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# Wartime Sexual Violence: Challenges and Opportunities for Data Collection and Analysis

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## Executive Summary

The current state of knowledge of sexual violence in war-torn societies is very weak. Policymakers cannot effectively intervene to stop sexual violence in war without information on *where* this behavior is likely to take place, *when* it occurs, who are likely to *perpetrate* the crimes, and who is likely to be *targeted*. This paper recognizes the need for comparable data on across cases in order to devise effective solutions for the prevention of sexual violence, and outlines the associated challenges and potential solutions. We discuss four main challenges with the study of wartime sexual violence: (a) Defining sexual violence, (b) measuring magnitude, (c) selecting relevant variables beyond magnitude, and (d) identifying and accounting for biases in source data. We recommend the adoption of a definition of sexual violence that allows for a broader set of violence beyond rape alone, and that includes the potential for male victims and female perpetrators. To measure the magnitude of sexual violence on a global scale, we recommend coding data in categories of severity rather than attempting to establish numerical estimates of victims. In order to develop early-warning systems, we suggest collecting data that is time-variant, includes details of location of the violation and the form of sexual violence, as well as characteristics of perpetrators and victims. Although there are a variety of biases in the sources of data used to gather these details, these may be mitigated through triangulating data, meaning using multiple sources. Despite the challenges in data collection on wartime sexual violence, the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC) project indicates that a global data collection is attainable.

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## Introduction

Sexual violence is a feature of many past and current wars. It can destroy lives and communities, and leave a terrible legacy for survivors and their families. Finding ways to prevent sexual violence is therefore an important job that needs to be done. Today, sexual assault is reportedly more frequent, more brutal, and of a more systematic nature than in previous eras. Researchers, and policymakers most notably within the UN, have called for more systematic analyses of wartime sexual violence so that policies can be crafted on a basis of empirical knowledge. However, the necessary data to conduct rigorous analyses does not currently exist. On 16 December 2010, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1960 on sexual violence, a follow-up to the related Resolutions 1325, 1820, 1888 and 1889, which reiterates the need for research by emphasizing that the UN wishes to ‘enhance data collection and analysis of incidents, trends, and patterns of rape and other forms of sexual violence’<sup>1</sup>. The SVAC project seeks to address this need.

This report discusses challenges associated with gathering systematic data on sexual violence. We describe four general challenges:

- Defining sexual violence
- Measuring magnitude
- Selecting relevant variables beyond magnitude
- Identifying data biases

Despite these challenges, a pilot study of sexual violence in African conflicts shows that there are also great opportunities for data collection on this topic, and an acute need for such data. We present the main lessons learned from the data collection in the pilot study. Based on these lessons, we recommend a set of priorities for future data collection and analysis.

## What are the Challenges?

We highlight four main challenges associated with collecting systematic data for cross-national comparison.<sup>2</sup> The first challenge is definitional, and includes the difficulties of finding the most accurate and relevant definition of sexual violence. The second challenge is measuring severity of sexual violence in a manner that is roughly comparable across settings and conflicts. The third challenge is deciding what variables are relevant beyond a measure of the magnitude of the violence. These additional variables, including details about the perpetrators and victims as well as how, where, and when sexual violence has occurred, are necessary both for understanding the complexities of sexual violence in wartime and for the development of preventative policies. The final challenge is recognizing the biases in the types of data used as sources in a cross-national data collection. Drawing on our data collection experience, we describe these challenges and suggest ways to mitigate them. Each challenge is discussed below.

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<sup>1</sup> See UNSCR 1960 here: <http://womenpeacesecurity.org/media/pdf-scr1960.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> We do not address the challenges of conducting original field research, such as interviews or surveys with victims or perpetrators of sexual violence; for that, we recommend consulting *Researching Violence Against Women: A Practical Guide for Researchers and Activists*, available at [http://www.path.org/files/GBV\\_rvaw\\_complete.pdf](http://www.path.org/files/GBV_rvaw_complete.pdf)

## The Definitional Challenge: What is Sexual Violence?

The use of the term “sexual violence” varies substantially by context. It may have different meanings to policymakers, NGOs and researchers; additionally, legal and societal definitions differ across cultures, time and even between areas of the same country.

