

The body of Ukrainian women: a battle field

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« *The actual scale of these crimes remains unknown* »

I am one of the women who suffered from the aggression of the Russian Federation in Donbas since 2014. We are 20 survivors in the SEMA network. Others were killed and buried. **And while I am writing about this, the Russian military has been torturing and raping women in the occupied territory of Donbas for almost 9 years.**

The actual scale of these crimes remains unknown, because none of the international human rights organizations had real access there. However, those liberated areas that have been under occupation since the beginning of the invasion in February and March 2022 leave us no room for optimism.

I also want to remind you about the survivors of the CRSV since 2014. After being released from captivity, these women lived all these years under the threat of the next Russian attack. Many, under this threat, did not dare to speak out loud about what they had experienced, about their psychological and physical injuries. And those who, thanks to the support of SEMA, still spoke - never got access to justice and psychologically suffer a lot from the feeling of impunity. Also, these women live in constant anxiety and danger.

7 years have passed, but I remember every story as if I had just heard it. There was the rape of a pregnant woman and pregnancy due to rape, introduction of complete drug addiction during the week of rape and drug injections and murder after abuse, those who were forced to observe rape. All this is primarily about humiliation, abuse, torture.

Between the 2014 context and today, there are more differences in the modus operandi of the crimes committed than there are similarities. As before, violence is committed at gunpoint and threats against the victims.

However, the similarities end there and the differences begin. **The range of cruelty** – from babies to the elderly; rape in various ways; high number of murders after rapes. If in 2014 there were recorded cases when militants and Russian officers stopped the violence, then in 2022 there are certain grounds to claim that the leadership - military and political - not only does not stop, but also encourages violence.

The attitude towards the facts of the CRSV has also changed significantly. First, the mass of discovered cases, because their concentration in villages and small towns of the agrarian zone was much higher, and therefore more visible to the community. Then, the breakdown of public consciousness from treating the CRSV as something “hidden and shameful” for the survivor to outrageous in relation to the aggressor and deep pity for the survivors. Finally, **a change in the attitude of governmental authorities thanks to the attention of the international community** - Pramila Patten, Denis Mukwege, and others.

Those killed and wounded during the war are heroines and heroes. They deserve respect and support. We have to do everything to make it so. Our vulnerability must be turned into our weapon.



Iryna Dovhan at the Stand Speak Rise Up! forum in 2019



Olena Suslova at the Stand Speak Rise Up! gala in Biarritz, 2022