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Strengthening Responses to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: The Implications of Armed Group Ideology for Intervention

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STRENGTHENING RESPONSES TO CONFLICT-RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE: THE IMPLICATIONS OF ARMED GROUP IDEOLOGY FOR INTERVENTION

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INTRODUCTION

In recent months and years, conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) has increasingly made headlines in news outlets and human rights reports. From depictions of war in pop culture to academic writing on political violence, CRSV has often been framed as being as old as war itself. This form of violence persists as a serious problem globally, and research has shown that these abuses are not unique to conflicts in particular countries or regions. For instance, high levels of wartime rape were reported in nearly every region around the world between 1989 and 2009 (Cohen 2013a).

Journalists, human rights practitioners, and researchers have documented state forces perpetrating widespread rape against Rohingya women and girls in conflict-affected regions of Myanmar. The military has also sexually abused women activists and protestors speaking out against the government following a military coup that rocked the country in 2021 (Wheeler 2017; Quadrani 2021). In Ethiopia's Tigray region, paramilitaries have subjected women and girls to gang rape and sexual slavery (Amnesty International 2021). Uighur women held in internment camps established by the Chinese government have been victims of sexual torture, forced contraception, forced sterilization, and forced abortion (Palmer 2021; The Associated Press 2020). In Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State has sexually enslaved thousands of Yazidi women (Amnesty International 2014). Journalists have also reported patterns of sexual abuse by Russian soldiers in Ukraine, including gang rape, sexual torture, and forced nudity among other crimes (UN News 2022). Meanwhile, Nigeria's military has carried out a nearly decade-long campaign of mass forced abortion against women impregnated by Boko Haram—which has itself

engaged in widespread rape and forced marriage (Reuters 2022). Cases of sexual violence have also been reported in the context of the ongoing Israel-Gaza conflict (Reuters 2023).

These crimes do not only affect women and girls. In fact, male-targeted sexual violence was reported in twenty-five conflict-affected countries between 1998 and 2008 alone (Dolan 2014).¹ Evidence from Sri Lanka, Iraq, South Africa, and Kosovo documents civilian men being raped by soldiers, being forced to rape one another, or being forced to commit other sexual acts in front of soldiers (OSCE 1999; Peel et al. 2000; Krog 2001; Dratel & Greenberg 2005). Survey evidence suggests that nearly half of men in conflict-affected regions of Sudan experienced or witnessed male-targeted sexual violence, while 23.6% of men in conflict-affected areas of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) experienced sexual violence (Nagai et al. 2008; Johnson et al. 2010). Men detained by Sri Lankan authorities during the country's civil war were subjected to electric shocks to their genitals, genital assault, anal penetration with objects, forced masturbation, and rape (Peel et al. 2000). In Syria, the Islamic State has committed sexual violence against Yazidi boys, as well as engaged in male-on-male gang rape and sodomy as initiation practices to build fraternal bonds among new recruits (Ahram 2015). And civilians are not the only targets of abuse: 32.6% of male ex-combatants in Liberia reported experiencing sexual violence (Johnson et al. 2008). However, the exact scale of male-targeted CRSV is difficult to discern due to under-reporting and barriers to service access, some of which are particular to men, boys, and LGBTQ+ individuals (Dolan 2014; International Committee of the Red Cross and Norwegian Red Cross 2022).

The prevalence of sexual violence across contemporary conflicts is harrowing. Yet recent research has also discredited the myth that it is inevitable 'collateral damage' in war (Wood 2014). CRSV perpetration varies widely across contexts along many dimensions. This variation includes *whether* sexual violence is being perpetrated at all by conflict actors, *how widespread* sexual violence is within a given context, *when* a particular actor engages in such violence across different stages of a conflict, *who* engages in this violence (Johnson et al. 2008; Cohen 2013b; Sjoberg 2016) and/or is targeted by it (Carpenter 2006; Sivakumaran 2007; Tschantret 2018; Edström & Dolan 2019), and *what kinds* of crimes are being committed (Wood 2006; Cohen 2013a; Cohen 2013b; Cohen 2016). As Dara Kay Cohen (2023), a leading scholar on the issue, has noted, "some armed groups

¹ Conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys has been reported in many countries, including Afghanistan, Belarus, Burundi, Chile, Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, El Salvador, Guatemala, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Myanmar, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Syria, Uganda, Ukraine, and Yemen, among other places. For further information, see Sivakumaran (2007) and Schulz (2020).

never perpetrate sexual violence and others commit it on a massive scale, even within the same war.”

Researchers seeking to explain this variation have rapidly advanced our understanding of the issue in recent years. Their work has elucidated the conditions under which armed groups choose to engage in sexual violence or, in some cases, actively regulate and prohibit these behaviors. In fact, academic study of conflict-related sexual violence has exploded, with the annual number of publications on the topic increasing tenfold over the last two decades (Nordås & Cohen 2021). Today, the dominant narrative surrounding CRSV frames this violence as a strategic military tactic (or “weapon of war”) to establish control over territory, torture or punish enemies, and extract information (Baaz & Stern 2013; Crawford 2017). Other explanations point to sexual violence as an opportunistic act taken by combatants during the chaos of war, as a byproduct of other forms of civilian-targeted violence, as part of a continuum of gender-based violence also prevalent in peacetime, as a tool for creating bonds of loyalty among combatants, and as a normative or ideological practice.

This paper furthers this research agenda by highlighting the role of organizational characteristics, namely ideology and socialization practices, in shaping patterns of conflict-related sexual violence committed by armed groups—including non-state actors and state military forces. Drawing on data from armed conflicts in Colombia, Sri Lanka, Iraq, the DRC, and elsewhere, this paper explores why combatants engage in such a wide repertoire of sexual violence crimes, who combatants target, and how systematically perpetrators engage in these violent acts. In doing so, this paper argues that both ideological beliefs and combatant socialization into those beliefs influence the types, targets, scripts, and collective nature of sexual violence perpetration.

Stronger recognition of the social and organizational mechanisms underlying sexual violence abuses has policy implications for prevention-oriented interventions, emphasizing the importance of shifting gendered social norms and collective practices in military institutions, non-state armed groups, and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs. Potential entry points are outlined in further detail below. This report thus urges policymakers and practitioners to take seriously the gendered role of identity and socialization in their efforts to prevent the perpetration of conflict-related sexual violence and to appropriately respond to its legacies in the aftermath of conflict.

