Enhancing OSCE Support for Security Sector Reform: Lessons from Gender-Based Violence Response in Ukraine and Mali

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Abstract

Security Sector Reform (SSR) is critical to building inclusive, accountable security institutions. This paper examines how the OSCE can strengthen its SSR approach by integrating lessons from efforts to address gender-based violence (GBV) and conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). Drawing on DCAF's 2024 field research in Ukraine and Mali, it analyses how pre-conflict GBV capacity-building shaped security and justice institutions' readiness to address CRSV when conflict escalated. Ukraine's experience demonstrates the dividends of gender-responsive SSR delivered with national ownership and close civil society engagement. Mali's case highlights the limits of externally driven reforms in contexts lacking institutional resilience. The paper distills strategic lessons for the OSCE's approach to SSR around survivor-centered practices, civil society partnership, shaping values and attitudes, and institutionalization. Amid political resistance to gender equality work in some participating States, the findings offer both encouragement and caution on how the OSCE can sustain and scale progress.

Keywords

SSR, CRSV, Ukraine, gender

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Introduction

The OSCE affirms gender equality, women's rights, and women's empowerment as essential elements of comprehensive security, even in the face of long-standing resistance by some participating States to gender concepts and language. Support for gender-responsive security sector reform (SSR) has been a hallmark of OSCE efforts to promote gender equality, connected at the policy level to implementing the broader Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda. OSCE entities have particularly prioritized strengthening police and justice responses to gender-based violence (GBV) and boosting women's participation in the security sector. The use of sexual violence against Ukrainian civilians and prisoners of war by Russian forces has garnered OSCE condemnation and reinvigorated

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attention to security sector responses to conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV).[1]

Efforts to address CRSV are an important priority for SSR and good security sector governance in conflict-affected contexts. Indeed, early scholarship on CRSV has shown that strong systems of accountability and control within armed forces and police reduce the likelihood of sexual violence.[2] Capacity-building for law enforcement and justice system practitioners is underscored in key normative instruments for addressing CRSV, such as the UN Security Council's resolutions on WPS and SSR,[3] and in regional mechanisms, including the EU's Strategic Approach to WPS. This is not to suggest that SSR alone is sufficient to effectively address CRSV: as will be evident in this analysis, CRSV victim/survivors face deep structural, social, and psychological barriers to reporting and justice, even within reformed security systems.

A foundational assumption of SSR support in the security and justice sector is that building institutional capacity for violence prevention and response in peacetime will enable the security sector to protect civilians more effectively during times of armed conflict or escalating violence. More specifically, in terms of gender-responsive SSR, policy planning—including that of the OSCE—presupposes that where a country's police, military, and justice sectors have been sensitized to gender inequality and GBV prior to a conflict, they will be more willing and able to prevent and respond to CRSV, including by supporting survivors to safely report violations and access justice.[4]

While the link between gender-responsive SSR and improved responses to CRSV may seem self-evident, there is scant field-based analysis to substantiate it. This paper confronts this gap, asking: to what extent does pre-conflict GBV capacity-building within security and justice institutions prepare them to respond to CRSV in wartime, and how can the OSCE use these insights to advance gender-responsive SSR?

To answer this question, this paper draws primarily on a 2024 DCAF study in Ukraine and Mali.[5] DCAF's research examined the impact of gender equality and GBV capacity-building in the police and justice sector on subsequent action and response concerning CRSV. Capacity development activities included training, as well as external expert support for the development of policies, practices, and curricula and the dissemination of research and analysis. The cases explore contrasting contexts, with Mali representing a fragmented, externally supported SSR environment and Ukraine characterized by greater national ownership and continuity of institutional development. Analyzing the divergent findings offers OSCE actors insights into effective approaches to strengthening security sector responses to GBV and, more broadly, enhancing SSR support.

After setting out the methodology of the DCAF study, this paper reviews OSCE commitments and practice on gender equality, gender-responsive SSR, and

CRSV. It then presents the Ukraine and Mali case studies, drawing on these findings to develop recommendations for how the OSCE can embed survivor-centered, culturally aware, and civil society–anchored approaches in its SSR programming. It concludes by reflecting on how the OSCE can sustain progress amid political resistance to gender work.

