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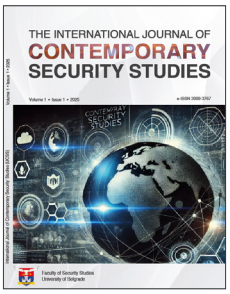

Gender-Based Violence in Armed Conflicts

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ABSTRACT

Gender-based violence (GBV) in the context of armed conflicts represents a deeply entrenched social and humanitarian issue with far-reaching consequences for victims and affected communities. This paper analyses various forms of GBV occurring during armed conflicts, including sexual violence, torture, sexual slavery, and forced prostitution, with a particular focus on women while also addressing the underexplored issue of violence against men. Furthermore, it examines the physical and psychological consequences of such violence on victims, their social status, and the obstacles faced in the rehabilitation process. Through a comparative and descriptive analysis of case studies from different regions—including instances of abuse within peacekeeping missions—the paper highlights that GBV constitutes a systemic form of violence requiring a global institutional response. The methodology encompasses comparative and descriptive approaches, as well as an analysis of relevant literature and international legal instruments. Emphasis is placed on the need for more effective victim protection mechanisms, gender-sensitive approaches in peace operations, and the strengthening of international legal accountability. The paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of GBV as a global phenomenon and to encourage the development of prevention and protection policies in post-conflict societies.

KEYWORDS

Gender-based violence, armed conflicts, victims of war crimes, wartime sexual violence, peacekeeping missions.

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) in the context of armed conflicts constitutes a serious global issue with far-reaching and long-lasting consequences for individuals, communities, and societies as a whole. This form of violence encompasses a wide range of acts, including sexual violence, forced marriages, human trafficking, and other forms of physical and psychological abuse, most often directed at women and girls but also affecting men and boys.

Sexual violence, as a form of gender-based violence, is frequently employed as a deliberate and calculated strategy by armed forces during conflicts, with the intent of terrorising communities, humiliating opponents, and destabilising societies. A critical feature of such violence lies in its social, economic, and physical consequences, which manifest through trauma, stigmatisation, and long-term injuries—often hindering the recovery process of entire communities (Gačić et al., 2021; Cvetković et al., 2018). Moreover, perpetrators are rarely punished, either due to the weakness of judicial systems or because they are members of the armed forces or hold

positions of power in the political elite. Gender-based violence in armed conflicts is not confined to a particular culture or region; it occurs globally—from Latin America and Africa to Europe.

The objective of this paper is to examine the causes, manifestations, and consequences of gender-based violence in armed conflicts, with a focus on both female and male victims. Although GBV is traditionally associated with women as survivors, increasing evidence shows that men have also been affected throughout history. Gender-based violence against men remains a complex and often neglected topic requiring deeper understanding and attention to be addressed appropriately. The study draws on contemporary case studies from Ukraine, Gaza, Syria, and beyond, as well as survivor testimonies and legal analysis. Particular emphasis is placed on the use of gender-based violence as a tactic of war, the failure of international peacekeeping missions to prevent and respond to GBV, and the gaps in legal and humanitarian protections.

Methodologically, the paper employs a comparative and descriptive approach, drawing on academic literature, case studies, international legal instruments, and empirical evidence from various regions. Through this analysis, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of GBV as a systemic issue in wartime and post-conflict societies and to propose recommendations for legal reform and survivor-centred protection mechanisms.

To explore the complex nature of GBV. In armed conflicts, this paper draws on three interrelated theoretical perspectives: feminist theory, masculinity theory, and social dominance theory. Each of these frameworks offers a unique lens for understanding the gendered dimensions of violence in war and post-war settings.

Feminist theory situates GBV within patriarchal power structures that reinforce the subordination of women. It argues that sexual violence. Conflict is not merely a by-product of war but a tool of domination rooted in systemic gender inequalities (Manjoo, 2011). War is understood as a patriarchal institution in which rape is one of its most extreme manifestations—used not only to violate individual women but to assert control over entire communities. From this perspective, GBV is a social and political act designed to sustain gender hierarchies and suppress women's autonomy (Badaru, 2018).

Masculinity theory examines how wartime intensifies societal constructions of manhood, which are often tied to control, dominance, and aggression. It helps explain the use of GBV not only against women but also against men as a means of humiliation and emasculation. (Banwell, 2020a). Rape, genital mutilation, and forced nudity serve to undermine a man's traditional role as a protector, symbolically (Christian, 2011). This theory highlights how militarised masculinity creates environments where violence becomes a normalised expression of power and identity (Solangon, 2012).

Social dominance theory emphasises how hierarchical group structures sustain violence and inequality. In conflict, GBV is often strategically deployed to reinforce dominance over marginalised or enemy groups—whether ethnically, politically, or socially defined (Wood, 2014). It operates both as a tactical method of warfare and as a broader tool of oppression that destabilises communities, weakens resistance, and reasserts control. In this view, GBV is not an aberration but a calculated method of asserting social power (Maciejczak, 2013).

2. Gender-based violence in armed conflicts

Gender-based violence manifests in numerous forms—physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, and psychological abuse, economic abuse, as well as intimidation, harassment, and stalking (Thobejane, 2018). According to Rashida Manjoo, war is inherently a patriarchal activity, and rape represents one of the most extreme manifestations of patriarchal dominance and the male pursuit of control over women (Manjoo, 2011). She argues that rape is not merely a violent act against women but an expression of deeply rooted patriarchal values that seek to reinforce male power. Historically, gender-based violence has accompanied armed conflict—so consistently that its presence is often perceived as a disturbing but inevitable element of warfare (Olaluwoye, 2022).

