



FACTSHEET:

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## Sexualized violence against children in Ukraine

On 24th February 2025, Ukraine marked the third anniversary of the full-scale war by Russian forces. There is evidence that Russian soldiers use sexualized violence as a **war tactic** – even against children.<sup>1</sup> This constitutes a **war crime** and one of the most serious **violations of children's rights**. The effects on the victims and their families are devastating, ranging from physical injuries to long-term emotional pain and developmental disabilities.

Since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion, **prosecutors have documented 335 cases of conflict-related sexual violence, among them 17 children (16 girls and one boy**, Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office, December 2024). Cases include rape, threats and attempts to rape, mutilation and other forms of violence to genitals, forced nudity as well as forcing to watch sexual abuse of a family member.

<sup>1</sup> This factsheet paper is based on nine expert interviews conducted between October 2024 and January 2025 with Ukrainian and international scholars and employees of NGOs. They conduct research in a relevant area, support affected individuals, or make significant contributions to the topic of sexualized violence in Ukraine.

# The true extent is still unknown

For several reasons, experts assume a **high number of unreported** cases, for example:

- Lack of data from Ukrainian provinces near the frontlines.
- Children and their parents living in liberated areas do not report sexualized violence because they fear that Russian soldiers might return.
- Affected children potentially face stigmatization and victim-blaming, such as being accused of collaborating with the enemy.
- Affected children may not realize they have experienced sexualized violence or may blame themselves for it.
- In times of war, survivors face many fundamentally life-challenging issues- reporting a crime might not be a priority.
- Lack of trust in state institutions and insensitivity of investigators.
- Refugee movements and mental health issues increase risk of sexualized violence.

## **Breaking the taboo:** Sexualized violence against vulnerable groups in Ukraine

For certain vulnerable groups of children, the path to support and justice is even more difficult than for others, among them:

**1. Children with disabilities:** Sexualized violence towards children with disabilities is hardly discussed in Ukraine. They are often not able to report cases due to the lack of support services that would receive such claims. When the perpetrator is also a care-taker for the child with disabilities, this makes reporting even harder. According to experts, affected children are often not believed when they make accusations. Further, Ukraine has a long history of placing children with disabilities in large institutions. Overcrowding, a lack of adequate support and staffing increases the risk of sexualized violence. Some of the children are identified as “disabled” and put in so-called boarding schools, while they actually need medical support. Since 2017, there have been plans for a social reform that would allow affected children who cannot return to their parents to live, for example, in foster families within the communities. This process has been delayed due to the full-scale war.

**2. Children in the Roma community:** According to experts who belong to the community, sexualized violence is a taboo topic which often cannot be discussed within Roma groups. It is connected to the notion of dignity and shame of the family. Many Roma communities are guided by traditional attitudes and roles within a strongly patriarchal culture. Child marriages and early pregnancies from 13 years onwards are still prevalent which are in themselves a rights violation leading possibly to sexualized violence. Among the internally displaced in Ukraine are many Roma families. The lack of safe housing increases the risk of experiencing sexualized violence. It is likely that there is a reluctance to make any cases of sexualized violence public and seek support due to an inherent fear of further discrimination. Some organizations have taken on the task to lift the taboo, raising awareness about the issue of gender-based violence: how to recognize it, whom to contact and where to receive help.

**3. LGBTIQ children:** When LGBTIQ youth in Ukraine have experienced sexualized violence, it is often difficult for them to report the crime. This is especially true for rural areas, where they face a discriminatory environment and fear a forced coming out. According to experts, there has been a case of „corrective rape“, the rape of a queer person with the intention to change their sexual orientation. If

regional support programs for youth-survivors exist, they are often not tailored to the specific needs of queer children and adolescents. LGBTIQ organizations have established special protection centers for queer survivors, as they have experienced discrimination in main protection centers.

**4. Children born of War:** Children born of war include children born from the rape of women, but also those conceived in consensual relationships across conflict lines. Crucial is that the biological fathers are perceived by the majority of society as part of the “enemy”. A grey area is the so-called “survival sex”, women consenting to sexual acts to protect themselves or family members from further harm. In Ukraine, children born of war and their mothers face stigmatization. Children fathered by Russian soldiers might be perceived as Russian rather than Ukrainian. This often leads to social exclusion. Consequently, women might choose not to address the sexualized violence they experienced, hoping to keep the child’s origin a secret. It is important to recognize that children born of war exist in Ukraine and that they need special protection as well as access to reparations. However, they have not been included in the law on interim reparations which has been passed in Ukraine in November 2024.

## Steps forward since the full-scale invasion

Ukraine has made significant progress in addressing sexualized violence. Efforts for **survivor-centered approaches** have increased when investigating these crimes. For example, affected persons are now able to register under changed names. Some experts see that there is more understanding and empathy for the survivors of sexualized violence in Ukrainian society than three years ago.

In September 2024, the Coordination Center for Victims and Witnesses of the General Prosecutor’s Office started its work, coordinating survivor-centered services like medical assistance, temporary accommodation and psycho-social support. Affected children, however, require specialized, age-specific support. So-called **Barnahus centers** provide a safe environment where children are interviewed only once, accompanied by a psychologist during the investigative process.

The Parliament of Ukraine has passed a new **law on interim reparation** for survivors of sexualized violence in November 2024. This law will enter into force in 2025. It is now planned that they can apply for interim reparations after giving an interview, even without conviction of the perpetrators. Ukraine has already gathered some experience through a project of the Global Survivors Fund which pays interim reparations. This project operates in all regions through staff who are in close contact with the survivors.

## Outlook: Empowering children to talk about it

Survivor-centered and child-specific approaches must be further strengthened. This means **seeing the survivor as a person with specific needs** that must be met and not solely as a witness that should give an interview about a crime. Children should be informed about sexualized violence and their protection rights. Additional efforts are necessary to provide services such as psycho-social support for survivors who belong to the growing category of internally displaced people. It is crucial that specific needs of vulnerable children are taken into account when planning and implementing support services. This could include a safe place to stay, educational campaigns or summer camps for rehabilitation.



# The true extent is still unknown

For the Ukraine Recovery Conference 2025 in Italy the **human dimension** of recovery and reconstruction must remain a key focus. It is essential that sexualized violence is on the agenda. Besides, voices of vulnerable groups including children and youth must be included in the panels. They should be able to discuss with government leaders and address their visions for the future of Ukraine.

Sexualized violence continues to be one of the key factors affecting children and their families in Ukraine. How the needs of survivors are addressed will also shape the success of recovery and reconstruction efforts.

## Kindernothilfe in Ukraine

For 65 years, Kindernothilfe has been advocating for children's rights worldwide. The NGO has an ECOSOC consultative status at the United Nations. Currently (in 2023), Kindernothilfe supports more than 2.2 million children through 503 projects in 36 project countries across Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Europe. In March 2022, the organization began working with project partners in Moldova and Romania and later that year also in Ukraine itself. This was supported by "Bündnis Entwicklung hilft". The support met the most urgent needs: food supply to school materials or winter assistance such as heating facilities, to safer places with psychosocial support for children. In addition to project work, advocacy with partner organizations is an important part of realizing the rights of Ukrainian children.



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