



# How Does Civil Society Understand Conflict-Related Sexual Violence?

*Perspectives from women activists in Colombia*

How do women mobilize against conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV)? How do such women activists understand the nature and causes of this violence, and what can we learn from these insights? This policy brief explores patterns of women's civil society mobilization around CRSV in Colombia, looking particularly at these women's perceptions of CRSV. It reveals that civil society activists link CRSV first and foremost to gender inequality and patriarchal norms in society. In contrast to the globally dominant understanding of CRSV as a weapon of war that stems purely from conflict dynamics and war strategy, these activists understand sexual violence in the private sphere and that perpetrated in war as on a continuum, entrenched in patriarchal norms and gender inequalities.

## Brief Points

- Sexual violence perpetrated by paramilitary forces, rebel groups, and government armies is widespread in conflicts throughout the world, including in the armed conflict that has plagued Colombia since the 1960s.
- Women mobilize in civil society against conflict-related sexual violence. Activists in Colombia perceive it to be a highly gendered violence that poses a threat to women as a social collective.
- These activists regard sexual violence as an extreme expression of gender inequality, anchored in patriarchal norms.
- Conflict further exacerbates the prevalence of sexual violence and amplifies the patriarchal norms in which the violence is rooted.
- The strategic use of sexual violence as a weapon of war must be understood through the lens of the gendered hierarchies in societies.
- Confronting sexual violence solely as a result of war – i.e. only prosecuting it as a war crime – is insufficient.

## Sexual Violence in Conflict

In all regions of the world, government armies, paramilitary forces and rebel groups commit sexual violence against civilians, sometimes on a massive scale. Wartime rape has been widespread for at least one year in two thirds of armed conflicts between 1990 and 2009 (Cohen, 2013). While reports of sexual violence against men and boys now surface more frequently, women and girls are the primary targets of the crime.

Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) has tremendous consequences for its victims. They may suffer injury or disability, infection with sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy, depression or other mental health problems. Due to the stigma attached to sexual violence, victims also often face social stigmatization. For women in particular, widespread CRSV means heightened insecurity and a generalized sense of fear. As a result, sexual violence is a major source of population displacement during armed conflict.

International responses to conflict-related sexual violence perpetrated by armed actors against civilians, especially women, have skyrocketed since the 1990s. CRSV is now recognized as a war crime and crime against humanity, and a wide array of political, security and humanitarian actors across the world mobilize against this violence. By contrast, local civil society efforts to confront this violence remain less recognized. This policy brief takes a look at such local agency.

## Women's Civil Society Mobilization in Colombia

In countries experiencing armed conflicts with prevalent sexual violence – such as Bosnia, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Colombia – women have formed victims' associations for awareness-raising and mutual support. More political forms of protest include the Korean “comfort women”, who have sustained their protests for recognition by the Japanese state for decades since the end of World War II.

A statistical analysis covering 47 countries between 1990 and 2006 shows that these patterns exist in many conflict-affected countries (Kreft, 2019a). In conflicts where sexual violence is prevalent, there is more women's protest and

more formal civil society activity with linkages to international women's NGOs compared to conflicts with no reports of sexual violence. Importantly, these results do not even capture purely domestic associations and organizations, which are quite numerous in conflict settings but on which systematic data do not exist.

In order to further explore the patterns of women's mobilization in response to CRSV, I interviewed 33 representatives of 24 women's organizations and victims' associations in Colombia. Data was collected during two rounds of fieldwork in 2017 and 2018.

Sexual violence perpetrated by paramilitary forces, rebel groups and government armies has been widespread in the Colombian armed conflict. As early as the 1970s, women began to collectively confront the violation of women's rights in CRSV, and this mobilization increased rapidly in the 1990s and 2000s. Some women's organizations were formed directly in response to sexual violence against women in conflict, such as *Mujeres en la Lucha* (Women in the Struggle) or *la Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres* (Women's Peaceful Route), as well as victims' associations like *Red de Mujeres Víctimas y Profesionales* (Network of Women Victims and Women Professionals) and *Corporación Mujer Sigue Mis Pasos* (Woman, Follow in My Footsteps).

Many other women's organizations and victims' associations also work on CRSV. They document cases, provide psycho-social and psycho-legal support to victims, and lobby government officials. Several presented their perspectives during the peace talks between the government and the FARC, and some have been involved in drafting legislation.

## Sexual Violence as Gendered Violence

Many of the activists I interviewed for this study perceive CRSV as a highly gendered violence that poses a threat to women as a social collective. They viewed sexual violence as primarily perpetrated by men against women, both in the private sphere and in the armed conflict. As shown in Figure 1, data recorded in the national victims' registry (*Registro Único de Víctimas*) supports the notion that women are the primary victims of CRSV.

