



Abstract: Since Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine one year ago, conflict-related sexual violence in the region has escalated. Drawing from the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict dataset, this policy brief summarizes reports of wartime sexual violence in Ukraine: who is perpetrating it and at what prevalence, what forms it takes and where it is happening.

Image: A local resident leaves his home after Russian shelling destroyed an apartment house in Bakhmut, Donetsk region, Ukraine, Wednesday, Dec. 7, 2022. (AP Photo/LIBKOS, File)

SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN ARMED CONFLICT (SVAC) PROJECT | FEBRUARY 2023

SVAC Explainer:

Wartime Sexual Violence in Ukraine, 2014-2021

Ketaki Zodgekar

Background

Russia and Ukraine have been at war since 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and further invaded Ukraine's Donbas region. In February 2022, Russia escalated the conflict, launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.¹ In the months since, fighting has spread across the country as Russian forces attempt to expand their control. In late September 2022, Russia staged referendums in four parts of occupied Ukraine – the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk regions – in which these regions voted in favor of joining the Russian Federation.² These referendums were widely condemned

1 Uppsala Conflict Data Program. "Conflict 13306: Ukraine: Novorossiya." Uppsala University, 2022. <https://ucdp.uu.se/conflict/13306>

2 Jason Beaubien. "Occupied regions of Ukraine vote to join Russia in staged referendums." NPR, September 27, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/09/27/1125322026/russia-ukraine-referendums>

as a sham, a violation of international law, and a move designed to further Russia's annexation of the region.³

Throughout the war, there have been numerous reports of sexual violence being used in the armed conflict.⁴

According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), the main armed actors in the conflict are the Ukrainian Government, led by President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy; the Russian Government, led by President of Russia, Vladimir Putin; and two Kremlin-backed separatist groups in the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk: the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR)

and Donetsk People's Republic (DPR). These two separatist groups are supported by the Russian Government both politically and with material resources. The LPR and DPR are currently occupying parts of Ukraine's Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts which together are referred to as the Donbas Region, and which the United Nations considers to be a part of Ukraine's territory.

Using insights from the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC) dataset, this policy brief outlines key trends in the use of sexual violence in Russia's war against Ukraine between 2014 and 2021, describing the reported perpetrators, where it occurred, and what forms it took. The SVAC dataset tracks reports of sexual violence⁵ in armed conflict based on information from the U.S. State Department, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, using coding rules that require the following: the sexual violence must be clearly related to the conflict and attributed in the source document to a specific conflict actor.⁶ Due to these coding rules, not all references to sexual violence in the source documents are included in the SVAC data.⁷

Between 2014 and 2021, the SVAC data include 11 distinct descriptions of reported sexual violence in Ukraine that meet the project coding criteria. During this period, all four main armed actors were

The **Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC)** dataset measures reports of the conflict-related sexual violence committed by armed actors during the years 1989–2021. The dataset includes information about the prevalence, perpetrators and forms of the reported sexual violence by each armed actor in each conflict-year. The information used to compile these data comes from three sources: the U.S. State Department, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

3 Ibid.

4 United Nations. "Reports of sexual violence in Ukraine rising fast, Security Council hears." UN News. United Nations, June 6, 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/06/1119832>.
Loveday Morris. "She was raped in Ukraine. How many others have stories like hers?" Washington Post, June 8, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/06/08/ukraine-rape-sexual-violence/>.
Cora Engelbrecht. "Reports of sexual violence involving Russian soldiers are multiplying, Ukrainian officials say." New York Times, March 29, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/29/world/europe/russian-soldiers-sexual-violence-ukraine.html>.
Laurel Walmsley. "Rape has reportedly become a weapon in Ukraine. Finding justice may be difficult." NPR, April 20, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/30/1093339262/ukraine-russia-rape-war-crimes>.