THE RECORD OF INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO CONFLICT-RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The abuses depicted in the introduction of this paper represent only a fraction of the CRSV crimes committed globally. They also illustrate the many forms this violence can take. While wartime sexual violence is most commonly associated with the rape of civilian women, it encompasses a much wider range of abuses. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) defines conflict-related sexual violence as “rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity” (International Criminal Court 1998). Scholars, human rights organizations, and international criminal jurisprudence have also classified forced marriage, sexual mutilation, and sexual torture as manifestations of this violence (Cohen & Nordås 2014; Dumaine et al. 2022; United Nations 2020).

Significant international attention to CRSV first arose in response to the brutal and systematic crimes that were perpetrated in Rwanda and the Balkans in the 1990s, where sexual violence such as genocidal rape was employed as part of a military strategy to dehumanize, torture, and ultimately eliminate “enemy groups.” During this time, feminist legal scholars and advocates presented strong normative arguments to recognize sexual violence as a grave violation of human rights and in some cases genocide, in the process introducing the idea that rape could be used as a “weapon of war” (MacKinnon 1994; Seifert 1996; Sharlach 2000; Farwell 2004). CRSV is still used as a war tactic in conflicts today. For example, the Islamic State has perpetrated sexual violence against Yazidi boys (and girls) in Syria to induce “shame, guilt and feelings of dishonour in the victim” (Ahram 2015). Male-targeted CRSV crimes have also frequently been tied to efforts by perpetrators to assert power and dominance, as well as to feminize, homosexualize, and prevent procreation by victims (Sivakumaran 2007).

As political awareness and will to address conflict-related sexual violence has grown over the past decade, the “weapon of war” narrative has become the dominant policy framing surrounding CRSV. This narrative has served as a useful tool in helping feminist policymakers, lawyers, and activists promote meaningful policy responses to the issue, which was generally neglected until recent decades (Crawford 2017).² For instance, a growing wave of international commitments has codified protections against these

² While the weapon of war narrative has played a crucial role in de-normalizing conflict-related sexual violence and mobilizing international action, several scholars have also examined the limitations of this framing’s explanatory value and its unintended policy ramifications. See, for example, Baaz & Stern 2013, Kirby 2013, and Crawford 2017.

violations over the years, including several provisions under international criminal law.³ Both the Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) categorized rape as a crime against humanity (United Nations 1991; United Nations 1994). The Statute of the ICTR also listed rape, forced prostitution, and indecent assault as violations of the Geneva Conventions. The 1998 Rome Statute of the ICC marked another significant milestone. Following continued pressure and input from feminist lawyers, the statute designated sexual violence as a war crime and a crime against humanity under international law and, thereby, enabled the prosecution of perpetrators at the international level (International Criminal Court 1998). Today, 123 countries have signed the Rome Statute (International Criminal Court 2023). Prosecutions under international tribunals and the ICC, including verdicts pertaining to the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Uganda, have strengthened jurisprudence on sexual violence (though there have also been several critiques of the ICC's and its predecessors' record in holding perpetrators of CRSV accountable) (Gaggioli 2014).

International organizations have also made financial commitments, established monitoring and response mechanisms, and set up professional staff to address wartime sexual violence. Multilateral organizations have played an important role in creating and strengthening a global norm against conflict-related sexual violence. The landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, established the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. The resolution called for women's increased participation in conflict prevention, resolution, and peace building efforts, as well as emphasized the need to address sexual violence in armed conflict. The UN Security Council further established specific, time-bound international commitments to addressing CRSV through the adoption of subsequent resolutions, including Resolutions 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2331 (2016) and 2467 (2019).

Other multilateral initiatives include the 2013 "Declaration of Commitment to End Conflict-Related Sexual Violence," which included concrete commitments to end sexual violence as a weapon of war and was signed by more than 150 countries (U.K. Foreign & Commonwealth Office 2013). The Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, held in London the following year, also aimed to galvanize global action on the issue and established the International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual

³ It is worth noting that acts of rape and other forms of sexual violence can also constitute an act of genocide. See footnote 3 of Article 6(c) in International Criminal Court. "Elements of Crimes," 2013. <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/Publications/Elements-of-Crimes.pdf>.

Violence in Conflict. The protocol provides guidance for documenting and investigating such crimes and supporting survivors (U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office 2014). In 2021, a decade after launching its first “Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative,” the United Kingdom began spearheading a global campaign to end sexual violence against women in conflict-affected areas. The campaign has released a joint statement to this effect in partnership with Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Indonesia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, and Liberia. The same year, NATO introduced its own policy to respond to CRSV (U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office 2021).

At the national level, many governments have similarly taken steps to address conflict-related sexual violence domestically through the adoption of national action plans and strategies to prevent and respond to this violence, such as provisions for protection, prosecution, and support for survivors. The Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Mali, South Sudan, Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia, Nepal, and Ukraine have all adopted such national action plans (UN Women 2020; United Nations 2022). Other countries have integrated similar measures into their foreign policy strategies. President Biden, for instance, signed a memorandum in November 2022 that strengthened the U.S. commitment to ending impunity for conflict-related sexual violence and aimed to improve accountability, including through the imposition of economic sanctions and visa restrictions on responsible parties, greater prioritization of the issue in foreign policy engagement and security assistance, and the allocation of resources to coordination, reporting, and training efforts (The White House 2022).

Several countries have taken an explicitly victim-centered approach to addressing conflict-related sexual violence. For example, the Canadian government has launched a national investigation into crimes against humanity and war crimes in Ukraine in line with the Murad Code, which outlines a code of conduct for collecting information from sexual violence survivors. In addition to these documentation efforts, Canada has contributed \$1 million to the ICC Trust Fund for Victims to support evidence-gathering activities related to conflict-related sexual violence and crimes against children in Ukraine and elsewhere. The Canadian government has also provided substantial financial support for UN Women, international accountability mechanisms, and local police and judicial institutions to identify and respond to CRSV cases in accordance with international law and through survivor-responsive processes (Department of Justice Canada 2022).

Despite these growing bilateral and multilateral commitments, implementation has often fallen short of expectations, and impunity for this violence persists (Sellström 2015; Martin 2020; Schulz & Kreft 2022). Survivors are often still marginalized or silenced in

peace and transitional justice processes (Aroussi 2011; Schulz & Kreft 2022). Moreover, ceasefire agreements and peace negotiations rarely address conflict-related sexual violence. In fact, according to a UN Women report, only 18 of 300 reviewed peace agreements mentioned sexual or gender-based violence (UN Women 2012a). Of all ceasefire agreements signed between 2018 and 2020, only one (the Juba Agreement for Peace in Sudan) explicitly prohibited it (United Nations 2022). Furthermore, one cross-country study suggests that UN sanctions to address CRSV demonstrate potential but are often applied too late and/or too inconsistently in sanction regimes to sufficiently prevent or reduce perpetration (Huvé 2018). These shortcomings make clear that there is still much work to be done.

