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Africa's Wars on Women

The world is becoming more violent. Currently, there are more than fifty ongoing armed conflicts, from Ukraine to Sudan, from Gaza to Afghanistan; indeed, the highest since World War II.[1] Africa remains the region with the most state-based conflicts, numbering twenty-eight in 2023, nearly double the fifteen conflicts in 2013.[2] Over the past thirty years, more than three-quarters of all African countries have been involved in armed conflict.[3] Uniquely, Africa also suffers from what might be called repetitive conflicts, occurring repeatedly in the same countries, perpetuating divisions and entrenching hatred. Indeed, every civil war in Africa and the Middle East since 2003 (except for Libya) has been a continuation of a previous civil war. For example, Liberia and Somalia have each suffered two wars, Sudan three, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) an incomprehensible five in about a generation.

The reasons are complex, but in recent years, the dynamics of warfare in Africa have evolved, with traditional state-centric conflicts giving way to multifaceted struggles involving non-state actors, militias, and terrorist organizations. The result is millions of deaths, injuries, and trauma—not just to the military but also to civilians, whose deaths far outnumber fighting soldiers. Indeed, this is a growing trend, not isolated to Africa. A recent study found civilian mortality rates in modern conflicts ranging from 13 percent to 87 percent, with many wars showing civilians comprising the majority of casualties.[4] A United Nations (UN) report estimated that in

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2023 alone, at least 33,443 civilians died as a result of armed conflict, representing a 72 percent increase compared to 2022, with the number of vulnerable female casualties double to triple the previous year.[5]

While these non-combatant spillover casualties are shocking, they mask the staggering numbers of victims impacted by what might be called the "war within a war," where sexual violence is the primary weapon. This was highlighted by journalist Christina Lamb, who concluded in 2020 that rape is "the world's most neglected war crime."[6] UN-verified cases of sexual violence in war increased by 50 percent between 2022 and 2023.[7] In 2024 alone, the UN verified around 4,500 cases of sexual violence in conflict, of which an overwhelming 93 percent of survivors were women and girls.[8] These numbers are particularly appalling given that twenty-five years ago, the UN Security Council (UNSC) launched Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, the first legal Security Council ruling requiring parties in a conflict to protect women and girls from wartime sexual violence, and to support women's participation in peace negotiations, post-conflict reconstruction, repatriation, resettlement, rehabilitation, and reintegration.

There is a "war within a war" where sexual violence is the primary weapon

Sexual violence in war, however described, is not novel. Its roots date back to biblical times and represent one of the most enduring human rights violations in conflict. There are numerous references to rape and sexual violence in the Old Testament, and later in ancient Greece, where rape was reportedly a common warfare practice. In the twenty-first century, the problem of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) remains as widespread as ever, continuing to be systematically employed in almost every conflict zone across the globe.[9] CRSV is broader than either wartime rape or sexual violence in armed conflict, covering "rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage, and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls or boys, directly or indirectly linked to a conflict."[10] Extreme examples include the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, where members of the Pakistani military and the Razakar paramilitary force reportedly raped between 200,000 and 400,000 Bengali women and girls in a systematic campaign of genocidal rape.[11] In the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, sexual violence was also used systematically, leading to international prosecutions for war crimes.

Africa offers no exception to this pattern of war rape; indeed, it experienced the world's highest number of rapes in any single conflict. During the 1994 Rwandan genocide, it was estimated that over 100 days, up to half a million women and children were raped, with sexual violence used as a tool for ethnic

cleansing.[12] More recently, the UN stigmatized the DRC as the "rape capital of the world," with experts characterizing the situation as a "rape epidemic."[13] The contemporary prevalence of CRSV in conflict results from numerous factors, but a common theme is the intent to terrorize and destabilize communities, as well as demoralize and humiliate the enemy through demonstrating its inability to protect its women. Although sexual violence in war is not inevitable, there is a sense that it has become the norm rather than the exception in Africa.

Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to assess Africa's ongoing wars to better understand the extent, causes, and necessary institutional responses to CRSV. This discourse is framed as a security issue to highlight its effect on national security and regional stability. This is particularly relevant in the African context, where sexual violence against women during ongoing conflicts is not only a war crime but also a crime against humanity. This violence is partly due to social attitudes and norms that condone and sustain violence against women, but there are other CRSV enablers such as the use of rape as a tactic of war, the emergence of resource conflict linked to the unregulated supply of arms, and weak governance and accountability frameworks. The article finds that there is a particularly urgent need to address the problem of funding adequacy to support victims, especially since the United States and other major Western donors have slashed aid budgets in recent years. However, such reforms are likely to be panaceas rather than solutions in resolving the core military and cultural dimensions of CRSV including malign foreign influences, illegal arms transfers, and most seriously of all, the endemic institutional neglect contributing to a sense of perpetrator impunity and unaccountability.

Gendered Violence in Africa Today

The UNSC calls rape "war's oldest, most silenced and least-condemned crime," not contained to a place or ethnicity, whether ordered by the upper echelons of the military or encouraged within a frenzied group of soldiers.[14] In 2022, Africa accounted for 58 percent of all state-based conflicts and experienced exceptionally high battle-related deaths.[15] There are multiple causes of contemporary wars in Africa, including political and governance dilemmas, racial and ethnic rivalries, religious fundamentalism, dictatorial and despotic repression, and increasingly, the search for control of markets and resources, especially oil and critical minerals. The economic dimension is of growing importance and often tied to superpower ambitions of geoeconomic hegemony that fuel conflict through greed and corruption, sponsored via the transfer of small arms.

Whatever the causes, the victims of Africa's wars are more likely to be civilians rather than fighting forces. Indeed, more than 70 percent of the casualties in recent

African conflicts have been non-combatants, and the majority of these were women, children, and the elderly.[16] In most African wars, civilians are targeted. Rape and gang rape, abduction, sex slavery, defilement, and forced marriage are common, with many young girls being lured by fighting men into sex in exchange for food, security, shelter, and financial assistance. Africa's enduring epidemic of sexual violence has created its own lexicon. For example, due to social stigma, girls who have suffered rape often continue to follow the fighters and engage in what is termed "survival sex."[17] Africa's female assault victims invariably suffer from Rape Trauma Syndrome—a term first used to reflect DRC, Ugandan, and other survivors' long-term emotional trauma and psychological damage—along with associated physical injuries, unwanted pregnancies, social stigma, and sexually transmitted infections such as HIV.[18]

> The victims of Africa's wars are more likely to be civilians than fighting forces

Rape is not usually reported by female victims due to cultural fears of shame and rejection by their husbands, and thus, under-reporting of sexual violence in Africa is widely acknowledged. One report indicates that for every rape case reaching a treatment clinic, there are ten to twenty never reported.[19] Yet, this has not discouraged researchers from the pursuit of truth, with one study employing various research methodologies to arrive at the incomprehensibly precise figure of 354,440 rapes in the 1994 Rwandan war.[20] In this conflict, the term "ethnic-genocide rape" was used to describe the scale of sexual abuse of Hutu military men to Tutsi women.[21] Indeed, it has been suggested that nearly every Tutsi female survivor over twelve years of age was a victim of rape.[22] Rape was thus the rule, and its absence the exception.

While Rwanda represents the extreme end of the scale, the trend of sexual violence in African wars is unfaltering. In the thirty years of DRC conflicts, rape has been so widespread as a weapon of war that by April 2020, an estimated one in three women had suffered from sexual violence.[23] Doctors Without Borders reports that sexual violence cases have exploded—especially in North Kivu, where fighting between the Congolese army and the rebel group M23 began in 2012—reaching 40,000 victims in 2024, mostly committed at gunpoint. In the first four months of 2025, Care International registered 67,000 cases of sexual violence against women and girls in the DRC, a 38 percent increase from 2024.[24] A similar extended pattern of sexual violence occurred in Sudan, which has endured three civil wars. Its most recent conflict erupted in April 2023, leading to an estimated 10,000 rapes.[25]

