

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative, HC 961

Tuesday 13 December 2022

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Members present: Alicia Kearns (Chair); Chris Bryant; Stewart Malcolm McDonald; Bob Seely; Henry Smith; Royston Smith; Graham Stringer.

Questions 1 - 13

Witnesses

I: Nadine Tunasi, Survivor Champion for Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative and Coordinator at Survivors Speak OUT Network; Kolbassia Haoussou MBE, Survivor Champion for Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative and Survivor Empowerment Director at Freedom from Torture; and Lejla Damon, Advocate for Children Born out of Sexual Violence.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Nadine Tunasi, Kolbassia Haoussou and Lejla Damon.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to the Foreign Affairs Committee's session focused on preventing sexual violence in conflict. We are very fortunate to have three phenomenal witnesses with us. I would be grateful if you each took the opportunity to introduce yourself.

Nadine Tunasi: I appreciate the opportunity to be invited to speak to you. I am a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Kolbassia Haoussou: I am a refugee from Chad. I work for a charitable organisation, Freedom from Torture, and I am the PSVI champion.

Lejla Damon: I was born in Bosnia during the war in 1992. I was born out of conflict-related sexual violence.

I have been a member of the charity, Forgotten Children of War, which was started in Bosnia to advocate for children born out of conflict-related sexual violence. Thank you for letting me be here.

Q2 Chair: No, thank you.

We know that each of you has personal stories connected either to sexual violence in conflict, torture or being a child born of rape and sexual conflict. It would be fantastic if you gave us a few of your personal stories and what led you to become activists to ensure your voices are heard, as well as what you have been doing in this field.

Kolbassia Haoussou: I want to take the opportunity to say I am really grateful to be given the opportunity to give evidence today and talk to you.

I am originally from Chad. I am a survivor. I have lived through war and lived in a refugee camp. I survived torture and sexual violence.

After that, I managed to get to the UK, where I sought protection. I was put in an immigration detention centre and after that I was granted protection to live in the UK.

I decided to be an advocate and an activist. My lived experience was one element. The second element is that I felt that as a survivor I was treated very badly. I have seen through my life how refugees and people seeking protection are treated, devoid of dignity and inhumanely—treated like a criminal and not given the dignity or respect that a human being should be given.

After receiving charity from Freedom from Torture for my trauma I decided to do something with the benefit I was given—the protection and rehabilitation—to highlight how important survivors' voices are and to create a platform for survivors to speak, especially for sexual violence and male sexual violence: to be able not to be ashamed and to be able to speak more and raise more awareness.



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I also wanted to represent this country that had given me the opportunity to start a new life and represent my friends—people I play football with—and represent freedom from torture, and to hold people accountable. I want to give something back. I want to be part of the solution.

That is how I got involved in activism, using my experience as a tool for the greater good and to give something back to this country.

Nadine Tunasi: I shall not match that detail, but I shall try my best to share my experience.

I am from the Democratic Republic of Congo, with Tutsi origin from my father's side. A few years after the war started in 1997 the President said that every Congolese had a duty to make sure that anybody of Tutsi origin needed to be killed, rather than innocently leave, because they were enemies of the Congo.

I would like to emphasise that I am a person who grew up in the Congo and identifies as Congolese. This is the only country I have ever known. My mother is Congolese. I knew that a lot of people from Tutsi backgrounds were running away. There were a lot of rumours that Tutsi were being attacked, but I didn't feel that I needed to because Congo was my country.

After a while, I encountered soldiers. I have experienced sexual violence, but I have to say that I have experienced sexual violence in another context in my personal life. My family went into hiding because there was no way we could carry on living our lives. Literally, neighbours would come after you, knocking on doors.

That is the way I managed to escape. I was the one to leave first, with my mother and sibling afterwards, and seek sanctuary in the UK.

When I arrived in the UK, I was, first of all, ashamed to talk about it because it is a taboo subject in my country and community. As a woman and a girl growing up you would not even mention it; it is a family conversation that you do not talk about.