5 Following the definition used by the International Criminal Court (ICC), the SVAC data code (1) rape, (2) sexual slavery, (3) forced prostitution, (4) forced pregnancy, and (5) forced sterilization/abortion. Following Elisabeth Wood (2009), the SVAC data also include (6) sexual mutilation, and (7) sexual torture.

6 See www.sexualviolencedata.org

7 For example, the sources can give too little information for the information to be codeable, due to missing details about which armed organization is responsible, whether the sexual violence is conflict-related, when it took place, etc.

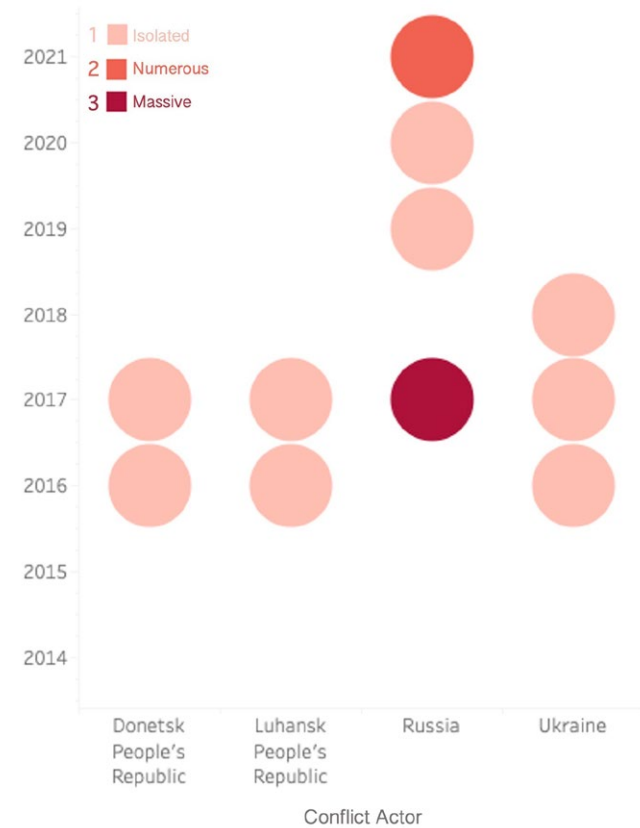
at some point reported as perpetrators of sexual violence, including forced prostitution, sterilization, abortion, rape, sexual mutilation, and sexual torture.

Who were the perpetrators of sexual violence in Ukraine?

SVAC data show that all four armed actors involved in the conflict were reported as perpetrators of sexual violence for at least two of the years since 2014. Of the four main actors in this conflict, Russia has been reported most consistently and prolifically as a perpetrator of sexual violence. In 2017, a year in which every conflict actor was reported to have perpetrated sexual violence, Russia was reported to have perpetrated sexual violence on a massive scale. The violence was described as “systematic” and “widespread,”⁸ taking place predominantly in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and used as a way for forces “to maintain control or for personal financial gain.”⁹

From 2019 onwards, Russia has been the only conflict actor reported as using sexual violence. Reports of sexual violence escalated in 2021, in the run up to the February 2022 invasion, moving from the isolated instances of sexual violence of previous years, to numerous reports. For example, the U.S. State Department estimates that for 2021 there

Prevalence of sexual violence by perpetrating conflict actor, Ukraine-Russia conflict, 2014 - 2021



Source: Chart constructed in Tableau. Data from US State Department Annual Reports, 2014-2021, prevalence coded according to SVAC project criteria: indicates reports of isolated sv, numerous indicates reports that sexual violence was common, and massive indicates that sexual violence was described as massive or innumerable.

8 US Department of State. “2018 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ukraine.” US Department of State, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ukraine/>

9 US Department of State. “2017 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ukraine.” US Department of State, 2017. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2017-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ukraine/>

was a total of between 170 and 200 victims who were subject to sexual violence by Russia while in detention.¹⁰

The armed separatist groups LPR and DPR were reported to commit sexual violence on an isolated basis, and predominantly in the years 2016-2017.