Existing studies often focus specifically on rape. Some also use definitions that include intentional physical injuries (e.g., Farr 2009), whereas some researchers and human rights organizations include non-physical acts such as sexual harassment (e.g., Leiby 2009). To make progress on understanding sexual violence as a global phenomenon, a clearly stated definition will allow valid comparisons across contexts.

The research group on Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC) has adopted the definition developed by the International Criminal Court (ICC). This definition includes rape, sexual mutilation, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, and enforced sterilization. Importantly, we rely on this definition for two main reasons:

- The focus on behaviors that involve direct physical violence and/or force
- This definition does not exclude the existence of male victims and female perpetrators

Although there will always be gray areas, drawing the line at the use of force is a clear-cut definition of sexual violence. By not including gender as part of the definition of the phenomenon, we can also study the gender dimensions of sexual violence. Future research must be very attentive to definitional clarifications. We recommend that the ICC definition be adopted as a standard for social scientific research so that studies across contexts can be more readily aggregated and compared.

## The Challenge of Measuring Magnitude

A second challenge is estimating the scale of sexual violence in wartime and the post-war period. No cross-national dataset will be able to reflect all the nuances of the magnitude of sexual violence. Yet by using multiple sources and by paying attention to counting practices, we can improve the reliability of claims about severity across cases.

It must be noted that any specific estimate of a global *number* of victims, perpetrators, or individual sexual violence events is likely inaccurate. Citing such numbers implies a false sense of precision.<sup>3</sup> We discuss several challenges of measuring magnitude below: under-reporting, over-reporting, and issues related to what to count. However, for the purpose of sexual violence prevention, relative magnitude in different setting might be as useful as numerical estimates, and this strategy therefore represents an important opportunity for measuring magnitude. Instead of collecting estimates on the numbers of victims, we advocate for a general assessment of the relative severity of sexual violence using severity categories.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> It may be possible to arrive at more credible estimates of these kinds for single conflicts or for more localized areas with extensive documentation or careful sampling practices.

<sup>4</sup> Even for single countries there are significant problems with reporting such numerical estimates, some of which are discussed in the sections on underreporting and over-reporting. Any attempts to provide numerical estimates for a large sample of conflicts will likely come across a range of reported estimates and should at a minimum report uncertainty in the form of low, best and high estimates.

How much of the observed sexual violence is related to conflict? To measure the magnitude of wartime sexual violence, it is useful to establish a sense of the baseline pre-war situation: Is the sexual violence a continuation of high levels of sexual predation in society, or did the war represent a decisive shift in the nature of sexual violence? A key issue is the establishment of what constituted the pre-war local norm. The fact that we observe sexual violence during and after a conflict is not sufficient to know that this is war related. Instead, an understanding of whether there was increase in sexual violence relative to the pre-war period is needed in order to more reliably establish that sexual violence was war-related. A rough baseline estimate could potentially be created by consulting estimates of sexual abuse in societies based on UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute statistics, Amnesty International country reports, and the U.S. State Department Human Rights Country Reports for the pre-war years. In some cases, there are also representative surveys of war-affected populations that include questions about pre-war, war-time and post-war occurrences of sexual violence.

In the SVAC pilot, we have focused on collecting information about sexual violence that can be attributed specifically to armed actors during the conflict period. This will to some extent assure that the sexual violence is war-related and not an epiphenomenon. However, for future iterations of the project, an estimate of pre-war levels of sexual violence will be established.

Even with a pre-war baseline estimate, however, measuring the magnitude of wartime sexual violence is difficult. Under-reporting of sexual violence is probably the most common problem, but over-reporting may happen as well. These points are addressed separately below.

### **a. Under-reporting**

Under-reporting is the most frequently cited form of potential bias in large-scale data collection on sexual violence. Researchers often treat any estimate—from the number of victims to the overall severity of the violence—an inherently conservative, based on the assumption that many victims are unable or unwilling to report rape and other forms of sexual violence.

Possible reasons that victims may not report include the fear of stigmatization, shame, fear of retributive violence, the inability to reach authorities to report violence, a lack of medical and social services, and the dispersion of social support groups. Victims may also be killed before they are able to report. Reports of rape may be especially unlikely in countries where abortion is illegal, where patriarchal norms are strong and where virginity is highly valued.

Under-reporting can to some extent be accounted for through data triangulation (using various sources of information), as well as through careful consideration of different biases in types of data sources (discussed later).