When I joined the charity, Freedom from Torture, where I work, I found that I had a voice and that I was able to heal. Also, I felt the need to make sure that people really knew what was happening in my country. Some countries maybe were highlighted more, but I felt guilty for surviving because I knew I was so lucky to make it. I knew that so many people were going through wars who did not have the opportunity to make it to a safe country.

My journey to the UK was not smooth, but I am very grateful that this country found me eligible to be granted protection. I have been able to rebuild my life, have my children here and make a career out of campaigning. As a survivor, I found the courage and resilience to make sure that what happened to us doesn't happen to anybody else. That has been my motto and strength to keep me going.



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Lejla Damon: I was born out of sexual violence in the Bosnian war in 1992. My birth mother was raped and held for a long period. She eventually gave birth to me on Christmas day.

My adoptive parents were two British journalists covering the atrocities in the Bosnian war. They came across my story as one of the first children born out of sexual violence.

They made the very brave action and decision to adopt me, and my birth mum made the brave action and decision to put me up for adoption and let me go, knowing that it might be the last time she would ever see me.

My parents interviewed her at the time. She had experienced incredible trauma and pain, and that was reflected in some of her words and feelings towards me—very specifically, extreme pain thinking that I would become the men who had raped her.

From watching a video when I was 18 I learned about being adopted and, age appropriate, the circumstances around my adoption. Those words really haunted me for a long time. I have grown up in the UK since I was about three. I have had the incredible privilege of growing up here, and to have had a great education, healthcare and support from my family.

For me, that was the catalyst and turning point in understanding and trying to find out more about sexual violence as a whole. I didn't know any children who were being talked about in the context of conflict-related sexual violence. There wasn't so much research into children who had been born out of conflict-related sexual violence, so for a really long time growing up I thought I was the only child born out of conflict-related sexual violence in Bosnia. That was an incredibly isolating time. That, along with the pain and trauma that my birth mum had experienced, had really affected me, especially through the teenage years and early 20s.

My main drive from an activism perspective started when I was about 18, at about the same time as the first PSVI conference, at which I came out with my story for the first time. I was part of the War Child youth engagement panel—an NGO and youth engagement panel of youths from different backgrounds and ages sharing an input into some of War Child's plans and policies.

That was my first step in connecting with anyone who had experienced war, to understand what their experiences were like and to share them in a safe place.

The main drivers of activism over the last decade for children born out of conflict-related sexual violence and for survivors who had experienced sexual violence have been through my journey of meeting my birth mum. We now have a relationship and I can see the long-lasting impact of what that experience has had on her and what little support she had in the early stages, as well as how much it has affected her. I am very close to Bosnia and I go back regularly and see the long-lasting impact on a lot of the women survivors and a lot of the children born out of sexual violence.



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For me, it is making sure that no one feels like they are alone. There needs to be a community and a global network. Ultimately, we need to come together to stop sexual violence continuing to happen, especially women and men not getting the support they need afterwards, but also how we support and empower them to be able to speak out, because I do think that that is a huge part of the healing process and the journey.

Q3 Chair: I know that Royston wants to talk to you all about the PSVI conference that recently took place and to hear your reflections, but before we go into that I want to ask Lejla specifically about the conference.

The Committee has travelled to Bosnia-Herzegovina and has had the privilege of meeting survivors of rape and sexual violence in war. The minimum estimation is that, under the Milošević regime, 25,000 Muslim women were raped, often in the industrialised rape camps that he set up.

The Serbian Minister for Foreign Affairs is known as “little Slobo” because he was seen as Slobodan Milošević’s protégé—he was his propaganda Minister and he has never apologised for or recognised the male sexual violence and war crimes that took place during the war. What message do you think it sends to survivors and to children of sexual violence that he was allowed to have a platform at that conference?