Methodology

The DCAF research that informs this analysis was conducted in 2024 with support from the Netherlands' Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of a broader portfolio of research examining how good security sector governance and SSR contribute to stability and development. Ukraine and Mali were selected as case studies because SSR initiatives in both contexts between 2017 and 2022—before the escalation of conflict—had explicitly prioritized gender equality and GBV.

The research methodology combined a desk review of legal frameworks, policy documents, and SSR program reports with qualitative data collection and expert consultation. In Ukraine, partner organization JurFem carried out eleven semi-structured interviews with prosecutors, judicial trainers, lawyers, and NGO experts. In Mali, DCAF's Bamako office, together with local consultants, conducted seven interviews with police, gendarmerie, and NGO representatives and administered a survey to seventeen police and gendarmerie personnel. Given the stigma and security challenges facing victim/survivors of CRSV, the study did not seek to engage directly with them. Instead, it relied on institutional informants and civil society perspectives. The study is also limited in temporal scope, offering only a snapshot of progress and challenges in mid-2024.

Gender-responsive SSR: OSCE concepts, commitments, and engagement

Normative frameworks, political resistance

The OSCE's commitment to gender-responsive SSR stems from its Charter for European Security, adopted at the OSCE Istanbul Summit in 1999. This document committed participating States to "making equality between men and women an integral part of [their] policies, both at the level of [their] States and within the Organization"—a commitment that has been further developed through successive Gender Action Plans. The 2004 Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality remains the central reference document. It commits to mainstream a gender perspective into OSCE activities, policies, programs, and projects, including in the politico-military dimension, and explicitly recognizes gender equality and gender-mainstreaming in the OSCE area as essential to comprehensive security. In the two decades since its adoption, successive Ministerial Council and

Permanent Council decisions have further reiterated OSCE commitments toward gender equality and developed the OSCE's mandate to support participating States in preventing violence against women. These include the Ministerial Council Decision on Women in Conflict Prevention, Crisis Management and Post-Conflict Rehabilitation, which brought the WPS Agenda into the OSCE, the Ministerial Council Decisions on Women's Participation in Political and Public Life and Elements of the Conflict Cycle, and the three Ministerial Council Decisions on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women.[6] Work within the framework of the WPS Agenda in particular has focused OSCE attention to gender in the politico-military dimension, including arms control, border management, conflict prevention and resolution, counter-terrorism, policing, and SSR.[7]

Even in 2005, when the OSCE integrated WPS into its policy framework, there was resistance to gender issues making their way into the politico-military dimension. The Holy See and Russia have blocked efforts to update the 2004 Gender Action Plan or adopt a regional action plan for WPS implementation.[8] Since the early 2020s, opposition to gender equality efforts has spread. In some participating States, senior political figures have fomented narratives portraying gender equality as part of an ideology imposed by foreign actors that threatens family values and national identity.[9] In the most recent annual report of the OSCE's progress on gender equality, the Secretary General called out "a worrying backslide in women's rights accompanied by an increase in misogyny and discrimination."[10] Gender equality is now widely regarded by OSCE staff as "politically sensitive."[11]

Yet resistance has not meant stagnation. Despite these sensitivities, the OSCE has been implementing strong gender-targeted projects with tangible results. The Secretariat's Gender Issues Programme has advanced ambitious initiatives, most notably the extrabudgetary Women and Men Innovating and Networking for Gender Equality (WIN) project, which has created networks of women peacebuilders and strengthened gender-sensitive approaches to mediation and community security.[12] Several Chairpersons have prioritized WPS, organizing high-level events. The OSCE WPS Roadmap, launched in May 2025 under the Finnish OSCE Chairpersonship, represents an important innovation.[13] While itself non-binding, it sets out a menu of seventeen high-level "optional actions" to which participating States are encouraged to pledge. The Roadmap is a mechanism for revitalizing the OSCE's work in the area of WPS, showing how, while consensus remains blocked, innovation and progress are ongoing at both the political and the programmatic level.