The 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action formally recognised GBV as a human rights concern (UN, 1995). Despite this, in many conflicts around the world, women are subjected to gender-based violence such as rape, sexual slavery, and other human rights violations—perpetrated by political actors, non-state armed groups (such as rebels and dissidents), community members, and even peacekeepers who are mandated to provide protection (Manjoo, 2011). The feminist movement, emerging from the broader civil rights move-

ment, views violence against women as a violation of human rights that transcends boundaries of race, culture, and class (Badaru, 2018).

The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women describes this violence as:

"A manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women. At the same time, violence is used to maintain and enforce the subordinate role of women. The Declaration identifies sexual and gender-based violence as one of the key social mechanisms by which women are forced into subordinate positions compared to men." (UN, 2014). Badaru (Badaru, 2018) It stresses that gender-based violence is a global pandemic, occurring daily in homes, communities, workplaces, religious and educational institutions, and even within legal systems that are supposed to offer protection. Christian (Christian, 2011) defines it as violence directed against a person based on their sex and/or socially constructed gender role. Another perspective views GBV as any harmful act targeted at individuals or groups based on gender identity and expression, including sexual violence, domestic abuse, human trafficking, forced marriage, and violent practices such as female genital mutilation, often justified by cultural norms and tradition (Rokvić, 2017).

2.1. GBV as a weapon of war

In conflict and post-conflict areas, GBV assumes fierce forms: rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy or abortion, abduction, human trafficking, forced nudity, and the transmission of sexually transmitted infections. Among these, rape stands out as the most widespread and brutal form—often involving multiple perpetrators and foreign objects such as weapons. Rape has long been considered a war crime; one of the earliest documented cases is from 1474, when Peter von Hagenbach, a military commander under Charles the Bold, was tried and convicted for rape as a method of conquest (Omerović, 2023). In addition to rape, other forms of public humiliation are common—such as forced nudity and strip searches. It is also common for human trafficking, forced prostitution, and domestic violence to increase during and after conflict. These acts are often employed deliberately as wartime strategies to destabilise civilian populations and discredit the enemy.

Women and girls are frequently abducted and held in military camps of enemy forces, where they are forced to provide sexual services and perform household labour. Gender-based violence is now recognised as a weapon of war, employed to control and terrorise populations through rape, sexual abuse of children, forced or coerced prostitution, human trafficking, and other forms of exploitation. Perpetrators often use knives, drugs, and threats to force compliance. Such violence is prevalent among conflict-affected populations, including internally displaced persons and refugees (Wirtz, 2014). The consequences for female survivors include genital mutilation, infertility, chronic gynaecological health issues, and social ostracism due to stigma (El Jack, 2003). If we consider gender-based violence as a strategic tool of war, it must be examined about the concept of a "weapon." A weapon is designed to harm the enemy by exploiting their vulnerabilities—whether physical, psychological, or structural—and to produce long-term effects that weaken their resistance (Maciejczak, 2013).

Contrary to the popular belief that wartime rape is a spontaneous act driven by soldiers' "uncontrolled sexual urges," feminist and critical theories increasingly argue that such acts are deliberate strategies of warfare rather than random incidents perpetrated by individuals (Manjoo, 2011). According to Susan McKay, rape has been recognised as a purposeful weapon of war—used to humiliate and demoralise the enemy, terrorise civilians, and force them to flee. It is a sexual expression of aggression and a form of extreme torture that, in wartime, serves as a symbolic act of humiliation against the adversary. During armed conflicts, GBV, such as sexual abuse—including acts such as rape, forced oral sex, genital mutilation, forced pregnancy, and prostitution—becomes an extension of the battlefield (McKay, 1998). As Asma El Jack notes, GB violence against women during conflict goes beyond exerting power—it symbolically violates the entire nation by targeting women as embodiments of purity and culture (El Jack, 2003). McKay asserts that women are not randomly targeted; they are chosen precisely because they represent the backbone of the community. When the goal is to destroy the enemy's culture, women become symbolic and strategic targets due to their central role in familial and social structures. They care for families, contribute to food production, and provide support during and after conflict (McKay, 1998). There is little doubt that sexual violence constitutes a "coherent, coordinated, logically structured, and brutally effective" weapon of war. Its coherence lies in how it is directed—selectively or indiscriminately—toward inflicting maximum harm on communities through some of the most extreme forms of abuse, such as gang rape,

forced incest, and genital mutilation. Even in the absence of explicit orders from military command, survivor testimonies suggest that perpetrators often acted in an organised and coordinated fashion.

Like other forms of violence in armed conflicts, gender-based violence follows a strategic logic—it exploits local economic, social, and cultural contexts to give one side of the conflict a tactical advantage over the other. Its effectiveness lies in its ability to achieve concrete strategic outcomes at a relatively low cost. Because it is simple to carry out, readily accessible and produces long-lasting and devastating effects on affected populations, GBV violence becomes an appealing instrument of warfare—especially in regions where armed groups lack access to sophisticated and expensive military technology (Maciejczak, 2013). In addition to serving as a means of achieving strategic objectives, sexual violence as a form of gender-based violence may also fulfil secondary functions within armed units. It can boost internal cohesion, raise morale, or be offered as a form of "war spoils" to poorly paid or undisciplined combatants. In some cases, it also provides an outlet for sexual and psychological tensions caused by warfare. The strategic functions of sexual violence are closely linked to the nature of the conflict. In ethnic wars, particularly those with genocidal dimensions, rape often becomes a "central technique in the technology of genocide"—as seen in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and, more recently, in Darfur. It leads to the mass displacement of populations, discourages the return of refugees, and marks women of the opposing group as "sexually defiled." (Maciejczak, 2013).

