



PHR's Child Interview Recording Kit (CIRK)

Context

Civilians, especially women and children, are increasingly affected by violence during armed conflicts, including sexual violence. When survivors overcome fear, stigma, and other barriers to seek medical treatment, they are often threatened by their perpetrators and discouraged from seeking justice. When survivors do choose to pursue investigations, they do so accepting significant risks. Once trials begin, their testimonies can result in retaliation against them and their families. In pediatric cases of sexual violence, there are even more obstacles to seeking justice. Most clinicians do not thoroughly interview child survivors because they lack basic knowledge on how to approach cases of pediatric sexual violence, interact with child survivors, and avoid re-traumatizing them. As a result, clinicians miss critical opportunities to collect complete testimonies, evidence that prosecutors could use to support and strengthen pediatric cases of sexual violence. Physicians for Human Rights brings the disciplines of science, medicine, public health, and law to bear on the intractable problem of impunity for sexual violence.

Technology

The Child Interviewing Recording Kit (CIRK) is a set of digital tools and technical protocols developed by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) to guide medical, legal, and psychosocial professionals through the complex process of collecting video testimony from pediatric survivors of sexual violence and other abuses. CIRK allows professionals to collect comprehensive evidence of child survivors' experiences and the associated mental health impacts which, with consent, can be used to support legal proceedings. Though UN agencies and other organizations have undertaken work to protect pediatric survivors during investigations and prosecutions, PHR is not aware of any existing tools specifically designed to guide professionals on best practices for capturing close-captioned video of forensic evaluations of pediatric survivors. CIRK can help obtain critical testimony while avoiding re-traumatizing survivors, who are too often asked to repeatedly recount details of their attacks to doctors, police investigators, and courts. CIRK combines video equipment for recording interviews with easy-to-follow guidance on how to elicit accounts of attacks from child survivors that should withstand the scrutiny of investigations and court proceedings. PHR has also piloted a voice modification system for victims (ViVoMo), which includes related protocols, to be used during prosecutions. ViVoMo enables survivors and witnesses to have their voices modified while testifying, thereby concealing their identities from perpetrators and others who might be prone to retaliate.

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Development

PHR piloted elements of CIRK as well as ViVoMo while supporting the investigation into a mass crime of sexual violence against children in Kavumu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). During the Kavumu investigations, PHR worked for more than five years with local multisectoral professionals to document more than 42 cases of pediatric sexual violence. In a landmark ruling, a provincial lawmaker and his militia, who had terrorized the community for years, were sentenced to life in prison in 2017. The judge in the trial deemed the forensic evidence crucial in helping the court understand the injuries sustained and the seriousness of the crimes committed. These safeguards for protecting child survivors and shielding witnesses' identities – which have been used in Australia, Canada, France, and the UK, among other countries – proved indispensable when used for the first time in the DRC during the Kavumu case. PHR hopes to build on the best practices developed through that work to expand the use of ViVoMo. Furthermore, in close coordination with local stakeholders, including medical, legal, and psychological professionals as well as government officials, PHR hopes to ensure that the development of CIRK is informed by a scientific understanding of child development.

PHR is well positioned to advance these technologies. Since 2011, PHR has worked to combat impunity for sexual and gender-based violence in the DRC, Iraq, Kenya, and Syria by finding ways to strengthen forensic medical evidence to improve judicial outcomes. The development of CIRK is led by PHR's police and justice expert, who has extensive international experience in police, justice, and security reform and in training police officers in forensic investigations. In total, PHR experts have trained more than 4,000 professionals across multiple sectors to document and investigate sexual violence. Recently, local PHR-trained experts have begun leading their own training workshops, creating a multiplier effect. Our trainings have increased the amount and vastly improved the quality of forensic evidence collected by clinicians and investigators. In 2018, PHR-trained professionals attended to approximately 14,424 survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.



Physicians for
Human Rights

For more than 30 years, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) has used science and the uniquely credible voices of medical professionals to document and call attention to severe human rights violations around the world. PHR, which shared in the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize for its work to end the scourge of landmines, uses its investigations and expertise to advocate for persecuted health workers and facilities under attack, prevent torture, document mass atrocities, and hold those who violate human rights accountable.