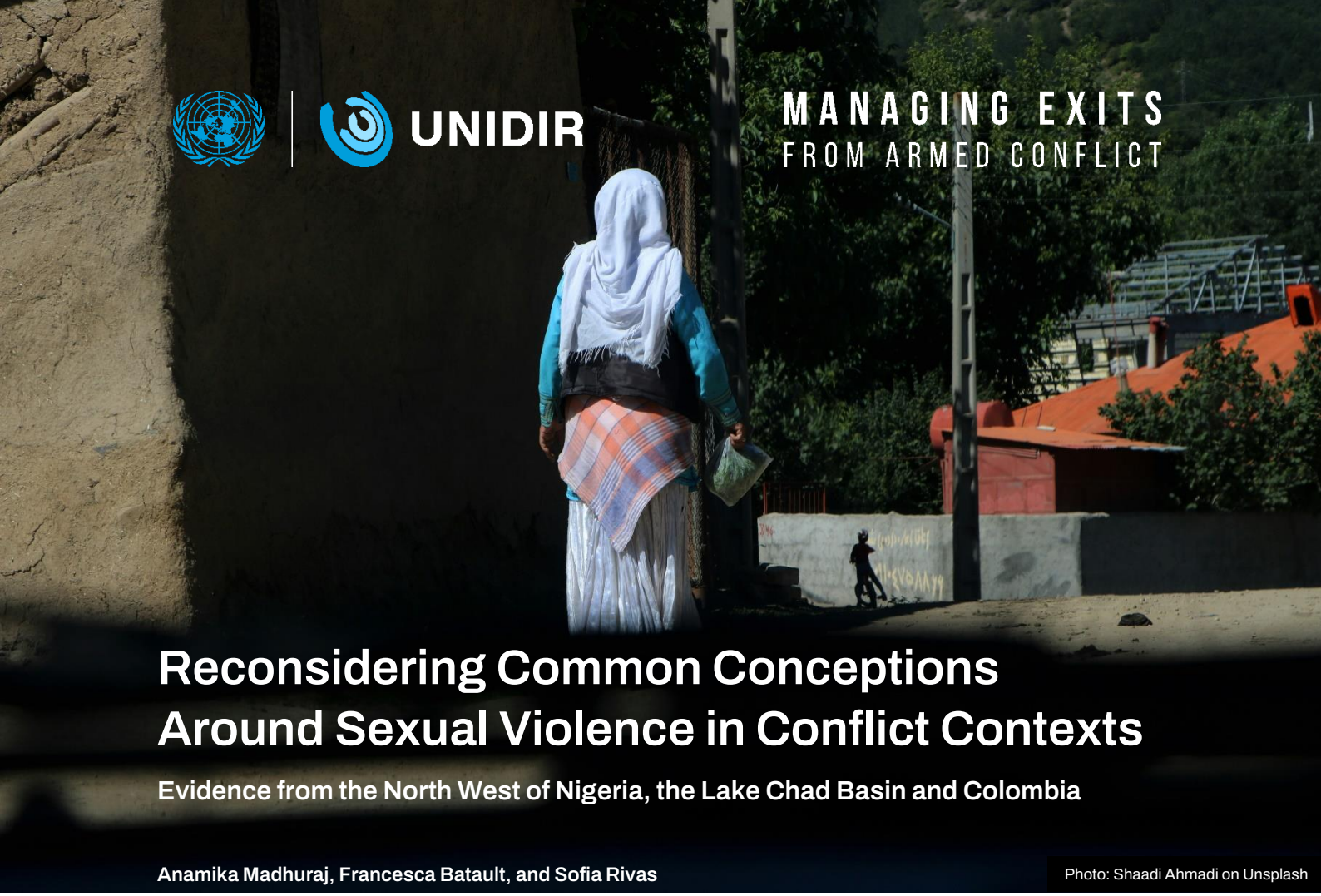

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MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

Reconsidering Common Conceptions Around Sexual Violence in Conflict Contexts

Evidence from the North West of Nigeria, the Lake Chad Basin and Colombia

Anamika Madhuraj, Francesca Batault, and Sofia Rivas

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Introduction

Sexual violence in conflict settings is often framed in narrow terms—strategically deployed, militarized, and perpetrated by armed actors. Yet, this framing can obscure more complex realities. Drawing on the Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) Project's evidence from the North West of Nigeria, the Lake Chad Basin (LCB), and Colombia, this brief interrogates and expands upon six common assumptions about conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). It assesses whether these assumptions hold in the settings where MEAC conducts studies, or whether the reality is more nuanced and varied than often understood.

In fast-moving humanitarian and policy environments, simplified narratives about CRSV may take hold out of necessity. But when these narratives become entrenched, they risk obscuring survivor experiences and misdirecting support. By critically examining these common conceptions, this brief surfaces key tensions, contradictions, and overlooked dynamics that challenge some dominant understandings of CRSV.

Rather than reinforcing a singular narrative, the findings point to the need for more contextualized and survivor-informed responses. Effective prevention and response efforts must grapple with the full complexity of CRSV—the diversity of perpetrators, hidden forms, and lasting consequences—in order to prevent CRSV and meaningfully support those affected.

Methodology

This brief is informed by several MEAC research components including:

- A phone survey conducted between January and March 2024 with 2,947 community respondents from Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara States in the North West of Nigeria.

- A phone survey conducted between April and June 2024 with 3,632 respondents from Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States in the North East of Nigeria, including 2,230 people unaffiliated with armed groups, 905 former associates of JAS or ISWAP who were largely part of the mass exits,[1] and 508 former and current affiliates of community security actors such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF).

- An in-person survey conducted in April 2024 with 517 respondents in the Far North and North Regions of Cameroon, including 305 people unaffiliated with armed groups, 187 former associates of JAS or ISWAP, and 25 men and boy former and current affiliates of community security actors such as the *Comités de Vigilance* (COVIS).