2.2. GBV in conflict zones and survivor testimonies

Armed conflicts often exacerbate pre-existing patterns of GBV, particularly against women, in two key ways. First, the prevalence of "everyday" violence, especially domestic violence, rises as communities become destabilized. Second, such violence escalates in the context of militarised masculinity. Examples include the establishment of rape camps and the exchange of sexual services for necessities like food and protection. Displacement caused by conflict alters sexual behaviours (e.g., survival sex), increases incidents of sexual abuse by armed forces, and reduces access to healthcare, including blood testing (El Jack, 2003). Male frustration or the perceived loss of traditional protector roles often results in violence toward women. The breakdown of traditional structures and the erosion of social cohesion during war create environments where GBV is not only tolerated but encouraged (Grujić, 2008).

One Lebanese woman stated that the stigma surrounding rape is so severe that most women never speak publicly about what they endured:

"Women who were raped during the war talk only to close friends. You rarely hear them speak out publicly. They prefer to suffer in silence and act like it did not happen. If hundreds of girls live with it, you can too. However, most of the rapes happened in the open. A certain rebel might like your daughter, and right in front of you—her mother, father, sisters, and brothers—it will be done openly." (El Jack, 2003).

Women in conflict zones are often forced into providing sexual services to soldiers as a means of survival. However, men are frequently unwilling to accept the consequences of these altered gender roles, which can lead to additional violence. One survivor explained:

"Men think we are responsible for what happened, that we did it on purpose. They think we are prostitutes. At that time, they were helpless—like babies. They could not care for their families. So the woman had to sacrifice herself, her marriage, and everything to save the family, and the men are not grateful... We sacrificed our image, our dignity, everything, to save their lives and the children." (El Jack, 2003).

Intentional violence against women can occur in their communities, refugee camps, and even during evacuation flights. Girls may be raped alongside their mothers or forced to watch the rape of the other. The most brutal forms of GBV have been documented in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where sexual violence was used as a tactical weapon to destabilise populations and destroy family bonds. Reports from mainstream media, peer-reviewed publications, and international NGOs estimate that tens of thousands of women were raped in the DRC (Peterman, 2011).

Furthermore, given that gender-based violence often receives extensive media attention, it can also be used as a distraction tactic. In such cases, the international community's focus on rape may divert attention from other criminal acts, such as illegal exploitation of natural resources. According to survivors, the objectives of these attacks include forced displacement, spreading fear, punishment for alleged collaboration with the enemy,

intentional transmission of diseases such as HIV/AIDS, and forced impregnation to destroy the social fabric of communities.

Some of the most brutal forms of violence—such as genital mutilation and rape resulting in permanent injury or death—cannot be explained by biological or sexual motivations. Instead, they point to a systemic pattern aimed at instilling terror and dismantling communal cohesion (Maciejczak, 2013). In cases where rape is not explicitly ordered but tolerated by commanders, it becomes an institutionalised behaviour within units. Fighters may engage in GBV to conform to dominant group norms. Commanders often tolerate such behaviour because consistent enforcement of discipline would require punishing militarily adequate personnel, expending limited resources, or denying fighters what is seen as a legitimate "reward" for their service (Cohen et al., 2013).

3. Consequences of gender-based violence against women

In addition to the physical consequences that occur following rape as a form of gender-based violence, women face struggles with shame, humiliation, and difficulties in resuming an everyday life. They also experience fear of judgment when seeking medical assistance. During armed conflicts, suicide rates increase among raped women, with the most common cause being the loss of a sense of control over their bodies and lives (McKay, 1998). Psychological consequences manifest as flashbacks, difficulties in establishing or maintaining emotional relationships, challenges in returning to previous life conditions, and depression (Wirtz, 2014). A particularly severe consequence survivors face can be unwanted pregnancies, which present additional challenges as they often lead to unsafe abortions, ostracisation from marital communities, and significant psychological and physical trauma for women and girls carrying and giving birth to children of their aggressors (McKay, 1998). Survivors may struggle to reintegrate into their families and communities, especially in patriarchal contexts where they are perceived as "dishonoured" or labelled as "damaged goods."

Additional problems arise within the healthcare system, which often is not adapted to their needs, especially in wartime conditions marked by food shortages and unequal resource distribution. Pregnant and breastfeeding women are in particularly vulnerable positions, as malnutrition further endangers their health. A concerning trend in this system is the increased rate of HIV infection — women face a heightened risk and thus require specialised psychological, medical, and social support. Many conflicts rage in regions where HIV prevalence is already very high (Manjoo, 2011). A significant number of survivors exhibit rape trauma syndrome, which includes reactions to sexual assault such as anger, despair, loss of control, the emergence of phobias, and guilt. It also manifests as a fear of repeated sexual violence that prevents women from engaging in everyday activities such as attending school, working, or even participating in politics (Wirtz, 2014).

