

Sexual Violence and Peacekeeping

Karin Johansson | ORCID: 0000-0003-1022-123X
Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University,
Uppsala, Sweden
karin.johansson.schaftenaar@uu.se

Anne-Kathrin Kreft | ORCID: 0000-0003-1374-3340
Department of Political Science, University of Oslo,
Oslo, Norway
a.k.kreft@stv.uio.no

Abstract

In the 1990s, conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) started to transform into a matter of international security. Today, this is reflected in the Women, Peace and Security framework, which has left an impression also on UN peacekeeping mandates and operations, as well as on global protection imperatives. Simultaneously, academic attention to CRSV has skyrocketed in the past two decades. This article reviews what this growing body of research tells us about how peacekeeping authorities handle CRSV. In brief, scholars have identified encouraging trends in peacekeeping responsiveness to this violence, and prior research on its effectiveness in protecting civilians also gives cause for cautious optimism. Nonetheless, notable gaps in our knowledge remain, in particular when it comes to more local, fine-grained data and analysis. By way of conclusion, the article therefore outlines where the authors see the most promising avenues for future research on CRSV and peacekeeping.

Keywords

peacekeeping – conflict-related sexual violence – civilians – protection – Women, Peace and Security

1 Introduction

As peacekeeping operations have become more complex and their mandates more multidimensional, scholars have increasingly assessed the capacity of peacekeepers not only to reduce altercations between different armed groups, but also to reduce various forms of violence against civilians. The focus is thereby not just on battle-related violence and deaths. Recent scholarship has undertaken efforts to take into account different types of conflict-related violence against civilians. One of these is conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). In this article, we review what existing academic research tells us about the responsiveness of peacekeeping authorities to CRSV and the missions' de facto ability to protect civilians from this violence. Our goal is not just to provide an overview of what we already know and what remains underresearched about the CRSV-peacekeeping nexus, but also to share our thoughts on the road ahead for this body of research.

Existing cross-national studies have found that peacekeepers are more likely to be deployed to conflicts with large-scale sexual violence than to conflicts with fewer, known, incidents of CRSV. This pattern corroborates a larger trend of increased international attention to sexual violence as a matter of global security. This trend marks a stark departure from the previous understanding of CRSV as an unavoidable side effect of war. Studies of peacekeeping effectiveness paint a cautiously optimistic picture: peacekeeper presence is associated, at least under certain conditions, with a decrease in sexual violence perpetrated by armed actors. At the same time, the studies do not suggest that CRSV prevention simply follows conventional peacekeeping practices. Rather, the findings suggest that CRSV may require different types of efforts, based on thoughtful analyses of drivers and consequences of CRSV within armed groups as well as in the conflict environment writ large.

While existing research has given valuable insight into the responsiveness and effectiveness of peacekeeping authorities, as well as persisting challenges, important gaps in our knowledge remain, in particular as we move from national-level patterns to more local, fine-grained dynamics. We therefore conclude this article with a discussion of the avenues for future research that we find most worthwhile. First, however, we provide an overview of CRSV and the global approaches to this violence.