Lejla Damon: I think the message is that fundamentally we’re not listening or taking on board what you’re saying. I saw his name on the agenda list of speakers. I said I couldn’t believe it and that we would have to wait and see. I watched the panel discussion. Ultimately, what the Minister from Kosovo said in the later panel discussion is bang on the mark. For survivors, you are encouraging them to come to a country and share their experiences and stories, in a place of neutral ground, only to find someone who potentially in another lifetime was an architect of these atrocities. It seems disrespectful and it feels like you are saying one thing but another is happening. What she said, and how the crowd responded to her comments, was fundamentally where the survivors’ thoughts were. Ultimately, I don’t know what happens if I listen—diplomacy behind the scenes—but it is one thing to invite someone to a conference; it is another to give them a voice. We need to make sure we choose the right voices to be heard in those situations.

Q4 Chair: It might be another lifetime for him, but it certainly is not for all those who survived.

Lejla Damon: That is one of the key things. When survivors or children born out of conflict-related sexual violence talk about their stories, it is a story to someone else but it is a life to them—and it continues to live on. That is sometimes forgotten. Whether it is doing interviews or media, we continue to live on with the experiences we are talking about and continue working through them.

Q5 Royston Smith: Kolbassia, what were your reflections on the conference? Did it meet your expectations? What do we need to do to move forward from it?



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Kolbassia Haoussou: My expectations may be beyond what I was expecting for the conference. It is only when we organise a conference, Freedom from Torture, that we see a higher number of survivors in the meetings. It was the first time I attended a conference as big as this conference. I have seen quite a big number of survivors coming from almost all corners of the world. They felt that the conference belonged to them and that they had a platform to raise their concerns, speaking on behalf of other survivors left in their respective countries.

Work has been done to achieve that. For the last five months up to the conference a group of survivors met almost on a weekly basis, preparing and developing the agenda and organising the meeting. That group of survivors is from around the globe.

I am talking from a survivor perspective with all the feedback I received from different survivors. As survivors we felt that we should say it is a conference for survivors; it is not about celebrities and it is not about Ministers. It is all about the survivors, so they need to be given the platform and the light of this conference. I am absolutely delighted that we managed to achieve that.

There is quite a lot of room for improvement. We just mentioned an example, and we are going to take that learning forward. People need platforms to have their voices heard, but we need to be very mindful of how it is done, not undermining the offer that has been done.

How will we move forward? With the UK Government we are securing a meeting in March for the survivors to come together to discuss what comes next. How are we going to move beyond what we achieved during the conference? How is the survivors' approach going to be moved forward? What structure do we need to put in place so that survivors who are hard to reach can be reached and their voice can be central?

How do we help other countries embrace the notion of survivors and create a platform for survivors to have their voices heard? I am pleased that we managed to have that opportunity and that we will bring survivors in March and develop that further.

Q6 **Royston Smith:** What would you like to see following the conference? What can the UK Government do to make sure that the outputs that you would like to see actually happen?

Nadine Tunasi: The conference is one event, but what is going to happen afterwards is more than a two-day event—we had a two-day event during the conference.

One of the things that Kolbassia mentioned is that we are planning a meeting for survivors. Our role is survivor champions. Lord Ahmed said that he wanted the conference to have a survivor-centred approach. We tried to work out what that meant in practice.

We know that the preventing sexual violence initiative has had global attention. People know that this issue has been raised, but we are seeing



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little on the ground. We are aware that a lot of survivors who left, especially those who came from abroad, went back with a lot of expectation: "There have been so many decisions and we are going to see these changes." If anything, we need to make sure that the things we agree will be followed up. A lot of things need to be invested in on the ground in the community where sexual violence is happening.

One thing that is important is making sure that survivors are always part of the conversation. I know that I am not the champion to speak only about the DRC. I represent many countries. It is important that I make sure those who are impacted in Iran, in Kosovo or in Colombia are also part of the conversation.

It is about picking up those conversations, the things that we promised and delivery. People are going to hold us accountable the next time we have a meeting, to make sure we are not going to lose this conversation. We can leave them in the book and nothing is followed up.

There are a lot of things we would like to see—women-led organisations doing peacekeeping roles or a similar job in the sector. We can pick up those conversations.