Additionally, some 60,000 women and girls were raped in Sierra Leone's civil war from 1991 to 2002, and reportedly over 40,000 cases of rape occurred across

the first and second Liberian civil wars between 1989 and 2003. Since 2017, Cameroon has been involved in the Anglophone Crisis between the English-speaking minority region and the French-speaking region, with the UN documenting over 4,000 cases of CRSV in 2020 alone.[26] At one hospital in Ethiopia's Tigray region, 254 war rapes were reported between late December 2020 and April 2021, with the youngest victim being just four years old and the oldest eighty-nine; some 175 survivors also became pregnant.[27] Terrorism is also associated with sexual violence. In Northern Nigeria, for example, the militant Islamic terrorist group Boko Haram has been involved in abducting and assaulting women and girls. According to UN estimates, at least 7,000 have been raped since 2009.[28]

Motivators and Facilitators of Sexual Violence in Africa's Wars

Two principal factors motivate Africa's warring factions to engage in sexual violence against local women. The first is military-driven, reflecting a discursive shift from discussing rape as an inevitability of war (because "men are men") to acknowledging that rape is a clear war strategy, and a war crime, that threatens international peace and security.[29] Rape is a means for combatants to maintain control over territories and to exert power over enemy forces by abusing their wives. Endless wars have led to poverty and economic desperation, contributing to sexual violence. During war, women become the breadwinners, increasing the vulnerability of their households to looting and carrying a higher risk of exposure to sexual violence. Combatants, therefore, rape women in the search for economic gain, stealing from them to survive. Rape is used to instill fear in the population, to stigmatize and hurt women, humiliate men, and destroy the social fabric of families and communities. Instead of reflecting the actions of rogue soldiers, rape is a deliberate tactic of warfare. In Rwanda, rape was weaponized to pursue ethnic genocide due to its potential to spread sexually transmitted diseases and sterilize women.[30] Genocide rape can therefore be used to pursue ethnic cleansing, prevent women from having children, and undermine the longevity of families and communities. This appalling cycle prompted one UN peacekeeping general to observe that rape "is more effective at destroying a village or a community than a bullet, and it is cheaper."[31]

Rape is a deliberate tactic of warfare

The second factor is anchored in Africa's cultural and socio-economic conditions. Within predominantly patriarchal societies on the continent, women are often seen as subordinate to men, with rape reflecting those power dynamics. A 2018 report found that over 40 percent of women in West Africa and 65 percent in Central Africa have experienced violence, making these regions the

highest-ranked in Africa for violence against women.[32] Moreover, across Africa, it has been estimated that one in five girls has been sexually abused during childhood, and for some countries, the proportion is closer to one in three.[33] This entrenched gender inequality contributes to conditions in which CRSV becomes tolerated or instrumentalized, leading women to be dehumanized as the spoils of war. In Africa's conflict-affected states—such as the DRC, Sudan, and Cameroon—the intersection of armed conflict and patriarchal structures has created an environment where violence against women is strategically employed as an instrument of war.

The spread of unregulated foreign-supplied small arms also plays a significant role in sexual violence in African conflict zones. In addition to traditional trade routes, African militias and rebel groups often receive arms through regional smuggling or international deals, increasing conflict intensity as well as duration and perpetuating sexual violence in unstable states like the DRC. Arms supplied via clandestine networks, including foreign mercenaries and government transactions, have worsened repression, fueled intra-state violence, and encouraged separatist groups to commit sexual violence with impunity. Foreign arms, especially from China and Russia but also allegedly Belgium, have played a key role in prolonging sexual violence during Sudan's Darfur conflict.[34] In the DRC, the relationship between foreign arms supply to local militias and sexual violence exacerbates rape as a tactic of war in controlling local populations. Women and girls have been disproportionately targeted by foreign-backed armed groups, particularly by armed militias from neighboring Rwanda.[35] Yet despite international condemnation, weakly enforced arms embargoes, and continued geopolitical interest in resource-rich regions, these destabilizing regional dynamics persist.