The interviewees located sexual violence against women firmly in patriarchal structures and norms and regarded it as an extreme expression of gender inequality. Sexual violence reflects the objectification of women, and men's sense of entitlement to their bodies. Sexual violence, several interviewees pointed out, has been socially constructed as a violence “reserved for” women, and is normalized as such in society.

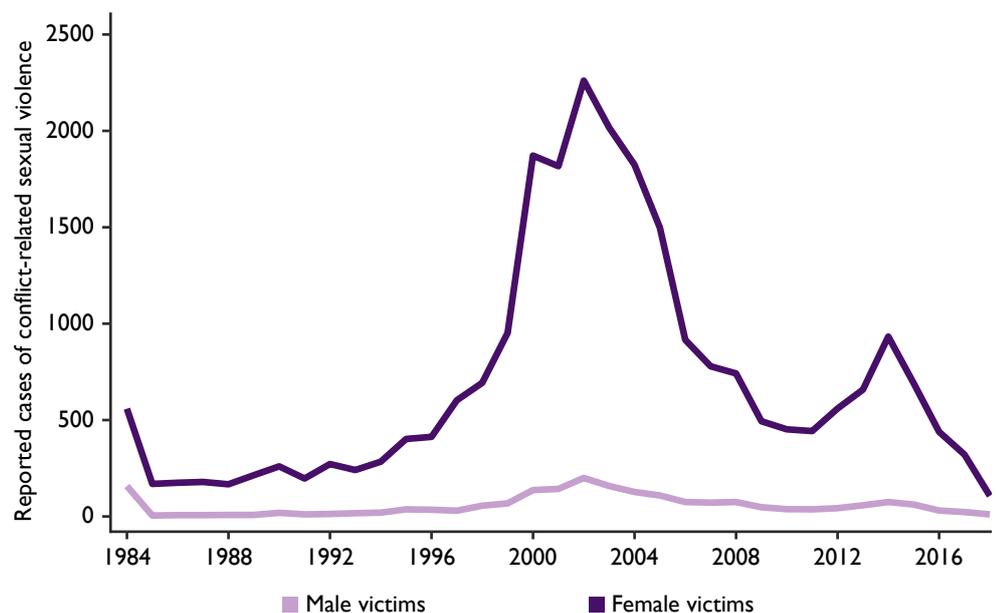


Figure 1. Reports of conflict-related sexual violence in the Colombian Registro Único de Víctimas, 1984–2016



Photo: Courtesy of Borja Paladini Adell

This violence is normalized in that it is very prevalent and often not even recognized as violence, for example in cases of marital rape. This does not make the pain and terror this violence causes any less real. In fact, it is precisely because of the normalization or routinization of sexual violence as a highly gendered violence that it generates fear among women. Women have shared experiences as a social collective:

*“What can happen to one woman can also happen to you and generate a situation of horror.”*

Sexual violence against one woman is thus indicative of the vulnerability of all women. Key here are the social hierarchies that exist between men and women, and how they find expression in the perpetration of sexual violence:

*“I do not think that the risk is the same for men. That is not to say that men do not get raped, [but] it is not the same [...] belonging to a collective that holds power as belonging to a collective that exists in a relationship of subordination and oppression.”*

Moreover, there was general agreement among the women activists interviewed that other factors, which intersect with gender dynamics,

further increase the risk of victimization. These factors include: poverty, living in rural areas, belonging to one of the ethnic minority groups, having a disability, being non-heterosexual and being transgender. Several interviewees also mentioned sexual violence against men, especially but not exclusively against homosexual men. However, the mobilized women overwhelmingly subscribed to the view that sexual violence arises from and reinforces the patriarchal dominance of men over women. Some women even suggested that men may consciously use sexual violence as a tool to incite fear and to control and dominate the women in their lives – patterns that are exacerbated on a larger scale during war. Sexual violence, in short, asserts gendered hierarchies. This is also mirrored in the perception that armed actors rape men to “feminize” them, i.e. to relegate them to an inferior position in the gendered, social hierarchy:

*“The men, they have to debase to the feminine condition, the woman is already debased.”*

#### Patriarchy and War Strategy

The interviewees insisted that sexual violence perpetrated in the private sphere and in war exist on a continuum. They were of the view that sexual violence perpetrated in armed conflict

has its roots in patriarchal norms in society, which they believed were further amplified by the presence of arms. Meanwhile, lacking state presence and the deterioration of education and social services increase the vulnerability of women in conflict-affected areas. Impunity becomes rampant.

