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Intersecting Ethnicity and Sexual Violence across African Conflict Typologies

[1]Udo Kingsley AsukwoIfiok

[1]Department of Political Science University of Calabar, Nigeria

Corresponding Author's Email: kingsleyprotect@gmail.com

Abstract

Men and boys face distinctive forms of vulnerability in armed conflict, including killing, forced recruitment, detention, torture, and conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). Yet the study and documentation of CRSV remain shaped by a persistent female-victim default, while research on male victimhood rarely asks how sexual violence is connected to ethnic or ethnolinguistic identity. This article examines that intersection in Sudan, the Central Sahel states of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, and Anglophone Cameroon. The study uses a qualitative, structured-focused comparison and treats male sexual violence as including rape, sexual assault, forced nudity, sexual torture, genital violence, and other intentionally sexualized forms of humiliation. Ethnicity is approached as a politically salient boundary of ascribed collective identity, including ethnolinguistic identity where it performs a comparable role in conflict. Recent reporting from Sudan places men and boys within wider patterns of conflict-related sexual violence and, in Darfur, provides evidence that sexual violence has occurred during attacks directed at identified ethnic communities. In the Central Sahel, male CRSV is documented, particularly in Mali, while available sources more often connect civilian targeting to suspected collaboration, counterinsurgency, armed-group governance, and communal insecurity than directly to ethnicity. Anglophone Cameroon shows a close relationship between male security suspicion and ethnolinguistic identity, alongside documented sexualized humiliation, although male-specific CRSV evidence remains limited. The differences are treated as case-specific and evidentiary rather than as effects produced by conflict type.

Keywords: male sexual violence; conflict-related sexual violence; ethnicity; masculinity; Sudan; Sahel; Cameroon; political violence.

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Introduction

The gendered distribution of wartime vulnerability presents a persistent analytical paradox. Men and boys are commonly imagined first as fighters, potential fighters, or perpetrators, yet the same gendered assumptions make civilian males conspicuous targets of killing, detention, forced recruitment, disappearance, and torture. Estimates assembled by Ormhaug, Meier, and Hernes (2009) and discussed in subsequent scholarship suggest that men may be between 1.3 and 8.9 times as likely as women to be killed directly in war, depending on the conflict and dataset. Kreft and Agerberg (2024) similarly show how civilian men's vulnerability remains politically and normatively difficult to recognize because public understandings of victimhood are shaped by gendered expectations. The result is not that women and girls are less vulnerable; rather, different forms of vulnerability become visible or invisible according to the categories through which conflict is interpreted.

This selective visibility is evident in the study and documentation of conflict-related sexual violence. The substantial and necessary literature on wartime rape developed largely through the experiences of women and girls. That focus corrected a long history of neglect, but it also contributed to institutional routines in which sexual violence is often presumed to have a female victim and a male perpetrator. Carpenter (2006), Sivakumaran (2007), Dolan (2017), Schulz (2020), Touquet et al. (2020), and Sawyer (2024) have demonstrated that men and boys are also subjected to rape, sexual assault, genital violence, forced nudity, sexual torture, and other forms of sexualized degradation. Because these acts collide with hegemonic expectations of masculinity and, in many settings, with criminalized or stigmatized understandings of same-sex acts, survivors may be unwilling or unable to disclose their experiences. Institutions may also record sexualized abuse as generic torture rather than sexual violence, further suppressing the male share of CRSV data (Sawyer, 2024).

A related blind spot concerns the relationship between male sexual victimization and collective identity. Conflict scholarship has long shown that ethnicity can shape mobilization, civilian targeting, displacement, and constructions of the enemy. Research on sexual violence has also shown that sexualized abuse may be directed at communities and used to communicate political domination. These literatures are less often brought together when the victim is male.

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Sivakumaran (2007) and Žarkov (2001) show that sexual violence against men may carry meanings that extend beyond the individual victim, particularly where men are treated as representatives of an opposing group. This raises a more specific question about the circumstances in which ethnic identity enters the targeting, interpretation, or documentation of male sexual violence.

This study asks how ethnicity intersects with conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys, and how that relationship is expressed in different African conflict settings. The analysis covers Sudan, the Central Sahel states of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, and the Anglophone regions of Cameroon. These settings provide contrasting political and organizational contexts in which collective identity, presumed combatancy, territorial control, and armed-group practices can be examined without treating the conflict labels themselves as causal explanations.

The comparison is used to trace the relationship between group identity and male sexual victimization rather than to rank conflict types. Particular attention is given to the way armed actors identify suspected enemies, how masculinity becomes associated with combatant potential, and whether sexualized violence is documented within wider patterns of collective punishment or political coercion. The evidence is uneven. Sudanese reporting provides direct links between sexual violence and ethnicized attacks in parts of Darfur, while reporting from the Central Sahel and Anglophone Cameroon often documents male vulnerability, identity-based suspicion, and sexualized abuse in separate or only partially connected ways. The analysis therefore distinguishes what is documented from what may be plausible but cannot be established from the available sources.

The study brings male CRSV scholarship into closer conversation with research on ethnicity, masculinity, and civilian targeting. It treats men and boys as internally differentiated rather than as a single victim category and asks how gendered assumptions about combatancy interact with collective identity. The contribution lies in showing where the available evidence connects these categories at the level of victim selection and where that connection remains uncertain because of underreporting, classification practices, or limited incident-level documentation.