Another facilitating factor is the emergence of resource conflict, whereby economic interests have begun to outweigh compliance with arms control legislation. The so-called "resource curse," or the paradox of plenty,[36] refers to resource-rich countries such as the DRC whose wealth in non-renewable resources has, contrarily, resulted in poor development outcomes and a higher propensity for violent conflict. International corporations operating in resource-rich conflict zones indirectly promote gender violence, with numerous reports highlighting the role that multinational mining companies and foreign mercenary groups play in perpetuating conflict and exploiting local populations.[37] Much evidence points to indirect corporate complicity—through sourcing practices, weak oversight, financing structures, or reliance on abusive security environments—rather than corporations directly perpetrating sexual violence themselves.[38] The UN explicitly states that armed groups in eastern Congo have used "mass rape as a deliberate strategy to control mines, trading

routes, and other strategic areas," linking mineral trade profits to continued violence.[39]

Also driving CRSV are weak governance and accountability mechanisms in Africa's crisis-torn states, which have encouraged a sense of impunity for the perpetrators of sexual violence. In many African countries, legal and governance frameworks for addressing CRSV are still developing, and accountability mechanisms within international organizations in conflict zones are limited. Foreign military advisors, whose role is to provide training, technical expertise and logistical support, may also intensify localized gendered violence, particularly when they support national forces accused of human rights violations. For example, UN experts have reported allegations that Russian "instructors" from the Wagner paramilitary group have committed "rape and sexual violence against women, men, and young girls" in the Central African Republic, alongside torture, disappearances, and executions.[40]

Foreign training programs invariably focus on combat, not human rights, and women potentially suffer when soldiers do not understand that there are red lines for sexual violence. UN peacekeeping operations can also be implicated in facilitating sexual abuse by failing to address structural gender inequalities, failing to restrict arms proliferation, and offering minimal support to CRSV victims. For example, peacekeeping and international interventions in Darfur were criticized for their inability to investigate human rights violations, contributing to ongoing sexual violence against women in displacement camps and rural communities.[41] This perception raises critical concerns about the design and implementation of international peace efforts in gendered conflict contexts. Multilateral post-conflict interventions focus on ceasefire agreements and elite power-sharing, often leading to the marginalization and trivialization of the lived experiences of women and sidelining justice for gender-based crimes.

International Responses to Predatorial Impunity

CRSV in African conflicts is also frequently characterized by impunity for perpetrators, partially due to an absence of command responsibility and accountability. Necessary governance reforms will not happen overnight, and a coordinated policy approach is required from stakeholders at the international, regional, and local levels. The earliest legislation to combat CRSV came under International Humanitarian Law, especially the four 1949 Geneva Conventions and the two additional 1977 Protocols. Each of the Conventions and Protocols recognizes the protection of women as civilians and as captured or wounded combatants. Human rights and refugee law also provide further protection for women affected by war and conflict. The 1998 Rome Statute made rape a crime

against humanity, resulting in notable convictions through, for example, the UN International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. Moreover, the UNSC has a non-binding commitment to "eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls … during and after armed conflicts."[42]

A coordinated policy approach is required from international, regional, and local stakeholders

There have also been significant international instruments introduced since the turn of the century to combat CRSV. Arguably the most important is UN Security Council Resolution 1325, launched in 2000 to address the importance of women's participation in peace processes and the protection of women and girls from sexual violence in conflict. This was followed by the 2008 UN Security Council Resolution 1820, which recognized sexual violence as a tactic of war and a threat to international peace and security, calling for the cessation of such acts and the prosecution of perpetrators. Yet more can be done, especially via humanitarian organizations and UN agencies such as the World Health Organization and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, to develop coordinated, multi-sectoral approaches to support CRSV survivors. This should encompass the provision of medical care, mental health and psychosocial support, legal assistance, and livelihood programs. The use of tools such as the Gender-Based Violence Information Management System—a standardized system used by humanitarian organizations to safely collect, store, analyze, and share data about incidents of gender-based violence—can inform and improve service delivery, ensuring that survivors receive comprehensive and effective support.