3.1. Sexual violence as a tool of torture and control

The act of GBV itself, often perpetrated with extreme brutality, leaves deep and long-lasting physical and psychological consequences not only for the survivors but also for members of their families and broader communities. Documented testimonies indicate that survivors have frequently been stigmatised as prostitutes by members of their communities, further exacerbating their social marginalisation and resulting in secondary victimisation, which complicates their rehabilitation and reintegration into society (Lindsey, 2024).

Perpetrators employed various methods of deception and intimidation to coerce victims into compliance: false offers of assistance, threats of harm to relatives, firing weapons near victims, threats with knives, and demonstrations of military equipment such as bombs. Physical violence accompanying sexual abuse included beating, slapping, hanging, biting, and burning with cigarettes. The consequences were severe and permanent: loss of consciousness, profuse bleeding, scarring, chronic pain, and mental health disorders. Victims often suffer from post-traumatic pain and other forms of physical trauma. These consequences extended beyond the individual level, deeply impacting society as a whole. Prolonged low self-esteem was particularly detrimental, affecting victims' professional and personal lives, as well as their ability to establish new social relationships and lead fulfilling lives. Reports indicate that a loss of confidence can impact careers, friendships, romantic relationships, and the willingness to engage in new experiences (Tewabe, et al., 2024).

Gender-based violence is sometimes used as a tool of military strategy to obtain information or enforce population loyalty. In such cases, women are accused of collaborating with opposing forces, and sexual violence serves as a method of torture aimed at destabilising communities and traumatising civilians. Even after the end of armed conflicts, women face institutional discrimination. In post-conflict societies, particularly in African countries, inadequate legal and social systems result in women, especially single mothers or heads of households, being deprived of equal rights to resource distribution and inheritance (Manjoo, 2011).

During violence and looting carried out by paramilitary formations, women were often systematically separated for sexual enslavement. These women became known as "ceiling women" because they were hidden in spaces between roofs and attics to prevent their discovery and murder by other attackers. Sexual assaults were often accompanied by mutilation of genital organs or body parts considered characteristic of members of the Tutsi ethnic group. These acts of genital mutilation included, among others, pouring boiling water into the vagina, opening the uterus to extract the fetus before killing the mother, breast amputation, cutting off the pelvic region, and severe dismemberment of genital organs. One interviewee emphasised that "everyone has problems, not only rape survivors," referring to displaced women who do not know how to return home, widows caring for their and relatives' children after their husbands were killed or imprisoned. Women most often bear the severity of the consequences of genocide. Women identified poverty, homelessness, inaccessible healthcare, isolation associated with the status of GBV survivors, and problems related to children born from such crimes as key issues. Women who became pregnant as a result of rape often resorted to self-induced abortions, even in late pregnancy stages, resulting in serious health complications. The director of the Central Hospital in Kigali noted that such interventions frequently led to uterine infections, uterine rupture, heavy bleeding, and other gynaecological complications (Nowrojee, 1996).

Social and legal marginalisation in post-conflict societies

Given the subject of this study, it is necessary to include a reflection on the conflicts that took place in the territory of the former Yugoslavia. Regarding the breakup of Yugoslavia and the consequences of the conflict on individuals, it can be confidently stated that female victims are significantly more numerous. Grujić identifies several factors explaining this phenomenon: "Our impression is that women's fear of the disintegration of Yugoslavia was stronger than that of men." (Grujić, 2008). This may have been related to the still more significant role of women in the family, which they experienced as their primary identification. At the same time, men were able to extend their identity through nationalism. It was evident that maintaining the family was their responsibility, and women were more aware of the possible consequences of ethnic conflicts than men.

The destruction of the family places women in a much more difficult and socially vulnerable position than men. Media attention focused on the issue of sexual violence in these areas was often sensationalist and instrumentalised for political purposes. Claims of 200,000 raped women in a population of less than two million displaced and refugees during the conflict are not supported by empirical evidence. The problem gained media prominence, but interest in the topic sharply declined once it became evident that the number of children born as a result of rape was small. Such instrumentalisation, according to Light, did not contribute to resolving the problem but further devalued the suffering of victims (Liht, Drakulić, & Mastilović, 1997).

There are numerous reasons for the lack of precise statistics on wartime sexual violence. Estimates of the number of raped women during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina range from 14,000 to 50,000. Statistics from the Rwandan conflict vary even more — from 15,700 to 500,000 rapes reported. The problem of precise rape statistics in war is not caused solely by political interests; rape is a particular war crime. Its concealment harms both perpetrators and victims at individual and collective levels. Survivors suffer due to shame, fear of exclusion, and non-acceptance; their (male) leadership conceals the extent of the "damage," and perpetrators avoid responsibility and guilt (Grujić, 2008).

4. Gender-based violence against men

In academic and public discourse, the term gender-based violence (GBV) is most often associated with violence against women and girls, with perpetrators predominantly identified as men. Although this perception reflects reality in a large number of cases, it is essential to recognise that gender-based violence can also be directed towards men and boys, with perpetrators being both other men and women. Within official definitions,

GBV experienced by men and boys is commonly categorised under "other forms of violence," which diminishes its visibility and significance. Historically, sexual violence against men in the context of armed conflicts dates back to Antiquity, including practices such as castrations carried out by the Chinese, Persians, Amalekites, Egyptians, and Nordic armies. Forms of this violence include rape, genital mutilation, sexual torture, forced sterilisation, sexual humiliation, forced nudity, forced masturbation, sexual enslavement, forced incest, and coerced rape, encompassing all other forms of violence described in definitions applicable to women and girls (Solangon, 2012). Despite the greater attention given to female victims in armed conflicts, gender-based violence against men has been documented in more than 25 conflicts over the past three decades. These include Uganda, Sierra Leone, Kenya, Liberia, Sudan, Central African Republic, Zimbabwe, and South Africa; El Salvador, Chile, Guatemala, and Argentina; Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Sri Lanka; and Greece and Northern Ireland, among others.

