



## The body of Ukrainian women : a battlefield

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I am a representative of the Ukrainian SEMA network, we are 20 survivors. Others were killed and buried. I am one of the women who suffered from the aggression of the Russian Federation in Donbas since 2014. 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. According to all previous data, there are a lot of such cases and new cases are constantly becoming known. I hope that they will not remain unpunished, that new victims will see the trials of criminals.

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. Because Russia does not like to leave witnesses of its crimes alive. **No one knows the extent of the violence in the territories occupied since 2014, but what is known now after the invasion is horrifying and impressive.**

Life under constant threat destroys the health of women who, even before the invasion in 2022, did not have access to medical care. We would like to hope that Ukraine will be able to protect and support its survivors of sexual violence. That our country will be a leading example of responding to the needs of victims of violence against women since 2014, by creating compensation programs and comprehensive mechanisms as a whole.

Already the first days of spring and summer 2014 brought terrible news about abuse, torture, kidnapping, and murder. For feminist organizations, the question immediately arose - were there any news related to the CRSV? These issues became practical after the beginning of anti-terrorist operation and the liberation of some towns and villages of Donetsk and Luhansk regions - Kramatorsk, Sloviansk, Druzhkivka, Rubizhny, etc. However, the first documentation group went to Donetsk region only in August 2015. There were several reasons for this - general confusion, the threat of escalation of aggression, the absence of civil society organizations that could act as partners in contacts with the local population (the regime of President Yanukovich significantly limited the real development of civil society organizations in these two regions. The active development of civil society in this region is precisely at the time of the aggression of the Russian federation).

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The monitoring report for documentation was organized and conducted by the Ukrainian Helsinki Union for Human Rights and the Women's Information Consultative Center. 38 people (18 women and 20 men) were interviewed. Approximately 15-20% have experienced sexualized violence, witnessed it, or know it from reliable sources.

*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, imitation of sexual intercourse and threat of rape, forced to undress and forced to observe rape. All this is primarily about humiliation, abuse, torture. At the time, I also drew attention to the fact that women who had once been threatened with rape, after a repeated threat at gunpoint, perceived it as a second rape. The CRSV is very different from other types of violence. If your leg is broken, it will hurt and be outrageous or offensive. Over time, the pain passes, emotions are subdued. Everything is different with SNPK... - Olena Suslova*

The few reports that followed, particularly from international organizations, were based on secondary data, so it is very difficult to assess the extent of the suffering.

**If the documentation had certain limitations and shortcomings in the process, then the investigation into the atrocities of the Russian army was generally not conducted.**

The only criminal proceeding in the case of sexual violence in the ATO (Anti-Terrorist Operation) is currently being investigated for the Tornado battalion. This is stated in the report of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (BBC, 2017). This report covers the period from March 4, 2014 to January 31, 2017.

They note that three members of "Tornado" were accused of *"satisfying sexual desire in an unnatural way with the use of physical violence."* Due to the nature of the case, the hearing in the Obolon court (District court in Kyiv City) was closed to the public.

The Military Prosecutor's Office reported that in December 2016 there were three criminal proceedings related to allegations of sexual violence committed by Ukrainian security forces or militants against civilians in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

As of December 26, 2016, two of them were closed due to the lack of a crime.

The report noted that cases of "mass rape" in the conflict zone have not yet been confirmed. This is explained by the fact that victims often do not report such cases.

Such a situation as a whole gave grounds to claim that "violence was from all sides." This narrative was actively picked up and is still reproduced by Russian and pro-Russian politicians and the media, regularly mentioned by some international organizations, although the equalization of both the situation in general and the attitude of the state in particular is, to put it mildly, incorrect. The CRSV accompanies most military conflicts, but the attitude of the parties to this phenomenon is a defining aspect. The Ukrainian side is taking steps to ensure that this phenomenon does not have any opportunity to develop in the Ukrainian armed forces, while the silence and distortion of facts related to the CRSV on the part of the Russian federation indicate rather the approval of this by the political and military leadership.

In 2018, the Coalition of Human Rights Organizations "Justice for Peace in Donbass" and FIDH (International Federation of Human Rights) handed over to the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court evidence of violence in Donbas recorded in the period 2014-2017, including at least 40 crimes related to with sexual violence. The information was collected by the "Eastern Ukrainian Center for Community Initiatives", which is part of the Coalition.

*"Now it became known about the violence, because these regions (Kyiv, Sumy, Chernihiv) were liberated quickly. In our case, no monitoring mission saw anything at that time. Often the monitors simply passed through the corridors of the prisons without stopping."* - Iryna Dovgan

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.

From the very first data of 2022 on sexualized violence against men, cases directed against priests were recorded. It was a threat of rape. A similar case was recorded in 2014 in the report of pastor Peter Dudnyk.

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; relatively high rate of rape and other types of sexualized violence against men.

**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.**

This all needs more careful research, but we can talk about some reasons that may have an impact. The seizure of Donbass in 2014 was carried out by small groups of well-trained cadre military units of the Russian federation, the large-scale invasion of 2022 required a much larger number of troops, mostly consisting of conscripts, most of whom are from depressed regions of Russia with low levels of education and welfare. Another reason may be that the goals of the Russian federation are different. In 2014, the goal was the joining of regions for the "revival of the USSR", in 2022 - the destruction of Ukraine, in particular, through genocide, the signs of which can also be seen in the methods of violence against the civilian population.

The attitude towards the facts of the CRSV has also changed significantly. This has, in particular, the following explanation.

The mass of discovered cases, in particular, due to the fact that their concentration in villages and small towns of the agrarian zone was much higher, and therefore more visible to the community, than in the large industrial cities of Donbas.

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. Particularly influential factors are violence against children.

A change in the attitude of governmental authorities - the number of cases no longer made it possible to refer to the fact that "the facts were not confirmed". An important factor was the activity of civil society organizations, close cooperation with the Governmental Commissioner for Gender Policy and her active position, as well as the attention of the international community - Pramila Patten, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Denis Mukwege, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and others.

*"Then no one paid attention to us, now everyone says that they are dealing with this topic. Both are a problem"* - Iryna Dovgan

The media play an important role in the life of modern society. Attention to the CRSV at the beginning of the invasion was enormous. From the first days, women's civil society organizations began to receive a huge number of requests for interviews and speeches. The CRSV was necessarily included in the general list of issues or was a valid topic that the media and organizations - public, international, governmental - wanted to talk about. During the first month, the WICC received about 500 letters and appeals, then about 20 interviews were given and participation in more than 40 events. Some had to refuse precisely because of an unethical approach to the victims and survivors. Unfortunately, some stories managed to get on the screen from the most famous foreign media companies. Today, the situation is gradually changing. More and more well-known international documents on the ethical coverage of the situation, such as the Murad Code. The Stratcom of the Armed Forces prepared and regularly broadcast videos about the rules of warfare, one of them is dedicated to the SNPK. However, there is still a lot of work to be done.

Journalists and journalists often "walk on corpses" or turn them into "concerts" in covering the problem of the CRSV.

### **Sexual violence in war is always a weapon that kills or seriously injures...**

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.