

Sexual Violence in African Conflicts, 1989–2009

What the data show

This policy brief summarizes key trends in conflict-related sexual violence in 48 conflicts in 33 African countries, encompassing 236 armed-conflict actors, including state armies, militias and rebel groups.

Findings from study area:

- Sexual violence was reported to be perpetrated by a minority of armed-conflict actors
- There was a slight increase over time in the share of actors that perpetrated sexual violence at a massive level
- African state armies were frequently reported as perpetrators
- Sexual violence was often reported when there were relatively few reported killings
- Sexual violence at times continued at a high level in the post-conflict period

Recommendations

- Maintain a focus on the prevention of sexual violence
- Pressure all relevant actors – and especially states – to end their practice of committing sexual violence
- Do not lose sight of conflict actors that are not especially lethal, as such actors may still commit sexual violence
- Increase attention to sexual violence by armed actors in post-conflict settings

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Sexual violence

Sexual violence is one of the most destructive and least understood aspects of modern warfare. Recent research suggests that sexual violence – in terms of form, prevalence, and targets – varies widely, both across conflicts and by armed groups within conflicts (Wood, 2006; Cohen, 2010).

The UN Security Council (through i.a. security Council Resolution 1960) has formally acknowledged the need for more systematic data collection and analysis to assist in the development of appropriate actions against sexual violence. The data collection in the SVAC project responds to this call.

In this policy brief, we highlight key trends in conflict-related sexual violence in Africa during the period 1989–2009 (for a policy brief on the pilot study, see Nordås, 2011).

By conflict-related sexual violence, we mean sexual violence committed by armed-conflict actors during active conflict years, as well as in the immediate post-conflict years.

Sexual violence prevalence measure

The definition of **sexual violence** employed by the SVAC project accords with the definition developed by the International Criminal Court (ICC), which includes rape, sexual mutilation, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization and sexual torture.

The prevalence of sexual violence is measured for every conflict actor (state forces, rebel groups and militias) for every year of active conflict, and for the first five years after a given conflict has ended.

Sexual violence prevalence is measured on the following four-point scale (Cohen, 2010):

- 0 No reports of sexual violence by the group
- 1 Isolated reports of sexual violence
- 2 Common reports of sexual violence
- 3 Sexual violence on a massive scale

Study area

For the African continent, we have collected detailed information on sexual violence from the annual reports of three key sources – the

US State Department, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch – in relation to all of the 236 armed-conflict actors (state armies, rebel groups and militias) active in conflicts in the countries listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Countries covered by SVAC Africa database

Algeria	Lesotho
Angola	Liberia
Burkina Faso	Mali
Burundi	Morocco
Central African Republic	Namibia
Chad	Niger
Comoros	Nigeria
Côte d'Ivoire	Rwanda
Djibouti	Senegal
DRC	Sierra Leone
Egypt	Somalia
Eritrea	South Africa
Ethiopia	Sudan
Guinea	Togo
Guinea Bissau	Uganda

KEY FINDINGS

Many African conflicts have been marked by high levels of sexual violence. Below, we summarize the main findings of our data collection on sexual violence in African conflicts from 1989 to 2009.

These findings are not representative of the global situation, and it is apparent from other recent studies that sexual violence is not just an 'African problem' (Cohen, 2010). However, our findings here reflect detailed information extracted from the specific source material for African conflicts during the study period.

Our findings on conflict-related sexual violence challenge some prevalent conventional wisdom. We focus on four such common arguments.

Conventional Wisdom 1: 'Sexual violence is omnipresent'

Out of the 236 conflict actors covered in our sample, 68 (or about 29%) were reported to have committed acts of sexual violence (see Figure 1).

Contrary to common beliefs, only a minority of African conflict actors were reported to engage in sexual violence.

A majority of the armed actors in African conflicts (ca. 72%) had no known record of sexual violence. Figure 1 shows the distribution of all armed-conflict actor-years in categories of sexual violence prevalence.

Figure 1 indicates that there is considerable variation between conflict actors in terms of the degree to which they commit sexual violence. Almost three-quarters (72%) of all observations involved no reports of sexual violence, whereas 6% of the observations involved reports of sexual violence at the highest level.

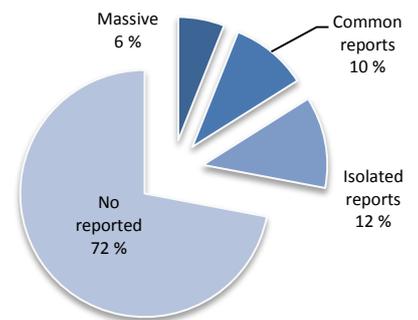


Figure 1. Prevalence of sexual violence at various levels of severity for 236 African conflict actors, 1989–2009. Unit of observation: actor-year.