At the regional level, the African Union (AU) acknowledges gender-based violence in its peace and security frameworks, but the AU Peace and Security Council must engage more aggressively in policy enforcement, monitoring, and survivor-centered programming. Addressing CRSV will also require stronger political commitment from national governments toward accountable governance, institutional reform, and civilian protection. In this regard, African countries must support the International Criminal Court through strengthened national justice mechanisms and accountability systems and endeavor to promote a functioning and effective African Court on Human and Peoples Rights, with ready accessibility to ordinary Africans, especially women. Political transitions and post-coup arrangements must incorporate robust gender protections and uphold international human rights standards. African governments, including those which are transitional or military-led, must prioritize civilian protection and

prosecute sexual violence as a war crime. Importantly, amnesty for perpetrators should never be part of peace deals.

Additionally, cooperative approaches with such bodies as the African Standby Force, FemWise-Africa, and partnerships with regional blocs like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) should be pursued to strengthen early warning systems and ensure rapid responses in areas where sexual violence is used as a weapon of war. One such example is the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), an organization offering financial and technical support to programs designed to encourage the advancement and empowerment of women and gender equality, which partnered with Rwanda Defense Forces in 2008 to train several thousand military officers to help prevent and respond to gender-based violence.[43]

These are important short-term measures to address the present crisis, but longer-term change will require accessible educational systems which promote inclusive civic and human rights norms. Security-sector reform efforts should prioritize military training centered on civilian protection and accountability. Central to creating a culture of military professionalism is the need to instill within soldiers, from the lowest rank to the most senior officer, core societal values such as integrity, honor, and respect for citizens; such norms require continual reinforcement through training, accountability mechanisms, and institutional leadership.[44]

Gender security reforms should also extend to African peacekeeping activities, and it is incumbent on the UN Security Council, the UN Department of Peace Operations, and troop-contributing countries to ensure that peacekeeping missions have explicit mandates to prevent and respond to CRSV. This includes providing comprehensive training for personnel on gender issues, deploying Women's Protection Advisers, and establishing accountability mechanisms to address misconduct. Strengthening these mandates will enhance the capacity of peacekeeping missions to protect civilians and address CRSV effectively. Sexual violence is routinely ignored in peace negotiations, and accordingly, it is far more likely that perpetrators will be rewarded as part of disarmament and peacebuilding agreements than that their victims will receive care, justice, or redress.

There is also an absence of female involvement in conflict resolution negotiations. In 2022, women represented only 16 percent of negotiators in active peace processes led or co-led by the UN, a decline from 23 percent in 2020. This is despite recent evidence showing that women's participation in conflict prevention and resolution can improve outcomes before, during, and after conflict. For example, women's participation has been shown to increase the probability of a peace agreement lasting at least two years by 20 percent and a peace agreement lasting fifteen years by 35 percent. This lack of female

representation likely accounts in part for why the terms of most peace agreements continue to fall short, with only one-third of agreements in 2022 containing specific provisions addressing the needs of women and girls. Women's participation in peacekeeping also remains low, comprising only 6.5 percent of the military and 15.8 percent of the police in peacekeeping missions.[45]

Women's participation in conflict prevention and resolution can improve outcomes

At the local level, women's groups often feel marginalized in peace negotiations and security reforms led by foreign consultants or male-dominated structures. Moreover, foreign political agendas can often override or weaken local gender protection systems by limiting opportunities for local communities to engage in the design and implementation of CRSV prevention and response strategies. The involvement of local women's groups encourages empowerment efforts, such as awareness campaigns and community dialogues, to help women and girls contribute to culturally relevant decision-making processes addressing CRSV prevention and response.