4.1. Social consequences and testimonies

Similar to women and girls, men and boys frequently do not report violence due to shame, fear of discrimination, stigma, and social condemnation; therefore, the data emerging from studies does not represent the full scope of the phenomenon. Men who have experienced GBV are often referred to as unrecognised and/or invisible victims (Banwell, 2020a). The scarcity of data on sexual violence against men in literature is attributed to underreporting, lack of legal frameworks, and the narrow focus on GBV against women (Solangon, 2012). A particular challenge is the absence of visible physical consequences, which further complicates the evidence of violence. In some societies, reporting sexual violence against men can lead to accusations of homosexuality, which in contexts where it is socially unacceptable or criminalised—as is the case in South Sudan—can have fatal consequences (Rokvić, 2017).

Gender-based violence against men leaves profound physical and psychological consequences similar to those experienced by women. However, injuries sustained by men often affect their ability to work and earn a living, with men frequently being the primary breadwinners in many African societies.

An interview with a rape survivor in Darfur, Sudan, illustrates this point:

"The risk is to go out and sell things because I might have to face rebels again and could be killed. However, staying at home without food and dying is another option. So we have to risk our lives. A man in our culture is the head of the family; when he is raped, he cannot accept it because he is not made to be like that. Women are raped, and it is accepted because they are meant to have sex with men, but men are not supposed to have sex with men. That is why men feel ashamed. This can happen to women, but not men, and it mostly happens in villages." (Banwell, 2020a).

As this survivor indicates, raped men often leave their families and homes to live in communities outside populated areas to avoid social stigma. Sexual violence between men is used as a tool to establish dominance and subordinate the victim through rape, castration, mutilation, or torture, stripping the victim of his masculinity. Similar to how sexual violence against women can symbolise the destruction of a national, racial, religious, or ethnic culture, sexual violence against men symbolises the emasculation of a national, racial, religious, or ethnic group. The rape or castration of a man deprives him of power, as he is viewed as the protector of the community, and violence against him signals his failure to protect his nation or community (Banwell, 2020a).

Common motives for the rape of men include humiliation and demasculinisation: "They rape men to humiliate us, to show they have the power to capture anyone and everyone, to destroy masculinity and our culture, to break families, to show men they are weak and have no power to protect themselves or their families"; "There were five men and all five raped me. They considered me their wife… I had to wash their clothes, take care of their children, and they raped me every day." (Rokvić, 2017). A specific feature of gender-based violence against men lies in the consequences and the lifestyle following the attack. Unlike women, who may be ostracised due to pregnancy, men often voluntarily exile themselves, leaving their communities and families, since women cannot evict men from the household, as men typically own the property. On the other hand, children born from rape represent a reminder and symbol of male failure to protect their family, making it difficult for women to return to the community (Christian, 2011).

4.2. Symbolic violence and strategic purpose

In cases of forced sterilisation (through castration) and other forms of genital mutilation, one could argue there is a genocidal intent, as it prevents reproduction within the targeted community (Banwell, 2020a). Since traditional masculinity is associated with power and dominance and femininity with submission and victimhood, sexual violence against men also serves a strategic purpose. In such cases, perpetrators demonstrate their own "masculinity," i.e., dominance and aggression, while symbolically "feminising," "emasculating," or "homosexualising" the victim, thereby depriving him of socially recognised male roles and power. This type of violence has a deeply humiliating and destabilising effect on the individual and the community. Further, it contributes to the broader objectives of armed groups—establishing control through fear, dehumanisation, and the destruction of social ties within communities (Maciejczak, 2013).

The reasons behind attacks by one man on another vary, with the most significant being power and nature. The collapse of order and lawlessness caused by conflict, combined with human biological sexual drives, may lead a man to sexually assault another. This suggests that men possess instincts for sexual aggression, which are suppressed under normal circumstances but "escape like steam from a pressure cooker" when balance is disrupted.

The increased number of demobilised fighters reintegrated into communities without adequate rehabilitation, alongside increased abuse of alcohol and drugs in conflict-affected areas, may also fuel sexual violence. In societies where masculinity is tied to power, some men who perceive themselves as having failed to maintain their protector roles, such as unemployed men unable to support their families, may see gender-based violence as an opportunity to regain some control over their masculinity. Comparative studies of societies with low and high levels of sexual violence suggest that such violence occurs significantly when male power is unstable. When authority is threatened, torture and/or sexual violence may be used to intimidate and subjugate people (Solangon, 2012).

5. Gender-based violence as a global challenge

Gender-based violence in armed conflicts represents a serious global challenge due to its impact on security, human and child rights, as well as the maintenance of peace at the international level. This phenomenon is universal, affecting the majority of conflict-affected regions and targeting various groups of civilians, with women and girls being the most frequent victims. However, as has been noted multiple times, men and boys are also increasingly recognized as victims. The global dimension of this issue is evident in its consequences, which transcend borders and manifest with equal intensity regardless of the victim's identity or community. The effects of gender-based violence occur with the same intensity irrespective of gender, ethnicity, or social status of the victim, posing a serious threat to individual recovery, social cohesion, and the long-term stability of post-conflict communities.

