

Sexual Violence by Militias in African Conflicts

Not a question of 'delegation' by states

In a study of African conflicts from 1989 to 2009, we find that governments do not seem to 'delegate' the commission of atrocities to militias in order to avoid accountability, as has often been assumed. On the contrary, when militias commit acts of sexual violence, states are also reported as perpetrators.

Also counter to conventional wisdom, our data show that:

- Only 30% of African militias perpetrated sexual violence.
- Conflicts with few killings often see militias committing widespread sexual violence.

What characterizes those militias that use sexual violence? We find that such militias often rely on child soldiers and operate in the poorest countries, but do not operate in the conflicts with the highest casualty rates from regular battles.

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Militias in African conflicts

Militias are an important but woefully understudied actor in modern conflicts. Recent research suggests that militias are often tasked with perpetrating the worst abuses against civilian populations.

Militias are irregular armed actors that fight to maintain the status quo. Included in our definition are cases where a militia group is fighting (or claiming to fight) to protect a local community (self-defence groups), as well as paramilitary organizations with informal links to governments.

Examples of well-known militia groups in Africa in the period under study include the Janjaweed in Sudan, the Interahamwe in Rwanda and the Mai Mai in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). A total of 75 militia groups in 16 countries are covered by this policy brief.

We utilize data on militias from Carey et al. (2012), who define militias as groups that are (1) pro-government or sponsored by the government (national or subnational); (2) not part of the regular security forces; (3) armed; and (4) have some degree of organization.

Definition of sexual violence

Sexual violence includes rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization/abortion, sexual mutilation and sexual torture. We focus on behaviours that involve direct force and/or physical violence, and we do not include threats or insults.

The prevalence of sexual violence is measured on a four-point scale, where 0 signifies no reports of sexual violence by the group, 1 signifies reports of isolated incidents, 2 signifies reports of common incidents, and 3 signifies that sexual violence is reported on a massive scale.

Data on sexual violence are taken from the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC) data project, and are based on information coded from annual reports issued by the US State Department, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch.

Is sexual violence delegated?

Scholars have argued that states delegate the perpetration of atrocities to militias to avoid

being held accountable – particularly for acts that violate the laws of war (such as the intentional targeting of civilians) – or to perpetrate forms of violence that are especially brutal or shameful.

Following the delegation hypothesis, then, sexual violence should be especially likely to be delegated to militias. Delegation of sexual violence would allow states to maintain plausible deniability for a form of violence that is widely condemned.

However, we find little evidence that states are delegating sexual violence to militias. In fact, our data show that **in every case of militia-perpetrated sexual violence, the state was also reported to be a perpetrator.**

In addition, we find four countries (Angola, Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa) where there were reports of sexual violence by states but no reports of similar violence by militias.

In other words, rather than delegating sexual violence to militias, states appear both to be also perpetrating acts of sexual violence themselves and to be committing sexual violence even when militias could presumably be used. Hence, sexual violence does not follow a clear pattern of ‘delegation’ from states to militias.

Figure 1 (below) displays the relative severity of the magnitude of sexual violence by state forces and militia forces in the countries where such violence was reported in the study period (1989–2009).

Killings do not predict sexual violence

An assumption that has been made in the Human Security Report (2012) is that sexual violence is declining over time owing to the decline in the number and lethality of armed conflicts.

For recent African conflicts, we find that sexual violence by militias is not more likely in conflicts with more lethal violence.

Indeed, we find that the relationship between battle deaths and sexual violence is the opposite of what is often assumed: sexual violence is relatively less common in the most-lethal conflicts than in conflicts with fewer annual casualties.

If conflict severity and sexual violence do not co-vary, we should also not assume that a decline in the frequency of large-scale armed conflicts will be matched by a corresponding decline in sexual violence.