As this section has highlighted, despite existing legal frameworks, enforcement remains inconsistent, and many CRSV perpetrators continue to act with impunity. Additionally, few robust mechanisms exist, either at the local or international levels, to monitor and control the influx of arms or hold violators accountable. Amnesty International has advocated for stronger enforcement of the UN 2014 legally binding Arms Trade Treaty in a bid to reduce illicit arms flows facilitating human rights abuses, and has called for the integration of a more gender-sensitive approach to conflict response strategies.[46] Given this picture, it is increasingly necessary to consider the nexus between gender-related issues and conflict resolution as well as foreign aid, including the accountability of arms manufacturers and exporters. Similarly, national governments, international judicial bodies, and civil society organizations should establish and strengthen legal frameworks to hold perpetrators of sexual violence accountable. This includes prosecuting individuals responsible for CRSV, addressing the complicity of foreign actors in arms transfers that facilitate such violence, and ensuring access to justice for survivors. Strengthening legal accountability mechanisms will contribute to deterring future violations and provide redress for victims.

Impact of Western Overseas Development Aid Cuts

Notwithstanding important local and international efforts to address CRSV, the scale and growth of the problem in Africa mean that overseas financial aid is urgently required in the short term for the provision of survivor-centered services including trauma counseling, legal aid, economic reintegration, and medical care. Yet, access to such funding has never been easy. Globally, donors allocated just 0.2 percent of global aid in 2022 to gender-based violence (GBV) responses.[47] According to 2023 data from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, sexual violence prevention initiatives accounted for less than 1 percent of all humanitarian assistance worldwide. Yet in conflict-affected areas, nearly 70 percent of women experience violence, almost double the rate outside of crisis zones. While demand for GBV support has surged by 40 percent since 2021, available funding has increased by less than 5 percent.[48] Africa's need for humanitarian aid is arguably manifestly greater than that of other regions,[49] especially as the continent is presently suffering severe declines in foreign aid at a time when the incidence of conflict, climate shocks, and displacement has risen dramatically. This reduction in aid is driven by Western sources, while China and Russia—the two states supplying the preponderance of arms fueling Africa's numerous conflicts—contribute little in foreign aid, adhering instead to a statecraft model centered on state-to-state interests rather than humanitarian norms.

Africa is suffering severe declines in foreign aid

There are five principal reasons behind Sino-Russian aversion to aid, with the first four externally driven. Firstly, these two autocratic states espouse the view that culpability for Africa's economic and social problems lies solely with the West through its historical colonialist exploitation of Africa's peoples and resources.[50] Secondly, the notion of humanitarian aid is held to reflect Western "moralizing," connoting conditionality with respect to governance, transparency, gender equality, and protection for rape victims.[51] This stance cuts across the alternative strategic narrative proffered by Beijing and Moscow of a transactional framework based on "mutually beneficial" infrastructural loans and military and security assistance programs.[52] Thirdly, Beijing and Moscow refrain from framing Africa's conflicts in moral or human rights terms, as this would inevitably lead to unwanted media scrutiny to pressure public acknowledgement of war crimes, including mass rape, along with accountability over the legitimacy of arms exports, which lie at the heart of these conflicts.[53] Fourthly, aid would likely require cooperation with UN human rights bodies that Beijing and Moscow often criticize, undercutting their narrative of acting as "neutral" development partners; this latter issue representing a red line

because non-intervention in the domestic affairs and sovereignty of African states represents the core principle espoused within Sino-Russian foreign policy. Accordingly, CRSV is viewed as a problem to be addressed solely by African governments. Finally, within China and Russia, the discourse of sexual violence can be politically sensitive, and thus restrictions on independent civil society, feminist movements, and human rights NGOs are imposed to reduce domestic pressure to debate foreign aid imperatives.[54]