Ukrainian forces were also reported as perpetrators of sexual violence, from 2016-2018, on an isolated basis. In 2016 and 2017, Ukrainian government forces were responsible for conflict-related sexual violence that occurred when people were detained – according to the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU), in those years:

“The majority of documented cases of conflict-related sexual violence happened when people, both men and women, were detained by either government forces or armed groups.”¹¹

Another example of violence perpetrated by Ukraine is from 2018, when four people were abducted on Ukrainian Government-controlled territory, subject to rape, and forced to confess affiliation with the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB).¹²

Where was the sexual violence reported in Ukraine?

Conflict-related sexual violence has been most heavily concentrated in the Donbas. Sexual violence has been consistently reported in Donetsk and Luhansk since 2014. The beginning of the conflict also saw reports of sexual violence happening in Crimea, when Russia invaded the peninsula.

The 2020 US State Department Annual Report references a 2017 paper by the HRMMU, which explains how sexual violence was used as a tool of intimidation in Donetsk and Luhansk, territories occupied by Russia:

“In the territory controlled by Russia-led forces, sexual violence was also used to compel individuals deprived of liberty to relinquish property or perform other actions demanded by the perpetrators, as an explicit condition for their safety and release. While the majority of these incidents dated back to 2014-15, the HRMMU continued to receive testimonies indicating that such practices still occurred in territory controlled by Russia-led forces and in Crimea.”

10 US Department of State. “2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ukraine.” US Department of State, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ukraine/>

11 US Department of State. “2017 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ukraine.” US Department of State, 2017. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2017-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ukraine/>

12 US Department of State. “2018 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ukraine.” US Department of State, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ukraine/>

In 2020, Human Rights Watch reported that armed groups in Donetsk and Luhansk deployed sexual violence, as well as torturing people and subjecting them to “beatings, asphyxiation, electric shocks.”¹³ Notably, many of the reports of sexual violence describe acts that were perpetrated in detention facilities. Conflict actors on all sides have been reported to illegally abduct civilians, soldiers and activists, and hold them hostage in detention centers, where they are subject to torture and sexual violence. According to the US State Department, most of the sexual violence in this conflict is carried out in forms of detention, against women and men:

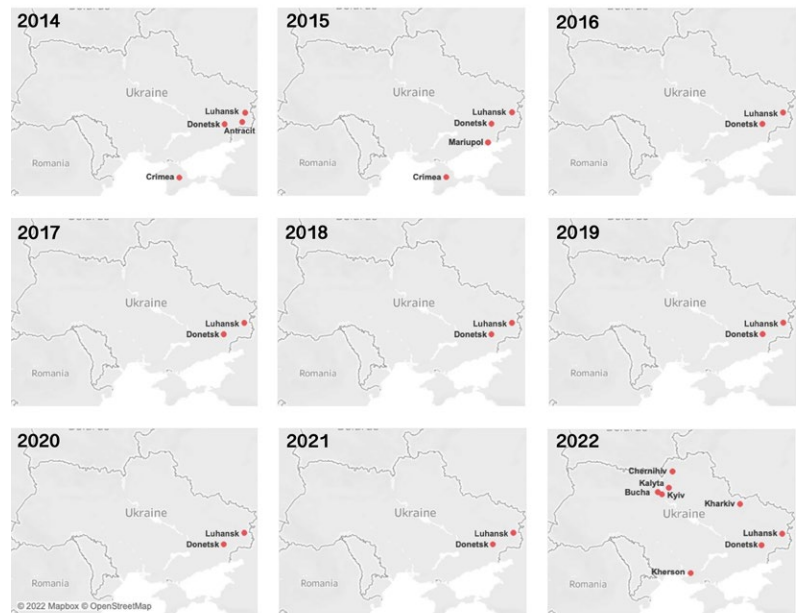
“In areas controlled by Russia-led forces, the Justice for Peace in Donbas Coalition

indicated that sexual violence was more prevalent in “unofficial” detention facilities, where in some cases women and men were not separated.”¹⁴