5.1 UN Response and Legal Framework

To mitigate the effects of gender-based violence, timely response from international organisations is essential, with the United Nations at the forefront. These organisations classify such conduct as a crime against humanity and/or a war crime and bear the responsibility to protect victims, prosecute perpetrators, and prevent further occurrences of these crimes. According to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1820, sexual violence in conflicts, despite numerous condemnations, remains a widespread tactic of warfare, reaching what has been described in many regions as a "level of horrific brutality." Rape has thus been classified as a "war crime" and assessed as a "threat to global peace and security." Examples of regions where sexual violence has had such an impact include the former Yugoslavia, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Liberia (Grujić, 2008).

It is necessary to address the categorisation of these crimes, particularly by distinguishing between gender-based and sexual violence. Although often used interchangeably in academic and legal literature, these terms are conceptually and terminologically distinct. Sexual violence refers to any harmful act committed

against a person's will and is rooted in gender norms and unequal power relations. On the other hand, gender-based violence is a broader concept that encompasses all forms of violence motivated by gender norms, socially constructed roles, expectations, and stereotypes assigned to men and women. According to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, gender-based violence is defined as "any harmful act directed against a person's will and based on gender differences between men and women." (Crescent, 2022). While sexual violence focuses on specific acts of a physical nature, gender-based violence includes economic, psychological, and structural forms of violence stemming from patriarchal culture and discrimination. Awareness of these concepts and their distinctions is crucial for developing effective mechanisms for prevention, intervention, and protection, as well as for establishing appropriate legal frameworks that ensure justice for all victims, regardless of their sex or gender identity.

6. Causes and patterns of gender-based violence

Various assumptions attempt to explain the causes of gender-based violence; the following text will address some of these, as well as the types of violence itself. Opportunistic schools of thought argue that soldiers commit rape because war provides numerous opportunities for such acts — as if there is something inherently present in men as such, or in the way men are shaped into soldiers, that makes them prone to such violence unless mechanisms exist to prevent it. This approach emphasises the role of the chaos that accompanies armed conflicts, which enables perpetrators to act with impunity, implying that preventing gender-based violence in conflicts is possible through more consistent law enforcement, improvement of normative frameworks, and strengthening of ethical codes of conduct.

However, another dominant explanatory narrative does not focus on individual perceptions of opportunity but rather on the functional role gender-based violence plays within the strategic objectives of the conflict itself. In this understanding, rape is viewed as an instrumentalised tactic of war — a weapon deliberately used to attack civilians to demoralise the enemy and displace populations. Rebel groups, in this context, have sought to establish control over women and their communities by consciously undermining the cultural values and social relations that form the foundation of the community. Under these conditions, boy soldiers have raped women of their grandmothers' age, rebels have sexually abused pregnant women and nursing mothers, and fathers have been forced to witness the rape of their daughters (Houge & Lohne, 2017).

This thesis is supported by the view that if military strategies — as well as their civilian allies and superiors — conceive of women as the foundation of the enemy culture, as symbols of male honour, or as property that men must protect, then violence against women will be logically integrated into military strategy. If women are perceived as bearers of the community — as is particularly evident in Congolese society, where women traditionally serve as caregivers, workers, mothers, and pillars of the family — then sexual violence has a double effect: it is both a physical and symbolic attack on the entire community (Wood, 2014).

6.1. GBV as military strategy and institutional practice

Specific armed organisations may simultaneously engage in gender-based violence both as practice and as a strategy. Rape as practice (i.e., an act not directly ordered but tolerated) can be far more frequent than rape as a strategic act. An example is an occupied village where the number of rapes resulting from command tolerance far exceeds those directly ordered as a form of torture against political prisoners. In some cases, rape represents an institutionalised form of reward for fighters, where civilian populations, women in sexual captivity, or forced marriages are used as compensation for "exemplary service." Forced marriages and sexual slavery particularly reflect the strategic nature of sexual violence, given that they are often regulated within armed groups through official rules (Cohen et al., 2013).

There is also a perspective that gender-based violence serves a function in building cohesion within armed groups. Such acts, which involve serious violations of social norms, sever recruits' ties with their communities while simultaneously binding them more closely to the armed formation. Furthermore, the high risk of untreated sexually transmitted diseases further complicates reintegration into civilian life and thereby stabilises their position within the group (Wood, 2014).

In war, killing is, under certain conditions, legalised and considered part of armed actions. Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). On the other hand, it can never be legally or morally justified, nor can it be interpreted as an act of self-defence (Houge, 2015). Documentation from the war in Bosnia contains numerous examples of gang rapes, where an escalation of physical brutality was noted about the act of rape itself — the more perpetrators involved, the more intense the violence. This form of violence indicates a "spiral of violence," in which the victim becomes a tool through which perpetrators demonstrate extreme forms of violent masculinity to one another. According to the theory of combatant group socialisation, the likelihood that soldiers will resort to aggressive and destructive behaviour increases when social cohesion within the group is weak. In such a context, excessive and sexual violence functions as a means of binding members of the community — especially those who participate against their will (Houge, 2015).

7. Violence committed during peace operations

When the perpetrators of crimes are precisely those sent to provide protection, the depth and seriousness of the problem become even more evident. Such incidents not only violate the fundamental human rights of the survivors but also seriously undermine trust in international institutions whose mission is to protect civilian populations in conflict-affected areas. Although the mandates of UN peacekeeping missions in these countries were aimed at maintaining peace, protecting civilians, and preventing violence, numerous reports and testimonies indicate systematic sexual abuse by certain members of these missions. These incidents include rape, sexual exploitation, and the abuse of power to obtain sexual services.