OSCE institutions and gender-responsive SSR

The OSCE has been integral to shaping the concept of gender-responsive SSR in

multilateral policy, in particular through collaboration with DCAF and the UN from 2006 onwards to develop the Gender and SSR Toolkit and, later, the 2019 Gender and Security Toolkit.[14] These guidance documents describe gender-responsive SSR as an approach that integrates gender perspectives and promotes gender equality throughout. Gender-responsive SSR involves ensuring that security institutions, policies, practices, and oversight mechanisms recognize and respond to the security needs and priorities of women, men, girls, and boys and that women's participation and leadership in security institutions and decision-making processes are promoted and supported. These changes require transformation of gendered power relations within the security sector through challenging discriminatory norms and addressing the institutional and societal structures that perpetuate gender inequality and exclusion. This, in turn, requires shifts not only in policy but in institutional culture, leadership accountability, and incentive structures. The OSCE's guidelines for its structures and staff on SSR and security sector governance outline commitments and entry points for strengthening gender equality across all of its dimensions.[15]

OSCE institutions have developed distinct but complementary roles in advancing gender-responsive SSR, often within the framework of supporting the implementation of WPS national action plans. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), operating within the human dimension, has been at the forefront, producing training and guidance materials for the security sector, capacity-building on WPS principles and GBV response, supporting women's associations within law enforcement, and advising on measures to enhance the recruitment of women, introduce family-friendly policies, and address harassment and discriminatory norms. The Conflict Prevention Centre has likewise supported women's networks in the security sector. The Transnational Threats Department has supported training on gender-responsive border management and, through the Strategic Police Matters Unit, training cadets on victim-centered approaches to GBV. OSCE missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Moldova, North Macedonia, Ukraine, and Central Asia have likewise demonstrated the Organization's capacity to convene expert exchanges, deliver capacity development, and provide advisory support to SSR in ways that enhance GBV response and promote women's participation in the security sector. The Secretariat's Gender Issues Programme provides organization-wide coordination. While much of its work focuses on supporting women's civil society and gender-sensitive peacebuilding, it also supports gender capacity-building of security institutions and the development of training standards.

The OSCE's experience with gender-responsive SSR support reveals both strengths and limitations. Its long-term field presences allow for sustained engagement rather than short-term projects, and its multidimensional approach en-

ables linkages between SSR, human rights, and development. Its partnerships with civil society organizations (CSOs) bring local legitimacy and expertise. With that said, gender expertise in field operations is often underfunded and overstretched, gender projects remain heavily dependent on extrabudgetary funding, and reporting has tended to be descriptive rather than evaluative.[16] The recent WPS Roadmap can be seen as strengthening OSCE institutions' mandate to prioritize support for gender-responsive SSR, explicitly encouraging the Secretariat and institutions to develop standards for mainstreaming gender equality in SSR.

OSCE institutions and CRSV

CRSV has been an implicit priority in the OSCE's strategic approach to gender equality, with the 2004 Action Plan recommending that OSCE participating States "[s]upport national and international efforts to bring to justice those who have perpetrated crimes against women which under applicable rules of international law are recognized as war crimes or crimes against humanity," alongside a commitment to further assisting participating States in reacting to sexual violence offenses.[17] The 2014 Ministerial Council Decision on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women took note of international and regional initiatives to combat sexual violence.[18] It tasked the OSCE with assisting participating States in combatting sexual violence against women and to better responding to the needs of all victim/survivors, with a strong emphasis on investigation and prosecution.

Through initiatives such as the Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE) project, the OSCE has developed a training manual on preventing and responding to GBV during conflict and in post-conflict settings.[19] The OSCE Secretariat has also issued gender guidance for military personnel in peace support operations to prevent, detect, and respond to CRSV. Several OSCE missions have directed their support to police, armed forces, and judicial institutions specifically to strengthen CRSV response. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, the OSCE trained police and members of the judiciary on CRSV investigation and prosecution and supported the introduction of survivor-sensitive procedures in courts. In Ukraine, as discussed below, CRSV has likewise been a distinct focus of OSCE support.

SSR approaches to CRSV in Ukraine and Mali

The 2024 DCAF study provides one of the first systematic examinations of whether pre-conflict investment in GBV-related capacity-building in security and justice institutions translates to improved responsiveness to CRSV during conflict. While it is to be expected that contexts as different as Ukraine and Mali will demonstrate different SSR outcomes, commonal-

ities remain when it comes to the factors that contribute to and hinder progress.