- An in-person survey conducted in April 2024 with 387 respondents in the Lac Region of Chad, including 221 respondents unaffiliated with armed groups, 159 former associates of JAS or ISWAP and nine men and boy former and current affiliates of community security actors such as the COVIS.

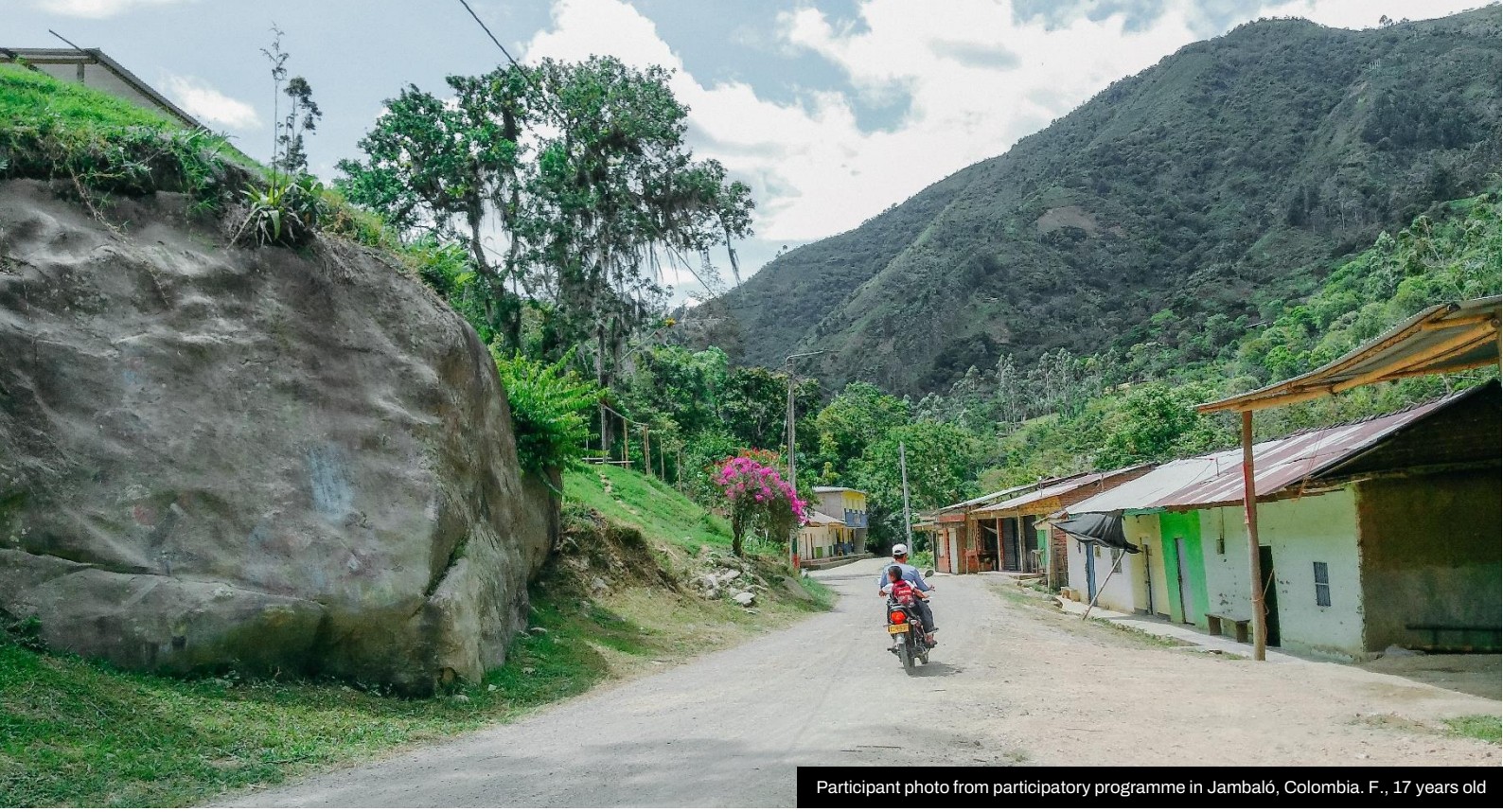
- Twenty focus groups (involving 45 women and girls and 44 men and boys) living in Maiduguri in North East Nigeria, including the Konduga IDP camp, the Bama IDP camp as well as neighbouring communities in April and May 2024.

- Three focus groups and two interviews conducted with leaders of the Nasa Indigenous community, specifically members of Association of Indigenous Cabildos [2] of Northern Cauca and the Nasa Indigenous Guard, of Northern Cauca, Colombia, from July 8 to 11, 2024.

- A series of ongoing interviews with various experts – including academics, practitioners, and first line providers – with extensive experience working to address CRSV against men and boys in Colombia and beyond.

[1] Following 2021 death of JAS leader Abubakar Shekau, some 160,000 people associated with the group or living in areas under its control are thought to have exited Boko Haram and surrendered to the Nigerian authorities. These exits continue today, although at slower rates.

[2] The Association of Indigenous Cabildos of Northern Cauca (ACIN) promotes the political and territorial development of the Nasa people by providing political and organizational support to the community, strengthening the Traditional Authorities, and consolidating their own form of government.



Participant photo from participatory programme in Jambaló, Colombia. F., 17 years old

1. Sexual violence is not only a consequence of conflict; it can also be a driver of conflict participation

The United Nations defines CRSV as "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 that is directly or indirectly linked to a conflict. That link may be evident in the profile of the perpetrator... the profile of the victim... [or] the climate of impunity, which is generally associated with State collapse, cross-border consequences such as displacement or trafficking, and/or violations of a ceasefire agreement. The term also encompasses trafficking in persons for the purpose of sexual violence or exploitation, when committed in situations of conflict."[3] CRSV is often framed as a consequence of conflict, which occurs after hostilities have broken out and is driven by militarization or used as a strategic tactic by parties to an armed conflict.