The 2020 US State Department Annual Report describes how Russian forces use sexual violence as a tool to elicit confessions from detainees:

“Russia-led forces continue to commit sexual and gender-based abuses, and the majority of cases occurred in the context of detention. In these cases both men and women were subjected to sexual violence. Beatings and electric shock in the genital area, rape, threats of rape, forced nudity, and threats of rape against family members were used as a method of torture and mistreatment to punish, humiliate, or extract confessions.”

Locations where sexual violence has been reported in the Ukraine- Russia conflict, 2014 - 2022



Source: Map constructed in Tableau. For years 2014-2021, chart depicts locations where sexual violence reported, according to the US Department of State Annual Reports and research papers published by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The data is not geolocated, and the dots are an approximation of the locations where sexual violence was reported, for illustrative purposes. For 2022, chart depicts locations where sexual violence was reported according to the New York Times (Jakes, L. (2022). In Ukraine War, a Long Journey Begins in Prosecuting Rape', New York Times, 29 April (online). Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/29/us/politics/ukraine-rane-war-crimes.html>) And NPR (Walmsley, L.(2022), 'Rape has reportedly become a weapon in Ukraine. Finding justice may be difficult, NPR, 30 April(online). Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/30/1093339262/ukraine-russia-rape-war-crimes>).

13 Human Rights Watch. “World Report 2020”. Human Rights Watch, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020>.

14 US Department of State. “2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ukraine.” US Department of State, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ukraine/>

What forms of sexual violence have been reported in Ukraine?

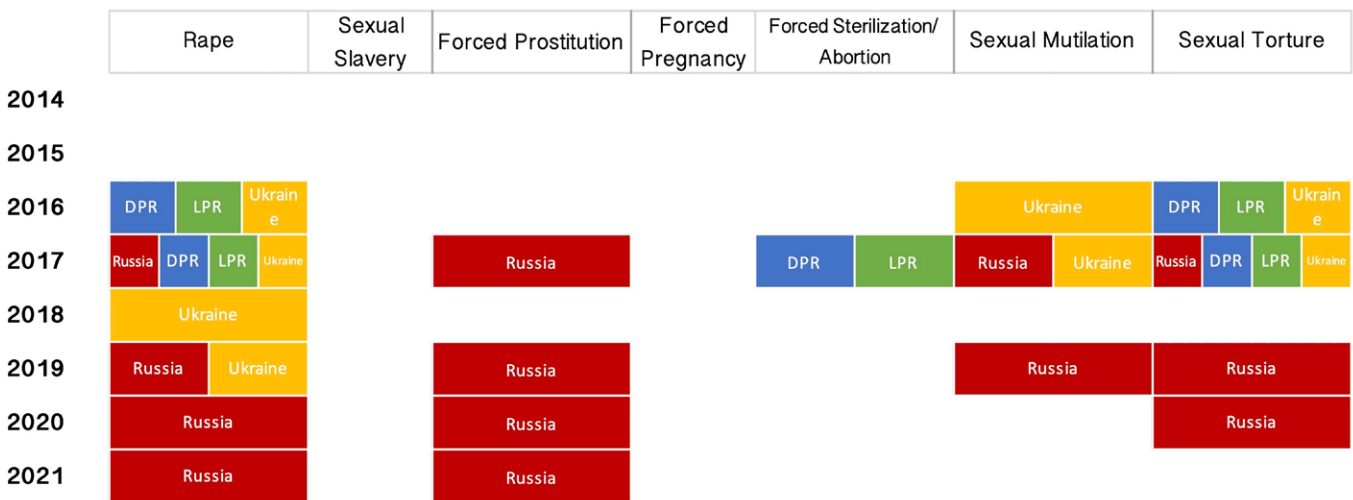
Rape has been consistently reported in every year of the conflict since 2016, and sexual torture and mutilation are also commonly reported.

