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Innovating to respond better - using digital technology to help victims of conflict-related sexual violence

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Sexual violence used as a weapon of war has always been present in conflict situations. It is a silent weapon and often renders its victims invisible. It is a weapon that causes multiple explosions, affecting not only the victim but also her family, her community and the whole of society. **Often referred to as "war rape", sexual violence in conflict can be military or political strategies in their own right.**

These rapes are crimes. It must be said that it is very rare for a conflict to not feature rape. While conflict-related sexual violence (CRS) has always existed, today it represents a political and/or military strategy, a phenomenon that is almost endemic in all contemporary conflicts. **It occurs in war but also in fragile environments such as migration routes, refugee camps or during political crises.** Conflict situations and the absence of the rule of law create a situation in which insecurity and therefore impunity prevail. It is in this context that rape can become related to mass crime, so it is also necessary to work on a preventive basis and to innovate in order to better respond to these issues, including restoring dignity to the victims.

With little or no access to either justice or care, the stigma and trauma that rape generates cannot be treated immediately, as it should. Victims then hide in silence, evidence disappears and the crime becomes a perfect crime: impossible to prove. A kind of collective silence, coupled with the taboo of sexual violence, deprives victims of a voice and a response to the crimes committed. War rape has a devastating impact on individual victims and on society. If left unaddressed and unprosecuted, the violence continues to escalate, and a rape culture takes hold in countries where war rape has taken place, long after conflicts have ended. Witnessing the rapes - which often take place in public or in front of family members, children and young adults - integrate these acts as a norm. This plants the seeds in the fertile ground of violence, with this malaise growing throughout society.

And yet, the crime of rape is still too often considered as being of secondary concern, and is still the least prosecuted crime at the judicial level. This is due to a lack of evidence and, above all, a lack of good approaches to identifying and allowing victims to express themselves, according to their needs.

In recent years, sexual violence in conflict has become a global public issue that is much more widely discussed, both in terms of international public policy and in the media. This is due to the ongoing work of civil society groups, but particularly survivors themselves who are speaking out and will no longer accept being relegated to the status of mere "victims". Although this progress is a significant step forward, bitterness remains. Although there is much more talk about these crimes, the situation remains virtually the same and the phenomenon is not diminishing. Moreover, although the subject has become more accessible, there is almost no data on the extent of sexual violence linked to conflicts in the

« *The reality on the grounds contrasts with this global awareness* »

world, its modus operandi, the profile of the perpetrators, the exact number of victims, etc.

So how can we respond to these issues when there is so little reliable data? How can we enable victims to express themselves and report these rapes without them feeling pressured or having to do so through intermediaries? How can we ensure that beyond international conferences and declarations, effective responses are funded and implemented on the ground? How can we develop innovative tools to address these issues and thus provide more sustainable, effective and impactful solutions? Because other options don't work.

To date, we estimate that over 80% of rape victims live in areas which are hard to reach. At worst, cases perpetrated in these locations are never identified. At best, they are identified and located, but only weeks or months after the crime was committed. **The conflict in Ukraine has shown us how complex it can be to find out what is happening to women and girls in areas under military occupation.** The lack of access to services renders them unable to report their plight and these crimes, not to mention the issue of evidence not being protected. There is also currently in Ukraine, as in many countries, a strong reluctance on the part of victims to come forward and report what they

have suffered. And this is exactly where we have failed. This is also true of domestic and marital sexual violence.

Spending a lot of time in the field, in very different geographical areas (including Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East), I have noticed that it is too often expected that the victims themselves will go to the care centres, that they will speak out and that they will be able to tell doctors, lawyers, NGOs, etc. what they have experienced. However, most of the time they cannot or do not want to interact with third parties, as the trauma, fear, taboos, and shame are so great. Moreover, in many places, victims are in areas that are not easily accessible, do not always have the means to move around and are faced with high risks to their safety. This means that care professionals are not in contact with them. This leads to situations that could be described as absurd. While it is a fact that some countries lack appropriate and functional structures and services, it is often forgotten that others have them but often fail to identify and locate victims, or to put in place the right approaches to be able to support them.

Even though sexual violence linked to conflicts is still mostly committed in countries where institutions are weak. These institutions are not able to respond to the needs of victims and support the professionals in the field. Finally, when complaints are filed, victims are sometimes directly confronted with the perpetrator, who is sometimes a state actor.

