

The Honors Program at the University of Missouri - Kansas City

**Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War: Rwanda, Global Silence,
and the #MeToo Movement
(Institutional Complicity, Cultural Silence, and the Fight for Change)**

Shicagolyn Hams Scroggins

Department of Communication Studies, University of Missouri - Kansas City

Written under the direction of professors:

Dr. Linda Kurz

Dr. Peter Morello

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Dedication

To my late brother, Pierre Francis Hams, my best friend.

A dedicated officer in the United States Army,
whose service included high-security missions, NATO collaboration,
and deployments in areas where the cost of silence was profound.

His experiences in military intelligence, his quiet endurance,
and the surveillance he faced near the end of his life
sparked the earliest questions that led to this study.

His unwavering commitment to truth, service, and justice
continues to guide me.

May this work honor the silenced, illuminate hidden wounds,
and carry forward the legacy of those who bore the truth
when the world refused to hear it

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Abstract

This study explores the intentional use of sexual violence as a weapon of war during the Rwandan Genocide and draws parallel insights from other global conflicts. It centers survivor testimony, including that of women, men, and children, whose suffering, resilience, and voices have too often been marginalized or silenced. The research poses two fundamental questions: How has sexual violence in war been weaponized and erased through global apathy, media silence, and limited judicial accountability? And how can survivor-centric narratives help reshape collective memory and advance justice? Drawing on historical records, international jurisprudence, and documentary film, the study integrates emotional and contextual perspectives often missing from official discourse. Through a qualitative, multi-method lens, it examines how conflict-related sexual violence is framed, acknowledged, distorted, or ignored. The research also considers how movements like #MeToo are shifting global conversations around gender-based violence, even in post-conflict contexts. What emerges is a clear and urgent call: for media, justice systems, and institutions to center the lived experiences of survivors, to tell the truth, and to commit to long-overdue recognition and healing. This work advances a survivor-centered, intersectional approach grounded in care, accountability, and moral courage.

Keywords: conflict-related sexual violence, Rwandan Genocide, survivor narratives, media silence, international justice.

**Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War: Rwanda, Global Silence,
and the #MeToo Movement**

Institutional Complicity, Cultural Silence, and the Fight for Change

Sexual violence as a weapon of war is not new. Its roots stretch deep into history, from the battlefields of ancient empires to the more recent atrocities of modern conflicts. To understand the strategic use of sexual violence during the Rwandan Genocide, we must place it within this long and troubling continuum, both historically and legally.

While this study centers on conflict-related sexual violence, it is important to acknowledge that such violence does not begin or end with war. Researchers have explored the biological and psychological forces that may contribute to these acts, particularly the influence of hormones like testosterone in shaping aggression and dominance (van Anders et al., 2011). These findings point to the ways in which male-perpetrated sexual violence may be linked to a mix of evolutionary, hormonal, and environmental factors—fueled further by conditions of militarization and unchecked power. At the same time, cultural shifts like the #MeToo movement have illuminated the widespread normalization of sexual violence even outside war zones, exposing how institutions have long silenced survivors and shielded perpetrators. (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Kearl, 2018). Together, these biological and social lenses reveal that wartime sexual violence is not some isolated aberration; it is an amplified expression of persistent, deeply embedded patterns of gendered violence.

As a Black woman whose family has deep military roots reaching back to World War II, I approach this work from both scholarly and personal ground. My late brother, Pierre F. Hams, served with distinction, as have many others in my family. I carry their stories and silences with me, especially the quiet pain of what they witnessed and endured. These personal histories have shaped how I understand the intersections of war, trauma, and memory. This research is not just academic analysis; it is an act of

witness. It is my offering in honor of the stories too often left untold, those of survivors, soldiers, families, and communities still carrying invisible wounds. My lived experience, shaped by racism, sexism, colorism, and ageism, has sharpened my awareness of who is left out of public narratives and who is overlooked in legal frameworks. I write with deep reverence, especially for African women and other survivors whose truths have been too long ignored.

Period	Event/Context	Significance	Key References
Ancient & Pre-Modern	Biblical & Classical Texts (c. 8th century BCE)	Mass rape and abduction normalized as spoils of war (e.g., <i>Iliad</i> , Old Testament)	Mann (2005)
	Ancient Rome & Greece	Women treated as spoils of war; no legal condemnation	Mann (2005)
	Middle Ages (Crusades, Mongol, Viking)	Sexual violence used to shame and humiliate enemy populations	Mann (2005)
Early Modern to Modern	Thirty Years' War (1618–1648)	Documented systematic rape during sieges	Mann (2005)
	Napoleonic Wars & American Civil War	Reports of rape widespread but often unrecorded or dismissed	Mann (2005)
World War II	Nanjing Massacre (1937)	Mass rape of 20,000+ Chinese women; earliest well-documented mass sexual violence	Chang (1997)
	Soviet invasion of Germany (1945)	Mass rapes of millions of German women by Red Army	Beevor (2002)
	Nuremberg Trials (1945–46)	Sexual violence ignored legally	Nowrojee (1996)
Late 20th Century	Yugoslav Wars (1991–2001)	Systematic rape as ethnic cleansing; framed as crime against humanity and genocide	Allen (1996)
	Rwandan Genocide (1994)	ICTR Akayesu case formally recognizes rape as genocide tool	Nowrojee (1996); Pattison (2016)
	Rome Statute ICC (1998)	Legal codification of sexual violence as war crimes and crimes against humanity	Rome Statute (1998)
Contemporary Movements	#MeToo Movement (2017–present)	Amplifies survivor voices and challenges culture of silence around sexual violence	Kearl (2018)

Note. This table provides a chronological overview of the normalization, documentation, and evolving legal recognition of conflict-related sexual violence from antiquity through modern movements.

Ancient and Pre-Modern Periods

Historical documentation reveals that sexual violence during warfare dates back millennia (Mann, 2005). Biblical texts, such as the Old Testament books of Lamentations and Judges, depict the mass rape and abduction of women as common spoils of war. Similarly, Homer's *Iliad* (circa 8th century BCE) normalizes the seizure of women as war trophies. In ancient Greece and Rome, mass rape during military conquest was widespread and socially accepted, with women often treated as spoils without legal protection. During the Middle Ages, invading armies, such as those during the Crusades, Mongol invasions, and Viking raids, used sexual violence as a tool of domination and humiliation aimed at shaming enemy men and dismantling social cohesion (Mann, 2005).

Early Modern to Modern Recognition

The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) in Central Europe witnessed chronicled, systematic sexual violence, particularly during sieges, signaling the persistence of wartime rape as a brutal tactic. The Napoleonic Wars and the American Civil War saw widespread reports of rape, though such violence was often underreported or dismissed as incidental collateral damage (Mann, 2005).

World War II – A Turning Point in Documentation

Nanjing Massacre of 1937 marked one of the earliest well-documented mass sexual violence atrocities, with over 20,000 Chinese women and girls raped by Japanese soldiers (Chang, 1997). Similarly, the Soviet invasion of Germany in 1945 involved the mass rape two million German women by advancing Red Army soldiers (Beavor, 2002). Despite these horrors, the Nuremberg Trials (1945–1946) ignored sexual violence and failed to prosecute it formally (Nowrojee, 1996).

Table 2: Chronology Overview of Sexual Violence from Antiquity to the Present

Date/Period	Event/Context	Sexual Violence Summary	Source
c. 8th century BCE	Biblical & Classical Texts	Mass rape and abduction normalized in war (e.g., <i>Iliad</i> , Old Testament)	Mann (2005)
Classical Antiquity	Ancient Rome & Greece	Women treated as spoils of war; no legal condemnation	Mann (2005)
11th–15th century	Middle Ages (Crusades, Mongol, Viking invasions)	Sexual violence used to shame and humiliate enemy populations	Mann (2005)
1618–1648	Thirty Years' War	Documented systematic rape during sieges	Mann (2005)
1800s	Napoleonic Wars & American Civil War	Reports of rape widespread but often unrecorded or dismissed	Mann (2005)
1937	Nanjing Massacre	Mass rape of 20,000+ Chinese women; earliest well-documented mass sexual	Chang (1997)
1945	Soviet Invasion of Germany	Mass rapes of millions of German women by Red Army	Beevor (2002)
1945–46	Nuremberg Trials	Sexual violence largely ignored legally	Nowrojee (1996)
1991–2001	Yugoslav Wars	Systematic rape as ethnic cleansing; framed as crime against humanity and genocide	Allen (1996)
1994	Rwandan Genocide	ICTR Akayesu case formally recognizes rape as genocide tool	Nowrojee (1996); Pattison
1998	Rome Statute of the ICC	Legal codification of sexual violence as war crimes and crimes against humanity	Rome Statute (1998)
2017–present	#MeToo Movement	Amplifies survivor voices and challenges culture of silence around sexual violence	Kearl (2018)

Note. This table provides a timeline of major historical and legal landmarks in the recognition, documentation, and codification of sexual violence during and after conflict.

Sexual Violence as a Recognized Weapon of War

A major shift occurred during the Yugoslav Wars (1991–2001), where the systematic rape of Bosniak women, often in detention camps, sparked international outcry and helped frame sexual violence as a crime against humanity and an instrument of genocide (Allen, 1996). The Rwandan Genocide (1994) further advanced this recognition when the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), in the

landmark *Akayesu* case (1998), formally acknowledged rape as an instrument of genocide (Nowrojee, 1996; Pattison, 2016). These precedents contributed to the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which explicitly criminalized rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, and other forms of sexual violence in conflict (Rome Statute, 1998).

Summary and Contemporary Context

While sexual violence in war is an ancient phenomenon, its formal recognition as a weapon of war is a recent development, shaped by legal rulings, survivor testimonies, feminist and postcolonial scholarship, and global activism (Pattison, 2016; Kearl, 2018). This study situates the sexual violence of the Rwandan Genocide within this broader historical and legal trajectory and connects it to contemporary movements like #MeToo, which amplify survivor voices worldwide.