Evidence from Colombia

MEAC's research in Colombia, however, challenges this narrow framing. In collaboration with the Association of Indigenous Cabidos of Northern Cauca (ACIN), MEAC conducted qualitative research to explore the relationship between sexual violence and recruitment into armed groups in the Nasa Indigenous community of Northern Cauca.[4] Evidence from this study suggests a reverse dynamic: some survivors of sexual violence join FARC dissident groups in search of justice, partly because the mechanisms available to them in their communities fail to deliver justice and accountability for perpetrators. The evidence suggests that in this particular community, sexual violence is most commonly perpetrated by family members, local authorities, and other members of the Nasa community, rather than armed actors.

[3] United Nations Security Council, "Conflict-related Sexual Violence, Report of the United Nations Secretary-General" United Nations, 19 March 2019, S/2019/280

[4] Ángela Aguirre, Ángela Gómez, Juanita Vélez, Sofia Rivas, Dr. Siobhan O'Neil, "Sexual violence and the Struggle for Justice: The Involvement of Indigenous Nasa Survivors in Armed Groups in Northern Cauca", *Findings Report 38*, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024.

Gender norms and roles further created dynamics that contributed to the perpetuation of sexual violence in the Nasa community. While the Nasa worldview promotes harmony and complementarity between genders, women in leadership roles – notably from the Indigenous Guard [5] or from the Women's Department [6] of the ACIN – reported that, in practice, Nasa women's voices and experiences are often are sidelined. This exclusion contributes to the perpetuation of sexual violence and the ongoing impunity surrounding these cases. The problem is further compounded by local men's lack of acknowledgement of the recurrence of intra-family and intra-community abuse, often downplaying their role in perpetuating such violence. This denial and internal normalization of domestic and sexual violence not only silenced survivors but also reinforced the systemic failures that pushed them toward armed groups in search for justice.

Recommendations

These findings demand a reframing of CRSV prevention strategies. When impunity and social exclusion become the norm, armed groups may paradoxically appear as protectors or instruments of justice to survivors of sexual violence. Therefore, to effectively prevent CRSV, it is important to adopt a more holistic approach to addressing sexual violence, including in contexts where conflict has not yet broken out. Such an approach – whether applied in indigenous communities like in Northern Cauca or elsewhere - would focus on:

- **Strengthening justice pathways for survivors**: Survivors need accessible, trusted systems of justice and redress that hold perpetrators accountable and shield survivors from retaliation.
- **Investing in survivor support systems**: Psychosocial care, legal aid, and safe spaces must be available, particularly for women and girls at risk of continued victimization or forced recruitment.
- **Transforming cultural norms**: Better understand community-level gender norms that minimize or excuse sexual violence to tackle impunity and break cycles of violence more effectively.
- **Enhancing institutional capacity and oversight:** Awareness raising sessions on the nature and prevalence of sexual violence in the community as well as training to acquire the necessary technical skills to build survivor-centered justice processes aligned with human rights standards are key to ensure a coherent response and prevention strategies.

2. Conflict-related sexual violence is not only committed by armed groups, but by a wide range of perpetrators

CRSV is frequently framed as a tool primarily wielded by armed groups and state forces. While such abuses by armed groups and state forces form the primary focus of CRSV perpetration within a conflict, this overlooks a broader spectrum of perpetrators, including other participants in conflict such as state-affiliated militias, and those who may not be classified as parties to a conflict: organized criminal groups, bandits, and gangs as well as civilian members of the community. Conflict environments can normalize the use of violence in society, leading to higher rates of intra-family and

[5] The Indigenous Guard represents a non-violent group that defends Nasa communities and territories.

[6] The Women's Department of the ACIN works to protect the rights of Indigenous Nasa women and girls.

intra-community abuse, including sexual violence.[7]

Evidence from the North West of Nigeria

MEAC research findings from the North West of Nigeria illustrate this complexity. Despite its devastating impact on communities, widespread banditry violence in states such as Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara cannot be neatly classified as an armed conflict.[8] Fourteen per cent of respondents in MEAC's 2024 survey in the North West of Nigeria [9] personally knew of someone in their community who experienced forced sex by an armed or criminal group like the bandits[10] and one per cent had personally experienced sexual violence at the hand of bandits. While these reported rates of sexual violence are low and prevalence is likely higher, these figures highlight the need to consider other perpetrators that fall outside the scope of those most often recognized for CRSV. Systematic underreporting, due to stigma, fear or the unavailability of reporting mechanisms, should not be misconstrued for nonoccurrence and understanding the full range of profiles of perpetrators of CRSV will serve to bolster prevention efforts in the future.

Evidence from the Lake Chad Basin and Colombia

Meanwhile, research in the Lake Chad Basin as well as the research in the North of Cauca (Colombia) noted above, [11] reveal that CRSV is not limited to insurgents or rebel fighters but is also perpetrated by those positioned as protectors: community members, local authorities, and security forces. This focus on CRSV perpetration by armed groups can leave survivors unrecognized and unsupported when the harm comes from actors beyond political focus or who fall outside the scope of CRSV-related interventions.

While reports of sexual violence are thought to be much lower than actual prevalence, among respondents who were willing to share their experience in a 2024 MEAC survey in the North East of Nigeria,[12] the array of perpetrators included Boko Haram (43 per cent), JAS (30 per cent), and individuals from the community (nine per cent).[13] In Chad and Cameroon, similar trends were observed. These findings challenge the narrow focus on parties to conflict and demand greater scrutiny of state actors and community-level sexual violence during wartime (and beyond). They underscore a

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[7] Alastair Ager, Carolyn Bancroft, Elizabeth Berger and Lindsay Stark, "Local constructions of gender-based violence amongst IDPs in northern Uganda: analysis of archival data collected using a gender- and age-segmented participatory ranking methodology", *Conflict and Health*, vol 12, No.10, (7 February 2018).

