

# Sexual Violence in African Conflicts

This policy brief summarizes key findings from a pilot study of conflict-related sexual violence in conflicts in 20 African countries, encompassing 177 armed conflict actors – state armies, militias, and rebel groups.

The study finds that, in Africa, sexual violence is:

- Mostly indiscriminate
- Committed only by some conflict actors
- Often committed by state armies
- Often committed in years with low levels of killings
- Often committed post-conflict

The present study forms part of a larger research initiative on Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC). The aim of the SVAC project is to collect data that may be used to facilitate the prevention of sexual violence. To achieve this goal, the SVAC research group recommends: (a) that the pilot presented here be extended to the global level, (b) that future research focus on the location and timing of sexual violence; and (c) that increasing attention be paid towards policies of preventing sexual violence in conflict as well as post conflict situations.

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## Introduction

On 16 December 2010, the UN Security Council formally acknowledged the need for better reporting and more systematic data collection and analysis to help devise appropriate actions against sexual violence (UN Security Council Resolution 1960). Resolution 1960 declares that there should be an enhanced focus on 'data collection and analysis of incidents, trends, and patterns of rape and other forms of sexual violence'. The SVAC project responds to this call.

To have a basis for prevention of future sexual violence, we need to study a wide sample of conflicts. A comprehensive sample can be used to identify systematic patterns, whereas drawing conclusions from high-profile cases alone can lead to inaccurate predictions.

To effectively stop sexual violence, interventions should be based on systematic knowledge not only on the scale of the problem, but also on several other dimensions:

- Which types of conflict actors commit sexual violence?
- Who is targeted? Who falls victim? And why?
- What forms does sexual violence take (e.g. gang rape, sexual mutilation or slavery)?

- What is the magnitude of sexual violence committed?
- How do these patterns vary across time and space?

## About the SVAC Project

The Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC) project is a response to the requests for better data set out in Resolution 1960 and other related resolutions (1325, 1820, 1888, 1889). The long-term goal of SVAC is create an early-warning model that can be used to assist in the prevention of sexual violence in conflicts at an early stage.

The SVAC project aims to create the most comprehensive global dataset on sexual violence. It builds and expands upon a previous data collection by Dara Kay Cohen (2010) (member of the project group). As a first step, we have conducted a pilot study by collecting and analyzing data on sexual violence in Africa.

We use the definition of sexual violence developed by the International Criminal Court (ICC), which includes rape, sexual mutilation, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, and enforced sterilization. The concept of sexual violence thus encompasses more than acts of rape, and may be commit-

ted against both women and men. In addition, both women and men can be perpetrators of sexual violence.

Data collection and coding has been undertaken by a team of four coders at the University of Minnesota under the supervision of Dara Kay Cohen and Ragnhild Nordås. The analyses reported here are based mainly on information found in four key sources: reports by the US State Department, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the International Crisis Group. In addition, we have conducted a more comprehensive source-material search in relation to four conflict countries: Burundi, Liberia, Somalia, and Uganda.

The SVAC data pilot project has been conducted with funding from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The pilot covers 20 countries in Africa with recent or ongoing armed conflicts (Map 1). We have collected information on sexual violence in relation to all the 177 armed conflict actors (state armies, rebel groups and militias) active in conflicts in these countries. Next, this policy brief presents key findings from the pilot study.