This research investigates how sexual violence was deliberately used during the Rwandan Genocide to terrorize, humiliate, and destabilize communities. It also examines how media underreporting, global indifference, and institutional neglect contributed to the erasure of survivors' experiences (Goldstein, 2001; Thompson, 2007). By centering survivor narratives and legal developments, this study aims to fill critical gaps in understanding and contribute to the urgent call for accountability and justice in conflict-related gender-based violence.

The History and Dynamics of Sexual Violence in War

Sexual violence has long been employed as a deliberate and devastating strategy in warfare, weaponized to terrorize civilian populations, dismantle familial and social structures, and assert power over perceived enemies. Far from being incidental, these acts are often organized and systematic, targeting individuals not only for their gender or ethnic identity but also as symbolic representatives of entire communities. Women and girls have historically endured the most of this violence, frequently subjected to mass rape, forced impregnation, sexual slavery, and genital mutilation.

Men and boys, though less often acknowledged, have also been victims, raped, tortured, and castrated, particularly in detention settings, yet often remain silent due to stigma, shame, and the lack of legal recognition.

In some conflicts, sexual violence has been used as an instrument of genocidal intent. Forced impregnation has been deployed to destroy a population's ethnic identity, inflict lasting psychological trauma, and attempt to erase communities biologically and culturally. Such acts are not spontaneous or isolated; they are calculated strategies aimed at annihilating a group's future through the bodies of its women and girls, while simultaneously emasculating its men and breaking intergenerational bonds (Sharlach, 2000; Stiglmayer, 1994; United Nations, 2000). Victims have ranged from infants to the elderly, highlighting the indiscriminate cruelty of this weapon of war.

The following cases, drawn from diverse historical and geopolitical contexts, illustrate the recurring and systematic use of sexual violence across different conflicts, each instance reflecting how deeply embedded and devastating this tactic has been in global warfare (Askin, 2003; Sharlach, 2000):

- **Rwandan Genocide (1994):** Rape was vital component of the genocidal strategy, with an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 women subjected to sexual violence. Victims ranged from young girls to elderly women. Hutu militias targeted Tutsi women for sexual assault, mutilation, and deliberate infection with HIV/AIDS. The aim was to destroy Tutsi family structures and lineage through both psychological trauma and biological warfare (Askin, 2003; Goldstein, 2001).
- **Bosnian War (1992–1995):** An estimated 20,000 to 50,000 women (some as young as 12) were raped by Bosnian Serb forces as part of a calculated ethnic cleansing campaign. Rape camps were established where women were repeatedly assaulted and deliberately impregnated, with the stated intent of altering the ethnic makeup of the Bosniak population. These war crimes were

later recognized by international courts as acts of genocide (Stiglmayer, 1994; Askin, 2003).

- **Nanjing Massacre (1937):** Japanese soldiers raped an estimated 20,000 to 80,000 Chinese women and girls over six weeks. Survivors reported rapes committed in public, in front of family members, and often followed by mutilation or murder. Children and elderly women were not spared, highlighting the extent to which sexual violence served as a brutal tool of domination and humiliation (Yoshimi, 2000, as cited in United Nations, 2000).
- **End of World War II (1945):** The Red Army's invasion of Germany resulted in the rape of an estimated 1.5 to 2 million German women, many between the ages of 8 and 80. These acts, often committed en masse, were overlooked or minimized for decades due to political considerations. The scale and impunity of the violence reflect the systematic nature of sexual assault as a weapon of conquest and reprisal (Goldstein, 2001).
- **Bangladesh War of Independence (1971):** The Pakistani military used sexual violence as a calculated weapon to suppress resistance. Between 200,000 and 400,000 Bengali women were raped, many held in camps for forced impregnation. The assaults were aimed at "polluting" the Bengali bloodline and were accompanied by the killing of male family members (Sharlach, 2000).
- **Democratic Republic of Congo (Luvungi region, 2006–2010):** Known as the "rape capital of the world," armed groups used gang rape as a means of territorial control, targeting entire villages including women, men, and children in nighttime raids. Assaults often involved public humiliation and left survivors permanently disabled or socially ostracized (UN SRSG-SVC, 2019).
- **Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962):** French military forces were accused of widespread sexual torture, including rape, against Algerian women detained on suspicion of supporting the revolution. These women were often

tortured in front of family members as a means of psychological warfare, stripping them of dignity and reducing community resistance (United Nations, 2000).

- **Israel– Hamas Conflict (October 2023):** During the surprise attack by Hamas militants on southern Israel, numerous Israeli women and girls were subjected to rape, sexual mutilation, torture, and murder, often before their stories could be told. Evidence collected by the Dinah Project and corroborated by Israeli authorities reveals these acts as part of a calculated war tactic designed to terrorize civilian populations and erase victims' voices. This sexual violence was accompanied by public displays of mutilated bodies, further amplifying trauma and fear among survivors and the broader community (Embassy of Israel in Cyprus, 2024; Dinah Project, 2025; Associated Press, 2023).

These cases, spanning continents and decades, illustrate the recurrent use of sexual violence as an intentional method of warfare. They also reflect the global pattern of silence, impunity, and erasure that has historically surrounded the experiences of survivors, especially those from marginalized or racialized groups.

Historical Roots of Sexual Violence as Social Control

Sexual violence has long been a weapon of power, not merely an instrument of war, but a systematized means of social control. In the United States, the transatlantic slave trade institutionalized the rape, coercion, and reproductive manipulation of African women, often with the explicit purpose of increasing enslaved populations and enforcing generational submission (Davis, 1981; Roberts, 1997). Enslaved Black women were treated as both laborers and breeders, subjected to routine sexual violation by enslavers and overseers (Jacobs, 1861/2001). This state-sanctioned violence was not collateral—it was deliberate, strategic, and central to the functioning of racial capitalism. Testimonies from formerly enslaved women, including those archived in the WPA Slave Narratives (Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938), offer harrowing

accounts of these abuses, establishing a direct lineage between historical sexual violence and contemporary struggles for bodily autonomy and justice.

Similarly, the colonization and forced displacement of Native American peoples were accompanied by widespread sexual violence, targeted especially at women and girls. During forced removals like the Trail of Tears and under policies such as the Indian Boarding School system, Native women were stripped of communal protections and subjected to rape, sterilization, and exploitation by military forces, missionaries, and settlers (Smith, 2005; Deer, 2015). Sexual violence against Indigenous women became a tactic of erasure, of land rights, sovereignty, and identity, mirroring the logic of ethnic cleansing seen in modern conflict zones.

Acknowledging these foundations is crucial: they place the phenomenon of conflict-related sexual violence within a broader historical framework, where domination over land and bodies go hand in hand, and where memory and justice are still unfinished business.

Literature Review

Sexual Violence as a Strategic Weapon of War: A Persistent Crisis

Sexual violence is a deliberate and calculated weapon of war, employed to assert power, dehumanize victims, and dismantle the social fabric of affected communities. International organizations such as UN Women (2019) and Amnesty International (n.d.) have documented its devastating impact across various conflict zones. During the Rwandan Genocide, sexual violence was systematically used as a tool of terror and ethnic cleansing. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) confirmed that the widespread use of rape against the Tutsi population constituted an act of genocide, as established in the landmark Akayesu case (Askin, 2003; Bowman, 2012).

Similarly, investigations into the ongoing war in Ukraine reveal widespread instances of sexual violence, including cases involving male victims. Reports from the United Nations (2023) show that sexual violence is a means to exert control and

dominance by combatants on both sides of the conflict. In Palestine, sexual violence is prevalent, particularly within the carceral system, where male prisoners face abuse and humiliation at the hands of Israeli forces. Documented practices include strip searches, threats of rape, and gendered torture. Despite the severity of these abuses, survivors' accounts remain unacknowledged in the public sphere (Al Mezan, 2024; Addameer, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2024).

In all three regions, conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) is not a byproduct of war, but a systematic tactic designed to instill fear, assert dominance, and break down communal bonds. The methods of execution vary: Rwanda witnessed community raids and ethnic cleansing campaigns; Ukraine's conflict has featured sexual violence primarily in detention centers; and Palestine experiences sexual violence within prisons. Each context reflects distinct geopolitical dynamics influencing the operation of CRSV.

The persistence of CRSV underscores the urgent need for strengthened legal frameworks and international accountability. Amnesty International (n.d.) stresses the importance of prosecuting these crimes through institutions such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), urging more robust mechanisms to ensure justice for survivors and hold perpetrators accountable. UN Women (2019) emphasizes the gendered nature of wartime sexual violence and calls for comprehensive measures to prevent and respond to these crimes.

Psychological and Biological Factors Behind Perpetration

Understanding why men commit sexual violence in conflict requires an examination that extends beyond ideology and power alone. Psychological scholarship suggests that war environments suppress empathy and moral judgment, enabling otherwise ordinary individuals to commit acts of brutality, including sexual violence. Zimbardo (2007) argues that under systemic pressures, such as deindividuation and obedience to authority, moral disengagement occurs, increasing the likelihood of violent

behavior. Staub (1989) similarly highlights how authoritarian and group-based dynamics fuel intergroup violence and aggression.

Biological and evolutionary frameworks contribute further insight. The male-warrior hypothesis, as proposed by Van Vugt, McDonald, Navarrete, and Oliver (2012), posits that intergroup aggression may have evolved in ancestral environments where coalitional violence among males led to reproductive or status-related advantages. This theory links behaviors such as dominance and aggression to elevated testosterone and status-seeking tendencies, traits that may be intensified under conditions of war.