Survivor empowerment is about ensuring that survivors are part of bringing the solution. I have met so many survivors who are leaders and are doing things in their own countries to make sure that this issue is not only raised but that the Government can do something about it. How can we support them? We need to make sure that survivor-led organisations are supported.

Q7 Royston Smith: Does a conference like that sometimes raise expectations unrealistically? Do expectations need to be managed? Is there much that can be done as a result that should be done? Do you have concerns that these things will not be followed up?

Nadine Tunasi: I know that the issue of justice is a big issue. It isn't going to happen overnight, but it is important that we talk about it. We need to keep our hope, and I don't think that if we didn't believe we will get somewhere we would be doing this.

We have come a long way. There used to be a time when we thought people were not listening, but for us to be invited here is a sign that this conversation is being mentioned.

It is a challenge, but we need to do something. There are humanitarian crises and we can do our best.

There are practical examples—things about education. These things don't take much. I was in a session talking about the role of education in preventing sexual violence.

We can identify things that we can do quickly and can invest in long-term projects where we know there are challenges, because not only the UK



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Government will be responsible for bringing the solution but have long-term plans.

Q8 Chris Bryant: You mentioned Colombia. I am conscious of the fact that sexual violence in Colombia has often gone alongside displacement from land and a series of other human rights abuses. How do we make sure that everything is properly prioritised and people get justice?

Nadine Tunasi: If you are asking me, I will say first the word “survivor”. In the DRC I am so grateful that we have Dr Mukwege doing what he is doing. When a survivor experiences sexual violence, the priority for that person, even before you talk about justice, would be to receive the proper care, that they are looked after and they have their own choice. These are things that require a will but do not require lots of challenges. They are easy to spot and pick up on.

Q9 Chris Bryant: Friends of mine were tortured in Chile and Argentina. For them, it was difficult to conceive of any kind of internal healing until such time as they had justice in a court of law. Am I getting that right?

Nadine Tunasi: From my personal experience I think that priorities on justice can change. There was a time when I felt that people had to be held accountable, but I see other things being addressed in my country as a form of justice. Survival is individual. Everybody has priorities.

I will take the example of a woman who has been divorced by her husband because she has experienced sexual violence and she lost her children. Her priority is not going to court. Her priority will be to regain her family and her marriage. The best thing is to address this on an individual basis.

Kolbassia Haoussou: Thank you for the question. As Nadine said, we need to think about no one solution suits all. We must think about survivors as individuals.

Part of the solution for me is to go directly to survivors and ask them what they need. Justice for one survivor could be different for another survivor. It depends where the person is in the journey of healing. Justice for somebody at the beginning of the journey would mean something else, but for another person after 20 or 30 years justice could be something different.

What would be the priority for somebody who is completely excluded from their community and does not have any means of surviving or looking after their children? That is why the survivor-centred approach is really important. You directly ask survivors how they want us to help them and come up with a satisfactory solution. For some people, it could be reparation. For some people, it could be taking the perpetrator to a court of law and holding them accountable.

There are two things that we need to consider when addressing justice: recognition that wrong was done to me as a survivor and addressing that, and holding the person who did the wrong accountable and getting a court of law to make that happen.



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Those two things need to go hand in hand to allow people to heal. Otherwise, people will not heal properly through rehabilitation, protection or whatever means that allow people to heal.

Q10 Chris Bryant: Lejla, I don't know which part of Bosnia you are from or go back to, and it is a while since I have been there, but my perception is that since the conflict the silos are even more entrenched. Kids go to school in their silo. They go to university in their silo. They marry in their silo. That doesn't seem to be getting better. Is that your perception in Bosnia?

Lejla Damon: Yes, 100%. I was born in Sarajevo and usually I go back to Sarajevo; I have visited a few other places, but predominantly Sarajevo.

I completely agree. It feels like Bosnia has been stuck since the agreement was made. It is very difficult for it to move on. You go back and things have changed—infrastructure, etc.—but it still feels politically and ethnically divided. This probably happens more in rural areas versus Sarajevo itself, because that is quite multicultural.