Ukraine

Beginning in 2017, international partners including the OSCE and DCAF implemented a series of initiatives to strengthen the capacity of Ukraine's police, prosecutors, and judicial institutions to respond to GBV. ODIHR, for example, trained police on GBV prevention and response, emphasizing survivor-centered responses and explicitly aiming to integrate gender perspectives into ongoing SSR. Through the WIN project, the OSCE trained State Emergency Services staff on gender-sensitive humanitarian response. The DCAF study emphasizes the cumulative effects of such support, which include legislative changes, the development of training curricula, the creation of specialized units, and structured partnerships with CSOs.

SSR support—including through the OSCE Support Programme for Ukraine—assisted key institutions such as the Office of the Prosecutor General and judicial training centers in developing and implementing training programs on survivor-centered investigation and prosecution of sexual violence, including conflict-related forms. These programs were complemented by institutional reforms, including the development of protocols for handling GBV cases and the integration of GBV modules into regular professional development curricula. Ukraine's human rights and gender equality strategies and National Action Plan on WPS provided a strategic framework that linked GBV and CRSV response explicitly to the responsibilities of security and justice actors.

Security sector and NGO informants noted that the GBV capacity-building programs supported by international organizations prior to the 2022 escalation of the armed conflict (and continued thereafter) significantly contributed to the speed and effectiveness of implementing survivor-centered approaches to CRSV response. Specialists in the Office of the Prosecutor General, the National Police, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs who had undergone this training developed a deep understanding of GBV and the importance of adopting alternative approaches to investigation. They were better equipped to interview survivors, collect evidence, and coordinate with service providers. The Office of the Prosecutor General has developed a dedicated structure and specialized approaches to CRSV, paying attention to survivor-centered practices and the prevention of traumatization.

The central role of civil society was another key finding of the DCAF study. Organizations such as JurFem and La Strada, in part through being part of SSR support programs, had built capacity among state officials but also cultivated trusting relationships that enabled rapid collaboration when CRSV surged. Survivors' networks, often overlooked in SSR frameworks, also played a transformative role, with some survivors becoming trainers themselves, embedding lived experience

in professional practice. This aligns with wider scholarship emphasizing that survivor-centered justice processes are more effective when survivors are active participants rather than passive recipients.[20]

Despite the CRSV frameworks in place in Ukraine, gaps and challenges remain. There is no comprehensive, coordinated nationwide policy on GBV prevention and response, and access to justice remains limited due to territorial distance from law enforcement agencies and courts, a lack of financial resources, and limited awareness of legal aid entitlements—particularly among Roma women, internally displaced persons, persons with disabilities, the elderly, people living with HIV, and women in rural and mountainous areas. Stigma is also a significant challenge. The general under-prosecution of sexual violence crimes likely translates to the under-prosecution of CRSV. Coordination between different CRSV service providers needs improving, especially for male survivors. The absence of a clear legal definition of CRSV in the Criminal Code has at times led to instances of war-related sexual violence being misclassified as ordinary crimes, resulting in weaker legal responses and sanctions.

Nevertheless, Ukraine's experience demonstrates that investing in GBV-related capacity within security institutions before the outbreak of conflict can enhance resilience and responsiveness. It also highlights the value of delivering international SSR support for GBV in partnership with local women's CSOs and gender experts, who are not only the most credible authorities in their local contexts but also play a crucial role in sustaining and advancing the work when conflict escalates. Challenges to effective CRSV response in Ukraine underscore the importance of strong mechanisms for cooperation between state authorities, law enforcement agencies, CSOs, and other actors at the national and the regional level. At the same time, prosecutor sensitivity to survivor-centered approaches to CRSV has led local advocates to call for CRSV good practices to be applied across all forms of GBV, demonstrating the potential for a virtuous learning loop between CRSV response and wider gender-responsiveness in the security sector.

For the OSCE, Ukraine demonstrates the dividends of long-term investment. OSCE engagement in gender-responsive SSR in Ukraine—through police training, cooperation with judicial training centers, and support for legal reforms—has contributed to institutions that are ready and willing to respond to CRSV. With that said, the case underscores the need for ongoing support to expand the reach and inclusivity of security and justice mechanisms' responsiveness to GBV.