The West, by contrast, has traditionally been generous in the provision of foreign aid, including Official Development Assistance (ODA). ODA includes OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members such as Japan and South Korea, but not non-members, such as India, China, Turkïye and the Gulf states. In 2024, total ODA funding was $221 billion with the United States ranked first in aid disbursement with over $63 billion, Germany second with $32.4 billion, and the UK third with $18 billion. The same year, total humanitarian assistance (which forms part of ODA) included funds earmarked for supporting the needs of gender-based violence, and amounted to $24.2 billion.[55] It is difficult to disaggregate this figure into individual country allocations, but the United States was again the largest contributor, Germany was second, EU institutions were third, and the United Kingdom fourth.[56] However, 2024 represented the first year-on-year decline in international aid in over six years, falling by 7 percent from 2023. Humanitarian aid suffered an even higher rate of decline, dropping by 9.6 percent from 2023.[57] This trend accelerated in 2025, caused by the toxic combination of fiscal fragility and continuous rises in defense and security expenditures, suggesting the world may be entering a global "post-aid" era.

The unwinding of Western aid commitments commenced in January 2025 when the Trump administration ordered a ninety-day pause on foreign aid. This was accompanied by the shutdown of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), which eliminated more than 90 percent of its contracts, removed about 5,800 out of 6,200 multi-year awards, and slashed $60 billion in global assistance.[58] President Trump's rationale was that the United States pays disproportionately for foreign aid and that other countries should bear more of the burden. While in absolute terms, the United States is by far the biggest national contributor of ODA, in relation to the size of its economy—which is what counts—its share is relatively small. In 2024, Washington's 22 percent share of global ODA was lower than the combined share of European Union member states and EU institutions, which together contributed over 40 percent of total official development assistance.[59]

The White House argues that the cuts are part of a broader effort to reduce federal spending and redirect resources toward domestic priorities. Yet, the euphemistically termed "pause" in aid has left thousands of US-funded projects

in limbo, including the funding of sexual and reproductive health, protection from violence, and rape treatment programs through partners including the UN's sexual and reproductive health agency, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). In 2025, UNFPA reported that nearly all its US funding agreements—worth about $377 million—were terminated, including grants that supported maternal health and rape services in crisis settings like the DRC, Chad, Sudan, and Mali. These cuts have been imposed despite US-funded humanitarian groups' relentless advocacy for access to post-rape medical kits, which contain medicine that can prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, if taken within a three-day window.[60] For tens of thousands of women, these services have proved a life-changing—sometimes lifesaving—intervention.

In the DRC, a UN situation report found that after funding cuts, more than half of GBV support services closed, some 90 to 100 percent of survivor support structures closed or suspended activities in frontline territories, and many other health facilities had little to no supply of post-rape medical kits.[61] Moreover, the scarcity of health resources coincided with a spike in fighting and sexual violence throughout eastern Congo in 2025, with UNFPA reporting that cases of rape were up by about a third over the previous year.[62] At the start of 2026, the United States announced a $2 billion increase in foreign aid. While some of this will indirectly support the needs of CRSV, the sum goes nowhere near restoring commitments to the $8 to 10 billion pre-2025 levels.[63]

Aid fatigue has also spread across the Atlantic, with major European donors announcing dramatic declines in spending. For example, in June 2025, Berlin announced that its 2025 ODA budget would fall to €10.3 billion, roughly €1 billion less than in 2024. This follows earlier budget reductions since 2023, amounting to around €2.5 billion. Humanitarian funding mirrors this downward trajectory, slashed by 53 percent from €2.23 billion in 2024 to roughly €1.04 billion in 2025. The German government justified this as part of efforts to comply with its "debt brake" law that limits new borrowing and allows funds to be redirected to domestic priorities and defense.[64]