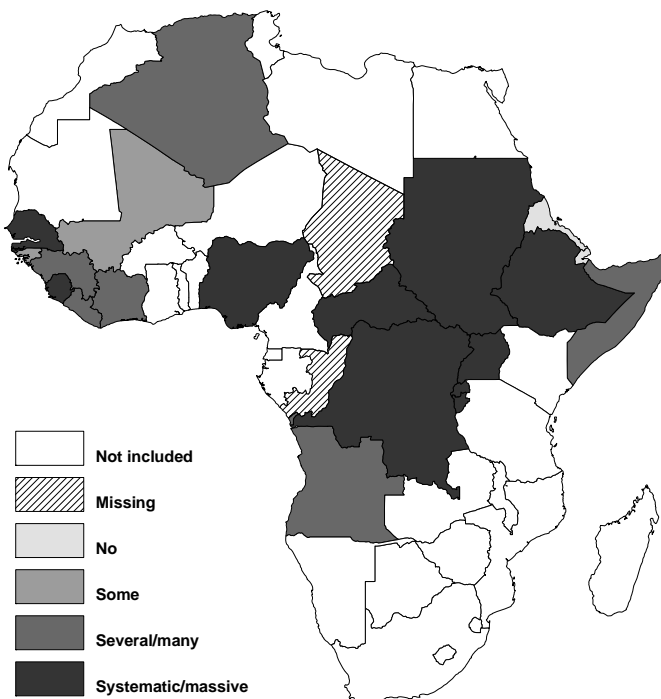
## Countries covered

Algeria	Guinea Bissau
Angola	Liberia
Burundi	Mali
Central African Rep.	Nigeria
Chad	Rwanda
Côte d'Ivoire	Senegal
DRC	Sierra Leone
Eritrea	Somalia
Ethiopia	Sudan
Guinea	Uganda

## Key Findings

Many African conflicts have been marked by high levels of sexual violence. Nevertheless, there is considerable variation in the incidence of such violence across armed groups and conflicts. Below, we summarize the main findings of our pilot study.

It should be emphasized that these findings are not necessarily representative for the global situation, but rather reflect the data we have extracted from our specific source material.



Map 1: Maximum level of sexual violence reported by country

### 1. Not All Groups Rape

Not all armed actors in African conflicts engage in sexual violence. Out of the 177 conflict actors covered in our sample, nearly 42% were reported to have committed acts of sexual violence (see Figure 1). Conflict actors include state militaries, militias and rebel groups active in conflicts since the year 2000.

The majority of armed actors had no known record of sexual violence beyond isolated episodes. It should be noted, however, that not all cases of sexual violence are reported (see Nordás & Cohen 2011).

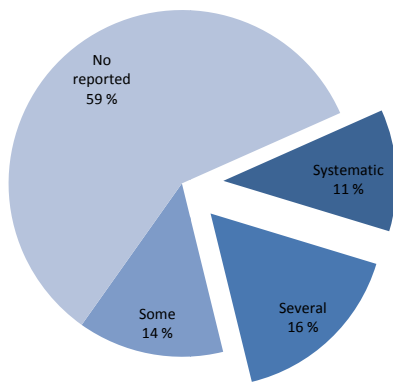


Figure 1: Most serious reported magnitude of sexual violence for 177 conflict actors

Figure 1 indicates that there is variation between conflict actors in the degree to which they commit sexual violence. Not all actors within a conflict use sexual violence as part of their repertoire of violence. Although sexual violence is rampant in many conflicts, a significant number of conflict actors do not seem to commit these sorts of crimes. Even in conflicts with high reported levels of sexual violence, some groups seem to refrain from such acts. Sexual violence is not an inevitable fact of war.

### 2. Declining Number of Perpetrators

In African conflicts, both the number and the percentage of conflict actors reported to use sexual violence has been slowly decreasing over the period 2000-09. If we break this down by different levels of magnitude of sexual violence (low, high, and extreme levels), however, an interesting pattern emerges: The downward trend is *not* seen among groups that commit extremely *high* levels of sexual violence; but it is quite clear for groups that

are reported to use sexual violence infrequently (*low* levels).