But, exactly as you are saying, children go to school. Their parents choose what school they go to and they are in their silo. Ultimately, it feels very fractured still. The war caused that huge fracturing and we haven't moved on. The political situation and set-up make it quite difficult.

Q11 Chair: I am aware of the recent news reports in Nigeria of forced abortions, which are tantamount to genocide, and of torture, as well as the deaths in the November attack in the DRC. What are your reflections, within these two conflicts, on what the UK could be doing? Are some countries doing anything exceptional in your experience?

Fundamentally, the question is: what are your biggest asks of Britain when it comes to PSVI? What are other countries or small organisations doing that you wish more countries would invest in or support?

Kolbassia Haoussou: Thank you for the question. I am just going to be blunt.

Chair: Please.

Kolbassia Haoussou: The United Kingdom is one of the countries that gives so much in terms of human rights to the world. The recent thing we gave is the PSVI. So many survivors are so grateful for the work that PSVI has done for lives in different countries. We exemplify what a country can go about and bring other countries to tackle something as abhorrent as sexual violence.

At the same time, it seems that when survivors come to our country seeking protection we glorify them, but when they come here we treat them as criminals, not as human beings, with the hostile asylum and immigration system.



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The Northern Ireland Bill going through the House of Lords will provide immunity for perpetrators. In the House of Commons, we have removed sexual violence from that, but if you cannot prosecute, if you cannot prosecute perpetrators, how would you determine sexual violence?

So, on the one hand, we are doing a great thing and on the other hand we are tarnishing that image. That image is really important worldwide. Everywhere I go, people are talking to me. If I am sitting on a panel, because I do quite a lot of those things, you try to represent one side. The other side is absolutely opposite to that.

There is the example we are giving to other countries. During the Overseas Operations Bill, if you remember that, Sri Lanka, to use as an example, also introduced some law giving impunity for perpetrators of torture. So, it is really important that we present ourselves accordingly, whether domestically or internationally. Otherwise, we play double standards.

On the example of other countries, I will not say that the Canadian immigration system is perfect because they also have detentions and they detain refugees and all that kind of thing. At least they have a system in place which gives the opportunity for torture survivors and sexual violence survivors to be resettled there through different agencies. There is a US law firm, which I support, implementing that policy. I agree with the Canadian Government, which resettles torture survivors and sexual violence survivors from refugee camps in Greece and Jordan. This gives an opportunity for people to start a new life and rebuild their life. That has gone not through the UNHCR but a private organisation.

As long as we do not treat people with respect and dignity, people who come into our country, people who have tried to cross the channel—we treat them as a criminal, we push them back to no matter what other country—if we cannot address that, I do not think we are going to be in a better place to tell anybody out there how to uphold human rights or how to treat people. That needs to be started from home.

Nadine Tunasi: Kolbassia and I were at a meeting yesterday at the Foreign Office. The Foreign Secretary said that 2022 has been a bad year. I just want to say that Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, has had 25 bad years. I left during the war and my country is still experiencing war. I know there are a lot of things going on in Nigeria.

I was very shocked to see the reaction, when the war started in Ukraine, how quickly the Government—quite rightly; it is the right thing to do—took leadership in asking for sanctions to be imposed on Russia and ensuring that people were protected, predicting, because there is a war, that there will be sexual violence and things like that. I am just shocked that what is happening in DRC is barely mentioned. We barely have anything mentioned in the media. I know over 6 million have been killed in the DRC.



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Is this a question of: let us protect people who look more like us? Then those who look less like us are less worthy of our protection, of our voice. The UK is a global leader. We saw in Russia, when the UK stood to say, "Let's do this," all the other countries followed through. It really is not fair and sometimes it makes my position quite difficult when I am telling people about the work. Obviously, people learn about what we do and they say, "Really? Which Government are you talking about? The Government are giving weapons to the country that is fighting us."