An incomplete set of interventions

Policy strategies and interventions have generally prioritized strengthening legal accountability for these crimes and providing survivors with access to justice mechanisms and support services. Many efforts taking a reparative approach in the wake of violence have focused on legal and administrative remedies, women's hearings, and rehabilitation (Ni Aolain et al. 2015; Rubio-Marín 2012; Durbach et al. 2017; Durbach & Geddes 2017). Meanwhile, many hoped that increased legal accountability would have an additional preventative effect through deterring would-be perpetrators through fear of sanctions and through strengthening social norms against sexual violence as an acceptable war strategy (Broach & Kore 2023; Wood 2012; Nordås 2013). These efforts are undoubtedly critical for addressing the aftermath of these atrocities and for holding guilty parties accountable. Yet it is also important to recognize their limitations, particularly in terms of their preventative effects.

There is little evidence that, on their own, interventions to bolster legal accountability effectively deter perpetration or sufficiently reduce the risks of sexual violence continuing in post-conflict settings. In fact, a growing body of research suggests otherwise, indicating that stronger justice mechanisms have a very small preventive effect when implemented on their own. For instance, a recent study by Broache and Kore (2023) found that jurisdiction interventions and cross-case actions taken by the ICC have negligible effects on CRSV perpetration by state forces active in intrastate conflicts. This echoes similar findings regarding the deterrent effects of ICC prosecutions on the perpetration of mass atrocities more broadly (Cronin-Furman 2013). Meanwhile, the effectiveness of domestic criminal trials appears to be mixed (Cohen 2023). Some studies have found that they can improve general human rights protections (Kim & Sikkink 2010). But others find that they

do not have a deterrent effect on conflict-related sexual violence in particular (Binningsbø & Nordås 2022).

In addition to these efforts, some on-the-ground initiatives have taken a different approach to prevention. An analytical inventory of these interventions by UN Women reveals that they often adopt a highly pragmatic theory of change in preventing “strategic attacks of a sexual character” by equipping peacekeeping forces with security practices, such as armed patrols and escorts or joint protection teams in active conflict zones intended to provide physical protection (UN Women 2012b). Some tactics also support the formation of community-based defense committees or safe havens, in addition to strengthening women’s role in community safety. The hope is that these practices can serve as a tool to strengthen community protection, improve information-sharing between military institutions and civilians, and better facilitate humanitarian access.

While an important part of the programmatic toolkit, these interventions rarely seek to dismantle the social, political, economic, and organizational factors that often underlie patterns of sexual violence. In order to effectively shift from reactive responses to CRSV toward more proactive and preventive approaches, it is crucial to develop a deeper understanding of the gendered social and political conditions under which these crimes are considered normatively desirable, tolerable, or unacceptable by armed actors. Knowledge production in this area will better prepare security forces to identify where conflict-related sexual violence is likely to occur, which communities are most vulnerable, and what early warning indicators to look for to mitigate or prevent perpetration.

TACKLING THE ROOTS OF VIOLENCE: AN ORGANIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Without recognition of the complex gendered social contexts in which these crimes occur, researchers and practitioners risk overlooking the various rationales and intersubjective meanings that motivate these violent acts and, therefore, also limit the set of potential tools at our disposal to mitigate and prevent them. To complement these existing efforts, it is crucial that strategies addressing conflict-related sexual violence also tackle the root causes of this violent behavior.

Researchers have not reached a consensus regarding the contributing factors underlying conflict-related sexual violence, but academic work has pointed to numerous potential drivers across different contexts. Some scholars frame CRSV as an opportunistic act taken by combatants during the chaos of war, which provides greater opportunity for sexual violence perpetration by eroding socio-legal infrastructures and increasing the level

of contact combatants have with local populations (Weinstein 2006; Butler et al. 2007; Hoover Green 2018). Others point to the role sexual violence plays as a wartime tactic, resulting from strategic calculations and orders made by group leaders. Feminist scholars, argue that the patterns of CRSV women face during war are driven by patriarchy and are causally related to pre-war or peacetime patterns of gender-based violence through a “continuum of violence.” Patriarchal, heteronormative norms and institutions are key contributors to the perpetration of wartime rape, and patriarchal societies are particularly susceptible to experiencing widespread sexual violence. War exacerbates these structural gender hierarchies, ultimately manifesting violently as CRSV (Cockburn 2004; Farwell 2004; Milillo 2006; Meger 2010; Seifert 1996; Davies & True 2015; Porter 2019).

Yet, these explanations cannot fully account for the wide range of sexual violence patterns that bear out empirically. For example, in some contexts armed actors operate within similar gendered societal structures and enjoy similar opportunities to engage in violence, but they commit CRSV at differing levels, in different forms, and against different communities. In Sri Lanka, for instance, human rights reports indicate that state forces perpetrated widespread wartime rape, whereas the LTTE insurgency largely abstained from sexual violence perpetration (UN Human Rights Council 2015). Such cases have prompted scholars to investigate internal differences between armed groups in order to better understand this variation within conflict settings.

Consequently, academic work in recent years has emphasized the important role that the features of armed groups play in explaining sexual violence perpetration—including their strategic aims, organizational and leadership structures, and ideological or normative commitments. The perceived “effectiveness” of sexual violence as a strategic weapon may, in fact, vary across cultural settings (Sharlach 2000). Enloe (2000) suggests that the incidence of sexual violence increases as gender roles become increasingly polarized and women are seen as “the backbone of an enemy’s culture.” Perceptions of women as men’s property, symbols of honor, or reproducers of society render them a valuable and effective target. Further, male adversaries are attacked symbolically through the physical assault of “their women.”

Other studies demonstrate how CRSV has been used as a tool for bonding members of militarized groups, particularly in contexts where group cohesion is low as a result of forced recruitment practices or the high presence of foreign fighters (Cohen 2016; Nagel & Doctor 2020). The strength and centralization of command-and-control structures within armed groups can also influence whether combatants engage in this violence. CRSV may also be a product of principal-agent problems within armed groups, and

combatants may be more likely to engage in sexual violence when they enjoy higher levels of agent discretion or lower degrees of accountability (Butler et al. 2007; Hoover Green 2018). In other instances, while not a mandated policy, CRSV may simply be a practice tolerated by group leaders. Revkin and Wood (2021) have identified the gang rape of Yazidi women by the Islamic State as one such practice.

