



Introduction

Background, Goals and Sections

Conflict-related sexual violence is an enduring problem globally. The burden of this violence often affects the most vulnerable within society, including women and girls, racial or other minorities, refugees and internally displaced persons, and in particular, children. According to the UN Secretary-General's 2024 report on children and armed conflict, almost 30,705 grave violations were committed against children in armed conflict, with sexual violence affecting 1,470 children, globally from January to December 2023.¹ That report indicated that sexual violence against children in conflict affected areas increased by at least 25 percent compared to the previous year, despite cases of sexual violence being vastly underreported due to “stigmatization, the fear of reprisals, harmful social norms, the absence of, or lack of access to, services, impunity and safety concerns,” indicating that the true number of children affected by conflict-related sexual violence is likely much larger.²

Survivors often face stigmas and prejudices when reporting sexual violence, and these problems can be exacerbated when working with child survivors who depend on parents, guardians, or other responsible adults to advocate on their behalf. Resources and capacity development for professionals on survivor-centered documentation and judicial processes is limited in conflict, post-conflict, and low resource settings, which can result in evidence not being properly collected or being collected in a way that leads to the retraumatization of survivors. There is also a lack of knowledge standardized approaches and practices for documenting sexual violence in children and, where evidence-based good practices do exist, they are often not shared in a way that can inform wider national, regional or international practices and policies. This toolkit seeks to address these gaps.

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) developed the **Child-Centered Documentation Toolkit** to provide practical tools for professionals seeking to reduce the barriers child survivors face when seeking accountability and justice. The toolkit also seeks to improve the documentation and justice pathway for survivors by emphasizing trauma-informed and rights-based approaches, as well as supporting child autonomy and well-being. The principal goal of this toolkit is to create *stronger* pathways for trauma-informed and survivor-centered documentation and justice processes for child and adolescent survivors. This toolkit seeks to provide practical resources for professionals to use along the documentation and justice pathway to improve trauma-informed and survivor-centered approaches.

PHR developed this toolkit in consultation with experts, partners, and a global community of practice through roundtable discussion and systematic review of resources available for the documentation of sexual violence against children in national, regional, and international contexts in addition to experienced gained during implementation of programmatic and capacity development activities.

This toolkit has been divided into five separate sections with specific objectives to help actors involved in sexual violence response ensure trauma-informed documentation and survivor-centered approaches are applied at various stages of the justice process for child and adolescent survivors. These five sections are:

Section One: Foundations

- Section one reviews the key concepts that inform the toolkit as well as the overall background and context that informs the creation of the tools and resources within the toolkit. In addition, this section focuses on the foundational concepts of consent, assent, and dissent as they relate to children and adolescents, with emphasis on their evolving capacity across all steps of the justice pathway, with specific consideration for conflict-settings. Consent, assent, and dissent are essential components of survivor autonomy, including that of children, and should be prioritized at all times.

Section Two: Capacity Development

- Section two introduces two PHR curricula that can be used to strengthen the capacities of professionals working with child survivors: the multisectoral curriculum and the pediatric curriculum, each of which provide practical guidance for professionals to apply the foundational concepts outlined in module one. These include capacity development on implementing trauma-informed and survivor-centered approaches along the documentation and justice pathway for child and adolescent survivors. The module reviews each curriculum briefly and provides further information for those who wish to access and implement the specific curriculums.

Section Three: Practical Approaches

- Section three includes examples of practical approaches and tools to strengthen trauma-informed documentation for child survivors, especially when collecting physical evidence and/or documenting children's testimony/experiences. Child-centered approaches are emphasized in this module. This includes key considerations for implementing child-centered spaces and their role in ensuring a trauma-informed and survivor-centered approaches along the documentation and justice pathway. It includes introductions to important concepts, such as "play therapy" which can be helpful in facilitating documentation and supporting child testimony. Additional practical approaches are also referenced here.

Section Four: Case Studies

- Section four applies the concepts, approaches, and tools described in sections one through three to real world examples through the presentation of case studies. This is intended to reinforce how this toolkit and these good practices can be applied in practice. Through these case studies, you will be able to make direct connections to their specific context, further assisting you in learning about these approaches and understanding how to apply these approaches to your own work to promote trauma-informed documentation for child-survivors.