Mali

SSR initiatives in Mali following the 2012 crisis unfolded in an environment marked by significant challenges, including fragmented security institutions, entrenched patriarchal norms, and repeated political instability. Against this backdrop, from

2017 to 2022, international actors worked to build the capacity of the Malian police, gendarmerie, and armed forces to address GBV, including CRSV, through training and technical assistance. They also supported the development of a GBV action plan for the Malian police. In addition, DCAF supported the institutionalization of gender focal points within the Malian police and a gender committee within the gendarmerie, building capacity on gender and the handling of cases of GBV. It also supported the development of GBV training curricula and gender self-assessment processes.

Local informants and sources highlighted the positive impact of gender and GBV capacity-building on GBV response. Some CRSV-related institutional mechanisms have been put in place, including regional police CRSV focal points to support sensitization among personnel. However, CRSV is largely addressed within broader GBV frameworks, without differentiated services. A toll-free number for victim/survivors of GBV and CRSV has been created, and both the police and the gendarmerie have conducted sensitization efforts with communities. Informants reported a greater appetite to implement gender-related projects and activities, increased confidence among police and gendarmerie officers in identifying cases of GBV, engaging with victim/survivors, and operating referral mechanisms, and improved overall responsiveness to GBV, all of which have enhanced community trust in the security services. These are not insignificant developments given the institutional and societal barriers that constrain reform in Mali.

Despite these advances, the DCAF study also highlights structural weaknesses that continue to mitigate the impact of SSR support. The gains achieved through GBV capacity-building in Mali have been limited by institutional shortcomings. International training was criticized for focusing on content without addressing how skills and knowledge could be applied and for failing to grapple with the chronic lack of resources and staff capacity. The new GBV policies and protocols were described as too dense and complicated for operational personnel to use effectively. Insufficient attention has also been paid to equal career opportunities for female personnel, who are a critical part of a GBV-competent workforce. The limits of the legal framework for GBV also hamper effective response. These challenges intersect with Mali's profound underreporting of sexual violence, which is driven by social stigma and fear of repercussions, lack of access to security services and support in many parts of the country, and widespread distrust of the legal system. These problems are underpinned by Mali's escalating insecurity and political turmoil, with CRSV continuing to be committed by members of armed groups, militias, self-defense groups, foreign security personnel, and members of the security forces.[21] With the withdrawal of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in 2023, the

progress achieved through GBV-focused SSR efforts risks being lost altogether.

Mali's experiences of GBV capacity-building through SSR thus confirm the limits of technical training in fragile states. Without local ownership, supportive legal frameworks, and institutional resilience, capacity-building does not translate to sustained CRSV responsiveness. This finding aligns with broader analyses of SSR in fragile contexts, which caution that externally driven reforms tend not to be effective or sustained where they are not embedded in deeper governance reforms.[22]

Conclusion and recommendations

The cases of Ukraine and Mali show that while GBV-focused SSR support *can* significantly shape institutional capacity to respond to CRSV in wartime, its effectiveness depends on structural conditions. The study also demonstrates an interplay of enabling and inhibiting factors that shape whether SSR support will translate to improved security and justice outcomes. Ukraine offers a compelling illustration of how sustained investment in GBV-related capacity-building during peacetime can contribute to the resilience and responsiveness of security institutions under conditions of war. Institutional preparedness—grounded in curricula co-development, strategic frameworks at the national and the institutional level, and meaningful collaboration with women's CSOs—has enabled Ukraine's police and prosecutors to implement survivor-centered responses more swiftly and effectively. Mali, by contrast, highlights the constraints of institutional fragility and weak internal gender equality. While there have been gains (including the establishment of gender focal points, new GBV protocols, and improved community trust), these remain partial and precarious, lacking broader institutional resilience. For the OSCE, which has invested heavily in gender mainstreaming and SSR programming, the central question is how to convert these lessons into practice.