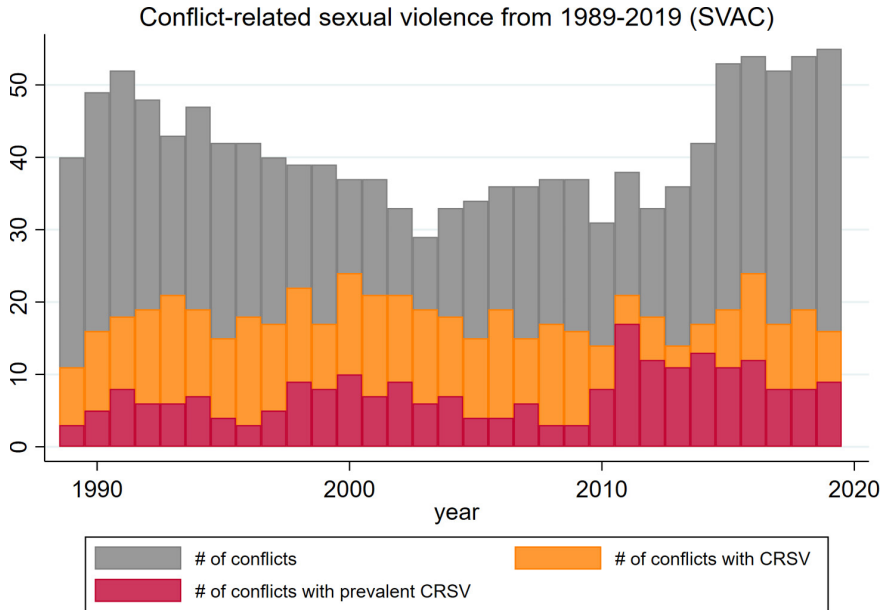


FIGURE 1 Conflicts with sexual violence from 1989 to 2019, based on data from the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict dataset. Prevalent conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) here reflects codings of 2 or 3 on the ordinal scale (i.e., any sexual violence that is classified as “widespread,” “systematic,” or “massive”)

2 Sexual Violence as an International Security Concern

State armies, security actors, nonstate armed groups, and paramilitaries perpetrate sexual violence against civilians in armed conflicts around the globe. Conflict-related sexual violence can take different forms and is usually understood to comprise rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization, forced abortion, sexual mutilation, and sexual torture.¹ Figure 1 provides an overview of how widespread CRSV is in conflicts around the globe, based on the most comprehensive cross-national data currently available: the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC) dataset.² Not all armed groups perpetrate sexual violence, however, and even where sexual violence occurs there is considerable variation in prevalence, targeting patterns, and the specific manifestations of sexual violence across armed groups and conflicts, or even for the same armed group over time.³

¹ Wood 2009; Cohen and Nordås 2014.

² Cohen and Nordås 2014.

³ Cohen and Nordås 2014.

Some armed groups impose strict prohibitions on the perpetration of sexual violence, while others adopt it as a policy or war strategy. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka is an example of a rebel group that actively refrained from perpetrating sexual violence.⁴ Meanwhile, in the wars in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda in the 1990s and more recently in Tigray in Ethiopia, armed actors infamously perpetrate(d) sexual violence against civilians strategically. Frequently, however, widespread sexual violence takes the form of an established practice that arises from individual motivations and group dynamics within military units and is tolerated by military leaders.⁵ In particular in armed groups that rely on forced recruitment and that lack strong and consistent ideological orientation,⁶ sexual violence in the form of gang rape often serves as a bonding mechanism and a way to create internal cohesion.⁷

Sexual violence has been documented in World Wars I and II as well as in different medieval and ancient wars,⁸ and was long considered an unavoidable side effect of warring. Only in the wake of the wars in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, which attracted unprecedented attention for the brutal and systematic use of sexual violence, did CRSV come to be understood as a weapon of war. The 1998 Rome Statutes of the International Criminal Court classify sexual violence as a crime against humanity and a war crime. This makes CRSV, in principle, a candidate for military intervention under the Responsibility to Protect.⁹ In the same year, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda recognized that sexual violence can constitute acts of genocide.¹⁰ In 2000, the UN Security Council (UNSC) for the first time urged all warring parties to protect women and girls against CRSV. This call was part of landmark Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS). Eight years later, CRSV was acknowledged as a threat to international peace and security in Resolution 1820 (2008). Since then, Resolutions 1888, 1960, 2106, and 2467 within the WPS framework have been dedicated specifically to CRSV, its prevention, the protection of civilians from this violence, accountability for its perpetrators, and support for its victims. In short, sexual violence has become of greater concern to the international community, at the same time as peacekeeping operations

4 Wood 2009.

5 Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013; Wood 2018.

6 Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2014.