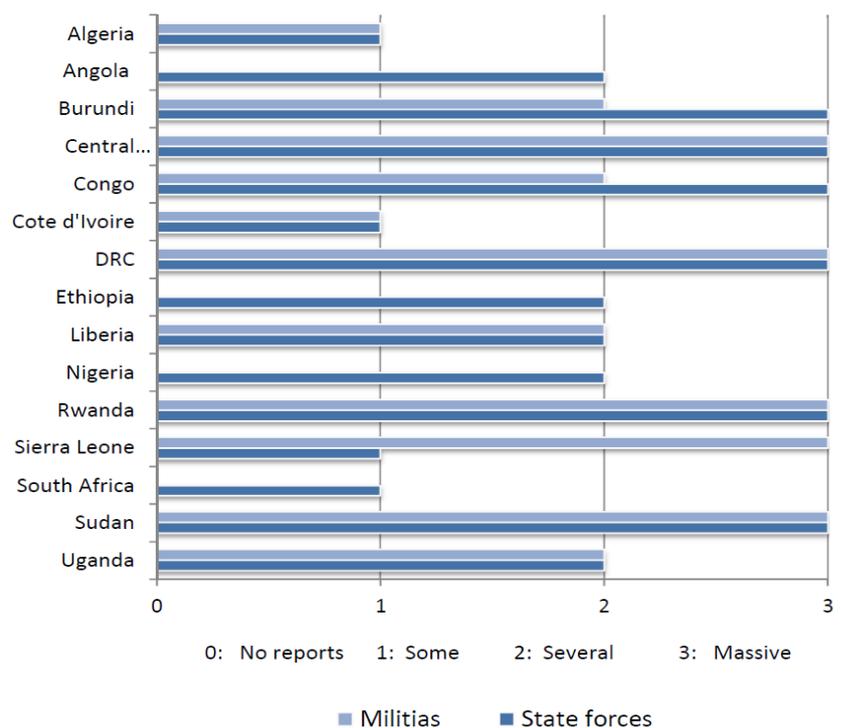
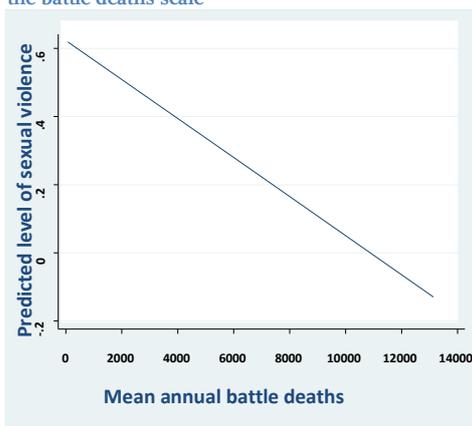


Figure 1. Sexual violence by militias and state forces in African conflict countries, 1989-2009

Figure 2 (below) depicts the central tendency in this relationship between battle deaths and predicted level of sexual violence by militias.

Figure 2. Predicted level of sexual violence along the battle deaths scale



How widespread is sexual violence by African militias?

Of the 75 militia groups active in the study period, 22 – or about 30% – were reported as perpetrators of sexual violence. Therefore, **the vast majority of militia groups show restraint with this violence type.**

Figure 3 displays the distribution of the frequency of militia groups for each of the four categories of sexual-violence prevalence:

- 20% of the groups in our sample were reported as perpetrators of high or very high levels of sexual violence (coded as a 2 or 3), while
- 80% of the militias were reported to have committed only isolated incidents or were not reported as perpetrators (coded as a 1 or 0).

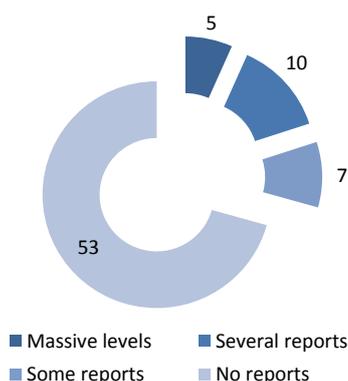


Figure 4. Frequency of sexual violence categories among African militias, 1989–2009

Importantly, however, these data do not record the *number of victims* of sexual violence, only the quality of the violence. Therefore, we do not know how many people fall victim to sexual violence by militia groups, or whether there are more victims of militia violence than, for example, rebel-perpetrated violence.

Figure 4 (below) displays a list of the 22 militias for which we coded reports that indicate these groups perpetrated sexual violence.