[8] Tosin Osasona, "The question of definition: Armed banditry in Nigeria's North-West in the context of international humanitarian law," International Review of the Red Cross, vol.105, No. 923 (June 2023), p.735-749.

[9] The Managing Exits from Armed Conflict project (MEAC), Survey with Community Members in Nigeria (North West, January – March 2024), UNIDIR, Geneva.

[10] Do you personally know anyone in your community who experienced forced sex or non-consensual touching or something similar - by an armed or criminal group like a group of bandits? Answer Options: Yes, No, Refused to Answer

[11] Ángela Aguirre, Ángela Gómez, Juanita Vélez, Sofia Rivas, Dr. Siobhan O'Neil, "Sexual violence and the Struggle for Justice: The Involvement of Indigenous Nasa Survivors in Armed Groups in Northern Cauca", *Findings Report 38*, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024.

[12] The Managing Exits from Armed Conflict project (MEAC), Survey with Former Armed Group Associates and Community Members in Nigeria (North East, April – June 2024), UNIDIR, Geneva. Less than one per cent of surveyed adults reported experiencing sexual violence. "'Has anyone ever forced you to have sex, or touched you in any way, without your consent?" Answer options: Yes, No, Refused to answer. Posed only to adults

[13] Who did this to you?" Answer options: Boko Haram (not sure which faction), Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah (also known as the Shekau or Bakura faction), The Mamman Nur faction (also known as ISWAP or the Al-Barnawi faction), Ansaru, Police, Military, the CJTF, Yan Gora (non-CJTF), Hunters and charmers, Kesh kesh, Bandits or thieves, People from other communities, Youths in the community, Other people in the community, International actors, Family member(s), Other, Refused to answer. Posed only to those who experienced sexual violence.

Photo: Moses Londo on Pexels

need to rethink accountability mechanisms and support systems to ensure they reflect the full spectrum of harm caused.

Recommendations

Viewing CRSV primarily as a weapon of armed groups and state forces can miss the everyday realities of survivors who suffer harm at the hands of those not officially party to the conflict. Consequently, any prevention strategy must tackle the deep-seated cultural norms that predate conflict and the specific wartime conditions—stress, impunity, and militarization—that spur previously nonviolent individuals into abusive behaviours.[14] These include:

- **Addressing all potential perpetrators**: Move beyond a "party to armed conflict vs. civilian" lens. Conflict conditions can escalate violence and impunity within communities, requiring greater attention to neighbours, vigilantes, and those not neatly categorized as parties to conflict – not just rebel and state fighters.

- **Reinforcing family and community ties:** Since sexual violence in conflict settings can occur within communities, it is crucial to raise awareness of this issue and foster safe, inclusive environments. As highlighted by Nasa community leaders in Colombia, strengthening social networks is key to provide survivors with the support they need to heal and rebuild their lives.

- **Upholding accountability:** Strengthen legal mechanisms to prosecute actors responsible for sexual violence regardless of who they are, including for military personnel, armed groups, and community members.

- **Coupling accountability with normative change:** Pair legal accountability efforts for wartime crimes with long-term norm change initiatives, including addressing patriarchal norms, marital coercion, and intimate partner violence that predate conflict. This dual approach addresses both the structural

[14] Amanda H. Blair, Nicole Gerring and Sabrina Karim "Ending Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in War and Peace: Recommendations for the Next U.S. Administration," Peace Brief 2015, (Washington, D.C., United States Institute of Peace, 2016) p.3; Elisabeth J. Wood , "Variation in Sexual Violence during War," Politics & Society vol 34, No.3 (September 2006), p. 307–342; Janie Leatherman , *Sexual Violence and Armed Conflict*, (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2011).

impunity and cultural attitudes that allow sexual violence to persist even after the guns of war have been silenced.

3. While the CRSV focus is mostly on women and girl victims, men and boys also experience conflict-related sexual violence

From the international response to CRSV, it might be assumed that sexual violence in conflict only affects women and girls. This is not true, and this narrow framing renders male survivors invisible, both in data collection and in the design of support and reintegration programs. Stigma plays a significant role in this invisibility. Deep-rooted stereotypes around masculinity can prevent male survivors from disclosing their experiences or seeking help. Research on, and screening CRSV against men and boys is often impacted by this bias, typecasting men and boys as perpetrators rather than potential victims. In other words, ddebates, policies, and legal frameworks often reinforce masculinist and heteronormative ideologies that equate gender-based violence exclusively with women's experiences. [15] Even when services exist, they are rarely designed to address male-specific trauma, contributing to cycles of silence and exclusion. In addition, laws that criminalize homosexuality or fail to include male victims in definitions of rape or sexual violence may further discourage disclosure of CRSV by men and boys.[15] Bias and stigma against male victims of CRSV is further evident in how these cries are categorized under legal frameworks. For example, in some contexts, such as Iraq or Sierra Leone, sexual violence against men has been documented, but was often classified under broader terms like 'torture', further obscuring its nature as CRSV and limiting access to tailored survivor services. [16] Generally speaking, despite evidence of CRSV occurring towards men and boys too, many researchers, practitioners and policymakers working in the field are reluctant to focus on this survivor population, fearing that doing so could divert funding and resources from women and girls, who are disproportionately affected by this form of violence. [17] This has prevented an accurate understanding of the true scope and magnitude of CRSV against men and boys and impedes the appropriate scaled and tailored prevention efforts and victim support.[18]

Evidence from Colombia

MEAC qualitative research findings from the Nasa Indigenous community of Northern Cauca[19] revealed that men and boys have also been victims of sexual violence in the community in the context of the armed conflict. In addition, the research showed that male survivors, like female survivors, have, in some cases, also joined armed groups in search of justice, especially when community and legal mechanisms failed to support them.