7 Cohen 2016.

8 Brownmiller 1993.

9 Hultman and Johansson 2017; Agerberg and Kreft 2022.

10 ICTR 1998.

have become more multidimensional and now often include a mandate to protect civilians. This has prompted scholars to examine to what extent and how effectively peacekeeping operations respond to CRSV.

3 Peacekeeping and CRSV: Attention and Deployment

Global transformations in the understanding of, and approach to, CRSV are mirrored in an increased attention by the UNSC to this violence. Michelle Benson and Theodora-Ismene Gizelis¹¹ found that the UNSC is more likely to pass a resolution on an armed conflict with more frequent reports of CRSV than on a conflict where reported CRSV is low. Conflicts with large-scale CRSV likewise receive a greater *number* of resolutions than other conflicts.¹² The increased attention to CRSV is also reflected in UN peace operations. In fact, the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO) has been at the forefront as sensitivity to gender-related aspects of security has gained traction within the UN. Already before Resolution 1325, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations urged the Secretary-General, through the Windhoek Declaration, to take measures to ensure gender mainstreaming in peacekeeping.¹³ This means, for example, that peacekeepers on arrival in a new host country are obliged to participate in induction training on gender issues. It also means that effects of peace agreements, and peace-supportive efforts more generally, should be assessed from a gender perspective. This necessitates the acknowledgment that men and women may be subject to different forms of conflict-related violence. Men tend to be executed to a higher extent than women in war,¹⁴ while women and girls generally are overrepresented among targets of sexual violence. As the Windhoek Declaration urges peacekeeping authorities to mainstream gender awareness into their work, this implies a widened ambition to not only, or primarily, reduce killings, but to also confront sexual violence.

Empirical patterns suggest that peacekeeping indeed has become increasingly responsive to CRSV. Since the mid-2000s, peacekeeping has been proportionally more common in civil wars with CRSV than in civil wars without any reported CRSV.¹⁵ Multivariate analyses confirm that incidences of CRSV influence decisions about peacekeeping deployment as well as mandate pro-

11 Benson and Gizelis 2020.

12 Benson and Gizelis 2020.

13 UN DPKO 2000.

14 Carpenter 2006.

15 Johansson 2022.

visions. On average, Lisa Hultman and Karin Johansson¹⁶ found that CRSV by rebel groups (not state forces), is associated with a higher likelihood of peacekeeping deployment (see also Joakim Kreutz and Magda Cardenas¹⁷). The different effect of state-perpetrated versus rebel-perpetrated violence is not surprising given that peacekeepers tend to be invited by host governments to assist in struggles against insurgencies. Peacekeepers rely on government consent to access civilian populations.¹⁸ The basic conditions for peacekeeping can thus be seen as more compatible with atrocities committed by rebel groups rather than by states. Hultman and Johansson¹⁹ further discuss the challenge of incomplete and divergent information available to the UNSC. Prominent sources of information about CRSV are Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the US State Department, but reported prevalence does not always correlate well across these sources. This highlights the challenges surrounding CRSV with regard to underreporting and uneven documentation.²⁰ This also has direct implications for peacekeeping deployment: Hultman and Johansson's analysis indicates that the UNSC differs in its willingness to deploy peacekeepers depending on where the information about CRSV stems from.

Sexual violence is a highly gendered form of violence—in terms of victimization patterns and in terms of its origins in gender inequalities. These gendered dimensions are reflected in peacekeeping mandates. Reports of CRSV increase the probability that peacekeeping mandates include gender provisions, focusing on the protection of women from violence and the participation of women in conflict resolution.²¹ Probing the micro-level foundations of these attention and deployment patterns, Mattias Agerberg and Anne-Kathrin Kreft²² examined public opinion in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Sweden on intervention in armed conflict. In equivalent survey experiments, they found that respondents are more likely to support having their country contribute troops to an international intervention in conflicts with widespread sexual violence than in conflicts with widespread ethnic violence, torture, or violence generally. As a core driver underlying these patterns, the specified or assumed victimization of women thereby activates the Responsibility to Pro-

16 Hultman and Johansson 2017.

17 Kreutz and Cardenas 2017.

18 Fjelde, Hultman, and Nilsson 2019.

19 Hultman and Johansson 2017.

20 Cohen and Hoover Green 2012; Meernik et al. 2012.

21 Kreft 2017.

22 Agerberg and Kreft 2022.

tect. This holds for respondents in the United States and the United Kingdom, but not in Sweden.

