, child-centred approaches, inclusive education, and effective classroom management. Teachers are also strengthened with skills on solution-focused therapy, basic counselling skills, and working with adolescents with depression and mental health issues.

***"I want to resume school because if I finish school and graduate, then Boko Haram will not have won. I will then be the winner."*** - a survivor of conflict-related sexual violence  
from Nigeria