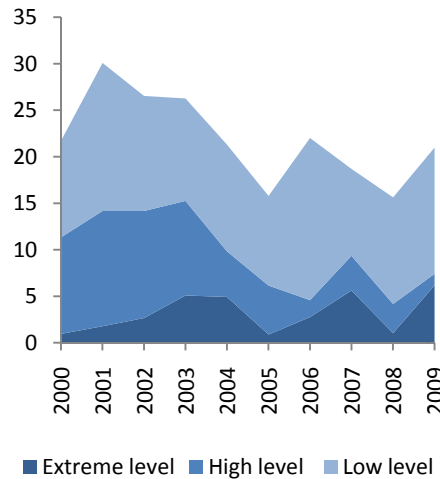


Figure 2: Percentage of conflict actors in three categories of sexual violence magnitude over time

The overall pattern depicted in Figure 2 could be summarized as a *polarization* of the problem of sexual violence: over time, groups seem to be gravitating towards committing either high levels of sexual violence or none at all.

Is the situation in Africa improving? Unfortunately, despite the slight downward trend, it is not clear whether the overall situation is getting better. The reason for this is that we do not know the total *number of victims* per year. This is mainly due to the (inherent) problem that victim counts are notoriously unreliable.

### 3. States Frequent Perpetrators

A striking feature of sexual violence in Africa is that the data shows that state actors are more likely to be reported to have committed acts of sexual violence than rebel groups and militias. Indeed, of the government actors involved in the 20 conflicts covered in this study, 59% have been reported as having committed sexual violence at some point. The equivalent numbers for rebel groups and militias were 42% and 35% respectively.

We should therefore not assume that only unruly rebel engage in sexual violence – it is very much an aspect of the warfare of government armies; and the evidence does not suggest that governments only delegate sexual violence to militias.

### 4. Temporal Variation

Armed groups often change their sexual violence behavior over time. The fact that an actor has committed sexual violence in the past does not necessarily entail similar activity in the future. Further study will be required, however, if we are to identify the determinants of such temporal variation.

### 5. Mostly Random

In some African conflicts of the last decade, sexual violence has been characterized by selective targeting of victims. Yet, in most of the sample, we see fewer reports of selective targeting than during many of the wars of the 1990s.

Governments, rebels and militias seemingly commit sexual violence without a clear purposeful selection of victims: the violence seems indiscriminate (Figure 3).

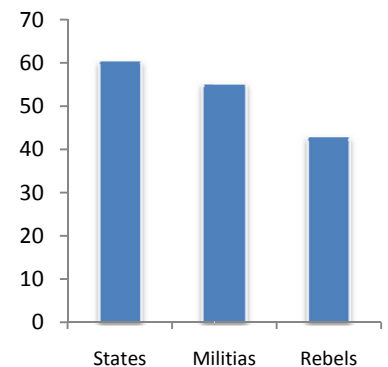


Figure 3: Percentage of conflict actor years with only indiscriminate targeting reported

However, there is variation in the logic of targeting in our sample. When selective targeting does occur, it is not solely based on ethnic belonging. Sierra Leonean rebels, for example, were reported to have specifically targeted very young girls to reduce the risks of STDs (Cohen, 2010).

### 6. Different From Killing Pattern

Many armed actors perpetrate sexual violence in periods when they are largely inactive on the regular battlefield. This holds true both for state and for non-state armed actors. In periods with few killings, half of all government actors and nearly 40% of rebel groups still commit sexual violence. Almost 8% of this sexual violence occurs on a massive scale.

The conflicts in the DRC and Central African Republic stand out in this regard. In both

cases, both the government army and rebels committed extreme amounts of sexual violence in years when the regular conflict was fairly calm.

### 7. More Than Rape

Although rape is the most commonly reported form of sexual violence, we see considerable variation in the types of sexual violence in African conflicts.

There are numerous reports of gang rape, sexual slavery, sexual torture, rape with objects, and sexual mutilation, along with, more rarely, reports of forced marriage and forced pregnancy. Rapes occurred in front of family members and in public spaces, and some victims were abducted and forced both to provide sexual favors for soldiers and to perform menial labor.

There are some reported instances of sexual violence by proxy – when people were forced to rape others, often their own family members. This form of violation was reported in five of the conflicts: Uganda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Burundi, and the DRC.