Jointly, prior research indicates that sexual violence elicits greater attention and a more interventionist response than other forms of violence do, at the individual level and in terms of peacekeeping deployment patterns. This has prompted some scholars to voice concern that the focus on CRSV in the international security architecture and within WPS distracts from other forms of (gendered) violence that civilians are exposed to in conflict settings.²³ On the other hand, the fact that CRSV is now taken seriously as a war crime is a long overdue progression after decades of neglect in the post-World War II global order.

4 Curbing CRSV: Peacekeeping Activities and Effectiveness

But what do peacekeepers do, once they are deployed, and what is the effect? Four UN peacekeeping missions currently have an explicit mandate to address CRSV. These are the missions in Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and South Sudan.²⁴ According to the UN in 2021, *all* field missions, however, *should pursue* objectives relating to CRSV. This means mainstreaming CRSV considerations throughout all mission components (military, police, and civilian) and to prioritize efforts relating to CRSV prevention and protection, ending impunity, awareness raising and condemnation, capacity building of national actors as well as empowerment of CRSV survivors.²⁵ The capacity building of domestic justice systems (civilian as well as military) is especially important to ensure a lasting impact of UN involvement.²⁶ An in-depth study of the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) reveals, however, that different entities within the UN (e.g., UN Women, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], the special representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict [SRSG-SVC]) as well as different mission sections (women protection advisors, human rights, UN police, and gender officers) do not always collaborate efficiently and in a complementary manner. Instead, distinct institutional mandates and approaches to CRSV and civilian protection often lead to duplicated efforts, turf wars, and insuffi-

23 Meger 2016; Barrow 2010.

24 UN DPO 2021.

25 UN Policy 2022, §17.

26 Lotze in Olsson et al. 2020.

cient information sharing.²⁷ Thus, even though different entities and sections working on civilian protection have jointly succeeded in raising the profile of civilian protection and CRSV within the mission, Janosch Kullenberg²⁸ shows that on-the-ground protection efforts remain fragmented and insufficient.

Given the urgency of ongoing crimes and the resources spent to address them, it is imperative to consider the observable effect of peacekeeping on CRSV. The UN Department of Peace Operations provides case-based evidence of peacekeeping successes. In its 2021 yearly summary, the DPO notes that the mission in the DRC has provided technical and financial support to enable court cases against more than 100 CRSV perpetrators.²⁹ This number is further corroborated by Walter Lotze,³⁰ who claims that the UN collaboration with its Congolese counterparts resulted in nearly 1,000 convictions during its first ten years. As another illustration of peacekeeping advances, the mission in CAR helped reduce CRSV during communal conflicts in 2021 by increased patrolling and the establishment of local protection groups.³¹

Systematic assessments of peacekeeping success-rates with regard to CRSV, across missions and years, are rarer. This is plausibly a consequence of the crude measurement of CRSV prevalence (compared to, for example, event-coded death tolls that can be used to study lethal violence) that limits the range of possible research designs. It might also be the low number of ongoing missions with an explicit mandate to address CRSV that has contributed to the low scholarly interest. There are, to the authors' knowledge, currently only two published large-*n* studies on peacekeeping effectiveness with regard to CRSV. Shanna Kirschner and Adam Miller³² studied the effect of peacekeeping on CRSV in African conflicts during 1989–2009. They found a dampening effect of peacekeeping on CRSV perpetrated by rebel groups and states. Karin Johansson and Lisa Hultman³³ studied the impact of peacekeeping on CRSV across the globe during the same time period. They identified no average effect of peacekeeping, but a few promising exceptions. In particular, they found that UN police working under a protection mandate is associated with a reduction in CRSV by rebel groups. Their analysis also shows that peacekeeping generally is more successful when CRSV is perpetrated by warring parties with function-