Thornhill and Palmer (2000) argue that the collapse of societal order during armed conflict allows latent biological predispositions toward sexual coercion to emerge. While their theory has generated considerable controversy, particularly its potential implications for excusing violence, it offers one lens for understanding how sexual aggression may manifest in the absence of institutional accountability. Their work suggests that sexual violence during war is not solely driven by personal desire but by a combination of evolved behavioral tendencies, psychological conditioning, and structural sanctioning. This structural element is particularly critical, as historical evidence suggests that mass rape has often been enabled, or even encouraged, by military leadership. For example, during World War II, widespread sexual violence perpetrated by Soviet troops was overlooked and tacitly condoned by leaders such as Joseph Stalin (Beevor, 2002), reinforcing how state authority can embolden and normalize such crimes in wartime.

Together, these interdisciplinary perspectives indicate that wartime sexual violence functions as a biologically and socially conditioned weapon. Rather than isolated acts of deviance, such violence is shaped by a convergence of psychological, hormonal, and sociocultural factors that thrive in the chaos and permissiveness of war.

Male Survivors: The Hidden Casualties

Discussions of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) have historically centered on women and girls, whose experiences represent a sizable portion of documented cases. However, emerging research and survivor testimonies indicate that men and boys have also been subjected to sexual violence during armed conflict—though their experiences often remain underreported and excluded from public narratives.

In the context of the Rwandan genocide, approximately 37.5% of male respondents reported experiencing traumatic events, including sexual violence, slightly higher than the reported rate for women during the same period (Jones, Bannon, & Barry, 2013). Male survivors have described acts such as rape, forced nudity, genital mutilation, and other forms of public humiliation.

Despite the severity of these violations, social stigma and gender norms have discouraged disclosure and limited access to justice or support services. As one survivor, Faustin Kayihura, later noted, “Men are told they cannot be victims... so we live in silence” (de Brouwer, 2018).

This pattern of marginalization continues in more recent conflicts, such as those in Ukraine and Palestine, where men face comparable forms of abuse and structural neglect. Reports by Human Rights Watch (2024) and the UNHCR (2016) highlight the limited availability of trauma-informed services for male survivors, as well as ongoing legal and cultural barriers that impede acknowledgment and redress.

Excluding male survivors from CRSV discourse contributes to a fragmented understanding of wartime violence and inhibits the development of comprehensive legal and humanitarian responses. Addressing this gap is essential to ensuring equitable recognition, support, and accountability for all survivors, regardless of gender.

Media Silence, Religious Complicity, and Institutional Failure

One of the most persistent barriers to justice for survivors of CRSV is inadequate reporting by media outlets. During the Rwandan Genocide, international media either

ignored or severely underreported the widespread use of sexual violence, particularly against male victims, resulting in delayed intervention and a limited global understanding of the gendered dimensions of the conflict (Thompson, 2007).

In ongoing conflicts such as those in Ukraine and Palestine, this pattern of silence continues. Media coverage often prioritizes geopolitical narratives while sidelining the lived experiences of survivors. Additionally, religious institutions have been critiqued for their role in perpetuating silence and inaction. Scholars such as Pitino (2023) highlight the failure of religious bodies, including the Vatican, to move beyond moral statements toward concrete structural actions addressing sexual violence. Despite their moral authority and influence over public discourse, many faith-based organizations have not provided substantial support for survivors or advocated effectively for systemic reforms.

This combination of media neglect, religious complicity, and institutional failure creates significant obstacles to raising awareness, delivering justice, and fostering social change. Comprehensive responses must include truthful reporting, accountability within religious institutions, and institutional reforms that center on survivor needs.

Legal Frameworks and the Need for Reform

Legal responses to CRSV have advanced over the past two decades, marked by significant milestones in international criminal law. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda's (ICTR) conviction of Jean-Paul Akayesu established an important precedent by recognizing sexual violence as a component of genocide. Similarly, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) set critical standards by classifying rape as a war crime during the Balkan conflicts (ICTY, 2016).

Despite these achievements, international legal frameworks remain fragmented and inconsistently applied. The International Criminal Court (ICC) faces jurisdictional and political limitations, particularly in active conflict zones, which often hinder effective prosecution. As noted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

(UNHCR, 2019) and Human Rights Watch (2020), strengthening local legal systems is essential to ensure timely, culturally sensitive justice, especially in contexts such as Palestine and Ukraine where international tribunals face access challenges.

Furthermore, legal systems rarely acknowledge or adequately address the specific experiences of male survivors, contributing to their continued invisibility. Comprehensive legal reform must prioritize survivor-centered justice by incorporating gender-inclusive definitions of sexual violence and creating accessible, trauma-informed avenues for redress. Post-conflict processes in countries such as Colombia demonstrate how survivor-led advocacy can effectively influence legal reform and improve accountability.

The #MeToo Movement: Expanding Awareness, Confronting Limitations

The global #MeToo movement has significantly broadened public conversations about sexual violence, creating platforms for survivors to share their experiences and challenging entrenched institutional norms (Perrin, 2019). It has played a crucial role in increasing awareness, fostering cultural shifts, and pressuring governments and organizations to pursue greater accountability.

However, the impact of #MeToo on conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) remains limited. While the movement has elevated the importance of survivor testimony, it has yet to fully transform legal mechanisms or effectively incorporate the experiences of survivors from conflict zones, particularly male survivors and those from non-Western contexts. The movement's Western-centric and gender-normative frameworks often fail to capture the complex realities of CRSV in diverse geopolitical settings (Alvarez & Akiyama, 2023).

Scholars and practitioners' debate whether #MeToo is truly "globalizing" or if locally rooted, non-Western organizations and movements addressing sexual violence are more effective in these contexts. In many conflict-affected regions, indigenous initiatives, survivor-led groups, and culturally specific advocacy networks are

increasingly shaping responses to sexual violence, often employing context-sensitive strategies that resonate more deeply with affected communities (Betts, 2021; Okello, 2022).

However, #MeToo's emphasis on challenging power structures and amplifying survivor voices provides a complementary framework for understanding wartime sexual violence. Future adaptations of the movement could benefit from intentionally integrating voices from the Global South and adopting intersectional approaches that consider the multiple layers of identity and oppression faced by survivors in conflict zones.

Global Responses to Sexual Violence

SEVOTA (Sexual Violence Transitional Justice in Uganda)

This Uganda-based survivor-led initiative works directly with victims of conflict-related sexual violence, providing legal advocacy, psychosocial support, and community reintegration programs. SEVOTA combines traditional justice mechanisms with international human rights frameworks, addressing the cultural and social barriers survivors face (Okello, 2022).

The Women's Legal Centre (WLC) in South Africa

While South Africa has seen #MeToo-related activism, the WLC focuses on providing legal assistance to survivors of sexual violence and works extensively on cases involving sexual violence during apartheid-era conflicts and post-conflict societal violence, utilizing a rights-based but culturally sensitive approach (Moyo & Gumede, 2021).

The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET)

FEMNET, headquartered in Kenya, is a pan-African feminist network that advocates for women's rights and addresses sexual violence across African countries. It promotes localized activism and intersectional approaches tailored to African **contexts**, often critiquing Western-centric feminist frameworks (Ngugi, 2020).

The Syrian Women's Network (SWN)

Operating in and around the Syrian conflict zone, SWN supports survivors of sexual violence by blending humanitarian aid with advocacy, legal support, and culturally sensitive awareness campaigns. Their approach highlights how localized efforts are vital in warzones where international movements like #MeToo have limited reach (Al-Ali, 2018).

The #WhereIsMyName Campaign in Lebanon and the Middle East

While more focused on women's rights and identity issues, this campaign has helped bring attention to sexual violence and patriarchy in Arab countries. It exemplifies a regional grassroots effort using social media activism distinct from but complementary to #MeToo (Sabbagh, 2021).

Historical and Contemporary Dimensions of Sexual Violence as a Weapon of Power

Sexual violence as a tool of domination and control extends beyond wartime contexts, rooted in deep historical patterns and ongoing social dynamics. The transatlantic slave trade stands as one of the most brutal historical examples, wherein sexual violence was systematically used to break families, erase identities, and enforce regimes of terror and subjugation (Painter, 2021; Davis, 1981). Similarly, the sexual abuse of Native American women has been documented as a deliberate tactic used during settler colonialism to erase Indigenous communities, functioning as a form of ethnic cleansing aimed at dismantling social structures and cultural continuity (Smith, 2005; Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 2003). Although distinct from modern conflict zones, these legacies illustrate the persistent use of sexual violence to sustain systems of oppression, effects that continue to resonate within contemporary social and racial inequalities.

In recent years, the global #MeToo movement has emerged as a powerful force revealing how sexual violence functions as a weapon of power and control in everyday

social, institutional, and political settings. While the movement’s primary focus has been on sexual violence outside of armed conflict, it has begun to make inroads into conversations about wartime sexual violence, offering a valuable framework for survivor testimony and institutional accountability across diverse contexts (Perrin, 2019).

By situating wartime sexual violence alongside historical abuses such as slavery, settler colonialism, and contemporary social movements like #MeToo, this research highlights a continuum of systemic sexual violence as a deliberate weapon of war and oppression. These intersecting contexts demand broader ethical and legal analyses that transcend geographic and temporal boundaries, underscoring the urgent need for inclusive, survivor-centered justice.

Table 3: Historical Foundations of Systemic Sexual Violence

Slavery and Sexual Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enslaved African women in the U.S. were raped to increase enslaved populations (Davis, 1981). • Seen as both laborers and “breeders” under racial capitalism (Roberts, 1997). • Harrowing testimonies preserved in WPA Slave Narratives (Federal Writers’ Project, 1936–1938).
Native Women and Colonization	<p>Sexual violence used to erase Indigenous identity and sovereignty (Smith, 2005).</p> <p>Occurred during forced removals and boarding school assimilation (Deer, 2015).</p> <p>Tactics mirrored ethnic cleansing—targeting body, land, and memory.</p>
Why This Matters	<p>These histories are not isolated. They reflect the global logic of sexual violence as a tool of conquest and control—one that still echoes in today’s conflict zones and courtrooms alike.</p>

Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative, survivor-centered, comparative case study methodology to examine sexual violence as a weapon of war, focusing primarily on the Rwandan Genocide with comparative insights from Ukraine and Palestine. Grounded in feminist and postcolonial research principles, it draws from historical document analysis, thematic content analysis, and narrative integration. Each approach centers survivor voices while critically evaluating institutional, media, and legal responses.

