

Sexual Violence on the Decline?

Recent debates and evidence suggest ‘unlikely’

The 2012 Human Security Report claims there is reason to believe we may be witnessing a decline in wartime sexual violence – a claim that has created newspaper headlines and intense debate within the blogosphere.

Key researchers specializing in the topic of conflict-related sexual violence have taken issue with the report, as well as the premises on which its claims are based. This brief summarizes key elements of the debate.

The brief warns that the focus on whether there has been a decline may sidetrack vital debate on how to mitigate conflict-related sexual violence.

The brief also highlights what a more productive debate and line of research might require in order to contribute to preventing sexual violence in the future, suggesting some priorities:

Key priorities

- Maintain a strong focus on preventing sexual violence
- Improve reporting mechanisms
- Secure the necessary funds to conduct systematic data collection on sexual violence
- Analyse how sexual violence co-occurs (or not) with other forms of violence

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Conflict-related sexual violence

In recent years, conflict-related sexual violence has gained the attention of both the general public and policymakers. Still, our understanding and documentation of its causes and consequences remain lacking. The UN Security Council and others have recognized the need to better document and understand the phenomenon, and to stop its occurrence.

Sexual violence can amount to a tactic of war used to humiliate and dominate enemy populations, to displace populations from contested territories, and as a tool for generating intragroup cohesion in armed organizations recruited through force (Cohen, 2012). It can constitute a war crime or a crime against humanity, and can be a constitutive act with respect to genocide (1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court [ICC]).

Sexual violence is rampant in many conflicts. It has detrimental social, psychological and physiological consequences for survivors and their families; for the communities affected; for the process of peacebuilding, reconciliation and development after conflict; and for the perpetrators themselves.

Human Security Report 2012

The 2012 *Human Security Report (HSR 2012)* rejects the view that rape and other forms of sexual violence in conflict represent an ever-increasing problem. The report also concludes that 'strategic rape' (the use of rape as a weapon of war) is less common than claimed in the mainstream narrative – which, according to the report, has been 'greatly influenced by a series of prominent UN reports and innovative initiatives – in particular, those associated with the Security Council's, Women, Peace and Security, policy agenda' (HSR 2012: 2).

One central claim in the report was that there is reason to believe that we are observing a *decline* in the problem. This was picked up as the main headline in the media coverage of the report and repeated worldwide.

The statement outraged members of the advocacy community and spurred various responses and counterpoints by researchers. In the subsequent debate, key researchers of wartime sexual violence took issue with the main claims of the report. Whereas some claimed there might be an increase, others

focused on the fact that we cannot know which way the arrow points.

The global decline claim

The Human Security Report Project describes how it is commonly held that sexual violence is strongly on the rise, and that this constitutes the mainstream narrative. Today, sexual violence in conflict is mentioned more often, and portrayed as more brutal and systematic, than was previously the case.

For example, in 2007 Jan Egeland, former UN Undersecretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, claimed that rape in war had reached epidemic proportions. Others have also explicitly stated that the nature of warfare is changing in ways that increasingly endanger women and girls, with particular reference to sexual violence (Ward & March, 2006). According to *HSR 2012*, however, there is little data to support such an assumption.

HSR 2012 continues, nevertheless, with conjectures about a *decline* in sexual violence in conflict over the past years.

The assumption about a possible decline is based on what the report calls 'indirect evidence'. The reasoning is as follows: The number of conflicts is declining, and so is the number of battle deaths. Research from PRIO and other places confirms this, and the decline in war has been prominently discussed by, among others, Steven Pinker (2012) and Joshua S. Goldstein (2011). Further, however:

The HSR Project assumes that because the number of battle deaths is declining, this must also be the case for sexual violence.

The HSR Project therefore assumes a strong correlation between battle deaths and sexual violence – that is, that we can use the number of battle killings as a proxy for how much sexual violence was perpetrated. That assumption has been challenged by experts on sexual violence.

Critique of HSR 2012 and the global decline claim

HSR 2012 has been criticized on several points. The critiques have been related to the *assumptions behind the global decline claim*, accusations about *selective use of data*, and how the report could negatively affect the public debate – and, by extension, victims of sexual

violence in desperate need of assistance – by potentially derailing the focus on ending sexual violence. Here is a summarized version of the critiques:

Methodology

The most careful and systematic critique of *HSR 2012* has been presented by Amelia Hoover Green, Dara Kay Cohen and Elisabeth Wood, three leading experts on conflict-related sexual violence (Hoover green et al. 2012; Cohen et al. 2013). Their critique of the assumptions behind *HSR 2012* is foremost that using the number of battle deaths as an indicator of the scale of sexual violence is likely to lead to errors. There are several reasons for this:

First, there are many examples of armed groups that are responsible for extensive lethal violence but perpetrate few acts of sexual violence, such as most subgroups of the Shining Path in Peru.