This section outlines four top-level recommendations that emphasize institutionalization, survivor-centered approaches, cultural shifts, and civil society engagement. First, gender-responsive SSR must be embedded in governance-level SSR support rather than being delivered as *ad hoc* GBV and WPS technical assistance projects. Such institutional SSR support should prioritize the development of legal and policy frameworks, operational tools, internal oversight, and inter-agency coordination mechanisms. Second, SSR engagement with criminal justice must be survivor-centered, working with survivor networks as equal partners and paying careful attention to both male and female survivors and to how intersecting forms of discrimination impact survivors' access to services and justice. Third, reforms must creatively engage with institutional culture and wider social values, including gender norms and tolerance of GBV. Fourth, NGOs and CSOs must be recognized as indispensable part-

ners—as opposed to call-in trainers and researchers—in the design and delivery of SSR. When civil society plays a meaningful role in advising institutions, monitoring service provision, and shaping professional curricula, reforms are more attuned to lived realities and more likely to be sustained. Their goal is to promote measures that embed gender-responsiveness into the everyday formal and informal structures and practices of security and justice providers.

The institutionalization of GBV and CRSV prevention and response. The most consistent finding across both cases is that institutionalization determines sustainability. In Ukraine, police and prosecutors were ready to respond quickly to CRSV because GBV-sensitive protocols and curricula had been integrated into formal training structures prior to 2022 and national policy and strategic frameworks were already functioning. In Mali, by contrast, policies and protocols on GBV remained largely unused, with limited operational effect.

Efforts to improve security sector responses to GBV and CRSV are most effective when they move beyond individual training to strengthen institutional mandates, structures, and accountability frameworks. Systemic reform of GBV response requires attention to multiple institutional developments, including the deployment of expert staff dedicated to supporting GBV response (such as gender focal points, gender units, and GBV teams), coordination with NGOs and health services, career opportunities for female personnel, the vetting of personnel with a history of GBV, the fostering of a supportive institutional culture, and monitoring and oversight mechanisms.

For the OSCE, this highlights the need to embed gender-responsive practices in the mandates, policies, and budgets of security institutions rather than treating them as standalone gender or WPS project-based activities. OSCE bodies and field operations can support this shift by prioritizing expert advisory support on gender-responsive security at the level of institutional governance. This could include supporting the formalization of internal policies and standard operating procedures that explicitly assign responsibilities for GBV and CRSV prevention and response, empowering GBV experts within institutions with clear mandates and resources, and integrating GBV indicators into performance frameworks and oversight bodies.

Institutionalization also requires legal clarity. OSCE support for legal reform should continue to prioritize the harmonization of national law with international standards, including the explicit criminalization of CRSV and alignment with the Istanbul Convention and the Rome Statute. This aligns with the OSCE's broader rule-of-law mandate and builds on its long-standing advisory work in Ukraine and the Western Balkans.

Survivor-centered approaches to GBV and CRSV. The second recommendation is to mainstream survivor-centered approaches across all OSCE-supported SSR. The needs, agency, and dignity of sur-

vivors should be at the heart of all GBV work. Research shows that confidentiality protections, informed consent, and trauma-sensitive interviewing have been critical to enabling Ukraine's prosecutors to respond to CRSV. Access to medical services and psychosocial and other forms of support were also important. Survivors themselves, when included as trainers and advisors, helped to shift institutional cultures within the security sector.

OSCE programs should therefore go beyond training officials to support survivor networks and CSOs as equal partners in SSR. This would resonate with OSCE Ministerial Council Decision 7/14 on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women, which tasks the OSCE with supporting comprehensive victim assistance.[23] It is also consistent with soft law international standards such as the Murad Code, which highlights the importance of community-based, sustained support systems for survivors of CRSV.[24]

Special attention should be paid to male survivors, whose needs are often different from those of women and girls and who are often invisible or underserved.[25] This includes ensuring that investigators and prosecutors are trained in both evidence collection from men and boys and trauma-sensitive engagement. More holistically, OSCE missions should ensure that survivor-centered approaches consider gender, age, and diversity and seek to address the stigma and distrust that prevents victim/survivors from engaging in justice processes.

Addressing values, attitudes, and institutional norms. The study highlights that in order for SSR to be impactful, technical skills are necessary but insufficient. In Mali, police and gendarmerie officers had received GBV training but often lacked the authority, resources, and institutional support to apply it. In Ukraine, by contrast, professional cultures had begun to shift before 2022, increasing receptiveness to survivor-centered approaches. Yet in both Mali and Ukraine, stigma and fear of ostracization remain a significant barrier to justice and support for CRSV survivors.