Forced prostitution has been a consistent feature of this conflict since 2019 – and in every case, has been perpetrated by Russia. This is atypical compared to other conflicts: research from Dumaine, Nordas, Gargiulo and Wood finds that forced prostitution is much less frequent than other forms of sexual violence used by state and rebel groups in armed conflicts around the world.¹⁵

US State Department reports from 2018-2021 detail Russian violence, consistently stating that:

“The reported forms of abuse included rape, threats of rape, threats of castration, intentional damage to genitalia, threats of sexual violence against family members, sexual harassment, forced nudity, coercion to watch sexual violence against others, forced prostitution, and humiliation.”¹⁶

Forms of sexual violence perpetrated by conflict actors in the Ukraine-Russia conflict, by year, 2014-2021



Source: Data from US State Department, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch annual reports and research papers, 2014-2021. Sexual abuse and sexual molestation are considered forms of sexual torture. The form variables are not mutually exclusive, as there can be various types of sexual violence committed in a conflict-actor-year.

15 Of all the actors involved in the armed conflicts from the years 1989-2015, the authors found that only 0.6% of states, and 1.1% of rebel groups had used forced prostitution. Logan Dumaine, Ragnhild Nordås, Maria Gargiulo, and Elisabeth Jean Wood. 2022. “Repertoires of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: Introducing the RSVAC Data Package.” *Journal of Peace Research* 59 (4): 611-21.

16 US Department of State. “2018 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ukraine.” US Department of State, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ukraine/>.
 US Department of State. “2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ukraine.” US Department of State, 2019. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ukraine/>.
 US Department of State. “2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ukraine.” US Department of State, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ukraine/>.
 US Department of State. “2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ukraine.” US Department of State, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ukraine/>.

How has the nature of sexual violence changed since the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine?

Because the sources from which the SVAC project collects data on sexual violence each year are yet to be issued for 2022, there are limited conclusions that can be drawn about acts of sexual violence in the year since the current conflict began. However, news reporting from the region suggests that sexual violence by armed actors has escalated since the February 2022 invasion. Investigations by Ukrainian officials and the United Nations are underway to document what has taken place.¹⁷

As the conflict has spread around the country, sexual violence has been reported beyond the Donbas, in cities and towns across Ukraine. Many reports come from in and around Ukraine's capital Kyiv. The *New York Times* reported on rapes at a glass factory in Bucha, a town to the west of the capital,¹⁸ and the *Guardian* documented reports of bodies which show signs of rape, north of Kyiv.¹⁹

Human Rights Watch published testimony from a woman who was raped by a Russian soldier in a Russia-controlled village in Kharkiv, in March 2022:

“The soldier took her to a classroom on the second floor, where he pointed a gun at her and told her to undress. She said: “He told me to give him [oral sex]. The whole time he held the gun near my temple or put it into my face. Twice he shot at the ceiling and said it was to give me more ‘motivation.’” He raped her, then told her to sit on a chair.”²⁰

In June, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) published a report on human rights in Ukraine stating that there were 108 allegations of conflict-related sexual violence between February and May 2022. Twenty-three of these cases were verified, and of these, 11 were committed by Russia, and 5 by Ukraine – the rest were perpetrated by unidentifiable parties.²¹

17 Some early reports of sexual violence from the region may have been inaccurate. Lyudmila Denisova, who was Ukraine's Ombudsman for Human Rights from March 2018, was accused of using exaggerating or even fabricating reports of sexual violence, and was subsequently dismissed in May 2022. As a result, we have removed all references to reports that originate from Denisova's claims. Matthias Bau and Sophie Timmerman. “Reports of sexual violence in the war: Why the Ukrainian parliament dismissed Human Rights Chief Denisova.” *Correctiv*, August 11, 2022. <https://correctiv.org/en/fact-checking-en/2022/08/11/reports-of-sexual-violence-in-the-war-why-the-ukrainian-parliament-dismissed-human-rights-chief-denisova/>