27 Kullenberg 2021.

28 Kullenberg 2021.

29 UN DPO 2021.

30 Loetze in Olsson et al. 2020, 540.

31 UN DPO 2021.

32 Kirschner and Miller 2019.

33 Johansson and Hultman 2019.

ing internal controls. According to this finding, peacekeepers face a particular challenge when seeking to address CRSV perpetrated by loosely organized or corrupted forces. It is important to find ways to overcome this challenge since states and rebel groups with low levels of organization and control are overrepresented among CRSV perpetrators.³⁴

The somewhat diverging, albeit encouraging, findings across the two studies call for further investigation, including of regional differences and subnational patterns. Another reason to revisit the relationship between peacekeeping operations and CRSV perpetration are developments over time. Considerable policy advancements have been made in the past ten to fifteen years. These include, but are not limited to, the formal acknowledgment of CRSV as a threat to international peace and security (UNSC Resolution 1820 [2008]); the implementation of systematic reporting systems within the UN (stipulated in UNSC Resolution 1960 [2010]), the development of the UN Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (which makes support from the UN conditional on a warring party's human rights record),³⁵ the evolving practice to support military justice systems³⁶ as well as the launch of the new policy on CRSV in peacekeeping.³⁷ The possible effects of all these initiatives are not reflected in existing studies.

Another limitation of the above-mentioned studies is that they focus solely on the power of peacekeeping to induce change in the sexual behavior of warring parties. Notably, warring parties are not the only actors dictating the degree of sexual violence facing civilian populations. In stark contrast to the formal objectives of UN peacekeeping, several scholars highlight outbursts of sexual violence as direct and indirect consequences of peacekeepers' own arrival (see Audrey L. Comstock in this special issue). Spikes in transactional sex as well as other forms of sexual abuses by peacekeepers is often mentioned,³⁸ as well as an environment increasingly conducive to human trafficking.³⁹ While the UN, for a few years, has implemented a zero-tolerance policy of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by peacekeepers, it remains to be seen whether it will lead to significant changes in crime rates over time. An initial appraisal of the UN Voluntary Compact on Preventing and Addressing Sexual Exploitation yields

34 Johansson 2022.

35 UN HRDDP 2015.

36 Lotze in Olsson et al. 2020, 538.

37 UN Policy 2022.

38 Jennings 2011; Hoover Green in Olsson et al. 2020; Nordås and Rustad 2013.

39 For example, Angathangelou and Ling 2003; Bell, Flynn, and Martinez Machain 2018; Horne and Barney 2019.

a mixed record: while signatories to the Voluntary Compact are more likely to sanction perpetrators of severe abuses, there is no indication of reduced SEA among troop-contributing countries that signed on to the compact.⁴⁰ The UN has been criticized for treating sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers as a matter of individual misconduct only, rather than addressing the structural and political conditions that enable it.⁴¹ Others have located the challenge in the UN's inability to fully control the military training and socialization that take place within troop-contributing countries prior to deployment.⁴²

5 Avenues for Future Research

Prior research has produced valuable insight into the questions on how peacekeeping responds to CRSV, how effectively it does so, and to what extent peacekeepers themselves perpetrate sexual abuse. The SVAC dataset,⁴³ which records the reported level of sexual violence annually (on an ordinal scale ranging from 0 to 3) for armed conflicts between 1989 and 2019 has been of fundamental importance in prior studies. SVAC contains information on rebel versus state perpetrators and, when available, the form of sexual violence perpetrated. As such, it is the most comprehensive dataset available for cross-national statistical analysis, and it has greatly enhanced the quantitative study of CRSV, including in the context of peacekeeping.