Interviews with researchers and practitioners in the region and beyond further emphasized that both national and international policies, research, and advocacy continue to focus predominantly on CRSV against women and girls, despite evidence that CRSV is also perpetrated against men and

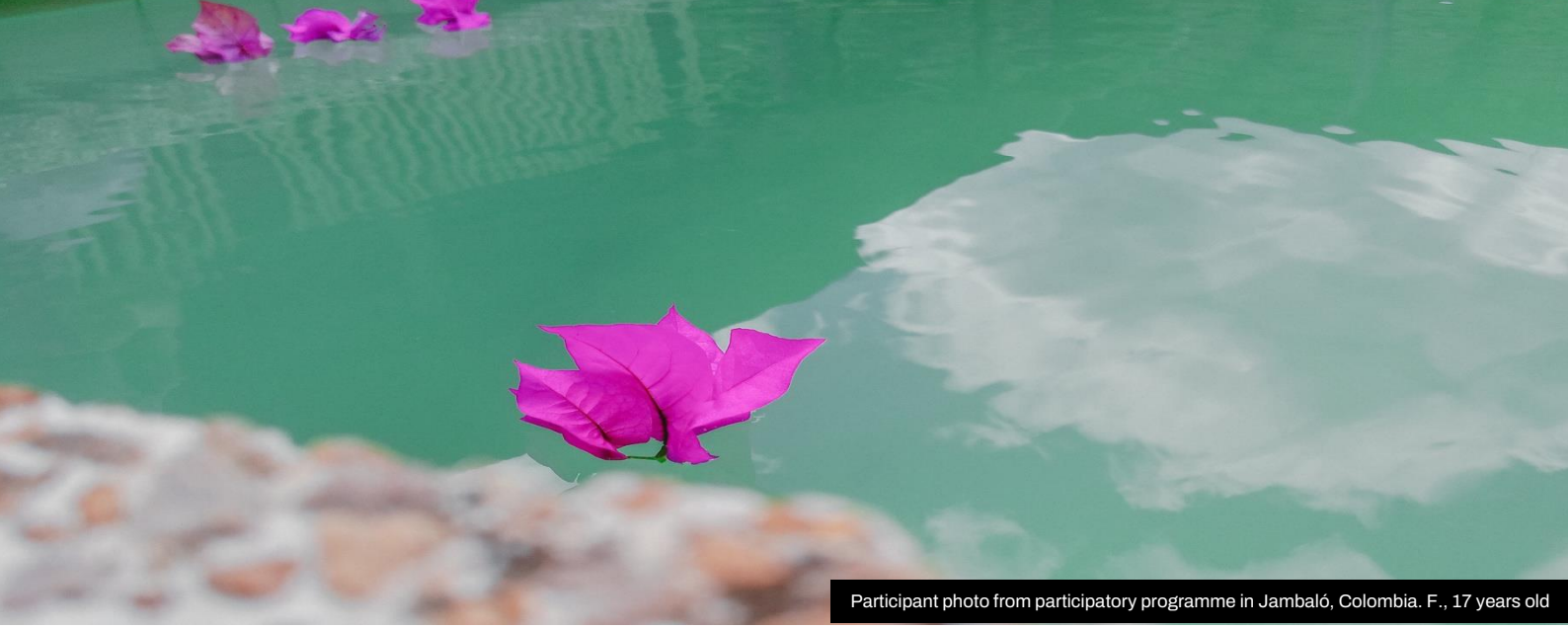
[15] Helen Touquet and Ellen Gorris, "Out of the Shadows? The Inclusion of Men and Boys in Conceptualizations of Wartime Sexual Violence", *Reproductive Health Matters,* vol.24, No. 47 (May 2016), p. 37

[16] Sandesh Sivakumaran, "Sexual Violence Against Men in Armed Conflict", *The European Journal of International Law,* vol.18, No.2 (April 2007), p. 254, 258.

[17] Heleen Touquet and Philipp Schulz, "Male survivors of CRSV, masculinities, and peacebuilding", *Routledge Handbook of Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding* (Oxfordshire, United Kingdom, Routledge, 2025).

[18] Heleen Touquet and Philipp Schulz, "Male survivors of CRSV, masculinities, and peacebuilding", *Routledge Handbook of Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding* (Oxfordshire, United Kingdom, Routledge, 2025).

[19] The Managing Exits from Armed Conflict Project (MEAC), Focus group discussion and interviews with the Nasa Indigenous Guard and leaders from the ACIN, (Northern Cauca, Colombia, July 2024); The Managing Exits from Armed Conflict Project (MEAC), Interviews with experts working on CRSV (2025).



Participant photo from participatory programme in Jambaló, Colombia. F., 17 years old

boys too.[20] As a result, male survivors of CRSV often lack access to basic forms of redress, including legal assistance, and medical aid.[21] This narrow perspective contributes to the systemic invisibility of male survivors, further marginalizing them and impeding the appropriately scaled and tailored prevention efforts and victim support.[22]

Recommendations

Failing to recognize that men and boys are also affected by sexual violence risks perpetuating stigma, misconceptions of masculinities and ostracizing those men and boys who are survivors of CRSV. Better understanding the gendered dynamics of CRSV victimization will contribute to a more responsive and holistic response and inform targeted prevention efforts. In order to do so, efforts must involve:

- **Strengthening screening and research to accurately capture CRSV**: Design research, screening, and assessment tools that explicitly allow for disclosure of sexual violence by all genders and adopt concrete measures to tackle the various challenges that prevent the effective collection of data on the issue.

- **Promoting inclusive survivor support systems**: Ensure medical, legal, and protection services are accessible and equipped to serve all survivors, regardless of gender or other intersecting identities. Where needed develop targeted services that address the specific needs of male survivors (e.g., legal redress, health care, psychosocial support).

- **Challenging stigma and harmful gender norms**: Raise awareness on the reality of male victimization. This could take the form of an information campaigns that call attention to the issue while challenging misconceptions surrounding male victimization.

- **Reinforcing training:** Equip researchers and frontline service providers, including counsellors, medical personnel, as well as local authorities and community leaders, with the knowledge and skills to respond sensitively to male survivors.