Section Five: Additional Resources

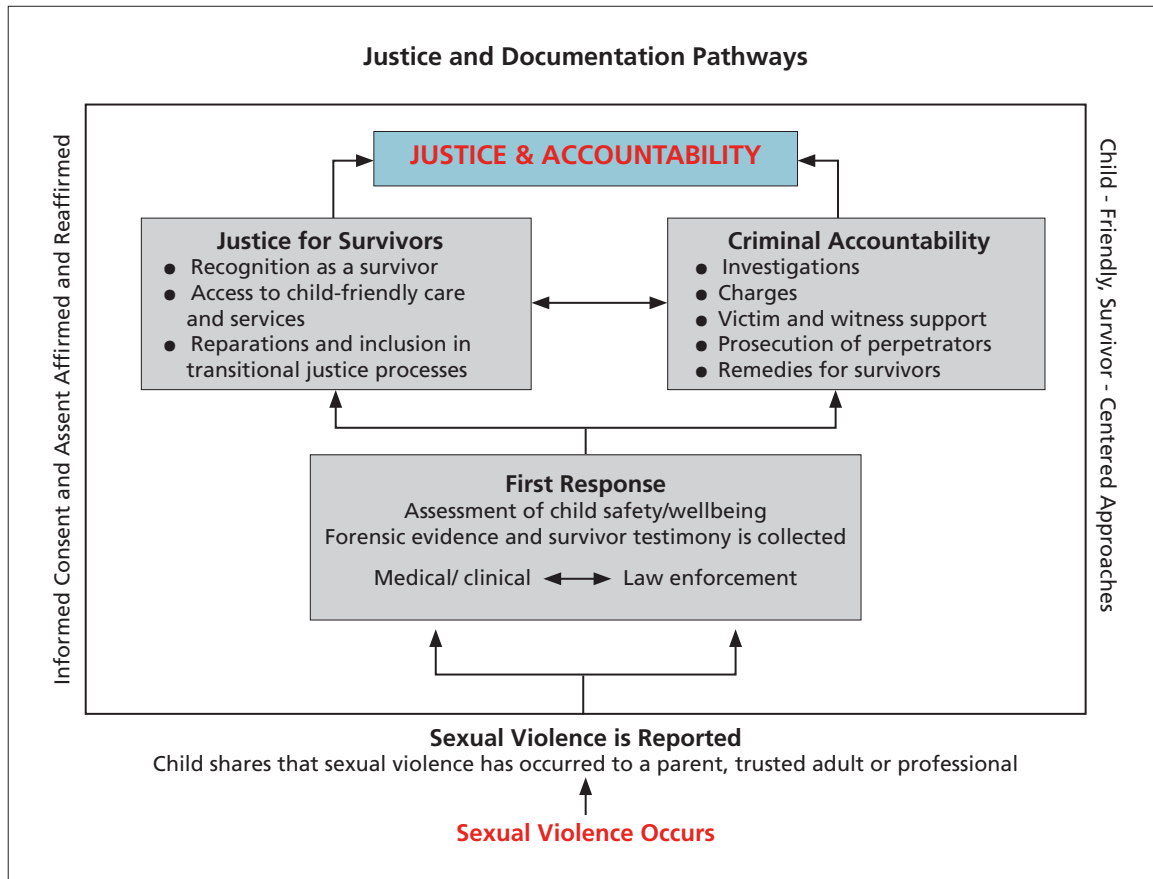
- Section five includes links to additional materials and resources such as international protocols, guidance documents, and other appendices referenced throughout the toolkit.

Intended Audience

This toolkit is intended as a guide and resource for all actors along the documentation and justice pathway. This includes those from clinical, judicial and advocacy settings, including social services and civil society. This includes first responders such as health care providers, police, and law enforcement; as well as actors within legal systems, such as lawyers, magistrates, prosecutors; and other survivor advocates, such as social workers. Specific roles may vary by region or context, but all those who work along the justice pathway involved with documentation of sexual violence with children may find reviewing this toolkit, or elements of it, useful in their work.

How This Toolkit Works

Justice and Documentation Pathways



The underlying conceptual framework for this toolkit is the documentation and justice pathways, which may include accountability, remedies, redress, acknowledgement or transitional justice, among others. The modules were developed based on these pathways, however, they do not necessarily correspond to specific points. They have different applications along a documentation and justice pathway and may be used multiple times throughout the process. For example, the foundational concepts of consent, assent, and dissent discussed in Module One *must* be assessed and reassessed throughout every step of a documentation and justice pathway.

Documentation and justice pathways are the “track” or “path” that sexual violence documentation, be it physical or testimonial evidence, “travels” from crime to different accountability processes, be it a criminal prosecution, reparations, or other justice and accountability process. The pathways cross law enforcement, clinical, and judicial spaces – though it is not necessarily strictly linear. Accountability and justice processes may require back and forth along the different steps of a pathway, especially after the first response stages. Different contexts and jurisdictions may also have variations of these pathways. As such, the pathways represented here are a generalized framework that can be adapted to specific and different local contexts. It also is important to understand that these pathways do not *exclusively* seek strictly legal accountability in the form of criminal prosecutions, but rather, broader justice and remedy for sexual violence. This accountability may take the form of survivors having better access to care and services or simply being recognized as survivors. Because of this, it is important to think of the pathway in a wider context of justice, not necessarily bound by national or local judicial processes.

Survivor-centered and trauma-informed approaches are essential to ensure that survivor well-being, safety, and autonomy are respected and preserved at all times, particularly by seeking ways to protect survivors from retraumatization and mitigate social stigmas that survivors of sexual violence may face. These considerations are important for child survivors, who are even more vulnerable to retraumatization because of their age and developmental stage.³ Survivor-centered and trauma-informed approaches must be incorporated along the pathway at all stages, including assessment of survivor consent, assent, and dissent.

Implementation of the Toolkit

PHR recommends that practitioners review the entirety of the toolkit, however, the toolkit does not necessarily need to be completed chronologically. You are welcome to mix and match separate sections and pull from the toolkit what you need to address your specific situations or contexts. This introduction provides context for the entirety of the toolkit and any additional resources or appendices referenced in sections one to four will be found in section five.

Each section will include a list of brief objectives that link the content of the module with the overall goal of the toolkit.

Citations

- 1 Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, “Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General.”
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Mazurana and Carlson, “The Girl Child and Armed Conflict: Recognizing and Addressing Grave Violations of Girls’ Human Rights”; Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, “Keynote Statement at the Global Summit on Sexual Violence, London.”

References

Mazurana, Dyan, and Khristopher Carlson. “The Girl Child and Armed Conflict: Recognizing and Addressing Grave Violations of Girls’ Human Rights,” n.d.

Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. “Keynote Statement at the Global Summit on Sexual Violence, London,” June 10, 2014. <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/2014/06/10-june-keynote-statement-at-the-global-summit-on-sexual-violence-london/undefined>.

Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict. “Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General.” Agenda item 67: Promotion and protection of the rights of children. Security Council: United Nations General Assembly: 78th Session, June 3, 2024.