Research Design

The research design is informed by intersectional feminist and trauma-informed frameworks. These approaches emphasize the necessity of honoring survivor agency and examining how gender, race, power, geography, and historical memory influence the documentation and perception of sexual violence during conflict.

Three primary research methods structure this inquiry:

1. Historical and Legal Document Analysis

This method includes the review of ICTR trial transcripts, the Rome Statute, United Nations Security Council resolutions, NGO publications, and scholarly texts. These sources offer foundational evidence for understanding how sexual violence was weaponized to destabilize communities and target specific identities (Allen, 1996; Beevor, 2002; ICTR, 1998).

2. Comparative Case Study

Rwanda serves as the central case, while Ukraine and Palestine provide comparative lenses. Though each context differs historically and politically, all three reflect patterns of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), media omission, and insufficient legal response.

3. Thematic Content Analysis

Thematic coding was applied to survivor testimonies, international news reports, legal documents, and human rights publications. Recurring themes included:

- The erasure of male survivors
- Institutional failures
- Euphemistic or sanitized media language
- Survivor agency and resistance
- The ethics of storytelling in documentary narratives
-

Table 4: Research Design Overview Across Case Study Phases-1

Research Phase	Approach	Tools / Sources Used	Purpose / Outcome
Case Study Identification	Conflict zone selection by historical impact	Rwanda, Palestine, Ukraine; UN archives	To ground study in documented patterns of sexual violence in war
Survivor Testimony Collection	Qualitative content analysis	Online testimony archives, UN Hearings, NGO reports	To amplify marginalized voices and examine patterns in survivor narratives
Media and Institutional Analysis	Discourse and policy review	Government releases, UN resolutions, international law	To trace how institutions and media have addressed or failed to address CRSV
Comparative Summary	Cross-case analysis	Tables, timelines, regional breakdowns	To identify disparities in recognition, justice, and visibility across cases

Note. This table outlines the methodological structure of the study, emphasizing the research phases, data sources, and intended outcomes across the selected case studies

Data Sources and Materials

Data was drawn from four primary categories:

- **Historical and Legal Texts**

Including the Akayesu judgment, UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820, and relevant provisions of the Rome Statute. These materials frame sexual violence as a prosecutable act within international criminal law.

- **Media Archives**

News coverage from major outlets (BBC, Al Jazeera, NYT) was analyzed for framing, erasure, or sensationalism regarding CRSV in the selected conflicts.

- **Documentary Film Analysis**

The Uncondemned, *Iseta: Behind the Roadblock*, and *Rwanda: The Silence is Broken* were selected based on ethical storytelling, direct survivor participation, and educational use in human rights discourse.

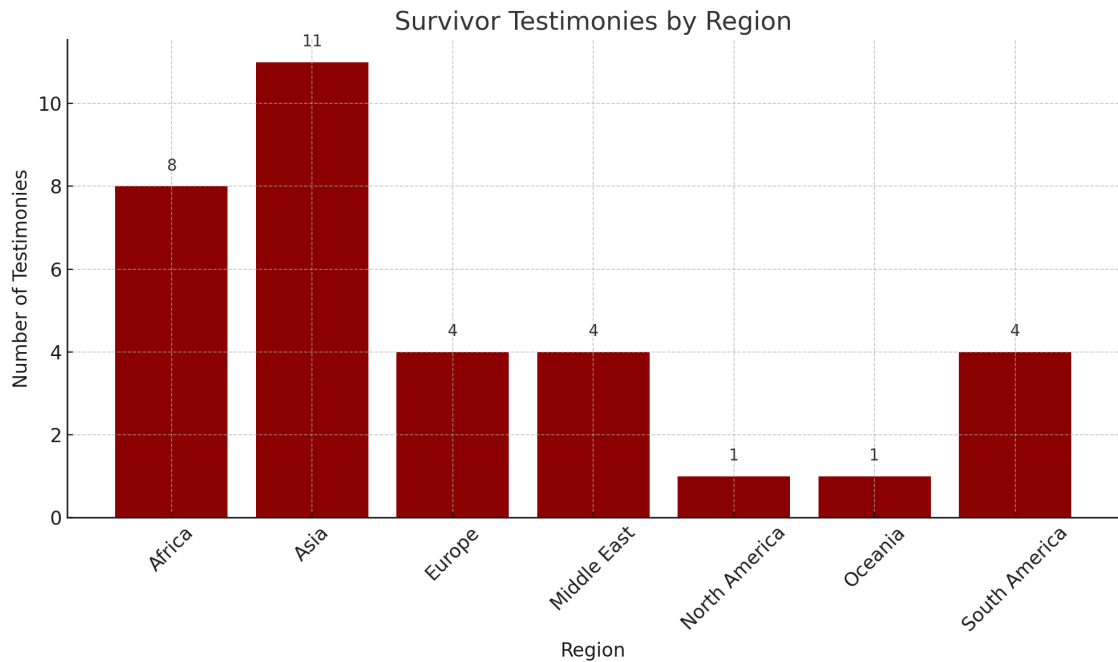
- **Survivor Testimonies**

Public oral histories, NGO interviews, memoirs, and legal testimonies were included if they provided ethical transparency, thematic richness, and direct relevance to CRSV patterns.

ID / Name	Country / Conflict Zone	Source & Year	Conflict Period	Role	Testimony	URL
Amina	Afghanistan (ongoing)	Amnesty International (2022)	2001–present	SRV	“Taliban forces used sexual violence to punish and control women... my community is shattered.”	https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/08/afghanistan-sexual-violence/
Tariq	Bangladesh (1971)	Sharlach (2000)	1971	SRV	“They wanted to pollute our bloodline and break our families.”	https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022343300032003002
Ludirlena Pérez	Colombia	Worldcrunch <i>undated</i>	2004	SRV	“Raped and impaled... left with 139 stitches... fight couldn’t end there.”	[Worldcrunch article]
Jean	DRC	UN SRSG-SVC (2019)	1998–ongoing	SRV	“The systematic use of rape destroyed communities and instilled lasting trauma.”	https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/key-documents/reports
Sita	China (Nanjing, 1937)	United Nations (2000)	1937	SRV	“The assaults happened in front of families... it was a deliberate tool of terror.”	https://www.un.org/en/preventing-sexual-violence/conflict/nanjing

This table features selected testimonies used in the main analysis to illustrate common themes of trauma, resistance, and erasure in conflict-related sexual violence

Note: For additional survivor testimonies, see Table A1 in the Appendix.

Figure 1: Survivor Testimonies by Region

Note. This figure illustrates the geographic distribution of conflict-related sexual violence survivor testimonies globally.

Analytical Approach

The analysis was conducted through layered, multi-modal strategies:

- **Survivor-Centered Narrative Integration**

Survivor testimony was not simply data, but the core narrative around which policy, media, and legal texts were evaluated.

- **Thematic Coding**

Codes were developed inductively, shaped by survivor expressions, media phrasing, and recurring policy rhetoric.

- **Visual Discourse Analysis**

This method was applied to the documentaries selected to assess tone, editing choices, gaze, and survivor positioning.

- **Institutional Discourse Review**

A review of official government and international body statements revealed shifts in policy language, symbolic silence, or institutional accountability.

Table 6: Key Institutional and Government Statements on CRSV-1

Organization / Official	Region/ Country	Year	Statement / Policy Quote	URL	Response Type
ACHPR (African Commission on Human Rights)	Africa	2021	“Condemns strongly all acts of ... sexual violence ... calls on all parties ... to put an end to ... weapons of war.”	ACHPR Resolution text	Regional resolution
African Union (AU)	African continent	2025	“Historic legal instrument ... prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls ...”	https://au.int/en/ucevawg	Continental convention adoption
United Nations Security Council (UNSC)	Global conflicts	2008-2009	“Rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes... mandates peacekeeping missions to protect women and children...”	undocs.org/S/RES/1820(2008), undocs.org/S/RES/1888(2009)	UN resolutions
Office of SRSG for Sexual Violence in Conflict (UN)	Global	2014	“Sexual violence ... must combat impunity for perpetrators ... National ownership, leadership and responsibility are essential.”	UN Press release on SRSG appointment	UN–AU cooperation statement

Table 5 summarizes key statements and policies from leading institutional and governmental bodies addressing conflict-related sexual violence, highlighting their commitments to prevention, accountability, and survivor protection across Africa, the United States, and the global stage.

Ethical Considerations

This research prioritized ethical responsibility in handling publicly available survivor testimonies and legal texts. No direct interviews were conducted. All sources were accessed through platforms that had obtained informed consent for public dissemination. Survivor anonymity was preserved when appropriate. The project was designed to minimize harm, prioritize survivor dignity, and critically reflect on the researcher’s own positionality.

Research Questions

1. How has sexual violence in conflict zones been systematically used and subsequently silenced?
2. What role has media coverage, or its absence, played in shaping global understanding of sexual violence during the Rwandan Genocide?
3. How do documentary films and survivor testimonies reclaim erased narratives?
4. What are the limitations of international legal responses to wartime sexual violence?
5. How do movements like #MeToo amplify or marginalize voices of survivors from conflict-affected regions?

Limitations

- Survivor testimonies used are not exhaustive and do not represent all affected identities, particularly LGBTQ+ and child survivors.
- Media analyses may reflect Western editorial biases or gaps in translation.
- Case studies differ in documentation access and legal progress, limiting symmetrical comparison.

Positionality Statement

As a Black woman and returning student undertaking this research later in life, I bring lived experience, generational awareness, and a sense of reverent responsibility to this inquiry. My identity, as a sibling to a soldier who served in Rwanda and a witness to systems of silence and resilience—informs the survivor-centered nature of this work. This is not neutral scholarship. It is an offering: a refusal to allow silenced voices to remain buried under institutional neglect and historical amnesia.