The importance of a systemic and organised fight against CRSV is emphasised, mainly because even peacekeepers and UN personnel, who are supposed to protect civilians, sometimes participate in these crimes themselves. While the task of international forces is to protect the population and ensure that all parties in the conflict respect international law, there is substantial evidence that some members of these forces, contrary to their mandate, have personally committed acts of CRSV or enabled them (Omerović, 2023). It is estimated that up to 250,000 women and girls in Sierra Leone experienced some form of gender-based violence during the civil war. The crimes they endured were characterised by the most extreme acts of violence, including multiple and gang rapes, abductions, sexual slavery, forced pregnancies, forced labour, and mutilations (Mills, 2015.).

7.1. Case Study: MONUC/MONUSCO in the DRC

In 1999, the UN Security Council authorised the deployment of the MONUC peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo following the signing of a ceasefire agreement between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and other African countries. Soon after, allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers emerged. Investigations revealed that most accusations were against soldiers involved in exchanging sex for money, food, and favors, which allowed the mission to frame these acts not as crimes but as exchanges of goods. Reports also indicated girls wandering around peacekeeping camps hoping to sell their bodies for food and money, often driven by poverty and desperation. In July 2010, the UN Security Council renamed the MONUC mission to MONUSCO, reflecting progress in implementing the ceasefire and its primary goal of civilian protection. Nevertheless, some experts argued that the name change partly reflected a loss of trust in MONUC following the 2004 sexual exploitation scandal. Despite the renaming and prior UN efforts, accusations of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers in the DRC continued to surface. For instance, in 2018, a UN military observer was suspended due to allegations of fathering a child with a minor.

Political instability and lack of economic opportunities make Central Africans, especially women and children, highly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Consequently, women and children are often forced to exchange their bodies for necessities such as money, food, and water. Between May and June 2014, a human rights officer and local UN workers uncovered allegations that foreign peacekeepers, mainly from the French Sangaris forces, allegedly abused young children in an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp in Bangui.

There are also documented cases of abuse against women by members of peacekeeping missions in the DRC. As one victim reported, an 18-year-old girl testified that when she visited a Republic of Congo troop base near the airport late in 2015 seeking food or money, armed peacekeepers forced her into the forest and gang-raped

her. "I did not want to have sex with them, but when I went to visit their base, they took me into the forest," she said. "There were three of them on me. They were armed. They told me they would kill me if I resisted (UN, 2016)

8. Contemporary cases of gender-based violence in armed conflicts

Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) remains a grave and pervasive form of gender-based violence (GBV) in the ongoing war in Ukraine. The United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine has played a critical role in documenting and reporting CRSV, working directly with survivors to ensure visibility and accountability. Between 24 February 2022 and 31 August 2024, the Mission documented 376 cases of CRSV, affecting 262 men, 102 women, 10 girls, and two boys. Notably, over half of the documented cases involved men, many of whom were subjected to torture in detention facilities located in Russian-occupied territories or within the Russian Federation (OHCHR, 2024).

The documented acts of violence include severe beatings, electric shocks, waterboarding, mock executions, cutting, placing sharp objects under fingernails, and genital mutilation. Forty-eight civilian detainees, including a child, were subjected to sexual violence, including rape, while additional cases were recorded involving 16 civilians—primarily women—who experienced sexual violence outside of detention settings (Reuters, 2024).

CRSV has been legally recognised as a war crime under Ukrainian law since 2014. However, the scope and urgency of investigations have intensified following the full-scale invasion in 2022 and the initiation of an investigation by the International Criminal Court (ICC). As of 1 November 2024, the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine had registered 329 cases of CRSV, involving 118 male and 211 female victims. Among these, 17 victims were minors—16 girls and one boy—underscoring the vulnerability of children in conflict zones (JusticeInfo.net, 2024)

The ongoing war in Gaza has had catastrophic consequences for women's health, bodily autonomy, and overall safety. As of October 2023, approximately 52,000 Palestinian women were pregnant when the latest round of hostilities began. The destruction of over half of Gaza's hospitals and the severe limitations in the functioning of the remaining ones have led to alarming conditions for childbirth. Women are increasingly forced to give birth in overcrowded, unsanitary shelters, often without professional medical assistance. Current estimates indicate that one baby is born under these conditions every ten minutes, contributing to rising maternal and newborn mortality rates (International IDEA, 2024).

Rights organisations have expressed deep concern over these deteriorating medical conditions. Emergency cesarean sections are frequently performed without anaesthesia, sterile equipment is scarce, and mothers are discharged mere hours after giving birth. Power outages and fuel shortages for hospital generators pose life-threatening risks for newborns reliant on incubators. Simultaneously, the lack of clean water, essential medicines, and blood supplies continues to endanger both maternal and infant health. The psychological trauma of war has also had a direct impact on reproductive health. Exposure to sustained conflict has led to a documented increase in miscarriages, premature births, and stillbirths. Stress-related complications, compounded by malnutrition and dehydration, are severely affecting pregnant women and their unborn children. Reports suggest that Israeli military actions have led to a 300 per cent increase in miscarriage rates among affected populations (International IDEA, 2024). Beyond reproductive concerns, access to basic menstrual hygiene remains a significant challenge.