ARMED GROUP IDEOLOGY, SOCIALIZATION, AND CONFLICT-RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE

A related and budding area of research examines how ideological characteristics and socialization practices within armed groups contribute to conflict-related sexual violence perpetration. Sexual violence is a uniquely violating and gendered form of political violence that is often value-laden and driven by more than rational or strategic decision-making alone; these crimes are also shaped by ideas, beliefs, and identities. This paper therefore takes a relational approach to understanding the logic of CRSV crimes. It offers a conceptualization of sexual violence that emphasizes ideas in an interactive, dialectic social environment. In theorizing the ideological dimensions of conflict-related sexual violence, I draw from literature in political science, sociology, and anthropology in conceptualizing these crimes as forms of organized social action that are socially embedded and arise from different social processes and structures (Granovetter 1985; Tilly 2003; Fujii 2001).

When we begin recognizing acts of violence as ideational transactions rather than exclusively unidirectional assertions of power, ideology becomes a natural starting point for thinking about why and how CRSV occurs. For the purposes of this analysis, ideology refers to “a set of more or less systematic ideas that identify a constituency, the challenges the group confronts, the objectives to pursue on behalf of that group, and a (perhaps vague) program of action” (Sanín & Wood 2014). It establishes individual convictions and depicts broader configurations of social reality. These configurations, in turn, implicitly or explicitly convey shared identities and social norms. What does it mean to take the role of ideas, identities, and socialization practices seriously when conceptualizing conflict-related sexual violence? Two ideological characteristics are particularly helpful for unpacking the relationship between ideas and gendered violence: ideological content and ideological socialization.

Ideological content: Defining social boundaries

First, it is crucial to understand the “substance” or “content” of an ideology—namely, the norms, tenets, and beliefs that inform what types of violence are considered normatively and strategically (un)acceptable and which communities are designated as (il)legitimate targets of this violence. Ideological content shapes the way that combatants perceive social boundaries by establishing an us/them (or in-group/out-group) paradigm, usually referencing ethnic, religious, political, or other social boundaries. These dynamics can increase the risks of collective political violence by influencing the presence and salience of violent claim-making, levels of coordination between groups, and the linkage between identity and violence (Tilly 2003). Furthermore, ideological content can also establish distinct normative and strategic obligations toward designated in-groups and out-groups, creating explicit and implicit rules around the use of violence. For instance, it can predispose armed groups to engage in certain kinds of sexual violence-related behavior by making particular sexual violence acts appear more or less strategically advantageous or by removing them from the menu of normatively acceptable options.

A gendered analysis reveals that ideological beliefs and identities are never gender neutral. Yet, as Asal et al. (2013) write, “[f]ar less attention has been given to the role of an organization’s ideology relating to gender when predicting its behavior.” Existing research suggests that the rise of an ethno-nationalist ideology among armed groups may activate ethnic tensions between communities that had previously coexisted peacefully. Some scholars argue that the intense emotional stakes involved in this type of war motivate sexual violence along ethnic cleavages to humiliate enemy groups (Leatherman 2011; Ferrales et al. 2016). Feminist scholars further highlight “genocidal rape” as a method of destruction, in whole or in part, of an out-group that does not require lethal violence (MacKinnon 1995; Sharlach 2000). In these scenarios, ideological identities serve as springboards for claim-making and delineate ‘legitimate’ identities from ‘illegitimate’ ones, often with gendered effects.

In many contexts, armed group ideologies and institutions also promote hegemonic, militarized masculinities that frame “real men” as “protectors” who engage in violence to defend their nation or community (Higate 2005). These militarized masculinities encourage or justify gender-based violence. For example, many combatants from the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) internalized gendered discourses tied to hegemonic masculinity, which motivated their engagement in wartime rape as an attempt to enact or perform idealized notions of masculinity. They claimed that

their “inabilities (or ‘failures’) to inhabit certain notions of heterosexual manhood,” motivated them to rape (Baaz & Stern 2009).

Unpacking gendered social frames embedded in patriarchal ideologies from an intersectional perspective also reveals why different groups of women may be treated differently by combatants. In Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State committed sexual violence against thousands of Muslim women. Yet these women were not all treated the same. The Islamic State enslaved thousands of Yazidi women—justifying the violence on ideological grounds—while also tolerating their gang rape. By contrast, the group did not enslave Sunni or Christian women. Instead, Sunni women were often forced into marriage with combatants (Global Justice Center 2016; Human Rights Watch 2017). Why did the Islamic State treat Yazidi and Sunni women so differently? Revkin and Wood (2021) have found that sexual slavery was an ideologically authorized policy, and only women from particular social groups were deemed “eligible” for enslavement.

While many ideologies reinforce gender discriminatory norms and power structures, not all ideologies promote patriarchal values or sexual violence. Several armed groups operating in contexts with traditionally patriarchal societal norms (and often experiencing high levels of gender-based violence) have explicitly included gender equality principles within their ideological claims, manifestos, and discourses (Hauge 2023). In Latin America, some of these groups include the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) in Colombia, the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca in Guatemala, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional in Mexico, and the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional in El Salvador. These groups are not unique to the region, however. The People’s Liberation Army in Nepal, the Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (Women’s Protection Units) in Syria, and the African National Congress in South Africa have also called for gender equality as part of their ideological and political claims (Barth 2002; Shekhawat 2015; Tank 2022).

In what ways does having a progressive, “gender-inclusive” ideology affect armed group behavior? For one, these groups may be more likely to recruit women and establish more gender-egalitarian organizational structures. Wood and Thomas (2017) demonstrate that political ideology plays a strong role in shaping the extent to which resistance movements incorporate women in their armed wings. These findings are corroborated by Murat et al. (2020), who found that the PKK’s secular egalitarian ideology promoted the implementation of gender equality measures in recruitment, training, practices, leadership structures, and protections against sexual violence (Haner et al. 2020). The FARC, which espoused an egalitarian and leftist ideology, also recruited high numbers of women.

Estimates suggest that women comprised 40% of the FARC's membership (Janetsky 2021).