### **b. Over-reporting**

Reports of sexual violence are not always the tip of an iceberg. First, wartime does not necessarily decrease the reporting of sexual violence. In some contexts, human rights groups and medical service organizations may be *more* accessible during war than in the pre-war period, resulting in a rise in reported rapes when the actual rate is either constant or perhaps lower. Second, the risk of stigma might lead to more reports of violence against children than, for example, against women of marriageable age (e.g. in Liberia). In

this case, reports of sexual violence against one demographic group may be over-represented as compared to their actual rate of commission.

Lastly, both individuals and NGOs may believe that emphasizing the incidence of sexual violence is advantageous in obtaining scarce resources.<sup>5</sup> One scholar noted that every female Sierra Leonean refugee he interviewed self-identified as a rape victim in an effort to “establish themselves as ‘legitimate victims’” worthy of aid (Utas 2005: 409). In another example, the incorrect but repeatedly-cited claim that 75% of the women of Liberia were raped during the civil war is likely an instance of human rights advocates exaggerating the magnitude of victimization (Cohen and Green 2010). The warring parties may also over-report, or falsify, violence committed against their constituents for political reasons.

### **c. What “counts”?**

Even when definitions are clear and data are reliable, accounting practices constitutes an additional methodological challenge. For instance, the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) only included victims identified by full name, discounting reports of anonymous victims (Leiby 2009). It is also unclear what counts as an individual act of victimization. It is not possible to compare one isolated rape by an individual perpetrator to months of gang rape as a sexual slave (Cohen 2010). Do we count each assault, or the number of perpetrators? Obviously, what figures are reported will vary considerably depending on counting practices. For the sake of clarity, we therefore suggest that cross-national measures of the severity of sexual violence should report categories of magnitude rather than numerical figures.

## **The Challenge of Moving beyond Magnitude**

To advance our understanding of wartime sexual violence and how it varies, it is necessary to collect detailed information about the perpetrators and the victims, where the violence occurred, and when in the course of the conflict it happened. Each of these variables is associated with different measurement challenges.

### **a. Who are the perpetrators?**

Studies of sexual violence in armed conflict are often not specific about the identity of the perpetrators. In order to assess whether sexual violence is an explicit military strategy or if it follows an opportunistic pattern, it is important to link sexual violence to particular perpetrators. As a first step, it is useful to establish a set of general perpetrator categories, including government military organizations, rebel groups, or militias.<sup>6</sup> For the SVAC project we have relied on the well-established UCDP/PRIO database, which provides a list of the most relevant armed conflict organizations that are potential

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<sup>5</sup> In addition, documentation efforts be may disorganized and there is a risk that the same people are interviewed by multiple organizations. This was problem noted in: Situation of Human Rights in the Territory of the former Yugoslavia: Report on the situation of human rights in the territory of the former Yugoslavia submitted by Mr. Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights, pursuant to Commission resolution 1992/S-1/1 of 14 August 1992 (Report from 10 February 1993).

<sup>6</sup> A possible addition to this list would be to include international peacekeeping forces.



perpetrators in each conflict-year.<sup>7</sup> Using the UCDP/PRIO database also facilitates analyzing how sexual violence is part of the strategies of the larger conflict.

In many conflicts, linking the perpetration of sexual violence to particular actors is difficult. Irregular combatants' affiliations are often not easily distinguishable because combatants do not wear uniforms. In some conflicts, perpetrators may switch uniforms with those of another faction when they commit atrocities. Also, incidents of wartime sexual violence may not be perpetrated by armed groups; due to the lack of a functioning legal system in many conflict situations, sexual violence may also be committed with impunity by civilians. No measurement system can entirely solve these identification problems.

Data triangulation is among the very few tools that may help researchers determine the affiliation (or non-affiliation) of perpetrators. Two sources of useful data are (i) surveys of ex-combatants and (ii) datasets that track geographical information about the locations of conflict-related events over time.<sup>8</sup> Although these sources seldom address sexual violence specifically, they provide important circumstantial evidence by reporting armed groups' geographic movements over time. Pairing these data sources with reports of sexual violence by victims may in some cases indicate the identity of the perpetrator.

## **b. Who are the victims?**

The likelihood of reporting sexual violence varies not only between conflicts but also within conflicts, and over time, space, and social groups. These differences make both measuring magnitude and making comparisons difficult.

