

International Women's Day Statement

“SGBV, being a deliberate and brutal act, is capable of causing long-term trauma to victims and communities in general. Accordingly, it is crucial to not let this crime go unpunished. In Ukraine, however, SGBV survivors have reported that their cases remained uninvestigated for years. When cases are being investigated, investigators and prosecutors demonstrate critically low levels of awareness of SGBV crimes and best practices in such cases. This must change if Ukraine wants to successfully investigate and prosecute SGBV cases”.

Anna Mykytenko

On International Women's Day, Global Rights Compliance ('GRC') and Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice ('WIGJ') express concern for the [real possibility that sexual and gender-based violence](#) ('SGBV') will occur within the context of Russia's most recent invasion of Ukraine and the continuing [conflict](#) and [refugee crisis](#). Since the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014, instances of SGBV have been recorded by human rights activists, and the number is likely to increase. GRC and WIGJ urge the international community to centre the voices of women and girls in their response to the current crisis; ensure the recognition and contemporaneous documentation of all types of SGBV in line with international best practices on the collection of evidence; and pursue all available avenues for accountability of such crimes.

SGBV almost always accompanies conflict, is frequently used as a 'weapon of war' and includes acts such as rape, enforced prostitution and other physical and non-physical acts of a sexual nature. Depending on the context in which these acts are perpetrated, they can amount to [war crimes or crimes against humanity](#) and can also be used as a [means of torture or persecution](#). While SGBV is not solely perpetrated against women and girls, they are often the main victims of such violence.

Since the conflict began in 2014, [SGBV has been prevalent](#) in conflict-affected areas of eastern Ukraine, with [individuals being subjected](#) to sexualised torture, rape, forced nudity, prolonged detention in unsanitary conditions with members of the opposite sex and threats of sexual violence towards detainees or their relatives to force confessions. For example, from 14 March 2014 to 31 January 2017, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights ('OHCHR') [documented](#) a number of cases of SGBV in Donbas and Crimea and concluded that the majority of cases illustrated that sexual violence was used as a method of torture and ill-treatment in the context of detention. Cases of SGBV have also been recorded in Crimea. In the current crisis, instances of sexual violence are likely to increase across Ukraine.

In addition, maximum available measures should be taken to protect refugees at the borders from human trafficking and subsequent enforced prostitution, instances of which have already been reported.

Considering the propensity for SGBV to arise in situations of armed conflict, such as that currently occurring in Ukraine, the need to ensure that evidence of any acts of SGBV are effectively collated is

all the more significant. In the context of Ukraine, sexual violence has often been [under-reported](#) due to factors including the stigma surrounding SGBV, the trauma associated with reporting violations, lack of the relevant training and skills among the law enforcement and other documenting agencies, and a lack of access to conflict-affected areas. The ability to [ensure confidentiality](#) of those who report acts of SGBV is vital. Additionally, protection initiatives geared towards women and girls should begin immediately, regardless of whether cases have been reported, in order to help prevent the perpetration of SGBV in Ukraine and in the host countries to which refugees have fled. All available attempts should also be made to provide services and support to survivors of SGBV, this includes survivors of previous instances of SGBV that have been forced to flee Ukraine and risk re-traumatisation, or those who have recently experienced SGBV.

In light of the grave situation women and girls currently face in Ukraine, GRC and WIGJ call for:

- Women's full and meaningful participation in all decision-making processes and humanitarian responses to the situation in Ukraine;
- The contemporaneous documentation of SGBV and a [survivor-centred approach](#) to evidence collection;
- The amplification of the voices and agency of women and girls, both of those in Ukraine and those who have fled;
- Understanding that women facing conflict/violence also include responders, activists, peacebuilders, etc.;
- Education on the gendered dimension of the conflict and Ukrainian society for all responders; and
- Particular attention to be paid to: women of colour, women and children with disabilities, the LGBTQIA+ community, sex workers, undocumented people, refugees and all others facing discrimination.