[20] The Managing Exits from Armed Conflict Project (MEAC), Interviews with experts working on CRSV (2025).

[21] Sofia Rivas "Combating Conflict Related Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys: Complexities and Avenues for Improvement", Findings Report, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2025 (forthcoming).

[22] Ibid.

4. Exits from armed groups do not necessarily end related sexual violence, which may persist long after exit

Historic approaches to Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) often assume that exiting an armed group entails a full severance of ties to the group and the violence that was committed in it, including CRSV. Yet for many women in the Lake Chad Basin who were married during their time with Boko Haram, exiting the group does not necessarily translate into a full separation from group ties or an end to conflict-related violence. These marriages—many initiated under coercion—frequently continue post-association, raising critical questions about what constitutes meaningful reintegration and whether international interventions are fit for purpose when it comes to fully "demobilizing" women and stopping CRSV.

Evidence from the Lake Chad Basin

Research findings from the region illustrate how deeply ties to former (and current) members – particularly through unions forced or constituted during time with the group – persist. Among women and girls formerly associated with Boko Haram who were married while in the group, 83 per cent in Nigeria, 77 per cent in Cameroon and all respondents in Chad report still being married to the same partner after they had left.[23] Unlike men who were fighters in the group, who disengage from their commanders, women and girls remain tethered in their relationship to Boko Haram, unable in most cases – either legally or logistically – to separate from these unions.[24]

While some women want to stay with men they were married to while with Boko Haram (even in cases where the union was forced), those that want to exit both the group and their marriages face legal and logistical hurdles. Findings from focus group discussions in the region underscore this complexity.[25] Some women spoke positively of their husbands, citing care, protection, or emotional bonds that formed over time. As one participant noted, "here is no one that will take care of you, so it's best for you to like them and he will help you. It's better for you to like him."[26] These assessments are often grounded in the reality that even if these women and girls leave their men and return home, their families would likely force them to marry quickly again. Other women and girls shared that they remain in these marriages because leaving is not a real option. Often then are no legal pathways to divorce (with the exception of Chad which is the only country in the region to allow women to divorce their husbands if their marriage was forced).[27] Even if they could legally divorce, practical obstacles prevent many from doing so as separating from their husbands would mean they would lose custody of their children from that marriage, be left with no economic means to survive, or face ostracism from both the community

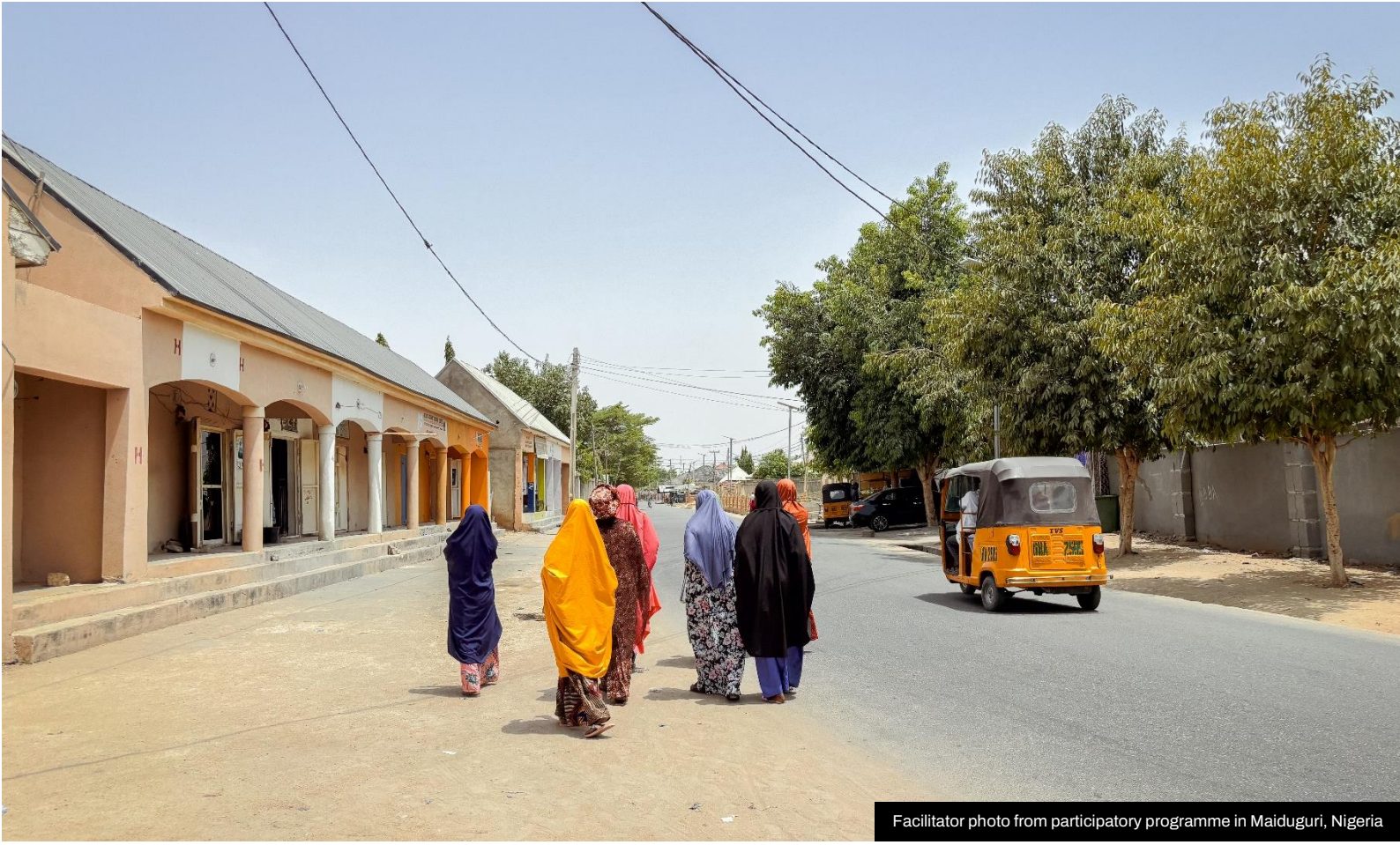
[23] "Are you still married to someone from [Boko Haram]? Answer options: Yes, No, Refused to Answer. Posed only to those who married while with Boko Haram.