Militia group name	Country
Ninjas	Algeria
Guardians of Peace	Burundi
Chadian Special Guard	Central African Republic
Cobras	Congo
Student Federation of Côte d'Ivoire (FESCI)	Côte d'Ivoire
FDD (Forces for Defence of Democracy)	DRC
FDLR	DRC
FNL (National Liberation Forces)	DRC
Mai Mai (Mayi Mayi)	DRC
Government of Liberia (GOL) militias	Liberia
Anti-Terrorist Unit	Liberia
Interahamwe militia	Rwanda
Local Defence Force	Rwanda
RUF	Sierra Leone
Civil Defense Forces/Kamajor/Donso/Gbethis/Kapras	Sierra Leone
Janjaweed	Sudan
Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)	Sudan
Popular Defence Forces (PDF)	Sudan
South Sudan Unity Movement/Army (SSUM/A)	Sudan
Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army – Nasir Faction (SPLM/A-Nasir)	Sudan
Anyanya II	Sudan
Local Defence Units	Uganda

Figure 5. African militias having used sexual violence, 1989–2009

Our analyses show that sexual violence by militias is not ubiquitous. This echoes previous research that emphasizes that sexual violence varies tremendously across actors and contexts (e.g. Wood, 2006; Cohen, 2010).

What types of militias commit sexual violence?

We considered the question of what types of militias are more likely to be using sexual violence. Controlling for numerous factors, our findings indicate that:

Militia groups that have recruited children to their ranks are significantly more likely to perpetrate sexual violence than groups that do not recruit children. The impact of this factor is substantial.

We believe that child recruitment may be capturing those groups who use forced recruitment, as recent work on African conflicts has found that child recruitment and forced recruitment are highly correlated (Beber and Blattman 2012).

This finding is in line with those of Cohen (2012), who finds that groups that use forced recruitment are more likely to use sexual violence. The assumed reason for this is that groups that recruit through forcible means lack the internal cohesion necessary to constitute a viable fighting force. Rape, and especially gang rape, enables these groups to create bonds of loyalty and friendship. Sexual violence can therefore be used to generate intra-group unity and a coherent fighting force out of a collection of strangers (Cohen, 2012).

Our findings also indicate that:

Militias operating in weak states are more likely to use sexual violence than militias operating in countries that are relatively stronger (in terms of GDP per capita).

In previous research, the relationship between state weakness and violence by militias has generally been assumed to reflect the logic of delegation – states with lower capacity are believed to be more willing to let militias fight on their behalf, in part owing to financial constraints (see, for example, Carey et al., 2012).

Given the lack of evidence of delegation, alternative reasons for this finding might be (1) that militia groups have a greater opportunity to rape with impunity in poor countries, due to lack of resources for policing infractions, or (2) that civilians in poor countries are particularly vulnerable to attacks.

However, for another (related) measure of state weakness – a state failure index – we do not find an association with sexual violence. Some caution is therefore warranted.

Expectations not met

Our analyses also call into question several common expectations regarding the causes of sexual violence.

● **Ethnic conflict:** The literature on sexual violence often assumes a relationship between ethnic conflict and sexual violence. We find, however, that this relationship is tenuous at best. *Militias involved in conflicts with ethnic mobilization do not engage in significantly higher levels of sexual violence than militias in non-ethnic conflicts.*

● **Ideological groups:** On the basis of previous studies of rebel groups, we expected militias that espouse an explicit ideology to be less likely to commit sexual violence than those that are non-ideological. However, *we did not find support for a significant difference between ideological and non-ideological militia groups.*

● **Training:** We expected that groups that have received no traditional military training would be less likely to regulate sexual violence on the part of their fighters – primarily owing to a lack of adequate command and control. However, *we find no significant difference in sexual-violence prevalence between militia groups that have received some military training and untrained groups.*

● **Other:** We also do not find that the regime type of the state (level of democracy) matters for the expected level of sexual violence by militias; nor are ‘semi-official’ militias more or less likely to commit sexual violence than militias that have less of an official recognition from the state.

Conclusions

We draw four main conclusions from our analysis of sexual violence by African militias:

- A minority of the African militias active in conflicts from 1989 to 2009 were reported to perpetrate any level of sexual violence.
- Militia groups that rely on child soldiers often commit sexual violence.
- Sexual violence by militias in Africa is not well explained by the thesis that states ‘delegate’ the commission of atrocities in order to maintain plausible deniability for such activities.
- Sexual violence and killings are *not* closely associated. Hence, the pattern of decline in major wars may not lead to an equivalent reduction in sexual violence.

In sum, *although sexual violence constitutes a very serious problem in many African conflict settings, sexual violence is not chronic and omnipresent, even by an actor type (militias) that is frequently assumed to be particularly susceptible to committing terrible atrocities.* ■

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CSCW

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