Surveys investigating the incidence and effects of sexual violence have been conducted in several countries. These surveys, when rigorously conducted, provide valuable insight into the characteristics of victims. However, scholars have noted that incidents of sexual violence are more likely to be reported when they occur in urban areas, or in regions that are accessible to NGOs and researchers (Wood 2006). In addition, sexual violence against males is likely to be systematically under-reported. Sometimes, such assaults are called by different names (e.g., torture), or simply not reported due to the stigma of being a male victim of sexual violence. Also, many surveys are conducted among hospital patients or IDP camp residents, not on a nationally representative sample, whose experiences are often quite different from those of the general population.

For the purpose of sexual violence prevention, what matters most is to be able to identify patterns of targeting. For instance, if victim targeting in certain contexts is selective, we can study such selectivity to make predictions about future vulnerable groups. In many instances, targeting is based on ethnicity or religious affiliation, as well as age group and gender. Mapping the patterns of targeting that occur in different contexts is essential to determining whether there is evidence of the strategic use of sexual violence.

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<sup>7</sup> The UCDP/PRIO database provides a list of all armed state and rebel actors that have been active in armed conflicts, and who have been involved in at least 25 battle-related killings in a calendar year (Gleditsch et al., 2002). We have supplemented these data with a new list of pro-government militias developed by CSCW affiliates Neil Mitchell and Sabine Carey: [http://www.sowi.uni-mannheim.de/lspol4/?page\\_id=41](http://www.sowi.uni-mannheim.de/lspol4/?page_id=41).

<sup>8</sup> One example of such is the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED). See <http://www.prio.no/CSCW/Datasets/Armed-Conflict/Armed-Conflict-Location-and-Event-Data/>

### **c. Locations**

Where does wartime sexual violence occur? Systematic information on this question will allow for more targeted efforts to protect potential civilian sexual violence victims. For example, civilians in refugee camps may be vulnerable to attacks by opportunistic armed groups. Geographically fine-grained data on where sexual violence has occurred in the past is necessary to predict where sexual violence may occur in the future.

Given data limitations, it may not be possible to assemble a cross-national sexual violence *events* database. However, our pilot study indicates that it is possible to track variation within a conflict, as reports often highlight the general location where sexual violence has occurred, such as the city or region, or note specific landmarks or venues.

### **d. Timing**

The variation in the timing of wartime sexual violence can be measured by examining the perpetrators, the dynamics of the conflict, or simply calendar-time. In terms of perpetrator groups, we may be able to assess whether particular phases in the life of an armed group are more likely to be associated with sexual violence. We may also be able to determine whether sexual violence occurs more frequently at particular times during a conflict, such as in the prelude to peace negotiations.

Some accounts of sexual violence may be very specific, including the date, time, and location of the attacks. In the pilot study, however, we determined that a cross-national dataset is only likely to be able to collect systematic data by year. Subsequent data collection efforts may move beyond this level of aggregation through using news media sources for a global database, and detailed witness statements on a case-by-case basis.

## **The Challenge of Potential Biases in Data Sources**

The data sources most frequently consulted by researchers of wartime sexual violence all have inherent biases. This section focuses on data sources that are the most useful for creating a global comparative database on wartime sexual violence, and summarize the challenges with each type of data source.

### **a. Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs)**

Data derived from TRC testimony contain rich details given by victims or witnesses to violence. However, the data must be treated with caution, as testimonies may not be representative for several reasons:

- a) They include only those who chose to come forward
- b) Some forms of violence, such as those associated with stigma, may be systematically under-reported, and
- c) There is the risk of missing the worst episodes of violence, where all victims and witnesses were killed.

Besides biases in reporting by victims, there are also potential biases in how TRC staffs code violations. In a study of the Peruvian TRC, Leiby (2009) found that severe violations were more likely to be reported from narrative testimony than were “minor” violations. Similarly, acts of rape were coded more frequently than other forms of sexual violence. Additionally, rapes of male victims were sometimes coded as torture rather than sexual violence per se. To be able to use TRC testimonies most effectively, therefore, researchers should consult case experts about the reporting practices in different countries.