[24] While some of these women and girls do not describe their marriages as 'forced', a reflection how limited marriage choice is in the region, most of these unions would not meet international standards of consent (e.g., Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). Arranged marriages are common across the Lake Chad Basin, and girls and women, whether affiliated with armed groups or not, often lack the power to refuse a match chosen by their families. As such, survey questions using a Western metric of 'forced marriage' may fail to capture experiences that, while deeply coercive, are not framed as such by respondents.

[25] Some women and girls did choose their husbands and wanted to be married to them. For instance, one young woman in a focus group in Maiduguri, Borno State Nigeria in April 2024 explained "We loved them, and we wanted to be married to them."

[26] The Managing Exits from Armed Conflict Project (MEAC), Focus group discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).

[27] Chitra Nagarajan, Francesca Batault, Siobhan O'Neil and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, "From Survival to Struggle: Women and Girls' Experiences with and After Boko Haram," Findings Report 39, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024.



Facilitator photo from participatory programme in Maiduguri, Nigeria

and their family. Even when the marriage was initiated under duress, women may stay because the alternative feels worse. This is striking, because the conditions many women and girls continue to endure after their exit from Boko Haram are dire. Upon their return to communities, some continue to face gender-based violence at the hands of their husbands, particularly domestic violence. In some cases, husbands continued to exert control over their wives' mobility and limited their ability to engage in livelihood activities. This continued enforced isolation and seclusion is reflective of the violence endured while associated with Boko Haram and narrow, gendered ideologies of the group.[28]

Recommendations

These gendered dynamics around disengagement challenge the prevailing assumptions that a physical exit from a group (even when aided by a demobilization programming) equals psychological, social, or economic separation and an end to the CRSV that many faced while under its control. Policy and programmes need to do more to address the continued violence women and girls face in their reintegration trajectories, for example by:

- **When desired, creating pathways out of coerced marriages:** Legal, procedural, and community mechanisms should be established to give women the choice to exit forced unions safely and with dignity. Reintegration efforts must address the continuation of forced or unwanted marriages beyond the moment of demobilization.

- **Enabling economic choice:** Without some degree of financial independence, few women can realistically leave violent or forced relationships, regardless of their desire to do so. Livelihoods, property rights, and housing access are core to allowing women to fully escape CRSV in the context of forced marriage to armed group members.

[28] Ibid.

- **Avoiding one-size-fits-all assumptions:** Not all women wish to leave forced marriages, even those to former Boko Haram fighters. Programs must respect women's agency and avoid imposing normative views of victimhood or ideal recovery on beneficiaries. The goal must be to expand choice and provide support that improves outcomes for women regardless of their decisions.

5. Sexual violence is often committed by weapons bearers; however, experiences of sexual violence can drive weapons acquisition

Whereas much of the existing scholarship focuses on how the proliferation of weapons can spur systematic sexual violence, MEAC's findings from the North East of Nigeria highlight a reverse dynamic: experiences or awareness of sexual violence may lead individuals to acquire arms, acquisitions assumed to be made for self-protection.

Evidence from the North East of Nigeria

Data from a 2022 MEAC community survey in the North East of Nigeria indicate a strong association awareness of incidents of sexual violence in the community and individual decisions to carry weapons.[29] Specifically, respondents who personally knew someone in their community who had experienced sexual violence by armed groups such as Boko Haram or Yan Gora reported carrying a weapon at twice the rate of those who did not know of such cases.[30] This suggests that in addition to militarization contributing to incidents of sexual violence, there is a cyclic trend whereby conflict-related sexual violence also appears to contribute to further militarization.

This trend sits within a broader pattern: individuals who have experienced violence, or have close ties to those who have, are more likely to perceive the need for self-defence. In settings where the state security apparatus is weak and trust in authorities is low, weapons may be seen not as instruments of aggression, but as essential tools for survival and deterrence.[31]

Research across criminology and conflict studies reinforces this observation. Studies consistently find that direct experiences of—or close exposure to—violence heighten individuals' sense of insecurity, leading them to acquire or carry weapons for self-protection.[32] In non-conflict settings, people who have personally been assaulted or seen friends/family harmed often perceive firearms as a deterrent against further victimization.[33] This principle holds in conflict zones as well, where state

[29] The Managing Exits from Armed Conflict project (MEAC), Survey with Community Members in Nigeria (Borno state, September - December 2022), UNIDIR, Geneva.

[30] Johanna Kleffmann, Francesca Batault, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Siobhan O'Neil, Jente Althuis, Rabby Shakur, Anna Hallahan, Hana Salama and Mohamed Coulibaly (2023). "Factors Driving Weapons Holding in the North East of Nigeria," *Findings Report 33*, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2023. Indirect exposure to sexual violence was used for the purpose of this analysis as rates of personal exposure were too low (0.4 per cent of respondents) to conduct meaningful statistical analysis.

[31] Bolaji Omitola and Goke Awotayo, "Arms Proliferation and Challenges of National Security and Sustainable Development in Nigeriav," *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa,* Vol.18 No. 2 (2016); Savannah de Tessières, Himayu Shiotani and Sebastian Wilkin (2019) "The Role of Weapon and Ammunition Management in Preventing Conflict and Supporting Security Transitions", UNIDIR, Geneva, Switzerland, p.22.