In terms of the 236 conflict actors (state militaries, rebel groups, militias), 64% of the actors are not reported as perpetrators of sexual violence, whereas 22% of the actors are reported as perpetrators at the two highest prevalence levels (2 and 3). Sexual violence is rampant in many conflicts. Still, as the data show that a significant number of conflict actors were never reported as perpetrators of these sorts of crimes, sexual violence cannot be said to be an inevitable fact of war.

It should be noted, however, that sexual violence is typically difficult to document, and there can be cases of sexual violence underreporting and occasionally over-reporting (see Nordås & Cohen, 2011, for a discussion of potential reporting biases).

In addition, the frequency of conflict actors that have been reported as perpetrators of sexual violence has increased over time. The level peaked in the early-to-mid-2000s. Since then, the number of groups reported as committing sexual violence has dropped somewhat, but stabilized at a lower level than in the 1990s. Look at the percent of conflict actors,

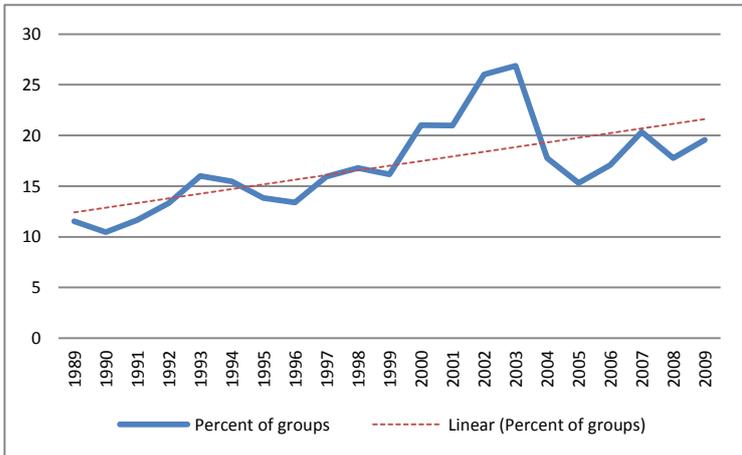


Figure 2. Percent of armed actors reported as perpetrators of sexual violence over time

Figure 2 shows a slightly upward trend in conflict actors reported as sexual violence perpetrators. The solid line shows the annual percentages, and the dotted line is the linear trendline.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of the conflict actors at different levels of sexual violence prevalence over time. Within the subset of actors that were reported to have committed acts of sexual violence within our sample, the share of groups that committed low levels of sexual violence increased over time. Reports of perpetration at the worst level (3=massive) started to emerge in the mid-1990s, and conflict actors reported to have committed this

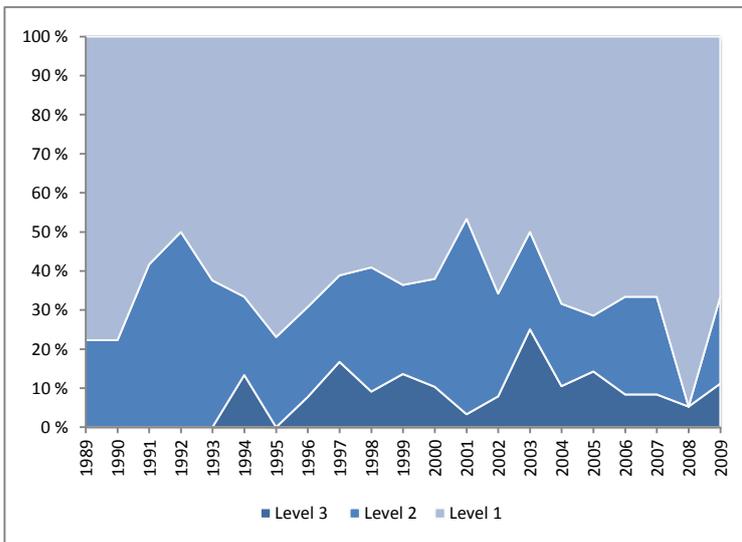


Figure 3. Percentage share of conflict actors in each prevalence category over time. (Non-perpetrators excluded)

level of sexual violence constitute a slightly larger but relatively stable proportion of actors over time.

The maps of Africa (right) confirm the point that there is considerable variation also between conflict countries in terms of what the highest reported levels of sexual violence prevalence has been in the years 1989 to 2009.