## **b. Newspaper reports**

News reports can be a useful source of detailed information. However, they may be biased by, among other things, the inaccessibility of particularly violent areas and the political orientation of the news source. As with survey research, newspaper reports are biased towards urban areas and towards deaths and disappearances (Davenport & Ball 2002). One systematic study of media reports on a related topic also finds that the geographic locale and political orientation of the newspaper influences how specific details are reported, and that different news sources not only cover different events, but that they may also construct different narratives about what took place (Davenport 2010).

One consequence of reporting bias can be an increase in reports of rape after a conflict area is reopened to reporters and international NGOs. This could happen absent an increase in the actual magnitude of sexual violence. Additionally, victims may be unlikely to report sexual violence while a conflict is ongoing. Victims also may not trust journalists enough to report rape, or they may fear that their identity will be revealed. Media-search-based studies must pay attention to possible biases. Using a wide array of news media sources can be an effective antidote to reporting biases for our purposes.

## **c. Annual reports**

Annual governmental reports on the state of human rights violations around the world, such as those issued by the U.S. State Department, are very useful for an aggregate picture of the violence. However, because these are gathered on an annual basis while conflicts are ongoing, they may be biased in important ways. For example, conflict zones may not allow foreign observers access to information about human rights violations or victims may not want to speak about their experiences, especially while the war is ongoing. Additionally, field offices that report on human rights violations to the U.S. State Department may vary substantially in quality or focus (Cohen 2010). The global political climate can also have an effect on what gets recorded in the annual reports. Reports on human rights abuses from allied countries may be edited to appear less severe due to political pressures; and this too may change over time. Although this is an important source of information about sexual violence, cross-national data collection efforts should strive to consult more than one source of annual reports to limit such biases.

## **d. Human rights organizations**

Human rights reports, such as those issued periodically by Human Rights Watch and annually by Amnesty International, often feature detailed statements from victims and witnesses. Such reports can be useful in raising awareness of the violence in a particular conflict and for giving details about serious violations. These reports, however, may be based on specific, especially violent, large or obvious crimes, rather than a representative account (Davenport & Ball 2002). They are also not always issued regularly, which can limit their utility for constructing a comprehensive cross-national dataset.

Most importantly, such reports are often focused exclusively on victims' accounts of violence; perpetrators' stories are gathered far less frequently<sup>9</sup>. Despite these

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<sup>9</sup> An exception is recent work by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, where they conducted interviews with active militia members in the DRC.

shortcomings, human rights organizations are often able to provide quite detailed witness and victims' accounts which can give more contextual information regarding sexual violence events. Therefore, despite problems of missing data on the conflict-year level and low reporting frequency, human rights reports are rich sources of detailed information.

## Lessons from the SVAC Pilot Study

From June to December 2010, the SVAC project conducted a pilot study of cross-national data collection on sexual violence in conflicts active since 2000.<sup>10</sup> The SVAC pilot study covered 20 countries in Africa, and involved three types of conflict actors (state militaries, militias, and rebel groups). From the pilot study, we have learned important practical lessons about the challenges and opportunities presented by data collection on sexual violence, and discovered strategies to address several of the challenges discussed earlier in this report.<sup>11</sup>

Our data collection in the pilot study was conducted using two different strategies. The first was based on a fixed number of sources and the other involved a comprehensive search. The fixed source approach had the advantage of producing the most comparable data across a wide set of cases, which is important for drawing inferences about cross-national patterns of sexual violence. The comprehensive search gave a better indication of all the evidence that exists on specific cases, but had the disadvantage of being highly time-consuming and possibly biased towards higher-profile, more studied cases.

The main data collection strategy is based on systematic coding of data from:

1. US State Dep. Human Rights reports (annual):  
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/>
2. Amnesty International (annual)  
<http://www.amnesty.org>
3. Human Rights Watch  
<http://www.hrw.org/>
4. International Crisis Group  
<http://www.crisisgroup.org/> <sup>12</sup>

We developed a codebook that sets out the details of how to capture not only the reported magnitude of sexual violence across conflict actors, but also other dimensions including reports concerning the selection of victims, different forms of sexual violence, and locations (Nordås & Cohen, 2010).

For victim selection, we coded whether there were reports of selections of specific gender, age cohorts, ethnic or religious groups, as well as whether victims were selected because they were refugees and/or captives/prisoners. We allowed for multiple types of selection to occur at the same time.

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<sup>10</sup> This pilot study builds on the first cross-national global data collection on sexual violence in civil war, collected by Dara Kay Cohen (2010).