Second, these groups may be less likely to perpetrate sexual violence. Quantitative research has identified correlations between the ideological preferences of rebel groups and their likelihood of committing CRSV. This work indicates that leftist groups are generally less likely to commit wartime sexual violence, while religious groups are more likely to engage in this violence (Sarwari 2021). Qualitative evidence further suggests that groups with Marxist-Leninist ideologies—such as the LTTE in Sri Lanka—are less likely to commit CRSV, even in contexts where other armed groups engage in widespread sexual violence crimes (Wood 2009). This aligns with similar findings that identify Marxist-Leninist ideology as a driver of restraint in civilian killing, for example by non-state armed groups in Mozambique and Angola (Thaler 2012). In some cases, armed organizations with gender-inclusive ideologies may also be more likely to explicitly prohibit and actively punish sexual violence. For instance, the FARC strictly enforced rules against rape, and members who were found violating this rule were tried by their peers and, if found culpable, executed (author interviews with FARC ex-combatants, August to December 2023).

However, understanding the gendered implications of ideology requires more critical examination. Interviews I conducted with former FARC combatants revealed that, while all recruits were taught that “men and women are equal and have the same rights and responsibilities,” this refrain was rarely elaborated upon in training or daily social life. Neither explicitly feminist principles nor in-depth discussions of gender equality were included in combatants' extensive political education (author interviews with FARC ex-combatants, August to December 2023). Experts in Colombia point out that “gender equality” in the FARC promoted women's inclusion in combatant roles but, in practical terms, this entailed the masculinization of women combatants (author interviews with Colombian women's rights organizations, government officials, and academic researchers, February to June 2023).

For instance, gendered framings of what it meant to be a “revolutionary” and a “soldier” were instrumentalized to justify and legitimize severe and systematic violations of women combatant's reproductive rights. Women were sanctioned for certain “feminine” characteristics seen as threats to the success of the insurgency. One quality in particular undermined the cohesion of the guerilla: motherhood. Pregnant women were unable to fight effectively in combat, if at all. Moreover, once a child was born, mothers were more likely to desert to raise their child outside of the guerilla. As a result, at its 8th Conference

in 1993, the FARC adopted a formal policy of forced contraception and forced abortion to prevent women from having children (author interviews with FARC ex-combatants, August to December 2023). One former combatant remarked that “they would tell you that women are not just biology, that women have to be the same as men; that is the ideology there [...] that women had to be like men, and since men can’t have children, women couldn’t either” (Méndez 2012: 130). Women who were true “revolutionaries” knew that they could not have children because they were part of a “people’s army” and needed to “put the movement first” (author interviews with FARC ex-combatants, August to December 2023). This illustration exemplifies the multi-dimensional nature of gender framings embedded in armed group ideologies. Acknowledging these complexities is critical to understanding why and how combatants buy into and rationalize sexual and reproductive violence.

Ideological strength: Socializing combatants into social boundaries

Clearly, ideologies can influence perceptions of gender-based violence among combatants who are deeply committed to ideological beliefs. But to what extent do the beliefs espoused at the upper echelons of an armed group affect the violent behavior of rank-and-file members? Scholarship has established that not all members of ideological armed groups are “true believers” or behave in accordance with ideological goals. To understand these discrepancies, it follows that ideological content “needs to be activated and mobilized” (Masullo 2021: 1852).

One way of understanding how ideology espoused at the highest levels of an armed group trickles down into rank-and-file behavior is by examining the extent to which combatants are indoctrinated, socialized, and pressured into an armed group’s ideological beliefs. As Zelina (2016) has written, “What combatants believe may not be as important as how strongly they believe it.” Patterns of conflict-related sexual violence depend not only on socially-constructed gender relations and norms, but also the salience, internalization, and enforcement of these gendered social arrangements. If higher degrees of socialization reduce principal-agent problems, then groups that undergo extensive ideological training will be incentivized to perpetrate consistent patterns of sexual violence (or consistent prohibition) compared to those that do not.

The degree of ideological socialization within an armed group can be shaped by how deeply combatants internalize ideological beliefs and how strongly the ideological principles are embedded in organizational and social structures (Schubiger & Zelina 2017). A group with strong ideological socialization might carry out recruit indoctrination,

hold political or ideological training for its members, build ideological values into everyday discussions, rituals, and disciplinary practices, and/or disseminate internal propaganda or manifestos. All these factors contribute to ideological socialization and institutionalization (Hoover Green 2018). Importantly, groups with high levels of ideological socialization are not necessarily “radical” groups. They are organizations in which ideological tenets (extreme or not) are deeply internalized by members and/or embedded in the group’s institutions, policies, and practices.

The effects of ideological socialization can be internalized or operate structurally. When sincere beliefs and principles embedded within ideologies are *internalized* by group members, those individuals are more likely to take ideologically-defined social boundaries as given (Leader Maynard 2019). This can arise from a number of places: the recruitment of members who are already ideologically committed, the political and ideological indoctrination of members, and combatant engagement in quotidian ideological rituals. Ideology can also operate *structurally* within groups when organizational institutions and group norms create social pressures or incentives to adhere to an ideology, even if individuals have not internalized it (Cohen 2016). Strict disciplinary rules and procedures can incentivize or coerce group members to conform to ideological practices in order to avoid punishment for deviation (Hoover Green 2018). More informally, members may fulfill ideologically-defined duties to prove their commitment and increase their standing or status within the group.

Levels of socialization can impact sexual violence perpetration in several ways. Collective sexual violence has been identified as a tool for socializing new combatants into armed groups and creating bonds of loyalty among group members. Because armed groups that forcibly recruit are less likely to have ideologically committed members, they are incentivized to instrumentalize sexual violence to socialize combatants and establish command structures. Sexual violence has been used by armed actors for this purpose in the DRC, Sierra Leone, and Timor-Leste (Cohen 2013a; Cohen 2016; Cohen 2017). These findings suggest that less ideological groups, which are more likely to rely on forced recruitment, may engage in higher rates of sexual violence to bond their recruits. Moreover, because group members are not ideologically committed or coerced, they are at greater “ideational liberty” to engage in sexual violence that is indiscriminate, less selective in targeting, and involves a larger repertoire of crimes. These patterns map onto existing findings from research on civilian killing. For instance, in armed groups like Frelimo and the MPLA, the weakening of ideological indoctrination processes and

ideological commitment over time contributed to more predatory and indiscriminate violence against civilians in the final years of their respective conflicts (Thaler 2012).

By contrast, groups that set up strong institutions to align the preferences of group leadership and the rank-and-file, including those implementing political and ideological education, encourage combatants to use a narrower range of violence and affect the way combatants behave toward civilians more generally (Hoover Green 2018; Scuto 2021). Researchers have also shown that combatants who join armed groups for ideological reasons are more likely to exercise discipline and are less likely to deviate from their orders for personal gain (Weinstein 2006; Sanín 2008; Oppenheim et al. 2015; Oppenheim & Weintraub 2017; Schubiger & Zelina 2017). For this reason, groups that socialize their combatants into an ideology and those with more “true believers” may engage in more discriminate patterns of sexual violence compared to groups without these characteristics. More specifically, group beliefs may inform and constrain what violence is condoned and proscribed, leading to more selective use of sexual violence crimes and targeting of communities.