Methods Summary

This study employs a rigorous, survivor-centered qualitative methodology rooted in intersectional feminist and trauma-informed principles. By combining historical and legal document analysis, thematic content examination of survivor testimonies and media, and comparative case studies of Rwanda, Ukraine, and Palestine, the research

captures the multifaceted realities of conflict-related sexual violence. Ethical rigor guided all stages, ensuring respect for survivor dignity and trauma sensitivity. This comprehensive methodological framework lays a strong foundation for illuminating the systemic challenges and nuanced experiences explored in the following Findings section.

Findings

This section examines Rwanda's multi-layered response to sexual and gender-based violence (GBV) through comparative analysis, policy evaluation, and practical measures. The focus is on key legal frameworks, survivor-centered services, community-based justice, and culturally grounded prevention initiatives.

Comparative Overview

Rwanda's approach integrates formal legal reforms and community-oriented programs to address GBV. Key initiatives include:

- Law No. 59/2008 on the Prevention and Punishment of Gender-Based Violence,
- Isange One Stop Centers (IOSCs) providing integrated survivor services,
- Gacaca Courts adapted for sexual violence cases, and
- Umugoroba w'Imiryango, culturally rooted family forums promoting dialogue and prevention.

These initiatives operate at various levels, (legal, medical, judicial, and-social) creating a comprehensive but uneven support landscape. While urban areas benefit from better-resourced centers, rural communities rely heavily on grassroots efforts. Formal justice systems face challenges around enforcement and survivor protection.

Table 7: Comparative Table of Rwanda's Key GBV (Gender Based Violence)

Policy Initiatives						
Policy / Program	Year Enacted	Target Population	Implementing Body	Key Features	Reported Impact	Gaps / Concerns
Law No. 59/2008 on GBV	2008 (amended 2018)	Survivors of gender-based violence	Parliament / MIGEPRO F / Judiciary	Criminalizes GBV including marital rape and psychological abuse	Expanded recognition of GBV as a national priority; increased legal cases	Enforcement uneven; stigma deters rural reporting cases
Isange One Stop Centers (IOSC)	2009	GBV survivors (women, children, men)	MIGEPRO F / Rwanda National Police / MoH	24/7 free access to legal, medical, psychosocial, and shelter services	UN-recognized model; improved survivor access and inter-agency coordination	Staffing shortages in rural areas; survivor fear of stigma
Gacaca Courts (sexual violence cases)	Modified post-2001	Perpetrators and survivors of genocide-related sexual violence	Local Community Leaders / Gacaca Courts	Community justice model with space for truth-telling and survivor testimony	Allowed thousands of cases to be heard; reinforced collective memory	Public exposure of victims; weak legal safeguards for complex trauma cases
Umugoroba w'Imiryango (Family Forums)	2011	Families, married couples, community members	Local Government / Village Leaders	Monthly dialogue sessions to discuss family conflict, domestic violence, unity	Strengthened local prevention networks; improved awareness and mediation	No formal evaluation; quality depends on local leadership commitment

The table illustrates how Rwanda integrates formal legal measures with community-oriented interventions, resulting in a broad but uneven support landscape.

While Isange One Stop Centers provide centralized, comprehensive survivor services, their reach remains limited in rural areas where grassroots initiatives like Umugoroba w'Imiryango forums serve an important preventive and dialogic role. Likewise, formal justice mechanisms, such as Law No. 59/2008 and Gacaca courts, offer vital frameworks for accountability but continue to face enforcement challenges and survivor protection concerns.

SWOT Evaluation of Rwanda's GBV Response

To assess Rwanda's multi-layered response to sexual and gender-based violence, a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) framework was employed. This evaluation examined:

- **Strengths:** Survivor-centered services such as Isange One Stop Centers (IOSC), legal reforms including Law No. 59/2008, and cultural programs like *Umugoroba w'Imiryango*.
- **Weaknesses:** Gaps in rural access, limited evaluation tools, and inconsistent survivor protections.
- **Opportunities:** Enhanced outreach and international partnerships.
- **Threats:** Social stigma, enforcement failures, and resource constraints.

The SWOT analysis helped map where Rwanda's efforts are pioneering and where systemic obstacles remain entrenched.

(See Appendix, Table A1: SWOT Analysis of Rwanda's GBV Response for a detailed breakdown. Policy Evaluation through SWOT Framework

A SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis reveals the multifaceted nature of Rwanda's GBV response, highlighting both progress and persistent challenges.

Table 8 Law No. 59/2008 on the Prevention & Punishment of Gender-Based Violence	
This foundational law criminalizes a broad spectrum of GBV, including marital rape and psychological abuse. Despite progressive provisions, enforcement gaps remain, especially in rural areas where stigma and logistical barriers hinder access to justice.	
Category	Analysis
Strengths	Comprehensive and survivor-centered; criminalizes marital rape and psychological abuse
Weaknesses	Uneven enforcement, especially in non-urban areas
Opportunities	Expand public legal education and legal aid services to improve accessibility
Threats	Cultural resistance, stigma, and lack of trained GBV specialists in the judiciary

Table 9 Isange One Stop Centers (IOSC)	
Operating since 2009, IOSCs offer integrated legal, medical, and psychosocial support 24/7, primarily at district hospitals. These centers have gained international recognition for effectiveness but are unevenly distributed, with rural survivors often facing stigma and accessibility issues.	
Category	Analysis
Strengths	Holistic, accessible, and survivor-focused services; integration of multiple forms of support under one roof.
Weaknesses	Limited staffing and outreach in rural communities.
Opportunities	Scale up mobile services and training for rural health workers
Threats	Budget constraints, burnout of providers, and cultural silence around rape and GBV

Table 10 Gacaca Courts and Sexual Violence Cases	
Originally designed to manage post-genocide cases, Gacaca courts now hear sexual violence claims, providing community-based restorative justice. While they facilitate survivor testimony,	
Category	Analysis
Strengths	Community participation; opportunity for truth-telling and acknowledgment
Weaknesses	Public exposure risks to survivors; absence of formal safeguards for trauma-informed adjudication
Opportunities	Study survivor outcomes to improve hybrid justice approaches
Threats	Potential re-traumatization, limited documentation, and community bias

Table 11 Umugoroba w'Imiryango (Evening Forums for Families)	
<i>Monthly village-level forums foster family unity, gender equality, and domestic violence prevention through dialogue among families and local leaders. Their success depends on local leadership quality, and they lack standardized evaluation.</i>	
Category	Analysis
Strengths	Promotes community ownership; reduces stigma through dialogue
Weaknesses	Variable quality and leadership commitment; limited formal training for facilitators
Opportunities	Institutionalize monitoring tools and training modules
Threats	High turnover of leaders, politicization of discussions, and reluctance to challenge cultural norms

Summary of SWOT Analyses and Policy Implications

The SWOT analyses reveal Rwanda's complex, multi-faceted approach to addressing sexual and gender-based violence. Each policy and program demonstrate clear strengths, including survivor-centered legal reforms and innovative service delivery. However, persistent challenges remain, such as uneven enforcement, resource limitations, social stigma, and cultural barriers. These findings underscore critical opportunities for targeted improvements, including expanding rural outreach, enhancing community education, and institutionalizing monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Effective progress requires a coordinated, adaptive approach to balancing legal rigor with culturally sensitive community engagement.

Practical Measures and Recent Developments

Rwanda's government and civil society complement these frameworks with practical initiatives to enhance survivor support and societal change:

- **Government-Led Services and Legal Reforms:**

IOSCs have expanded to 48 centers nationwide, featuring safe rooms for all genders. The 2008 law was amended in 2018 to allow abortion under specific circumstances such as rape and health risks (MIGEPRIS, 2024; The Guardian, 2018).

- **Community Engagement:**

Programs like Umuganda and Umugoroba w'Imiryango foster open discussions and shift social norms to reduce GBV stigma (Rebero, 2024).

- **Institutional Training:**

Specialized gender desks in police stations nationwide provide trained officers for sensitive GBV case handling. The Defence Force runs workshops raising awareness among military families (ECOI, 2023; MOD Rwanda, 2025).

- **Civil Society and International Partnerships:**
NGOs engage men in promoting gender equality, while collaborations with UN agencies provide hotlines and prevention in refugee settings (Time, 2023; UNHCR, 2024).
- **Law Enforcement Training:** The Rwanda National Police and Rwanda Defence Force have established specialized gender desks in police stations nationwide. Officers receive training to handle GBV cases with sensitivity and efficiency. ecoi.net
- **Military Spouse Workshops:** In 2025, the Rwanda Defence Force conducted workshops across six districts to raise awareness about GBV prevention among military spouses, promoting family welfare and positive community roles. mod.prod.risa.rw+2mod.gov.rw+2mod.gov.rw+2
- **NGO Initiatives:** Organizations like the Rwanda Men's Resource Center engage men in gender equality programs, challenging traditional roles and promoting shared responsibilities to reduce domestic abuse. time.com+1mencare.org+1

Findings Summary and Policy Implications

Rwanda's multi-layered response to sexual and gender-based violence demonstrates notable strengths in legal reform, survivor-centered services, and culturally grounded prevention strategies. Initiatives such as Isange One Stop Centers, Law No. 59/2008, and *Umugoroba w'Imiryango* illustrate an intentional, coordinated effort to address gender-based violence across legal, medical, and community spheres. However, persistent challenges, including inconsistent enforcement, limited rural access, stigma, and insufficient program evaluation, reveal ongoing structural and cultural barriers. The SWOT analysis underscores opportunities for improvement in outreach, data collection, and intersectoral collaboration, while identifying threats rooted in resource scarcity and entrenched social norms. These findings highlight the complex

relationship between top-down legal structures and grassroots activism, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive, survivor-centered approaches to promote lasting justice and accountability.