Second, there are also groups that seemingly turn sexual violence into their trademark, without causing many deaths on the battlefield. In the Central African Republic, for instance, the ICC's Office of the Prosecutor found that allegations of sex crimes in the 2003–04 conflict far outnumbered alleged killings (ICC, 2007).

Third, we know that sexual violence often continues when conflict has officially ended. In some cases, such as in Eastern Congo, the sexual violence is extreme and extensive.

Furthermore:

Evidence from data from Dara Kay Cohen (2012) shows an increase over time in the proportion of conflicts with high levels of rape by armed actors.

(See Hoover Green et al.'s [2012] counterpoint to *HSR 2012* on 1 November 2012.)

Figure 1 is based on the to-date most comprehensive global data on wartime rape from Dara Kay Cohen (2010), which *HSR 2012* also uses. It shows a clear *increase* over time in the how frequently conflict-related sexual violence is reported to have occurred during the period 1990 to 2009.

These data also confirm the upward trend in terms of the number of conflicts with high levels of reported sexual violence prevalence (see Figure 2, based on Cohen's data).

The highest point on the curve occurred in the early 2000s (65% of conflicts had high levels of sexual violence prevalence in 2001), but the graph has remained high since then, and always higher than before the mid-1990s.

Hoover Green et al. (2012) therefore find that the claims of *HSR 2012* are overstated, if not wrong, as *existing data do not support the global decline claim when looking at the time period 1989–2009*.

Similar trends can be found using the Sexual Violence and Armed Conflict (SVAC) Africa data, where we see that the number of perpetrator groups in African conflicts has increased over time from 1989 to 2009. The data show a spike in the early 2000s and subsequent relative stabilization, with around 20–25 African conflict actors using this form of violence annually (see Figure 3) (Cohen & Nordås 2012). Importantly, however, this cannot tell us whether the number of victims is going up or not, as no comparative statistics on the number of victims exist.

Megan MacKenzie (2012) also published a critique of *HSR 2012* in October 2012. Her main criticism was that the authors of the report had no data to support its claims, and that the main conclusion of *HSR 2012* had been drawn simply on the ‘war decline hypothesis’ (which had been the focus of the 2005 *Human Security Report*), as the *HSR* stated that conflict-related sexual violence has decreased ‘primarily because there has been a global reduction in the number of large-scale armed conflicts’ (*HSR Project, 2012: 27*).

Selectivity

According to Hoover Green et al. (2012) and Cohen et al. (2013), *HSR 2012* offers only one (selective) interpretation of existing data to support the global decline claim.

The claims for a decline in sexual violence are no stronger than the claims for an increase – rather the opposite: There has been a steady increase in reports of wartime sexual violence.

Still, *HSR 2012* seems to choose to interpret these numbers as simply a result of reporting problems and biases – the implication being that the increase we see is simply an artefact of increased reporting, not actual increases in the prevalence of conflict-related sexual violence. The relationship between reporting and reality, however, remains unclear (Hoover Green et al., 2012), and thus the suggestion

that actual events are moving in the opposite direction to the reporting may be a problematic reading of the data.

HSR 2012 also chooses not to report on data prior to 2000, owing to ‘chronic under-reporting’ in earlier years and the existence of more reliable data since then. Choosing to present data only from 2000 onwards, however, could also be interpreted as a selective use of data that potentially misrepresents existing findings.

Distraction from more important matters

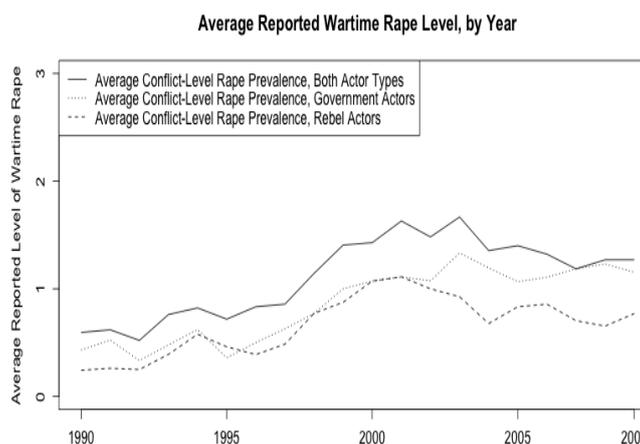
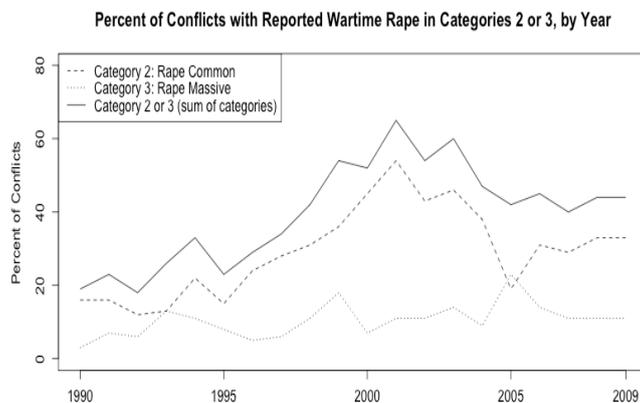
MacKenzie (2012) warns that the focus on a decline could take pressure off governments to devote adequate resources to tackling the problem of conflict-related sexual violence, which would be particularly detrimental at a time when such violence has just begun to gain momentum as a serious issue and a war crime.