### 8. Post-Conflict Continuation

Sexual violence often persists after the battle deaths have ended. In the first five post-conflict years, there were reports of sexual violence by one-quarter of state armies and about one-third of all rebel groups and militias. Although many state militaries desisted from acts of sexual violence when the killing stopped; a substantial share of these actors did not. In 4% of the cases, the post-conflict sexual violence continues on a massive scale.

#### Recommendations

- **Improve reporting mechanisms.** The percentage of groups that are *not* reported to have committed sexual violence might be considered conspicuously high. In the years

2000–09, this figure varies between 69% (in 2001) and 84% (in 2005). This could be an accurate reflection of the situation on the ground. However, it might also be the result of poor reporting practices. It should therefore be a priority to build and strengthen monitoring and reporting to secure reliable estimates.

It is critical that reporting happens without harm to the victims of sexual violence. Venues and practices must therefore be established for reporting on abuses whilst limiting the associated risk of stigmatization. Developing systems for anonymous reporting by witnesses and victims should be explored. More direct consultation and collaboration with women's grassroots organizations in conflict countries could be useful for this purpose.

Unified systems of regular reporting on sexual violence events should be established for every major peacekeeping operation, and the UN as well as individual countries should explore how to best integrate reporting of sexual violence with other activities.

- **Identify signals of danger in early conflict phases.** The establishment of an effective early-warning system should be a priority for preventing future sexual violence. In order to create such a system, more data will be required, particularly on variations in exactly *where* and *when* sexual violence occurs.

- **Targeted interventions.** The reported polarization of sexual violence means that targeted interventions could prove effective.

Today, the number of actors committing massive sexual violence seems quite limited, with only five armed groups (out of 81 active armed groups) in this category in 2009, and an additional 12 armed conflict actors committing sexual violence but at lower levels of magnitude. Interventions directed specifically towards these actors could therefore provide an opportunity to drastically reduce overall

sexual violence in Africa.

As state militaries are also committing sexual violence in Africa, more international pressure needs to be put on these states to actively prosecute perpetrators at different levels.

- **Maintain a strong focus on sexual violence in post-conflict and low conflict years.** The mandates of all peacekeeping missions should include explicit policies aimed at preventing sexual violence.

Even if killings subside, mission size must be maintained at a level where peacekeepers can protect civilians against sexual violence. There is a need for research on how wartime sexual violence relates to other conflict behaviors, and how it is carried over into post-conflict situations (both by conflict actors and within society at large).

#### Useful Documents and Publications

Chun, Suk & Inger Skjelsbæk, 2010. *Sexual Violence in Armed Conflicts*. PRIO Policy Brief 1/2010. Oslo: PRIO.

Cohen, Dara Kay, 2010. *Explaining Sexual Violence During Civil War*. PhD Dissertation, Stanford University.

Economist, 2011. *War's overlooked victims: Rape is horrifyingly widespread in conflicts all around the world*. 13 January.

Nordås, Ragnhild & Dara Kay Cohen. 2011. *Wartime Sexual Violence: Challenges and Opportunities for Data Collection and Analysis*. CSCW Paper. Oslo: PRIO.

Skjelsbæk, Inger. 2010. *Elephant in the Room: An Overview of How Sexual Violence came to be Seen as a Weapon of War*. Report to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Oslo: PRIO

Wood, Elisabeth, 2009. *Armed Groups and Sexual Violence: When is Sexual Violence Rare?* *Politics and Society* 37(131).

#### THE AUTHOR

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#### THE PROJECT

The SVAC project is establishing the most comprehensive database of wartime sexual violence to date. The SVAC core research team consists of Inger Skjelsbæk (PRIO) (Project manager), Ragnhild Nordås (CSCW/PRIO), Dara Kay Cohen (University of Minnesota), Scott Gates (CSCW/PRIO), and Håvard Strand (CSCW/PRIO).

#### CSCW/PRIO

The Centre for the Study of Civil War (CSCW) is a Norwegian Centre of Excellence at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). PRIO is a non-profit peace research institute. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.