Discussion

While the findings reveal Rwanda's layered approach to addressing conflict-related sexual violence, from legal statutes to community healing, they also surface tensions between policy ideals and on-the-ground realities. Rather than merely reporting existing frameworks, this discussion takes a critical, interdisciplinary turn: it interrogates the broader moral, psychological, and institutional forces that shape how wartime sexual violence is understood, remembered, and redressed. By centering survivors and drawing connections between post-genocide Rwanda, global media ethics, and movements like #MeToo, the analysis reframes the narrative, moving beyond statistics toward a more humanized and justice-oriented lens.

The Strategic Use of Sexual Violence in War

Sexual violence in conflict zones is a deliberate, often systematic weapon of war, deployed to terrorize, dominate, and destabilize civilian populations. As demonstrated in the Rwandan Genocide, this violence was not incidental but strategically implemented by both state and non-state actors to serve political, ethnic, and military objectives. This section deepens the legal and policy analysis by incorporating psychological, biological, media, and religious dimensions, offering a broader understanding of the complex mechanisms and consequences of conflict-related sexual violence

Legal Responses and Gaps in Accountability

The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) set a vital legal precedent by recognizing rape as a constituent act of genocide in the landmark Akayesu case (ICTR, 1998). However, survivors still face significant barriers to justice. Although the Rome Statute codifies sexual violence as a crime against humanity and a war crime (United Nations, 1998), its implementation remains inconsistent, particularly within

fragile or post-conflict states. Limited institutional capacity, inadequate training for legal personnel, and erosion of survivor trust often hinder effective enforcement (Askin, 2003). Understanding these legal limitations is complemented by insights from psychological and biological research, which reveal the profound and lasting impact of sexual violence on survivors.

Psychological and Biological Dimensions

Beyond legal remedies, it is essential to grasp the neurobiological and psychological toll of sexual violence to inform survivor-centered policies. Trauma from such violence often leads to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and chronic somatic symptoms. Furthermore, scholars have linked wartime male aggression to hormonal influences and evolutionary psychology, suggesting that addressing sexual violence requires attention not only to its outcomes but also to environmental and biological triggers (van Anders et al., 2011; Thornhill & Palmer, 2000).

From Silence to Sensationalism: Western Media and the Ethics of Covering Sexual Violence

Beyond legal and institutional frameworks, media narratives play a critical role in shaping public perception and survivor experiences. Despite this power, the media has historically failed to adequately report on sexual violence in conflict zones. During the 1994 Rwandan genocide, many Western journalists were swiftly evacuated under U.S. military protection, limiting deeper investigation into the scale and gendered nature of the atrocities (Carleton, 2011). Before the genocide, Western media often framed the conflict as “ancient tribal hatred,” overlooking its political and colonial roots. Such biased portrayals dehumanized victims and arguably fueled the escalation by ignoring warning signs (Thompson, 2007).

During and after the genocide, underreporting of mass sexual violence, especially against Tutsi women and girls, allowed these crimes to remain hidden in the global narrative. Yet Rwanda became a legal watershed: the ICTR was the first court to

prosecute rape as an act of genocide, fundamentally changing how international law defines and addresses sexual violence in war (ICTR, 1998).

In contrast, contemporary media often overexposes sexual violence narratives, especially following the #MeToo movement. While #MeToo has amplified crucial conversations, it has also revealed disparities in whose voices are heard, frequently sidelining survivors from marginalized or conflict-affected communities (Gill & Orgad, 2018). Ethical journalism must transcend voyeurism and selective empathy by centering survivor agency, upholding cultural sensitivity, and committing to long-term narrative justice rather than episodic sensationalism.

The Influence of the #MeToo Movement

Although rooted in peacetime and institutional settings, the #MeToo movement offers a valuable lens for reframing conflict-related sexual violence. Its emphasis on voice, visibility, and collective accountability can inform post-conflict justice models and disrupt entrenched cultures of impunity (Kearl, 2018).

Government Initiatives and Policy Frameworks

As described in the Findings section, Rwanda's multifaceted response—including Law No. 59/2008, Isange One Stop Centers, and Gacaca courts, reflects a commitment to survivor support and legal accountability. Nonetheless, ongoing challenges remain in rural outreach, enforcement equity, and trauma-informed practices. These policies offer instructive models for other post-conflict nations, provided they receive consistent resources and are adapted to local contexts.

The Role of Religious Institutions: Global Complicity and the Ethics of Redemption

Religious institutions worldwide hold significant influence in conflicts marked by sexual violence, yet their roles are often ambivalent and complex. In diverse contexts, faith communities have simultaneously offered sanctuary and support to survivors while being implicated in silence, denial, or direct complicity. This tension is evident in

Rwanda, where some religious leaders sheltered survivors and facilitated healing post-genocide, while others remained silent or participated in atrocities, highlighting a dual legacy that religious institutions must confront to foster justice, reconciliation, and accountability (Longman, 2010).

The Catholic Church, as one of the largest global religious bodies, exemplifies these challenges. Many local Catholic communities provide refuge and pastoral care to survivors of wartime sexual violence, but the Church's broader institutional response has faced criticism for inadequate accountability and failure to address clergy abuses, especially in fragile conflict zones (Doyle, 2016; Johnston, 2019). Investigations reveal instances where Church authorities ignored or concealed abuse, perpetuating trauma and undermining the Church's moral authority. Such ambivalence complicates the Church's spiritual mission and highlights the urgent need for reform centered on transparency, survivor care, and theological reflection.

In the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, religious institutions, particularly the Russian Orthodox Church, face scrutiny over their responses to sexual violence used as a weapon of war. Some faith leaders have been criticized for aligning with nationalist narratives that minimize these abuses, complicating accountability and survivor support (Kulyk, 2022). This situation reflects broader challenges faced by religious institutions operating within politicized environments, where moral authority may be compromised by alliances with state power.

In much the same way, in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, religious institutions (including Jewish, Muslim, and Christian organizations) play complex roles in shaping societal responses to sexual violence. While some faith leaders have condemned abuses and collaborated with human rights advocates to support survivors, others face criticism for political complicity or silence amid ongoing conflict (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2020). The intersection of religion, nationalism, and patriarchal norms

embedded in religious teachings often complicates efforts to address sexual violence publicly and support survivors.

This global pattern reflects a broader truth: religious institutions, with their cultural authority and extensive networks, must actively confront both historical failures and ongoing responsibilities. They bear a critical obligation to dismantle doctrines and practices that perpetuate stigma, silence survivors, and obstruct justice. Instead, faith communities should foster accountability, advocate for human rights, and promote survivor-centered healing.

This imperative is urgent as sexual violence is increasingly recognized as a deliberate weapon of war, a tactic designed to terrorize communities, fracture social cohesion, and enforce dominance (United Nations Security Council, 2008). Only through courageous self-examination and reform can religious institutions transform from sources of complicity or silence into catalysts for healing, justice, and sustained peace in conflict-affected societies.

Survivor-Centered Approaches

Effective responses must prioritize the safety, agency, and long-term healing of survivors. This includes access to trauma-informed care, economic resources, legal counsel, and social reintegration. Inclusive frameworks must recognize the diversity of survivor experiences (including men, children, and LGBTQ+ individuals) to promote equitable recovery and sustainable peace.

Toward Holistic Accountability: Integrating Legal, Social, and Scientific Perspectives

Addressing wartime sexual violence requires coordinated reforms spanning legal frameworks, healthcare services, media practices, and faith-based institutions. A crucial component of this work is empowering survivors to actively participate in developing solutions. Governments need to harmonize domestic laws with international standards, restore trust among survivors, and promote research into the intersections of trauma,

biology, and justice. This issue extends beyond legal considerations to encompass profound moral responsibility (United Nations Security Council, 2008).

Social movements like #MeToo highlight ongoing issues of denial, victim-blaming, and protection of perpetrators, even in high-profile cases. Examples such as the acquittals or dismissals involving public figures reveal how power and legal loopholes often shield offenders (AP News, 2025; BBC News, 2023; NPR, 2021, 2023; The New York Times, 2024).

Meanwhile, neurobiological research shows trauma can affect memory and emotional expression, often misunderstood as dishonesty, further disadvantaging survivors in courts and media (van der Kolk, 2014).

Together, these realities show that sexual violence remains a tool of power across contexts, eroding faith in justice. Combating it requires holistic accountability, integrating legal reforms, survivor empowerment, scientific understanding, and broader societal change.

Discussion Summary

This analysis shows that sexual violence in conflict zones, though often hidden or distorted by sensational media, is a deliberate tactic of war with deep and lasting effects. Using the example of the Rwandan Genocide and expanding through legal, psychological, religious, and cultural perspectives, it becomes clear that true justice requires more than punishment, it needs ongoing, survivor-focused efforts across many areas. From international courts to local community programs and media reform, every response plays a role in the bigger picture of healing and accountability. Yet, the continued marginalization of some survivors and uneven global justice highlight the urgent need for real systemic change. This discussion leads to a final call to action: one that embraces complexity, centers survivors' voices, and challenges the structures that allow such violence to continue.

Conclusion

Conflict-related sexual violence is not incidental. It is a deliberate, calculated tactic of war, used to fracture societies, silence survivors, and assert control through terror. As demonstrated in Rwanda and echoed across global contexts, the enduring consequences of such violence demand far more than procedural remedies; they require sustained moral and institutional reckoning.

The analysis presented here centers survivors whose experiences have too often been erased, women, men, and marginalized groups affected by the weaponization of sexual violence. Through a qualitative approach rooted in feminist and trauma-informed principles, this study examined how legal frameworks, media representations, and community-based responses shape public understanding and pathways to justice. Rwanda's multi-sectoral strategies, including Law No. 59/2008 and the Isange One Stop Centers, reflect substantial progress. However, persistent challenges remain, such as enforcement disparities, limited rural access, entrenched stigma, and gaps in program evaluation.