In order to respond to these challenges, we need to become aware of the trauma that rape generates and the contexts in which it is committed. Above all, we need to listen to these victims by ceasing to impose injunctions and by adapting OUR approaches to THEIR needs. Current programmes are still based too much on old processes, which do not necessarily correspond to the reality of needs. In addition, too many court cases are unsuccessful due to a lack of evidence. Yet local activists, investigators, doctors, etc. have direct access to valuable information without knowing where, with whom, or how to use it. Others, such as documentary journalists or NGOs, meet survivors and collect testimonies without having the means, knowledge or networks to use this information for the benefit of victims. The risk that some activists or witnesses may disappear or be killed means that they need to be provided with secure, easy-to-use backup tools for the material they collect, thus enabling them to use their work. Finally, the victims themselves are capable of giving a great deal of information very quickly after the event. They often lose this capacity quickly afterwards due to the effects of the trauma, the traumatic memory and the triggering of the psyche, which, for survival purposes, blocks certain images and memories. Time is therefore of the essence.

Technological progress can be criticised legitimately, but mainly because it is developed for lucrative markets. Why can't concepts such as Uber, WhatsApp, Twitter, Doctolib or Airbnb also be conceived and developed for the general public interest? Digital technologies such as smart mobile phones can be found all over the world, often contrary to popular belief. Particularly in developing countries, beyond being merely a communication tool, a smart phone is often a key element

of information and daily life.

We are NOT Weapons of War innovates to solve problems of general interest. Since its creation, it has been interested in digital technology and new approaches in order to have a greater impact. This is required in the face of this phenomenon, which continues to grow and for which the responses remain largely ineffective. **Digital technology has thus emerged as the ideal means of responding to the challenges of conflict-related sexual violence, with the idea of using digital technology to benefit the victims themselves.** From this was born the BackUp concept: a transversal project that responds directly to these problems and is based on three tools that work together:

- A web application for reporting and identification. It has a simple questionnaire but lists the essential elements. It is secure and continuously accessible via any tool (phone, tablet, computer, etc.) and is intended for a) survivors who wish to report crimes and be assisted by local and international intermediaries (medical, psychosocial and judicial services), b) relatives who wish to file reports, and c) third parties (relatives, witnesses, activists, journalists, doctors, researchers, etc.) who witness crimes. The tool was developed over a period of 4 years by the company Intech in cooperation with WWoW, with the support of the Foundation of H.R.H. The Grand Duchess of Luxembourg, the Luxembourg Business Partnership Facility and several private donors. It has been piloted with very positive results in Burundi, Rwanda, Guinea Conakry and Libya in 2019 and 2020, funded by the French Development Agency. BackUp was developed by and for survivors who actively participated in creating its content and functionality to best suit their needs. And it was a Syrian refugee who was in charge of developing its design. Many of the survivors in the pilot phase stressed the importance of being able to testify without having to face anyone, without pressure and in the way they chose.
- BackOffice is another aspect of BackUp, which collects, centralises and secures data received which is then classified and analysed with the help of artificial intelligence. The finalised testimonies and files are authenticated, recorded and archived on the blockchain, in order to ensure the inalterability and non-repudiation of the evidence. It also makes it possible to quantify and give a voice to victims, with elements that come directly from the field and therefore do not go through intermediaries. In the long run, BackUp also builds the story of all these survivors around the world and gives them the voice they do not have. BackUp also makes it possible to measure the extent of sexual violence in the world in real time, and thus to produce reliable data that can better orient needs and therefore support programmes, and even become a long-term warning tool.

Finally, it is a professional collaborative platform, a tandem of the mobile web-application which, through private access, federates and coordinates professionals, through a specialised hotline.

It leads to the exchange and sharing of experiences, good practices and information in a secure manner. It will include a professional directory and a database to create a network of specialised experts who can be mobilised quickly. The pooling and authentication of the resources collected and shared will soon enable the creation of the first International Observatory on Conflict-related Sexual Violence (IOCSV). This platform still needs to be developed.

At the institutional and individual level, BackUp is therefore an accelerator of justice in the broadest sense. Above all it is a tool that gives a voice to victims throughout the world, by enabling them to say: "my name is Solange, Irina or Salma, I exist and this is my story". BackUp increases, facilitates and multiplies people's ability to reach out. Moreover, it gives back dignity and a voice to those who are silenced by their embarrassment. It is about wanting to hear what humanity is capable of doing and to help us open our eyes, and, finally, respond to these silent cries... This tool must now be deployed worldwide, and this requires resources that WWoW does not have.

Encouraging survivors to speak out requires us to be equal to the task. We can no longer turn a blind eye.