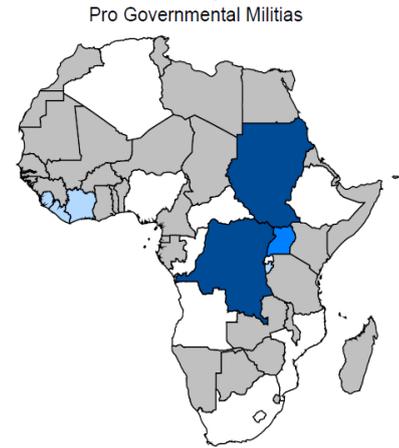
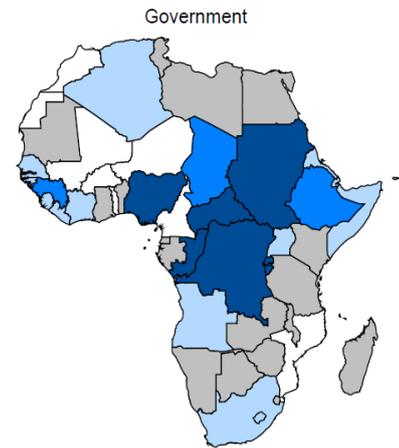
Conventional Wisdom 2: 'Sexual violence is a problem of unruly rebels'

Of the government actors involved in armed conflicts on the African continent between 1989 and 2009, 64% have been reported as perpetrators of sexual violence at some point.

The equivalent numbers for rebel groups and militias were 31% and 29%, respectively. The evidence suggests that governments do not only 'delegate' sexual violence to militia groups (Cohen & Nordås, 2012): they are also commonly reported to commit sexual violence themselves.

Therefore, a striking feature of sexual violence in Africa is that the average state army in conflict is more likely to be reported as a perpetrator of sexual violence than the average rebel group and militia.

Accordingly, we should not assume that only unruly rebels engage in sexual violence: it is very much a regular feature of the warfare of African government armies.



Map notation:
 Level 3 (massive): Dark blue
 Level 2 (common): Lighter blue
 Level 1 (isolated reports): Lightest blue
 Level 0 (no reports): White
 Grey: Outside sample

Conventional Wisdom 3: 'All bad things go together: More battle deaths means more sexual violence'

Many armed actors perpetrated sexual violence in periods when they were largely inactive on the regular battlefield. This holds true both for state and for non-state armed actors.

Specifically, during so-called *intermediary years* (years with fewer than 25 battle-related killing in between conflict years with more than 25 deaths) more than 20% of the observations included reports of sexual violence by conflict actors. About 4% of the intermediary years have reports of common or massive levels of sexual violence (level 2 or 3).

Conventional Wisdom 4: 'Ending the war is the only effective solution'

Sexual violence was also often reported after the battle deaths ended.

Although most conflict actors desisted from acts of sexual violence when the killing stopped, a substantial share of these actors did not. In the first five post-conflict years, there were reports of sexual violence by 37% of state armies, about 22% of all rebel groups, and 12% of militias.

In some cases, sexual violence continued at the highest level: during 4% of the post-conflict observations, sexual violence continued on a massive scale. The evidence therefore suggests that ending wars *may reduce* conflict-related sexual violence by armed actors, but ending the war certainly *does not eliminate* sexual violence by armed actors.

Recommendations

From these findings, we present four main recommendations:

- **Maintain a strong focus on the prevention of sexual violence.**

Sexual violence is not inevitable in war. This is evident from the significant variation observed between different armed actors and over time. Preventive policies – if designed and implemented in a robust manner – can therefore have positive effects.

- **Pressure all relevant conflict actors – and especially states – to end their practice of committing sexual violence.**

State armies are frequent perpetrators. Previous research suggests that states can be effectively 'named and shamed' to stop atrocities (Krain, 2012). The international community should pressure states to uphold the laws of war as they relate to sexual violence, and state leaders and high-level military commanders should be brought to justice and held responsible for sexual violence atrocities.

- **Do not lose sight of conflict actors that are not especially lethal, as such actors may still commit sexual violence.**

The relationship between battle-related deaths and sexual violence is not as straightforward as is often assumed. Armed-conflict actors that are not responsible for many killings may still commit large-scale sexual violence. An explicit focus on sexual violence – not just lethal violence – is therefore necessary, as is keeping a watch also on armed groups that are otherwise inactive on the battlefield.

- **Pay close attention to sexual violence in post-conflict settings.**

Even if killings subside, sexual violence by armed actors may continue. After war ends, monitoring of sexual violence must be maintained, and peacekeeping missions must be able to provide adequate protection to civilians

against sexual violence.

There is an acute need for research on how wartime sexual violence is carried over into post-conflict situations – by armed actors, combatants and civilians. ■

References and further reading

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