The shortage of menstrual products has forced women and girls to use unsanitary materials, leading to infections and further compromising their health and dignity. The broader breakdown of social structures, mass displacement, and collapsing health systems have heightened the risk of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), including rape and sexual assault—what the United Nations describes as "the most ancient, least discussed, and seldom condemned crime of warfare". Emerging evidence also points to sexual violence perpetrated by multiple actors. A recent investigation found "reasonable grounds" to believe that Hamas committed acts of sexual violence during its attacks on Israel, highlighting that GBV in conflict affects populations on all sides of the violence (International IDEA, 2024).

According to UNFPA reports, survivors of gender-based violence often face insurmountable barriers to reporting abuse or seeking support. The collapse of protection systems, limited movement of GBV response

personnel, and critical shortages in trained providers have left many women without access to life-saving services. Intimate partner violence—especially emotional and psychological abuse—is among the most frequently reported forms of GBV. Conflict-related sexual violence, sexual exploitation, and abuse are increasingly prevalent, particularly where women's access to aid and basic needs depend on male intermediaries. Adolescent girls, especially those displaced by conflict, face growing restrictions on their freedom of movement, which in turn limits their access to education, health, and psychosocial support. Many women and girls remain silent about their experiences, feeling that the broader devastation of war overshadows their suffering. The stigma surrounding sexual violence and the perception that personal suffering is secondary to communal trauma create a culture of silence that perpetuates impunity and neglect (UNFPA Palestine, 2025).

The Syrian conflict, now spanning over a decade, has produced a protracted humanitarian crisis marked by widespread gender-based violence (GBV), both in active conflict zones and among displaced populations. High—yet often underestimated—rates of forced marriage, sexual violence, and intimate partner violence are reported among Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons. Numerous women have recounted experiences of sexual exploitation by smugglers, humanitarian workers, and others in positions of power, leading to devastating consequences for their physical and mental health, as well as for the wellbeing of their families.

Structural and systemic barriers further exacerbate the vulnerability of Syrian women. Discriminatory cultural norms surrounding GBV, restrictive and inadequate legal frameworks in host countries, and the general absence of social, economic, and legal protections have left many women without recourse or support. Despite some improvements in the availability and quality of GBV services over the past several years, women's access remains restricted due to factors such as poor inter-agency coordination, ongoing gender discrimination, pervasive distrust of humanitarian aid providers, and a lack of holistic, survivor-centred approaches to care (Al-Natour, 2019).

In addition to direct acts of violence, Syrian women are increasingly subjected to structural forms of gendered harm. One particularly critical issue is the denial of reproductive health care, including in cases of sexual violence. In crisis settings like Syria, this often results in unwanted pregnancies and contributes to high maternal mortality rates, especially in contexts where abortion laws are restrictive, or health systems have collapsed. For instance, in conflict and displacement situations, unsafe abortions account for approximately 25% of maternal deaths—disproportionately affecting young, poor, and refugee women. These patterns of structural violence are often overlooked in mainstream conflict narratives. Policies such as the U.S. "Global Gag Rule," which withholds international funding from organisations that provide or even discuss abortion, further limit access to critical reproductive services. Although this is a partisan policy within U.S. politics, its global implications for conflict-affected women are profound, as it indirectly denies care to survivors of wartime sexual violence (Banwell, 2020a).

Another dimension of structural violence involves the emergence of "survival sex" as a coping mechanism. Distinct from formalized or forced prostitution, survival sex arises from the acute economic desperation experienced by displaced women and those left as heads of households due to the death or disappearance of male relatives. In the absence of viable employment—exacerbated by environmental crises such as drought—Syrian women have been reported to engage in sexual transactions in exchange for food, shelter, or safety for themselves and their families (Banwell, 2020b)

9. Conclusion

Gender-based violence (GBV) in armed conflicts remains one of the most pervasive and brutal violations of human rights, with profound consequences for individuals, communities, and international peacebuilding efforts. While women and girls continue to represent the majority of GBV survivors—often subjected to rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, and other forms of gendered violence—there is a growing recognition that men and boys are also significantly affected. Their experiences, however, remain underreported, poorly understood, and largely excluded from humanitarian interventions, legal frameworks, and survivor support systems. A balanced and inclusive approach is thus essential for understanding the full scope and complexity of GBV.

To address GBV effectively in conflict-affected settings, a multi-pronged strategy must be adopted—one that goes beyond mere condemnation and moves towards systemic prevention and survivor-centred intervention. The following policy and institutional recommendations are proposed. Legal frameworks at both international

and national levels must be revised to explicitly recognise all forms of GBV—including those targeting men and boys—as war crimes and crimes against humanity. Peacekeeping missions must adopt and enforce strict zero-tolerance policies towards GBV, with independent oversight and survivor-centred reporting mechanisms. Support services for survivors should be accessible, inclusive, and tailored to the diverse needs of different genders, providing comprehensive assistance in medical, psychological, legal, and economic areas.

Reliable, disaggregated data collection is essential for designing informed policies and reaching underrepresented groups. Lastly, survivors must be included in peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery processes, where their perspectives can guide the development of inclusive justice and reintegration mechanisms. In sum, only a comprehensive and inclusive response to GBV—one that recognises the full range of victims and confronts the power structures that enable such violence—can lead to sustainable peace, justice, and human dignity in the aftermath of conflict. Future research, policy, and practice must prioritise intersectionality, survivor agency, and structural reform to break the cycles of violence that have for too long characterised modern warfare.

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