In short, ideological socialization conditions the enactment of ideological principles by determining the extent of social learning and ideological conformity. The greater the magnitude of ideological socialization, the lower the severity of principal-agent problems between group leaders and combatants. While it is not possible to explain the behavior of *all* armed group members, we can better understand how combatants generally become true believers or at least ideological adherents. In understanding why combatants behave in accordance with ideological beliefs even when it is not the “rational” or “advantageous” choice, it is therefore more useful to think about degrees of ideological internalization and coercion rather than classifying combatants along a simplistic binary of “true believers” and “non-believers.” Some combatants are more ideological than others, and even where combatants have not internalized group beliefs, they may be structurally incentivized or coerced into abiding by them.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

Re-framing the ideational and organizational roots of conflict-related sexual violence equips us to better understand how armed actors come to commit these crimes. For one, it sheds light on the various functions of violence beyond inflicting physical harm— including weakening social fabrics within communities, emotionally threatening out- groups, punishing individuals who deviate from group norms or rules, as well as

promoting group bonding and protecting group cohesion—and how this can change over time. Unpacking armed group ideology is crucial for understanding the sociopolitical framings that justify and motivate sexual violence as part of these processes. It also prompts an examination of how sexual violence and other violent acts influence perpetrators' and groups' identities, cohesion, and organization. CRSV prevention efforts should therefore be rooted in a theory of change that recognizes the fundamental role organizational features and cultures can play in improving prevention (Sellström in Olsson et al. 2020).

Second, this framework foregrounds important nuances between ideologically similar groups. Moving beyond broad-brush assumptions that leftist groups are less likely to engage in conflict-related sexual violence and ethno-nationalist or religious groups are more likely to commit these crimes, this study emphasizes that these relationships are much more complex. For example, some leftist groups do engage in sexual violence (sometimes systematically), but they often differ from other ideological groups in terms of who they target, what specific crimes they commit, and how this violence is framed and justified. Closer inspection of the ideological content of armed groups reveals much about why ideologically similar groups perpetrate sexual violence in distinct ways. Moreover, variation in perpetration also depends on the salience, internalization, and institutionalization of these ideological beliefs within groups. How strongly combatants believe in or are coerced into enacting ideological beliefs is just as important as the ideological beliefs armed groups promote. Third, this organizational perspective also provides important context for understanding *who* combatants choose to target and *how* they choose among the menu of sexually violent options at their disposal.

What are the implications of this analysis for policy and practice? The current state of the evidence regarding effective strategies to prevent conflict-related sexual violence is relatively weak, and there is a need for more empirical research on how interventions can effectively address the drivers of this violence. This study seeks to strengthen prevention efforts by pointing to potential entry points for intervention, new practices, and future research. Understanding the social processes through which shared beliefs and organizational practices influence why and how armed groups commit CRSV opens up new pathways to intervene and prevent perpetration. As previously noted, most existing efforts to address CRSV are reparative. Moreover, preventive initiatives focus on increasing security within vulnerable communities, but these strategies often neglect entry points to dissuade potential perpetrators from committing acts of violence in the first place. While academic research increasingly emphasizes the role of social, ideational, and

organizational drivers, policy interventions remain largely unattuned to this growing body of knowledge. As both Moncrief (in Olsson et al. 2020) and Wood (in Olsson et al. 2020) assert, we must better understand the structures, leadership, cultures, ideologies, and social norms of armed organizations perpetrating CRSV in order to develop effective preventative measures. A few key areas of intervention present important opportunities for change.

Centering social norms and collective identities

A growing area of intervention—targeting both wartime sexual violence and gender-based violence more generally (including in the domestic and political spheres)—aims to shift discriminatory gender norms and attitudes that normalize or encourage this violence. The theory of change behind these interventions is rooted in the recognition that gender-based violence stems from harmful social norms and beliefs that normalize, justify, and may even encourage gendered hierarchies and violence. While the idea of shifting gender-discriminatory social norms to reduce sexual and gender-based violence is not new, there is a dearth of empirical evidence on aid efforts to shift norms in conflict-affected contexts. Some actors are beginning to invest in developing such practices. The United Kingdom, for instance, has launched a new strategy that includes activities to prevent CRSV through changing social norms, attitudes, and behaviors (U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office 2022a).

Most of the evidence base on social norm change interventions is derived from non-conflict contexts. Lessons learned from these efforts may nevertheless yield valuable insights for similar initiatives in conflict-affected and humanitarian environments with the recognition that more unstable settings inevitably present unique challenges to implementing this kind of programming—from forced displacement, collective trauma, restricted access and mobility, and fractured social networks and communities.

While an in-depth analysis of the efficacy of norm change interventions is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth highlighting a few key insights and best practices. First and foremost, social norm change is a challenging and arduous process that requires long-term commitments and evaluation frameworks from aid providers, as well as multi-dimensional approaches. Second, one size does not fit all. Effective interventions necessitate tailored programs that grapple with context-specific gender norms, which may vary across countries, regions, and even individual communities. Working with local organizations to design programs is a useful strategy that international actors can employ to ensure that their interventions are context-specific and context-relevant. Finally, scaling up norm

change interventions will depend on the development of stronger methodologies to monitor and assess progress. Social norm change is notoriously difficult to measure, and many organizations shy away from engaging in norm change in part due to the difficulty of clearly demonstrating results or “success stories.”

CARE has piloted qualitative and quantitative tools to explore and document which gender norms are linked to particular behaviors and practices, whose behavior norms influence, and under what conditions this occurs. They have also used these methods to assess whether and how these norms are changing, as well as identify promising opportunities to catalyze transformative change. Among these efforts, CARE has begun implementing its Social Norms Analysis Plot (SNAP) framework, which draws on vignettes, surveys, and focus groups to document and track norm change indicators (Stefanik & Hwang 2017).

Prevention programs adapted to humanitarian settings are slowly becoming more common. These initiatives draw on emerging evidence that such programming can “leverage the social upheaval that frequently accompanies conflict to achieve meaningful social change” (U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office 2022b). In the DRC, Tearfund has implemented its Transforming Masculinities intervention to reduce sexual and gender-based violence by changing gender norms through engagement with local religious leaders, providing gender-sensitive training, facilitating community dialogues, and promoting community-wide messaging. Evaluations of the program suggest that social norms and behaviors may begin to shift in as little as two years, and the program documented a substantial decline in rates of gender-based violence (*ibid.*; Tearfund 2022).