<sup>11</sup> We have also made a few preliminary conclusions from this initial data collection, which is summarized in CSCW Policy brief no. 1 (2011): "Sexual Violence in African Conflicts".

<sup>12</sup> Initial consultation of a report by DCAF, "Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict" (2007) proved not to be helpful: [www.dcaf.ch](http://www.dcaf.ch)

There is a wide range of possible forms of sexual violence that could be observed and reported. As this was a pilot study, we allowed for the type of violence to be coded as text variables (listing the different types of sexual violence that have been reported in each case), provided they fell within the definition of sexual violence (see p. 4). The text variables will allow us to define categories for specific analytical purposes in future work.

For the pilot, we applied the same strategy of using text variables for locations of sexual violence. Had we chosen to limit the coding to predetermined locations (e.g. geographical units) we might have missed important dynamics. The text variable lists locations with reports of sexual violence including, but not limited to:

- “in/near refugee camp”
- “in X village/town”
- “in X region/district”
- “in rice fields/bush”
- “in/around church/mosque/other symbolic place”
- “in detention facility/prison/police station”
- “in military barracks/headquarters”
- “at checkpoint”
- “in victim’s home”
- “in public place/town square/market”

In news media searches, it might be possible to also match reported locations of sexual violence with geographical coordinates or regions, which would enable different spatial analyses.

Our experience using the fixed list of sources is that many sources only refer to sexual violence for the overall conflict without reference to specific details (such as “sexual violence was widespread”), and seldom contain details on specific events. In particular, the DCAF report proved unhelpful for data collection purposes, whereas the annual reports from the US State Department and Amnesty International were the most useful.

A second data collection strategy was a comprehensive search of information about four conflicts: Burundi, Liberia, Somalia, and Uganda. The purpose of the comprehensive search was (1) to triangulate the data collected in the fixed source search, and (2) to improve data collection on variables of interest beyond what was available in the five main sources.

The comprehensive search was conducted using Google and Google Scholar as the search engines, along with a pre-set list of keywords to identify relevant reports, articles, and documents. We then read the sources and which other reports and sources they used to locate the most fruitful and reliable sources of information. Specifically, the comprehensive searches established which publications were the most frequently cited and which sources had the most robust information that could be coded according to the conflict-actor-year data structure.

All 30 combinations (5\*6) of the following truncated conflict and sexual violence keywords<sup>13</sup> were run in this process of comprehensive information searches:

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<sup>13</sup> The question mark is a wildcard, which in search terminology means that rebel? will match every word that start with rebel, such as rebel, rebels, rebellion, etc.

Keywords on conflict:

1. war?
2. conflict
3. armed
4. rebel?
5. militar?

Keywords on sexual violence:

1. rape?;
2. rapist?
3. raping?;
4. sex? assault?;
5. sex? viol?
6. sex? abus?

Based on the documents retrieved from these searches, our coders selected the sources that were the most informative and most important.

The lessons from comparing the two coding strategies are mixed. For some conflicts, the comprehensive search led to more information than we were able to glean from the five fixed sources. In some cases, additional information came from personal testimonies. While these testimonies are important in providing information that may help paint a fuller picture of SVAC for that particular conflict-actor-year, they lack the generalized, big-picture outlook of some of our standard five sources.

In some instances, the information from the comprehensive search led to changes in the original coding from the five sources, but in most instances, the comprehensive search reaffirmed the information from the original coding. We occasionally found reports of sexual violence by actors other than the main conflict parties.<sup>14</sup> This finding could be interesting to pursue in future research. Anecdotal evidence suggests that when sexual violence becomes a weapon it might increase the general level of sexual violence in society at large.

Based on the insights from the two strategies, our main conclusion is that conducting a comprehensive search is ultimately beneficial to establishing a thorough database. However, lessons from the initial comprehensive searches mean we are now increasing the efficiency of the searches and limiting the number of hours spent on the searches in the next phase of the SVAC project.

## Recommendations

There are no “ideal data” on sexual violence available across armed conflicts. Given the limitations discussed in this paper, we propose key short-and intermediate-term goals. We present a list of prioritized tasks in order to generate the most relevant research and policy outputs. The overarching recommendation is to establish a collective and rigorous data collection effort to gather comparable, relevant sexual violence data across time and contexts. Specifically, priority should be given to:

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<sup>14</sup> These were not in the dataset because they had not become officially active according to the definition of being an organized actor that crossed the threshold of being involved in 25 battle-related deaths in a year.