In addition, the interviews revealed, the dynamics of an ongoing war may add strategic dimensions to the perpetration of sexual violence by armed actors. These build on the gendered nature of sexual violence and what this violence signifies in a very patriarchal context. In other words, the strategic perpetration of sexual violence exploits the ability to generate fear and to control, dominate and regulate women. Furthermore, armed actors capitalize on patriarchal notions of women as objects and as the extensions of men to attack men and communities via the bodies of women:

*“[The woman’s body] becomes one more object that can be destroyed, and with that... you cause damage to the other, so to speak, and this is as old as the wars in the world, right? And I think it follows from this structure in which we as women are viewed as objects who don’t have – we’re not autonomous, so*

*everything they do to us, nonetheless does not do damage to us, no? It's to do damage to him who is there, him who is with her."*

Men who fail to protect "their" women – members of their families or of their communities – are humiliated and "emasculated." Sexual violence thus serves to reinforce gendered hierarchies between perpetrator and victim. In the understanding of Colombian women activists, war strategy and patriarchal structures are closely intertwined and cannot be divorced from each other. The strategic instrumentalization of sexual violence, then, can only be understood through the lens of gendered hierarchies that manifest in society.

### Confronting Sexual Violence

Why is it relevant how women mobilized in civil society understand sexual violence? Because the women's organizations and victims' associations are sources of expertise – they have amassed significant knowledge through their extensive work on sexual violence in conflict.

It is worth noting that the assessments of the nature and causes of CRSV by the women activists also closely align with those of various national and sub-national government officials working on CRSV, whom I also interviewed. Taking such local perspectives seriously improves our understanding of how societal and conflict dynamics intersect in the perpetration of sexual violence in war.

And ultimately, how we understand CRSV affects how we confront it. This is exemplified in the work of the mobilized women themselves, many of whom actively challenge patriarchal norms and harmful conceptions of masculinity and femininity in their work. Such long-term transformations in gender roles and norms are necessary to change the patterns of violence

against women in Colombian society (and not only there).

This means also that confronting CRSV solely as the result of war, i.e. by only prosecuting it as a war crime, is insufficient. Achieving justice for the victims and sanctioning the perpetrators is certainly important, but it does not target the problem at its source. Neither can the legal approach be treated in isolation from patriarchal structures and norms. Some core obstacles to the pursuit of justice, according to my interviews, are the impunity of perpetrators, persistent victim-blaming, and the dismissal of victims within the justice system:

*"There is the psycho-legal assistance for victims in their dealings with the office of the public prosecutor and all that. Why does there need to be psycho-legal assistance? Because that is where [the patriarchal system] is most reinforced, because the word of the other is violated, revictimization occurs, this person who goes there to report a crime doesn't have validity because – and in particular when she has a lower socio-economic status – well, they can do what they want with her."*

Just as patriarchy gives rise to sexual violence, so it undermines the pursuit of justice. Equally important, patriarchal norms also shape and amplify the psychological and social consequences this violence has for its victims, such as stigmatization, victim-blaming, feelings of shame and guilt, silencing and ostracism. In sum, the different dimensions of sexual violence – as a crime, a horrendous experience for the victim, and an expression of patriarchy – are interrelated and cannot be divorced from each other.

### Implications

The interviews with representatives of civil society actors in Colombia cast doubt on the usefulness of the globally dominant weapon of war discourse, according to which sexual violence by armed actors is purely the result of war strategy and conflict dynamics.

Tackling CRSV requires careful attention to gender inequalities and patriarchal norms entrenched in societies themselves, and how armed conflict exacerbates these. Likewise, a careful consideration of how patriarchal norms permeate the justice system and court proceedings is a prerequisite for actually achieving justice for the victims.

It is also important to bear in mind that different activities to confront CRSV and its structural pathologies are already ongoing in domestic civil society, as we see in Colombia. It is imperative for international actors to identify, understand and support such processes of resistance, and to engage with the expertise that local civil society actors possess. In other words, international actors should not fall into the trap of thinking of victims, or women in war generally, as passive and invariably in need of outside empowerment. ■

### Further Reading

Cohen, Dara Kay (2013) 'Explaining Rape during Civil War: Cross-National Evidence (1980–2009)'. *American Political Science Review* 107(3): 461–477.

Kreft, Anne-Kathrin (2019a) 'Responding to sexual violence: Women's mobilization in war'. *Journal of Peace Research* 56(2): 220–233.

Kreft, Anne-Kathrin (2019b) *Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict: Threat, Mobilization and Gender Norms*. PhD dissertation. University of Gothenburg.

### THE AUTHOR

Anne-Kathrin Kreft holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Gothenburg and is a former member of the Research School on Peace and Conflict. Her research focuses on domestic and international responses to conflict-related sexual violence, the Women, Peace and Security framework, gender norms and women's rights.

### THE PROJECT

The PhD thesis 'Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict: Threat, Mobilization and Gender Norms' examines the nexus of victimization and agency in domestic and international responses to conflict-related sexual violence. It finds that sexual violence makes gender salient and sparks both international and domestic civil society mobilization around gender issues.

### PRIO

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