

Although conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) is now widely recognized as a serious violation of international law, the voices of survivors themselves still rarely make their way into the practice of international criminal justice. While international courts and tribunals do prosecute such crimes, a fundamental question remains: does international law truly deliver justice from the perspective of those who have experienced sexual violence?

To date, there is a lack of cross-cultural psychological and legal research focused on the needs of survivors of sexual violence related to armed conflicts and on how the law might adequately respond to those needs. Studies conducted at the national level, where rape is prosecuted as a domestic crime, show that survivors' expectations go far beyond the mere punishment of perpetrators. The prevailing approach has assumed that the only appropriate response to CRSV is the imprisonment of perpetrators and the provision of compensation—often delivered long after the events. However, national psychological studies indicate that punishing perpetrators is not equivalent to providing real support to victims, whose needs are far broader and more complex. To this day, no one has truly asked survivors what kind of response and assistance would be most appropriate for them. This reveals a serious gap in the current justice approach, which remains primarily focused on criminal sanctions.

In response to this problem, the project focuses on analysing and reforming the international justice system in the field of sexual violence committed during armed conflicts.

This topic has gained relevance considering ongoing armed conflicts. For example, since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, numerous reports have documented systematic instances of sexual violence, including rape, committed by Russian armed forces in occupied territories. Between 24 February 2022 and 31 August 2024, the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine recorded 376 cases of conflict-related sexual violence, while Ukrainian law enforcement registered 327 such cases by autumn 2024. Similar patterns of violence have been observed in other armed conflicts—for instance, the 2023 report of the UN Secretary-General documented 3,688 verified cases of CRSV.

Given the scale and nature of these crimes, the project aims to analyse the current response systems of international and domestic courts and tribunals to CRSV and assess to what extent international criminal law meets the needs of survivors and fulfils the goals of international justice.

The project will include research activities such as a review of literature on the foundations of international criminal law, legal analysis of existing norms and court rulings, examination of alternative forms of response, and psychological research involving survivors of CRSV. The expected outcome is the development of a comprehensive model of justice that integrates criminal accountability with restorative elements identified through the conducted studies. These may include mediation, official apologies, reconciliation initiatives, as well as recommendations for legal and procedural reforms that improve victims' access to support and justice. The project seeks to build a more humane and effective system of international criminal law—one that not only punishes perpetrators but also responds to the needs of those who have experienced sexual violence in armed conflict, thus contributing to their real protection and support. The proposed solutions will be directed at both international courts and tribunals, and domestic courts adjudicating international crimes under universal jurisdiction.