Research and expanded quantitative data collection efforts that focus on more fine-grained patterns would be a valuable addition to the field in the future.⁴⁴ Armed conflict dynamics vary substantially across regions within a state, in terms of, for example, conflict intensity, presence and activity of various armed groups, and their repertoire of violence. Likewise, peace operations are not equally distributed across all regions of a country in which they are deployed. Subnational, geocoded peacekeeping data mapping these variations already exist.⁴⁵ More fine-grained CRSV data would facilitate analysis of how subnational variation in sexual violence—with respect to, for example, perpetrators, prevalence, and the forms of sexual violence committed—relates to

40 Comstock 2022.

41 Westendorf and Searle 2017.

42 Hoover Green in Olsson et al. 2020. See also Audrey L. Comstock in this special issue.

43 Cohen and Nordås 2014.

44 Johansson in Olsson et al. 2020.

45 Cil et al. 2020.

subnational variation in peacekeeping deployment, in terms of, for example, mission strength, distribution of military and civilian personnel, gender distribution of peacekeeping staff, or equipment.

An important caveat needs to be noted: data on human rights violations and violence in war are commonly collected based on secondary sources. The SVAC data, for example, are coded based on what two international human rights organizations (Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch) and the US State Department report. None of these are “neutral” actors, human rights campaigns are also political actions, and none of these organizations and institutions make any claim of exhaustiveness.⁴⁶ As such, underreporting by victims—already a major challenge when it comes to conflict-related sexual violence—is compounded by political considerations of which organizations record what kinds of violations, perpetrated by what actors and against whom.⁴⁷ For the collection of quantitative data, other valuable data sources could therefore also be household and public health surveys; national victim registries (as, e.g., the Registro Único de Víctimas in Colombia); the systematic collection of social media posts by local civil society organizations, journalists, and other local or international observers, as well as news reporting. Complemented with qualitative interviews, such data could considerably improve our understanding of the complex links between CRSV, peacekeeping deployment and activities, the effectiveness of the latter, and the mechanisms that make peacekeeping successful in curtailing CRSV.

Given that different studies have documented the importance of local civilian and civil society efforts to promote conflict resolution, local-level and everyday peacebuilding,⁴⁸ another fruitful avenue for future research is to closely study interactions between the civilian components of peacekeeping missions and local civil society actors. Women’s civil society mobilization in particular has attracted attention in different settings, including women’s mobilization in response to CRSV and other gender-based conflict violence.⁴⁹ In an attempt to achieve justice for victims, hold perpetrators accountable, and achieve an overall transformation in harmful gender norms, women’s organizations and victims’ associations engage in victim support, reporting and documentation of CRSV, protests and public awareness raising, school and youth initiatives, advocacy, and consultation in peace processes.⁵⁰ Existing research points to

46 Chaudhry 2019; Dawkins 2021.

47 Kreft 2022; Davies and True 2017.

48 Kaplan 2017; Mac Ginty 2014.

49 Tripp 2015; Berry 2018; Kreft 2019; Zulver 2022.

50 Kreft 2022.

the capacity of peacekeepers to secure an environment conducive to civic activism,⁵¹ but how this plays out in relation to CRSV activism is understudied. To what extent and how peacekeeping missions involve local civil society organizations in their protection efforts and CRSV programming, engage with them as carriers of expertise, and leverage their closer ties to local populations—and to what extent they fail to do so, treat them with suspicion, or find collaboration challenging—lend themselves to in-depth qualitative investigation in particular. Kullenberg, for example, notes that in the DRC “NGOs’ [nongovernmental organizations’] staff reported how cooperating with the mission was difficult because MONUSCO would not share information, ‘forget’ to invite them to meetings, and not include them in work processes.”⁵² A better sense of how and why such problems arise, whether these exist across missions (thus pointing to structural and organizational challenges), or whether and why some missions are more successful at collaborating with local nonstate partners than others can ultimately also provide the basis for future reforms in UN policy and workflow.

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51 Belgioioso, Di Salvatore, and Pinckney 2020.

52 Kullenberg 2021, 679.

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