A similar concern is also found in the critique by Hoover Green et al. (2012). Their main conclusion is that *HSR 2012* is a distraction from more important issues.

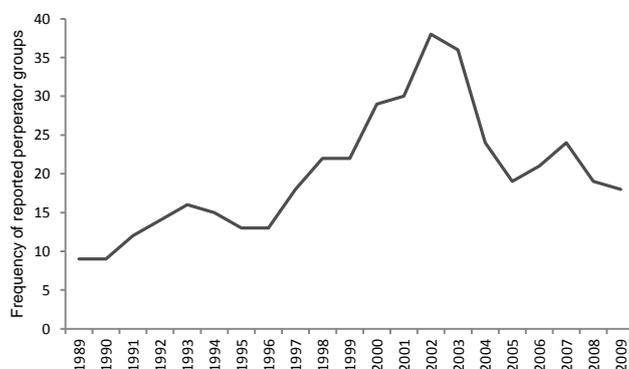
A similar line of reasoning can also be found in an op-ed in the Norwegian daily newspaper *Dagsavisen* from 16 November 2012 (Nordås 2012), in which I outline the problems with some aspects of the debate, and suggest what I would regard as a more productive focus.

The allure of numbers and alternatives

We do not know exactly how many people are affected by war-related sexual violence, and we probably never will. But, do we actually need



Annual number of conflict actors in Africa reported to commit sexual violence, 1989–2009 (SVAC Africa data)



to have a figure for this? *The new focus on whether the trend is increasing or decreasing could be counter-productive to finding solutions.* Even if we managed to produce a numerical figure, it would not have much practical use in terms of finding solutions to the problem.

Analysing variation in the prevalence and patterns of sexual violence is key to understanding and prevention (Wood 2012).

We need a better mapping of the problem, as well as a more nuanced discussion about what might explain the significant variation in the occurrence of sexual violence across armed actors and conflict situations, and over time.

Specifically, we need to know:

- when the danger of sexual violence is most acute;
- in what situations it happens;
- which groups are most vulnerable for targeting at any given time;
- who the perpetrators are;
- what types of sexual violence they perpetrate;
- what this can tell us about why they do it.

Discussions about a global increase or decline can give us none of this information.

With recent research efforts, we now see the contours of some preliminary findings that may challenge common assumptions (Cohen et al. 2013; Cohen & Nordås 2012):

- Research shows a relationship between the abduction of recruits and the occurrence of rape.
- Sexual violence is more often committed by state militaries than by rebel or militia groups. This calls for higher pressure on the governments of the countries involved.
- Where the question has been asked, males represent a significant fraction of the victims.
- Rape and other forms of sexual violence may have different causes
- Sexual violence is often committed when there are few battle-related deaths, as well as in post-conflict settings.

The last finding also challenges the key assumption on which *HSR 2012* seems to have based its claims: If the relationship between

battle deaths and sexual violence is not as strong as the report assumes, the basis for the global decline claim may be essentially flawed.

Key priorities

We need continued focus on reporting these crimes, systematically analysing the data, and evaluating efforts to intervene and stop sexual violence. The priorities should be to:

- **Maintain a strong focus on preventing sexual violence.** The claim that sexual violence is declining (HSR Project, 2012) seems largely unfounded or based on problematic assumptions about the relationship between battle-related deaths and sexual violence (Hoover Green et al. 2012).
- **Improve reporting mechanisms.** The mandates of all peacekeeping missions should include explicit policies aimed at preventing sexual violence.
- **Secure the necessary funds to conduct systematic data collection on conflict-related sexual violence.** The debate following *HSR 2012* highlights the need for further strengthening rigorous data collection on the problem of sexual violence, for continuing efforts that have already begun to systematize existing material, and for new initiatives to gather micro-level data through surveys and careful ethnographic research.
- **Analyse how sexual violence co-occurs (or not) with other forms of violence.** Even if killings subside, sexual violence often continues. There is a need for research on how sexual violence relates to other conflict behaviours, and how it is carried over into post-conflict situations (both by conflict actors and within society at large).

References and further reading

See <http://hsr2012.tumblr.com/> for an overview of the different online contributions to the debate following the publication of *HSR 2012*.

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