The OSCE should, in all its SSR support—but particularly as regards GBV—actively engage not only with laws, policies, and procedures but also with values and attitudes related to interpersonal violence and gender norms. Rather than being framed around training, SSR initiatives can incorporate methodologies such as mentoring, peer learning, and community dialogue. These offer more meaningful opportunities to transform the attitudes and beliefs that cause some forms of violence and abuse to be overlooked, including within the security and justice sector. Such conversations should include political and institutional leaders such as senior police and justice officials. CSOs, traditional and faith leaders, and social influencers can also be partners, ensuring that programs are attuned to cultural nuance.

Strengthening cooperation with NGOs and CSOs. Meaningful partnerships between civil society, police, and prosecu-

tors were decisive in supporting CRSV response in Ukraine. CSOs not only train state officials but also advise on law and policy and are part of advisory structures. The DCAF report emphasizes that this form of co-production of security was critical to enabling Ukraine to adapt quickly to CRSV challenges. Local NGO and CSO advocates and service providers bring deep contextual expertise and can be the only actors able to reach GBV victim/survivors in conflict-affected contexts and beyond major centers. They can generate political will for legal reform and institutional accountability.

The OSCE should design GBV capacity-building, and indeed all SSR activity, to support and empower local NGOs and CSOs alongside security sector institutions. It can support institutionalized cooperation between the security sector and women's CSOs via working groups, referral mechanisms and other coordination bodies, and collaborative research and monitoring. This aligns with global findings that multi-stakeholder approaches to WPS yield the most sustainable outcomes.[26] NGOs and CSOs should not, moreover, be treated merely as service providers; their long-term autonomy, safety, and resourcing should be funded. OSCE extrabudgetary projects could prioritize core grants to local organizations to build their sustainability and advocacy capacity, even in politically sensitive environments.

At a time when global backlash threatens to erode hard-won gains in gender equality, the OSCE must hold firm to its comprehensive security mandate. Rather than stepping back from gender equality and WPS work on the grounds that they are "politically sensitive," OSCE structures should place gender equality and WPS, including CRSV response, at the core of their SSR efforts. Gender-responsive SSR and WPS implementation should be recognized and framed as essential to institutional professionalism, operational effectiveness, integrity, and public trust in the security sector. The stakes are high: without such reforms, security institutions risk perpetuating impunity and even harm; with them, they can deliver justice, protection, and accountability. This is not only a matter of gender equality but also a core element of the OSCE's vision of comprehensive and cooperative security.

Notes

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4 See the DCAF, OSCE ODIHR, UN Women Gender and Security Toolkit, available at: https://www.dcaf.ch/gender-and-security-toolkit. See also UN Security Council, cited above (Note 3), para. 26; UN Department of Peace Operations, Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, United Nations Field Missions: Preventing and Responding to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, Ref. 2019.35 (January 1, 2020), https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/DPO-DPPA-SRSG-SVC-OHCHR-Policy-on-Field-Missions-Preventing-and-Responding-to-CRSV-2020.pdf; Maureen Murphy, Erika Fraser, Guy Lamb, and Lillian Artz, Evidence for Action: What Works to Prevent Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (FCDO, 2022), https://www.sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-04/14.%20CRSV%20Flagship%20Report.pdf; UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict, Framework for the Prevention of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (UN, 2022), https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/auto-draft/2022209-CRSV-Prevention-Framework.pdf

5 The full report of this study is published as Megan Bastick and Marta Ghittoni, SSR and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: Understanding the Impacts of Peacetime GBV Capacity-Building (DCAF, 2024), https://www.dcaf.ch/ssr-and-conflict-related-sexual-violence-understanding-impacts-peacetime-gbv-capacity-building. The underlying research on Mali that informs this paper draws on the work of Safiatou Diallo Dramé and Souleymane Niaré. The research on Ukraine draws on the work of JurFem partners Khrystyna Kit, Kateryna Shunevych, Daria Rosokhata, and Yaryna Bushchak, conducted as part of the DCAF project.

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