- **Establishing clear definitions of sexual violence**

Research communities and policymakers should strive to present clear definitions of the phenomenon. This allows knowledge to accumulate, and useful comparisons to be made across contexts. The ICC definition used in this pilot appears to be the best candidate for a standard definition.

- **Establishing a baseline of sexual violence by country**

Researchers and policy communities should invest in data collection efforts that gather reliable, comparable information on both conflict and non-conflict periods. In the short term, existing sources can be used to create a pre-war estimation. In the longer term, comparable surveys should be conducted collect data on pre-war as well as wartime sexual violence. It is important to remember that sexual violence is a major problem in non-conflict situations as well.

- **Collecting data on perpetrators and victims**

Data collection efforts should focus on perpetrators of sexual violence, including the possibility that perpetrators may include state forces, paramilitaries, insurgents, civilians and peacekeepers. Similarly, data on victims should be collected with the goal of making systematic comparisons of the factors that make particular groups of individuals vulnerable in given contexts. Conducting more comprehensive searches could contribute such information because there is a significant depth in detail that can be added to the data, as well as useful contextual information.

- **Collecting time-variant data**

Data collection efforts should focus on establishing when sexual violence occurs, during which phase of armed groups' organizational life, and in what stage of the conflict and peace process. Such temporal patterns could be of great utility in creating systems of early warning and better pre-emptive measures to protect civilians. News media searches should be attempted to collect such data.

- **Collecting location data**

Systematic data should be collected on the geographical locations of sexual violence as well as which types of locations and landscapes are associated with more sexual predation. Such data can contribute to the development of early warning systems. News media sources are likely to be the most useful source of data on this dimension across countries, along with witness testimonies.

- **Conducting data triangulation**

Data triangulation, or using multiple data sources to establish more reliable estimates, is critical given the measurement difficulties faced by sexual violence researchers. Policymakers and researchers must invest time and finances in best-practices estimation methods, even where those methods are time consuming or labor intensive. For example, studies that compare best-practices estimates to convenience samples will provide important evidence about gaps in “easier” measurement strategies.

## The Road Ahead

Based on the lessons from the pilot study, there is substantial potential for overcoming data challenges and limitations. We therefore recommend three major extensions and continuations of the SVAC pilot project.

The first, and perhaps most important, an extension of the SVAC project will establish global coverage for the data. Currently, the data only cover 20 countries in Africa. However, we know that sexual violence has been perpetrated in other parts of the world as well. We also need to have a sample with sufficient representation of cases with little to no wartime sexual violence to make valid inferences and conclusions about the risk factors for sexual violence.

Second, we see an important data collection opportunity in conducting an automated news media search with subsequent manual coding. Such a data collection is an opportunity to get more detailed information on the timing and location of sexual violence. A news media search will also be important in the data triangulation effort, as the results will be a check on the previous data coding.

Finally, a future avenue for research is based on a potentially powerful preliminary finding from the pilot study. The pilot study showed that about 24% of conflict actors in our sample of African wars perpetrated acts of sexual violence *after* they had ceased to commit lethal violence. This is interesting, as it has been argued that “war is not over when it’s over” (Jones 2010). The norms against the use of violence in society are often damaged by the conflict, anecdotally resulting in a surge of violence, including domestic violence. Existing knowledge on these processes is very limited. With a greater focus on on post-conflict sexual violence, we may be able to systematically evaluate the extent of post-conflict sexual violence, which will serve to create a better understanding of the long-term effects of armed conflict.

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## About the SVAC project

This policy paper forms part of a project on *Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict* (SVAC) funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The project constitutes an effort to create a comprehensive database on patterns of sexual violence within and across contexts and conflict actors, with the goal of facilitating evidence-based preventive strategies.

## CSCW

The Centre for the Study of Civil War (CSCW) is a Norwegian Centre of Excellence; a long-term, multidisciplinary research initiative aiming to clarify the ways in which actors respond to civil war, in all its phases from onset to post conflict, whether as primary participants, general citizenry, or intervening powers. The CSCW is an autonomous centre within its host institution, the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO).

## PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.