Media coverage of sexual violence in conflict has historically lacked depth and consistency. Patterns of omission, distortion, or sensationalism have shaped public perception and policy response. By contrast, movements such as #MeToo have prompted significant shifts in cultural discourse, increasing visibility and demanding accountability, although their reach has often excluded survivors from conflict zones and marginalized populations. Faith institutions, similarly, have held ambivalent roles, offering healing in some contexts while remaining silent or complicit in others. Their untapped capacity to serve as moral agents of justice and reconciliation remains a critical frontier.

Psychological and biological research underscores the extensive and long-term impacts of trauma. These findings suggest that effective responses must move beyond

legal remedies to include holistic strategies for healing, recovery, and empowerment, especially in post-conflict settings.

Ultimately, addressing conflict-related sexual violence requires a comprehensive and interdisciplinary response. Survivors must be recognized as central stakeholders in shaping justice and recovery. Ending these patterns of violence will depend on collaborative reform across legal, political, religious, and cultural systems. Such efforts demand collective courage, sustained accountability, and an unwavering commitment to truth, dignity, and restoration.

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Appendix A
Survivor (SRV) Testimonies and Institutional Responses to CRSV

ID / Name	Country / Conflict Zone	Source & Year	Conflict Period	Role	Testimony	URL
Amina	Afghanistan (ongoing)	Amnesty International (2022)	2001–present	SRV	“Taliban forces used sexual violence to punish and control women... my community is shattered.”	https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/08/afghanistan-sexual-violence/
Fatima	Afghanistan (ongoing)	Amnesty International (2022)	2001–present	SRV	“Sexual violence is used as a weapon to instill fear and silence women.”	https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/08/afghanistan-sexual-violence/
Zainab	Afghanistan (ongoing)	Amnesty International (2022)	2001–present	SRV	“Each day under Taliban rule has brought more violence against women.”	https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/08/afghanistan-sexual-violence/
Tariq	Bangladesh (1971)	Sharlach (2000)	1971	SRV	“They wanted to pollute our bloodline and break our families.”	https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022343300032003002
Karim	Bangladesh (1971)	Sharlach (2000)	1971	SRV	“They targeted men and women to destroy the spirit of the resistance.”	https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022343300032003002
Farida	Bangladesh (1971)	Sharlach (2000)	1971	SRV	“They sought to break us by destroying our bodies and spirits.”	https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022343300032003002
Ludirlena Pérez	Colombia	Worldcrunch (undated)	2004	SRV	“Raped and impaled... left with 139 stitches... fight couldn’t end there.”	[Worldcrunch article]
Angela María Escobar	Colombia (South America)	Rostov/Lawg (2018)	1990s–2010s	SRV	“I was raped three times... impunity is institutionalized.”	https://www.lawg.org/voces-from-colombia-womens-rights-advocate
Vanessa García	Colombia	Vanity Fair (2018)	1990s–2014	SRV	“Raped repeatedly from age 11... impregnated three times... escaped	Vanity Fair interview

ID / Name	Country / Conflict Zone	Source & Year	Conflict Period	Role	Testimony	URL
Carmen Zape Paja	Colombia	The Guardian (2019)	1960s–2010s	SRV	“Sexual violence against indigenous women...power of violence as a weapon of war.”	[Guardian article]
Rufina Amaya	El Salvador (Central America)	UN Truth Commission (1992)	1981	SRV	“Watched soldiers rape women and children then machine-gunned them... prayed to tell the world.”	https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rufina_Amaya
François (alias)	Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)	Jackson (2007)	1998–ongoing	SRV	“When they entered our village, they took everything. Then they took us.”	The Greatest Silence: Rape in the Congo
Dina	Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)	HRW (2019)	1998–ongoing	SRV	“They gang-raped women in front of their families, humiliating entire communities.”	https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/06/05/we-are-telling-our-stories/sexual-violence-eastern-congo
Musa	Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)	UN SRSG-SVC (2019)	1998–ongoing	SRV	“Rape was used as a tool to terrorize entire villages and destroy families.”	https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/key-documents/reports
Jean	Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)	UN SRSG-SVC (2019)	1998–ongoing	SRV	“The systematic use of rape destroyed communities and instilled lasting trauma.”	https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/key-documents/reports
Paul	Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)	UN SRSG-SVC (2019)	1998–ongoing	SRV	“The scars from systematic rape still haunt our villages.”	https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/key-documents/reports
Jan Ruff-O’Herne	Oceania (Japanese military 'comfort women')	Jan Ruff-O’Herne testimony to US Congress (2007)	WWII (1942–45)	SRV	“Forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army... spoke out publicly after 50 years.”	[PDF testimony before U.S. Congress]
Han	Korea (1910–1945)	Korea Times (2021)	1910–1945	SRV	“I was just a child... they destroyed my innocence and my family’s honor.”	https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/08/177_313862.html

ID / Name	Country / Conflict Zone	Source & Year	Conflict Period	Role	Testimony	URL
Min-Jae	Korea (1910–1945)	Korea Times (2021)	1910–1945	SRV	“The trauma of the forced ‘comfort women’ system still shadows my family today.”	https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/08/177_313862.html
So-Young	Korea (1910–1945)	Korea Times (2021)	1910–1945	SRV	“We were children forced to endure unspeakable horrors.”	https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/08/177_313862.html
Sita	China (Nanjing, 1937)	United Nations (2000)	1937	SRV	“The assaults happened in front of families... it was a deliberate tool of terror.”	https://www.un.org/en/preventing-sexual-violence/conflict/nanjing
Lian	China (Nanjing, 1937)	United Nations (2000)	1937	SRV	“They brutalized women in front of children, destroying the fabric of our community.”	https://www.un.org/en/preventing-sexual-violence/conflict/nanjing
Mei	China (Nanjing, 1937)	United Nations (2000)	1937	SRV	“The violence was deliberate and meant to terrorize entire communities.”	https://www.un.org/en/preventing-sexual-violence/conflict/nanjing
Olena	Ukraine (2022–present)	HRW (2023)	2022–present	SRV	“They used rape to terrorize our villages... women and men alike.”	https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/10/ukraine-rape-conflict
Igor	Ukraine (2022–present)	HRW (2023)	2022–present	SRV	“Men and boys were also victims; no one was spared from this terror tactic.”	https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/10/ukraine-rape-conflict
Natalia	Ukraine (2022–present)	HRW (2023)	2022–present	SRV	“This weaponization of rape targets the soul of our nation.”	https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/10/ukraine-rape-conflict

ID / Name	Country / Conflict Zone	Source & Year	Conflict Period	Role	Testimony	URL
Immaculée Ilibagiza	Rwanda (1994)	Ilibagiza (2006)	1994	SRV	"During the genocide, I hid for 91 days (about 3 months) in a tiny bathroom with seven other women. The horror of what happened will haunt me forever."	https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/238203.Immaculee_Ilibagiza
Honorine (alias)	Rwanda (1994)	HRW (1996)	1994	SRV	"They raped me in front of my children and neighbors; the pain still lingers."	https://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Rwanda
Béatrice	Rwanda (1994)	Human Rights Watch (1996)	1994	SRV	"Rape was systematic and used to terrorize entire communities; I was one of many."	https://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Rwanda
Claire	Rwanda (1994)	UN Truth Commission (1995)	1994	SRV	"We were treated as enemies by our own country; the violence left scars no one could	https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/2234946
Jasmina	Bosnia (1992–1995)	Human Rights Watch (1996)	1992–1995	SRV	"They took us from our homes, forcing us into camps where the atrocities never ceased."	https://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Bosnia2/
Esmā	Bosnia (1992–1995)	Human Rights Watch (1996)	1992–1995	SRV	"I lost my family to the violence; the camps were hell on earth."	https://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Bosnia2/
Rokia	Bosnia (1992–1995)	Stiglmeier (1994) & Askin (2003)	1992–1995	SRV	"We were kept in camps, raped daily... it was meant to erase our people."	https://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Bosnia2/
Survivor Group (anonymous)	Bosnia (1992–1995)	ICTY Documentary (2016)	1992–1995	SRV	"We came forward to testify... We will not be the last."	Sexual Violence and the Triumph of Justice https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-44398649
Nameless Yazidi Woman	Iraq/Syria (ISIS, 2014–18)	BBC (2018)	2014–2018	SRV	"They traded us like livestock... I had to survive for my sister."	https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-44398649
Khaled (alias)	Gaza/Palestine (ongoing)	Al Jazeera (2024)	ongoing	SRV	"They beat me, then did worse... it was meant to erase me."	https://www.aljazeera.com

ID / Name	Country / Conflict Zone	Source & Year	Conflict Period	Role	Testimony	URL
Samira Ahmed (alias)	West Bank/ Palestine (ongoing)	UN Women (2023)	ongoing	SRV	"I reported on others... The trauma silenced me until I met others like me."	UN Women Oral Histories Project
Layla	Israel/ Palestine (ongoing)	B'Tselem (2021)	ongoing	SRV	"The humiliation was public, meant to break our spirit."	https://www.btselem.org/publications/fulltext/202106_sexual_violence
Yara	Israel/ Palestine (ongoing)	B'Tselem (2021)	ongoing	SRV	"Every act of violence aimed to humiliate and degrade us publicly."	https://www.btselem.org/publications/fulltext/202106_sexual_violence
Anonymous Survivor	U.S. (WWII Japanese-American camps)	Densho / Smithsonian archives	1942–1945	SRV	"Sexual violence was reportedly much less documented...but survivors describe humiliation, racial violence and psychological trauma."	https://densho.org/
Mai	Vietnam (1965–1973)	PBS Frontline (2017)	1965–1973	SRV	"They took us into camps... we suffered terrible abuses... but few speak of this war crime."	https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/comfort-women-pbs/
Linh	Vietnam (1965–1973)	PBS Frontline (2017)	1965–1973	SRV	"The silence around sexual violence in this war has left many survivors invisible."	https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/comfort-women-pbs/
Thuy	Vietnam (1965–1973)	PBS Frontline (2017)	1965–1973	SRV	"Our stories were silenced for too long, but we will no longer be invisible."	https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/comfort-women-pbs/