[32] James D. Wright, Peter H. Rossi, and Kathleen Daly, *Under the Gun: Weapons, Crime, and Violence in America* (Chicago, Routledge, 1983); Alan J. Lizotte and David J. Bordua, "Gun Ownership and Gun Culture in the United States: The Results of the 1979, 1980, and 1981 GSS Surveys", *Criminology*, vol. 27, No.2., p. 265–286.; World Bank, "World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development," (Washington, DC., 2011)

[33] Gary Kleck, Tomislav Kovandzic, Marc Saber and Will Hauser "The Effect of Perceived Risk and Victimization on Plans to Purchase a Gun for Self-protection", *Journal of Criminal Justice,* vol 39, No. 4., p. 312-319.

protection may be weak, and community trust in formal security is low.[34]

Recommendations

- **Integrate sexual violence and trauma services into disarmament and violence prevention programming**: Safe, accessible avenues for psychosocial and medical support must be supported. The role of survivors of sexual violence as active agents of change who can inform prevention and response efforts must be emphasized.
- **Avoid treating disarmament and arms control measures as purely technical processes:** DDR, community arms control interventions, and stabilization efforts must explicitly address the security concerns driving weapon acquisition. Such a 'demand side' perspective includes:
    - Reinforcing trust in civilian protection mechanisms and state security forces. Addressing the root causes of, and underlying gendered harms, including sexual violence, that prompt communities to arm themselves.
    - Developing a culture of peace and non-violence, particularly among young people, through education on the risks associated with weapons and the transmission of civic values.[35]
    - Offering alternatives to the use of weapons for conflict resolution purposes such as the promotion of dialogue and access to justice as well as the use of traditional and customary mechanism for conflict resolution.[36]

6. Sexual violence is widely underreported, but adjusting how we conduct research is not enough to confront the underreporting issue

In conflict-affected environments, data collection based on self-reported incidents of sexual violence has clear limitations, particularly in contexts shaped by stigma, fear, and varying conceptions of what constitutes sexual violence. The result is a consistent and significant underestimation of the scale and nature of these violations, with notable implications for effective response and prevention efforts.

Evidence from the Lake Chad Basin

Across the Lake Chad Basin, reported rates of sexual violence remain strikingly low given the intensity and protracted nature of the conflict. In response to the question, "Has anyone ever forced you to have sex or touched you in any way, without your consent?" five per cent of respondents in Chad, six per cent in Cameroon and less than one per cent in Nigeria answered 'yes'. These figures are difficult to reconcile with what is known about the widespread targeting of women and girls by Boko Haram and other actors in the region, underscoring the extent to which stigma, fear, and cultural norms likely suppress disclosure of sexual violence. For example, during recent MEAC fieldwork in Cameroon, the research team helped refer a survivor who had been assaulted by six men while harvesting maize to support - illustrating that severe incidents are occurring, even when they do not show up in official data.

[34] Nicholas Florquin, Sigrid Lipott, Francis Wairagu, "Weapons Compass: Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa," Small Arms Survey, (Geneva, 2019).

[35] United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs "Summary Report: Regional seminar on the prevention of violent extremism and the management of conventional weapons in West Africa" UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024.

[36] Ibid.

Facilitator photo from participatory programme in Maiduguri, Nigeria

Evidence from Colombia

Despite widespread evidence of CRSV being perpetrates by all parties in conflict in Colombia – including state security forces

and illegal armed groups- violence against men and boys remain is particularly underreported. Researchers and practitioners[37] in the region attribute the underreporting of this phenomenon to multiple intersecting barriers, including entrenched stereotypes around masculinity, limited government recognition of male survivors, a lack of funds assigned to this line of work, and a resulting near-total absence of tailored services.[38] As a result, male survivors often choose not to disclose their experiences as there are few, if any, safe spaces for these them to speak about the trauma they have endured. This underreporting complicates identifying survivors, understanding their needs, and providing them with effective and sustainable support.

Recommendations

Low rates of CRSV reporting do not necessarily indicate low occurrence—they often reflect the difficulty of disclosure, the inadequacy of data collection methods, and the weight of social silencing. To address this and capture more accurate data in order to adequately prevent and resource the response to CRSV, researchers and practitioners can:

- **Adopt a multi-method approach**: Combining quantitative data collection with qualitative methods (e.g., focus groups, key informant interviews) can build a more accurate, nuanced picture of CRSV. Also consider alternative methodologies that require more indirect forms of disclosure, such as art therapy and other expressive practices,

[37] The Managing Exits from Armed Conflict Project (MEAC), Interviews with experts working on CRSV (2025).

[38] Sofia Rivas, "Combating Conflict Related Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys: Complexities and Avenues for Improvement", Findings Report, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2025 (forthcoming).

which have proven highly effective in helping survivors process trauma.[39]

- **Ensure safe, ethical conditions for safe disclosure**: Data collection on CRSV must prioritize informed consent, survivor-centered protocols, confidentiality and protection measures, and optional referral to medical and psychosocial support, and safety for participants.

- **Account for gendered reporting barriers**: Tailor assessment tools to account for the distinct dynamics that prevent men, women, and gender-diverse individuals from disclosing sexual violence, particularly in culturally conservative or highly militarized contexts.

Conclusion

Conflict-related sexual violence has long been viewed as a weapon of war, most often perpetrated by state forces or non-state armed groups against women and girls. Yet, as the findings presented in this brief have illustrated, CRSV is a complex and often insufficiently understood phenomenon. Effective response and prevention must move beyond narrow concepts and recognize that perpetrators fall outside the archetype of militarized men and include those cast as protectors of communities; that sexual violence not only affects women and girls, but also men and boys and that sexual violence continues long after the guns have been silenced. Interventions seeking to address and prevent this violence need to be attuned to these nuances to effectively support survivors on their way towards healing and security.

[39] Jackie Heijman, Hans Wouters, Karin Alice Schouten & Suzanne Haeyen, "Effectiveness of Trauma-Focused Art Therapy (TFAT) for psychological trauma: A mixed method single case study" , *BMJ Open*, vol 14. No. 1 (November 2024).

MANAGING EXITS
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