I am even scared to say the name because I have learned that people who mention that name get in trouble. I know the Government know who is causing the trouble behind sexual violence, who is raping girls and babies of six months.

I have experienced sexual violence in the DRC. I would like to see more leadership, with this being mentioned and given the same priority as Russia. What you did in Ukraine is the right thing; you should not keep silent. When people experience what they are going through in Ukraine, why not DRC?

I will go further. I have links with survivors from Iran who have been crying at the conference. They are saying, "We have not heard a single word about Iran. Why is the conference not talking about Iran?" Girls are put in prison because of protesting. Because they were virgins, the military say, "They cannot die a virgin. We need to rape them." Why are we selecting? Are we less worthy people?

I am talking to an audience that is very informed, more than me. You know who is behind this. The Government know what to do. We know who is doing what is happening in the eastern part of the DRC. Something needs to be done. Sanctions need to be imposed on the perpetrators. We need to stop supplying weapons, ammunition to the attacker.

I know Dr Mukwege is doing a lot of work. I do not know what would have happened to survivors receiving treatment. I know the UK Government supports Dr Mukwege. He should continue to be supported and given protection. I know locally people do not appreciate his work; he is seen as another enemy. Dr Mukwege deserves to be supported more. Really, as much as we are keeping on with the conversation about Ukraine, let us keep what is going on in the DRC.

In the recent attack, the Government in Kinshasa said over 275 people died. What are we saying about this? One life is worth it? Over 6 million have died. I would really like to see not only the DRC, because I do not want to speak only about the DRC, but every other country. Iran is one. My Iranian colleague would love me to mention Iran. Girls are dying every single day and nobody is talking about it. I learned yesterday from my other colleague, who was doing an interview, over 16 girls committed suicide because they experienced sexual violence in prison. They knew their life would no longer be the same. We are not talking about this. The



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double standard needs to be stopped. We need to give all countries the same attention.

Chair: Thank you. Thank you for giving a voice to those Iranian women today.

Q12 **Bob Seely:** I apologise for being late. If you have covered this already, please tell me. I worked on the ISIS campaign in Syria. One thing that exercised my and some of my colleagues' minds was what could be done about the Yazidi women who were being used as sex slaves. They were established in, effectively, brothel factories. If you bombed the brothel factories, you would kill the Yazidi women, which would obviously defeat the purpose of trying to save them.

What we were able to do was work out a way of linking. Where a man had been to one of these brothels and then had gone to another recognised ISIS target, we could then drop a bomb. It took some time to get there.

You say more needs to be done, but in the heat of battle, in a military campaign, what more can realistically be done to help women who are being raped and abused as the Yazidi women were in places like Mosul? It was something we thought a great deal about and struggled to come up with practical answers to save women until we had physically liberated the territory.

Nadine Tunasi: The thing I can think of is relocation schemes. Relocation can be a solution in protecting people or in moving survivors who have experienced incidents such as sexual violence to a more peaceful place.

We talk about resettlement schemes in the UK. When people take a journey—a dangerous journey like I did to make my way here—they will be called invaders, they will be called not worthy of coming to our country. We can create resettlement schemes, but I would never advocate that resettlement schemes are the only option that will make people come. We know, even in Afghanistan, so many people were left behind. If we can create more of those, when we identify survivors, we can help people being picked up in the danger zone or relocate them in the most peaceful place in their own land.

Q13 **Chair:** Kolbassia, I am aware that you need to leave us. We could all talk to you for the rest of the afternoon.

Kolbassia Haoussou: That is fine.

Chair: I have kept an eye on the clock. We are all united in wanting to end the stigmatisation and impunity that exists around sexual violence. I am very grateful to all three of you for the bravery you have shown in talking to us. You are being a voice for those whom others seek to silence through torture and through sexual violence. It is a privilege to hear from you. I hope you have felt heard. That was part of our goal in holding today's session. If there is ever anything you feel we should be pushing or arguing for to prevent sexual violence in conflict and supporting child



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survivors, do write. We are very grateful for your time today. Thank you ever so much.