Meanwhile, in Somalia, the Communities Care program has combined strengthening primary care services to survivors with community dialogues to change harmful social norms associated with gender-based violence. The intervention developed a social norms and beliefs scale related to a range of gender-based violence prevalent in humanitarian settings. An evaluation indicates that the program successfully began changing social norms among men and women regarding protecting daily honor, husband’s rights to use violence, and responses to sexual violence, as well as increased confidence in service provision in complex humanitarian settings (Glass et al. 2019; U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office 2022b).

Societal-level efforts to change attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are key to ensuring that communities condemn and punish conflict-related sexual violence. This is a long-term process that requires a multi-dimensional approach. Interventions that directly engage

populations most likely to commit these crimes—such as state and non-state armed actors—present a more targeted approach to complement society-wide and community-focused efforts. Currently, we have very limited evidence for effective strategies to deter armed actors from engaging in sexual violence and, as noted above, the criminal prosecution of high-level commanders in transitional justice contexts does not appear to have a preventive effect. These legal efforts must therefore be combined with additional measures that engage armed actors earlier on.

Internal reforms within state militaries and peacekeeping structures

Non-state armed groups are not the only perpetrators of CRSV. State militaries and peacekeeping forces (as well as unarmed humanitarian actors) are also responsible for these crimes in many conflict settings, in addition to non-criminalized acts of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA).⁴ In fact, state forces are reported as sexual violence perpetrators more frequently than non-state armed groups (Cohen et al. 2013). As discussed above, these abuses are not the result of a “few bad apples,” but rather often result from ideational and structural conditions within military institutions.

As with non-state armed groups, social norms within these organizations can have a significant impact on the risks of members engaging in sexual and gender-based violence (Feather et al. 2021). One review of these crimes by military personnel found that perpetration is often the result of inconsistent leadership messaging and weak senior-level buy-in for gender equality and prevention (U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office 2022b). In a cross-mission analysis of peacekeepers operating in post-conflict settings, Moncrief (2017) found that the norms and socialization processes that troops are exposed to in state militaries contributing to peacekeeping forces and within peacekeeping missions themselves, as well as disciplinary breakdown, are linked to variation in sexually abusive practices by peacekeeping forces.

There is little systematic evidence for best practices to reduce these risk factors, and very few interventions have tried to tackle social norms and attitudes within these institutions. By framing CRSV crimes as at odds with the normative and strategic goals of their group, as well as making concerted efforts to socialize members into these beliefs, military leaders may be able to better regulate and control the violent behavior of their subordinates. One promising approach may involve military and peacekeeping institutions implementing internal organizational reforms to mitigate ideational and organizational

⁴ It is worth noting that SEA encompasses both criminal and non-criminal acts, whereas all forms of CRSV are criminalized.

drivers of CRSV. This involves enacting change in attitudes through training and awareness-raising among all genders and at all levels—from high-level commanders to rank-and-file soldiers—including through standardized training for new recruits and as part of in-service training (U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office 2022b). The content of such training should be based, in part, on an assessment of gender biases in institutional norms and practices, with the aim of shifting institutional cultures to be gender-inclusive. These organizations should also conduct a critical gender assessment of their internal doctrines, training procedures, and disciplinary processes. Based on this assessment, they can embed sexual and gender-based violence issues into their disciplinary manuals, policies, and procedures, including establishing clear and strict institutional regulations against CRSV crimes that are then reliably implemented.

Internal reforms within militaries and peacekeeping missions may also better equip them to prevent sexual violence perpetrated by other actors as part of their institutional mandates. As Ruffa (in Olsson et al. 2020) argues, preventing conflict-related sexual violence has never been a central priority or responsibility of peacekeeping operations, nor are their military cultures often conducive to prevention. This has meant that deployed operations have often had a weak understanding of the problem and insufficient capacity to address it. Some military forums, such as the Nordic Center for Gender in Military Operations, have begun focusing on developing and sharing learning about best practices to improve military actors' contributions to conflict-related sexual violence prevention, including integrating prevention into military training practices and institutional frameworks (Engvall 2014). The Center has also recently developed a military gender analysis tool to integrate a gender perspective into military operations with the aim of increasing protections for women, girls, men, and boys with implications for conflict-related sexual violence prevention (Nordic Centre for Gender in Military Operations 2022).

Engaging with non-state armed groups

Equally important, though perhaps more challenging, is engaging with non-state armed groups to prohibit and censure sexual violence committed by their members. These groups are not only difficult to reach, but in many cases may also be less likely to be swayed by arguments to refrain from violence deemed illegal under domestic and international law, or to collaborate with governmental and non-governmental organizations promoting this work. Yet, some emergent practices are taking shape. For instance, Geneva Call launched a “Deed of Commitment on the Prohibition of Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict and

Towards the Elimination of Gender Discrimination” in 2012 to complement its other training and awareness-raising tools and materials that it uses to engage with armed groups. The organization has also organized training and sensitization sessions with armed group members from multiple levels of seniority to educate these groups about sexual violence, relevant international legal and policy frameworks, and modalities to integrate internal policies and practices to reduce this violence. Twenty-five groups have signed the Deed of Commitment to date. According to Lamazière (2014), “[c]ontrary to a commonly held view, at least some [non-state armed groups] are keen to address sexual violence. They recognise that they lack the knowledge and support they need to meet their obligations, and have expressed their willingness to engage in a dialogue with Geneva Call [...] This acknowledgement is the key to starting engagement.” In fact, several armed groups, including the SPLA-IO in South Sudan, have made formal commitments or action plans to prohibit CRSV (though it is unclear how strongly these commitments have been implemented) (Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict 2015).

Evidence also suggests that non-state armed groups can and have established preventative cultures against CRSV—at times driven by internal dynamics and at others by external pressures. The Palipehutu-FNL in Burundi, for instance, successfully established an organizational culture that was preventative of CRSV by framing it as “status-reducing and shameful” within its Christian ideology. The group systematically inculcated members into principles that stigmatized sexual violence, for example through formal training and prayer sessions (though these rules weakened in the later stages of the conflict due to political and military pressures). Meanwhile, within the same context, the CNDD-FDD shifted from an internal culture that was permissive of sexual violence to one that was preventative in an attempt to gain credibility from the local population and the international community (Sellström in Olsson et al. 2020).