18 Carlotta Gall. “Bucha's Month of Terror.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, April 11, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/04/11/world/europe/bucha-terror.html>

19 Lorenzo Tondo and Isobel Koshiw. “Evidence some Ukrainian women raped before being killed, say doctors.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News Media, April 25, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/25/evidence-ukraine-women-raped-before-being-killed-say-doctors-russia-war>

20 Human Rights Watch. “Ukraine: Apparent War Crimes in Russia-Controlled Areas.” Human Rights Watch, April 3, 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/03/ukraine-apparent-war-crimes-russia-controlled-areas>

21 UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine. “Situation of human rights in Ukraine in the context of the armed attack by the Russian Federation.” United Nations, June 29, 2022. <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/situation-human-rights-ukraine-context-armed-attack-russian-federation-24-february-15-may-2022-enuk>

Notably, Pramila Patten, the U.N.'s special representative on sexual violence in conflict, has cautioned against drawing conclusions from the limited available data, highlighting the chronic underreporting of sexual violence in armed conflict – which is a particular problem in Ukraine.²² Patten has emphasized the importance of centering resources and support for victims of sexual violence in any humanitarian response to the conflict.

Recent reporting by the *New York Times* reveals patterns of sexual violence encouraged by Russian commanders, linked to invading new territory and holding victims in detention.²³ Russian commanders have actively encouraged rape in conflict, commonly committing rapes within two or three days of taking over an area – with commanders in some cases “giving instructions” covertly encouraging rape, such as “telling soldiers to find some relaxation.”²⁴ Detention centers also carried tools and implements to facilitate sexual torture, with rape in detention described as “extensive.”²⁵

Conclusion

There is a pattern of sexual violence being used in the Ukraine-Russia conflict: it has been reported consistently throughout the past eight years of war, and, according to media reports, escalated in 2022 during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

All four key conflict actors according to UCDP – Russia, Ukraine, DPR and LPR – are reported to have committed sexual violence in conflict, though Russian forces are by far the most common perpetrators. Until the most recent invasion, the prevalence of sexual violence has been concentrated around the Donbas region – in the conflict-heavy oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk. News reports suggest that in 2022, sexual violence is being documented more frequently,²⁶ and in a wider range of locations around the country.

The increase in violence warrants renewed attention to conflict related sexual violence: how, where and when it manifests, to better understand why it occurs, and how to tackle it.

22 United Nations. “Reports of sexual violence in Ukraine rising fast, Security Council hears.” UN News. United Nations, June 6, 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/06/1119832>

23 Carlotta Gall. “‘Fear Still Remains’: Ukraine Finds Sexual Crimes Where Russian Troops Ruled.” *New York Times*, January 5, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/05/world/europe/ukraine-sexual-violence-russia.html>.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 United Nations. “Fighting conflict-related sexual violence in Ukraine.” UN News, December 4, 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/12/1131317>

Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge Harvard Kennedy's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, and the Carol J. Hamilton Research Fund on Gender, Negotiation, and Conflict at the Kennedy School's Women and Public Policy Program, for support of this research. The author would also like to thank Professor Dara Kay Cohen for her encouragement and guidance with this research, as well as Ilya Sergeevich Timtchenko, Robert Nagel and Ragnhild Nordaas for their feedback on the brief, and Sharon Wilke and the communications team at the Belfer Center for preparing the text for online publication.

About the Author

Ketaki Zodgekar is a Research Assistant with the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict project and a Master of Public Policy candidate and Frank Knox Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School.



Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs
Women and Public Policy Program

Harvard Kennedy School
79 JFK Street
Cambridge, MA 02138