Similarly, London announced in 2025 that the United Kingdom's ODA would fall from 0.5 to 0.3 percent of gross national income by 2027/28, the lowest proportion since the 1990s.[65] British aid has been cut to free up funds for defense and security spending after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which will severely impact development and humanitarian programs as well as contributions to multilateral agencies. Bilateral aid to Africa alone is forecast to fall by about 12 percent in 2025-2026 (around £184mn less than in 2024-25).[66] The United Kingdom's equality impact assessment for its 2025-2026 ODA allocations shows that planned reductions in spending will hit women's health, health systems strengthening, and health emergency responses in countries such as the DRC, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia. These programs underpin sexual and reproductive

health services, clinical care after rape (including post-rape medical treatment), and broader health system capacity that survivors rely on for timely and sensitive care. The United Kingdom reaffirmed its commitment in March 2026 to addressing conflict-related sexual violence in Africa through a £19.95 million Sudan initiative and additional humanitarian support for CRSV survivors.[67] Yet these commitments occurred amid wider reductions in UK overseas development assistance budgets, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of gender-focused humanitarian programming.

The Western media's muted response to the suffering these cuts have caused is difficult to comprehend. The media, including civil society and religious leaders, have an important role to play in lifting the cultural veil of silence to provoke international public opinion, societal pressure, and meaningful institutional responses.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to highlight the extent and impact of sexual violence in Africa's wars today. CRSV is not a new phenomenon, as throughout history women have suffered as the victims of war. Yet its frequency in the modern era is unacceptable, notwithstanding the efforts by legislators and international bodies to suppress sexual violence in conflict. Rape during war can be culturally driven, but the degree of sexual violence is also invariably a military symbolic act, reflecting revenge, subjugation, militarized patriarchy, and humiliation of enemy forces. There may also be darker forces at work, where genocidal rape is employed as a means of ethnic cleansing. After the cessation of war, there is often also the concept of conquest rape, reflecting a "spoils to the victors" mentality.

Genocidal rape is employed as a means of ethnic cleansing

Sexual violence in African conflict zones is not merely a byproduct of war, but also a deliberate psychological form of "gray" warfare designed to humiliate and terrorize the enemy as a means of undermining its morale. Additionally, the proliferation of arms acquired through illegal trade, often facilitated by porous borders and complicit foreign actors, contributes to the perpetuation of sexual violence. Inconsistent application of arms embargoes and sanctions, driven by foreign political interests, undermines local gender protection systems and marginalizes women's voices in peace negotiations and security reforms. International, regional, and local institutional fora need to address sexual violence

in conflict zones, recognizing it as a structural security issue. Enhanced global and regional cooperation is essential to tackle the root causes of sexual violence in war. Neither combatants nor UN or regional peacekeepers perpetrating sexual violence in conflict should be immune from accountability and sanction. Nearly all wars everywhere involve some degree of sexual violence, including mass rape, but the persistence and cyclical nature of armed violence in Africa —especially in the DRC, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, and the Central African Republic—is incomparable.

The reasons behind Africa's continued and increasing incidence of sexual violence against women and girls have much to do with deeply entrenched gender inequalities and weak accountability mechanisms, but there are numerous other explanatory variables. These include the proliferation of armed groups and mercenaries, the uncontrolled supply of small arms, and of course, the endemic sense of impunity. Of grave concern is that recent cuts to foreign aid will exacerbate what is already an immense continental-scale tragedy. Aid reductions will worsen the conditions that increase vulnerability to CRSV, especially through the closure of GBV protection programs, survivor support services, and the associated loss of protection officers, refugee camp security and women-safe spaces; the absence of institutional support; the likelihood that women will have to travel further for food and water, exposing themselves to an increased risk of gender-based violence; and the inevitable demise of local women-led organizations that drive advocacy against impunity and foster community early warning and protection systems.

According to the May 2026 Report of the UN Secretary-General on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, CRSV cases globally have doubled between 2024 and 2025. This now includes, for the first time, CRSV incidents perpetrated by the Israeli and Russian armed forces. However, the vast majority of cases continue to be in Africa. While the media does have a responsibility to expose this horror, governments also have a responsibility to protect. Political neglect is morally indefensible, and the world must act.

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