These developments suggest that there is indeed space for humanitarian actors to work with armed groups to prevent sexual violence in active conflict contexts, and some work in this area is already taking place. As part of its sexual violence prevention and risk reduction strategy, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) holds dialogues with non-state armed actors (and state actors) that emphasize their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect civilians from CRSV and allow victims access to essential services, as well as discuss the negative impact of this violence on communities (International Committee of the Red Cross 2021). These efforts can be strengthened by leveraging information about rebel groups’ internal characteristics, structures, rules, and

beliefs to configure and integrate prevention logics that align with these organizational features. Where non-state armed groups are open to internal reform measures, it may also be fruitful to apply this perspective to efforts promoting preventative internal policies and procedures (similar to those mentioned for state militaries and peacekeeping missions above), including internal gender assessments, gender sensitivity, and social norm change training.

There are, however, important hurdles that will require politically-smart tactics on the part of practitioners. Establishing high-level buy-in from group leadership will be a challenging but essential prerequisite to conducting this work. Additionally, operating in these environments will require organizations to work with a high level of political sensitivity, particularly if they are engaging multiple armed groups within the same conflict context. Moreover, ensuring implementation of and accountability for any commitments these groups make is unlikely.

DISMANTLING WARTIME GENDER REGIMES IN TRANSITIONAL AND POST- CONFLICT CONTEXTS

This analysis also has potential implications for disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs. Ideological beliefs do not simply disappear once conflict ends or once an individual leaves the battlefield. It is therefore unsurprising that sexual violence often continues in transitional and post-conflict contexts. If DDR programs more concretely grapple with violent ideologies, they may be better equipped to shift attitudes and reduce violent tendencies among demobilized fighters, ultimately helping them to more fully reintegrate into society.

One entry point would be to include social norm change activities as a component of psychosocial care and support programs that many DDR programs already implement. Such activities should include a strong gender component to challenge discriminatory and violent gender norms that are often exacerbated in conflict contexts. To go a step further, DDR programs could also systematically include sexual violence prevention programs into their processes—something which is currently very rare. Moreover, as Nordås (2013) has noted, “[d]esigning programmes for reforming past wrongdoers, however, is a challenge, as fighters often are desensitized during war. Sustained effort and careful local anchoring of programmes are likely to be necessary.” Such programs may also need to be tailored to different sub-communities of ex-combatants. For instance, ex-combatants who were forcibly recruited (especially as children) are often subject to high levels of sexual

violence and may require different legal conditions and support programs (United Nations 2012). Together, these approaches could help to break cycles of violence as actors demobilize and reintegrate into civilian communities by shifting attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors while also strengthening accountability mechanisms and support to survivors (including those who may themselves be demobilized from war and re-entering society).

Recognizing limitations

These programming entry points present promising opportunities to address militarized gendered identities; however, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations that such approaches likely face. For one, patriarchal norms and cultures are deeply embedded within armed organizations, and militarized masculinities and misogynistic behaviors are characteristic of these institutions across the globe—often constructed by and within gendered imaginaries of the state. As Sjoberg and Via (2010) write, “gender constructs war and militarism, which in turn construct gender—the concepts are interdependent, inseparable, and mutually constitutive.” Cockburn (2010) similarly points out that “[i]t is a masculinity (and a complementary femininity) that not only serves militarism very well indeed, but seeks and needs militarization and war for its fulfilment. Of course, the violence of war is in turn productive [...] It produces particular gender identities.” Given this fundamental link between masculinity and militarism, between patriarchy and war, the aim of targeted interventions addressing gender discriminatory norms and behaviors within individual armed groups is most usefully conceived as reforming organizational cultures to reduce the perpetration of gender-based violence. These smaller-scale initiatives are not well-placed to bring about gender transformation to a degree that would drive a wholesale shift in the nature of militarized groups or reduce the prevalence of war itself.

Nevertheless, even if these patriarchal and often violent dynamics cannot be completely deconstructed, there is potential for interventions to make smaller but nonetheless important inroads. Interventions to shift gendered norms and behaviors among active and demobilized combatants are worthwhile, as they can mitigate gendered violence in conflict and post-conflict settings. There is a clear link between militarized masculinities and violence (Caprioli & Boyer 2001; Goldstein 2001; Tickner 2005; Bjarnegård & Melander 2011); yet, the presence of these violent cultures on their own does not render sexual violence an inevitable “natural outcome.” If this were the case, we would see less variation in perpetration than the empirical record indicates (Wood 2014; Moncrief 2017). The influence of militarized masculinities on the perpetration of sexual

violence is conditioned by organizational processes and characteristics, such as socialization processes.

While these patriarchal norms cannot be entirely eradicated, they can be mitigated through interventions that directly address these group characteristics. This analysis underscores the need for a transformation in gender relations to be included as a component of more targeted strategies to foster peace, even if temporary or limited in scale. Organizational cultures rooted in militarized masculinities may not be completely erased within state and non-state armed groups, but mitigating their influence within these institutions can help prevent future perpetration. These more modest objectives may be less sweeping than advocates and policymakers might hope, but such progress should still be considered a success.

CONCLUSION

This report has sought to further research and policy agendas on conflict-related sexual violence by highlighting the role of armed group ideology and socialization practices in shaping its perpetration. CRSV has gained increasing attention in recent decades. In response, international and domestic actors have begun strengthening their commitments to ending this violence. Yet, leading policymakers and human rights organizations have invested the bulk of their time and resources into strengthening legal accountability for perpetrators and service provision for survivors. These initiatives are a crucial part of addressing these atrocities. However, such reparative measures must also be combined with more proactive and preventive approaches that stop actors from engaging in this violence in the first place.

To date, most preventive activities have focused on bolstering the physical security of vulnerable communities, rather than engaging the populations most at-risk of committing these crimes. However, academic research shows that the internal characteristics of armed groups play a significant role in shaping their likelihood of committing sexual violence—including their ideological characteristics. In order to tackle the roots of this violence, researchers and policymakers must acknowledge and address the influence of ideology, socialization, and other ideational factors on sexual violence perpetration. Analyzing the ideological content and ideological socialization of armed groups is crucial to understanding and preventing the wide variation in CRSV crimes that bear out across conflicts. It can also inform new entry points for intervention that directly engage potential perpetrators and de-socialize them from violent norms and practices. Transforming

ideological and social framings of gender, as well as altering training and disciplinary practices, could prevent armed actors from committing these abuses by shifting the social framings of this violence. Social norm interventions could therefore be usefully integrated into military institutions and peacekeeping missions, engagement work with non-state armed actors, and DDR programs to reduce the prevalence of conflict-related sexual violence in active, transitional, and post-conflict environments.

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