Appendix B Institutional and Government Responses

Organization / Official	Region/ Country	Year	Statement / Policy Quote	URL	Response Type
President Barack Obama	Global conflicts	2009	"The focus ... is one of the most abhorrent features of modern war: the use of rape as a weapon..."	https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/10/02/...	Executive policy statement
President Joe Biden (USA)	Global	2023	"Today ... sanction actors who perpetrate this abuse ... first time conflict-related sexual violence sanctions."	White House statement 20 June 2023	Executive policy / sanctions
Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton	Global conflicts	2010-2024	"Rape and other forms of sexual violence are still too often viewed as collateral damage of war..."	https://kff.org/news-summary/clinton-condemns-mass-rape...	UN Security Council debate testimony
South Sudan Ministry of Gender, Child & Social Welfare	South Sudan	2024	"Ministry announced task force to accelerate enactment of Anti-GBV Bill ... underscoring government's commitment."	https://equalitynow.org/press_release/troubling-sexual-violence	Government policy announcement

Appendix C

SWOT Analysis - Rwanda's Response to Sexual & Gender-Based Violence

Strengths	Weaknesses
Progressive legal frameworks criminalizing broad GBV, including marital rape and psychological abuse (Law No. 59/2008).	Enforcement gaps, especially in rural areas hindered by stigma and limited access to justice.
Comprehensive survivor services offered by Isange One Stop Centers (IOSCs) with integrated medical, legal, and psychosocial	Unequal distribution of services with rural survivors often underserved.
Community-based restorative justice via Gacaca Courts and culturally grounded forums like Umugoroba w'Imiryango.	Public exposure and insufficient legal protections in community justice mechanisms.
Specialized gender desks in police stations and military awareness workshops.	Lack of standardized monitoring and evaluation of community programs.

Opportunities	Threats
Expanding rural outreach and mobile service units to improve accessibility.	Persistent social stigma and cultural norms that discourage reporting and access to
Institutionalizing data collection and evaluation frameworks for program effectiveness.	Potential political instability and resource constraints affecting program continuity.
Enhancing community education and engagement to shift social norms and reduce	Entrenched patriarchal attitudes that undermine survivor empowerment.
Leveraging international partnerships for technical and financial support.	Risk of retraumatization if survivor voices are not ethically engaged in program design.

Appendix D

Annotated Bibliography

Amnesty International. (2025, April). Sudan: Rapid Support Forces' horrific and widespread use of sexual violence leaves lives in tatters. Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org>

This article sheds light on the heartbreaking reality faced by countless people—especially women and girls—in Sudan, where the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have been using sexual violence as a brutal tool of war. Drawing from survivor stories and on-the-ground reporting, Amnesty International paints a raw and urgent picture of the physical and emotional scars left behind. It's a powerful call for the world to pay attention, act, and demand justice.

Askin, K. D. (2008, April 1). Testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee: Rape and war—accountability and justice for sexual violence in conflict. United States Senate. Retrieved from https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/askin_testimony_04_01_08.pdf

In this moving testimony, Dr. Kelley Dawn Askin addresses the Senate Judiciary Committee on the critical issue of sexual violence in war. Drawing on her deep legal knowledge and on-the-ground insights, she explains how rape is used as a deliberate weapon in conflict and outlines the need for stronger international accountability. Her remarks shine a light on the experiences of survivors and advocate for justice systems that meet their needs.

Bowman, D. W. (2012). *Sexual violence in armed conflict: International law and its implementation.* Oxford University Press.

Bowman analyzes the legal frameworks surrounding sexual violence in armed conflicts, with a focus on the implementation of international laws. He discusses the ICTR's pivotal role, especially in recognizing rape as genocide in the Akayesu case. This book is essential for readers examining the intersection of legal practice and theory in post-conflict justice.

Burke, T. (2018). *Me Too: A brief history of sexual violence and its legacy.* Atria Books.

Burke, the founder of the #MeToo movement, provides historical context and personal insights into the global conversation around sexual violence. She explores how the movement has expanded awareness beyond everyday contexts to include wartime sexual violence. This book connects grassroots activism to global justice efforts.

Denov, M., & Saad, D. (2024). Umwana w'umugore: The gendered realities of girls born of conflict-related sexual violence and their mothers in post-genocide Rwanda.

Journal of Health Psychology, 29(1), 89–102. <https://doi.org/>

[10.1177/13591053231152873](https://doi.org/10.1177/13591053231152873)

This qualitative study investigates the social stigma, trauma, and marginalization faced by mothers and daughters born of genocidal rape. It gives voice to survivors and their families while critically examining Rwandan societal responses and policy gaps. A crucial source for understanding intergenerational trauma in post-genocide Rwanda.

Engle, K. (2010). Mobilizing the will to prosecute: Crimes of rape at the Yugoslav and Rwandan Tribunals. *Human Rights Review*, 11(4), 555–571. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12142-010-0166-5>

This article explores how local Rwandan women's organizations contributed to successful prosecutions of sexual violence at the ICTR. Engle underscores the importance of grassroots advocacy in influencing international justice and demonstrates how these efforts shaped landmark rulings on rape as genocide.

Farmer, P. E., Nutt, C. T., Wagner, C. M., Sekabaraga, C., Nuthulaganti, T., & Binagwaho, A. (2016). Health system redesign following sexual violence during the genocide in Rwanda: A qualitative study. *International Journal of Public Health*, 61(3), 297–304. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00038-015-0769-7>

This article examines Rwanda's public health infrastructure transformation after the genocide, focusing on survivor-centered care, community involvement, and policy redesign. It offers insight into how the Rwandan government integrated health services with justice and social healing efforts.

Human Rights Watch. (2002, June 20). The war within the war: Sexual violence against women and girls in Eastern Congo. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/report/2002/06/20/war-within-war/sexual-violence-against-women-and-girls-eastern-congo>

This powerful report from Human Rights Watch exposes the brutal use of sexual violence during conflict in Eastern Congo. Featuring survivor stories and field evidence, it critiques widespread impunity and the limited justice outcomes for victims. A critical account of wartime sexual violence and state inaction.

Human Rights Watch. (2004). Struggling to survive: Barriers to justice for rape victims in Rwanda. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/report/2004/09/29/struggling-survive/barriers-justice-rape-victims-rwanda>

This report details post-genocide legal reforms in Rwanda, with a focus on survivors of sexual violence. Despite the establishment of Gacaca courts and formal justice mechanisms, it highlights persistent barriers—such as stigma, fear, and weak enforcement—that survivors continue to face.

International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). (2017). Sexual violence and international law: Key developments and challenges. Retrieved from <https://www.icty.org>

This ICTY report outlines the progress and ongoing challenges in prosecuting sexual violence, particularly in the Bosnian War. It offers insight into evidentiary and cultural hurdles in international law and contextualizes global lessons applicable to Rwanda and beyond.

Perrin, K. (2019). The #MeToo movement and the struggle for justice. *Journal of Gender and Conflict Studies*. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org>

Perrin examines how the #MeToo movement intersects with legal and institutional accountability for sexual violence. She critiques the movement's limited reach in conflict zones and offers ideas for policy and justice reform.

Save the Children. (2019). Weapon of war: Sexual violence against children in conflict. Retrieved from <https://www.savethechildren.net/blog/weapon-war-sexual-violence-against-children-conflict>

This report estimates that over 70 million children are at risk of sexual violence in war zones. It documents rising incidents, emerging perpetrators, and failures in protection systems. The call for stronger international data and prevention is urgent and sobering.

Sideris, T. (2023). Health and social consequences for survivors of genocidal rape: A systematic scoping review. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 36(5), 845–860. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22936>

This systematic review synthesizes literature on the physical, psychological, and social outcomes for survivors of genocidal rape, with key insights from Rwanda.

Sideris offers trauma-informed recommendations for survivor care, policy, and long-term recovery.

Stone, K. (2022). #MeToo and wartime rape: Looking back and moving forward. In E. Krimmer et al. (Eds.), *German #MeToo: Rape cultures and resistance, 1770–2020* (pp. 197–216). Boydell and Brewer. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781800106055-010>

Stone reflects on how the #MeToo movement reshaped global understanding of wartime rape. She discusses justice gaps, public silence, and the ongoing need for survivor-centered policies in post-conflict settings.

Thomas, D. Q., & Ralph, R. E. (1994). Rape in war: Challenging the tradition of impunity. *SAIS Review*, 14(1), 82–99. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/women/docs/rapeinwar.htm>

Thomas and Ralph provide a sweeping account of rape in global conflicts, highlighting its use as a deliberate strategy. Their critique of impunity lays the foundation for today's calls for international legal reform and survivor justice.

Thompson, A. (Ed.). (2007). *The media and the Rwandan genocide*. Pluto Press.

This edited volume critiques the global media's silence during the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, especially regarding sexual violence. It argues that the lack of coverage delayed justice and policy response, making it essential reading for understanding media responsibility.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2016). Sexual violence and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org>

This report examines the ICTR's influence in defining rape as genocide. It evaluates landmark cases and discusses challenges in international justice, especially in the Rwandan context.

United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM/UN Women). (n.d.). Conflict and post-conflict: Sexual violence during and after conflict. Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org>

This fact sheet outlines how sexual violence persists during and after armed conflict. It calls for survivor-centered peace-building and legal reform, with Rwanda's genocide cited as a key case example.

United States Mission to the OSCE. (2024, June 13). The Russian Federation's ongoing aggression against Ukraine. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Retrieved from <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/c/571261.pdf>

This address by Chargé d'Affaires Katherine Brucker highlights documented sexual violence in occupied Ukrainian territories. It urges international condemnation and action, particularly around the treatment of women and detainees by Russian forces.