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Literature Review

Conflict-related sexual violence and the recognition of male victimhood

The modern study of CRSV emerged partly in response to the systematic marginalization of rape and sexual abuse from conventional accounts of war. Feminist scholarship and advocacy established that sexual violence is not merely an accidental by-product of conflict and that it can be connected to military strategy, forced displacement, detention, armed-group socialization, opportunistic predation, and political repression. Later scholarship, however, cautioned against replacing neglect with a single 'weapon of war' explanation. Wood (2006) demonstrated substantial variation in the occurrence and form of wartime sexual violence, including conflicts in which armed organizations exercise restraint. Cohen (2013) linked some patterns of rape to armed-group recruitment and socialization, while Eriksson Baaz and Stern (2013) criticized overly instrumental accounts that presume command-level strategy whenever sexual violence occurs. Taken together, this literature supports a disaggregated approach that asks which actors commit what forms of sexual violence, against whom, under which organizational and political conditions.

Male victimization complicates these debates because the category itself is systematically under-observed. Carpenter (2006) argued that civilian men and boys fall through protection frameworks built around a gender binary in which males are associated with combatancy and females with vulnerability. Sivakumaran (2007) identified multiple forms of sexual violence against men in armed conflict, including rape, enforced sterilization, genital mutilation, forced nudity, and coerced sexual acts, and emphasized the role of shame and masculine norms in underreporting. Dolan (2017) similarly challenged humanitarian and legal assumptions that make male victims difficult to recognize. More recent work reinforces the point. Touquet et al. (2020) show that common claims that male sexual violence ‘rarely happens’ are sustained by definitional, social, and institutional barriers, while Sawyer (2024) provides cross-national evidence that reporting of male sexual violence is affected by legal environments and by the tendency to classify sexual abuse of men as torture rather than sexual violence. Implicitly, observed cases cannot be treated as a direct measure of prevalence. In active conflicts, recorded

male CRSV is better understood as a lower-bound indicator filtered through survivor disclosure, service access, legal definitions, monitoring mandates, and organizational coding practices

Masculinities, emasculation, and sexualized domination

Masculinity provides a central mechanism connecting male sexual victimization to political violence. Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) reformulation of hegemonic masculinity emphasizes that masculinities are relational and hierarchical rather than fixed attributes of biological sex. In many conflict settings, socially valued masculinity is associated with bodily autonomy, heterosexuality, the capacity to protect dependants, and the capacity to exercise rather than receive coercive force. Sexual violence can therefore be designed or experienced as an attack on gender status: rape, forced nudity, genital abuse, and coerced sexual acts can communicate that the victim has been subordinated, feminized, or stripped of the social authority attached to manhood.

This logic becomes collective when the male victim is understood as a representative of a community. Žarkov (2001), writing on representations of male sexual violence in the former Yugoslavia, demonstrated how the violated male body could be used to construct both masculinity and ethnicity. Sivakumaran (2007) similarly noted that sexual violence against men in ethnic conflicts may symbolically emasculate not only an individual but an entire group. Schulz's (2020) study of northern Uganda further shows that survivors' experiences are mediated by local expectations of masculine providerhood, sexuality, kinship, and social belonging. Such scholarship cautions against reducing male rape to a mirror image of female rape. The gendered meanings of the act are shaped by social norms, but those meanings intersect with other identities and with the political projects of armed actors.

At the same time, an emasculation framework must be used carefully. It can reproduce the very hierarchy it seeks to explain if it implies that being feminized is inherently degrading or that every male survivor understands his experience in identical terms. The relevant analytical question is not whether sexual violence objectively 'makes men into women,' but whether perpetrators, institutions, or social audiences mobilize gendered hierarchies to communicate domination. This distinction permits analysis of sexualized humiliation without reproducing essentialist notions of gender.

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Ethnicity, othering, and civilian targeting in African conflicts

Ethnicity is frequently invoked in explanations of African conflict, sometimes too readily. A constructivist approach treats ethnic categories as historically produced and politically activated rather than as primordial causes of violence. Their significance lies in the work that group boundaries perform: they can organize political exclusion, armed recruitment, territorial claims, security dilemmas, and categories of suspicion. Cederman, Hug, Schubiger, and Villamil (2020) show that ethnic civil wars can produce distinctive patterns of civilian victimization, while the broader conflict literature demonstrates that armed actors often infer political loyalty from group membership when individual-level information is costly or unavailable.

The Central Sahel illustrates why ethnicity should not be treated as a singular causal variable. Violence involving Fulani, Dogon, Tuareg, Arab, Songhai, and other communities has been shaped by pastoralist-farmer tensions, state neglect, insurgent recruitment, counterinsurgency, local self-defence organizations, and transnational jihadist projects. Benjaminsen and Ba (2021) show that the Fulani-Dogon conflict in Mali cannot be adequately explained as timeless communal hostility; insurgency and counterinsurgency transform local disputes and identities. Haidara (2023) likewise shows how jihadist expansion interacts with grievances and local social structures. Ethnicity may therefore be highly salient to violence while still failing to explain the specific choice of sexual violence or its targeting of male victims.

In Sudan, by contrast, racialized and ethnic categories have long been embedded in patterns of militia mobilization, counterinsurgency, forced displacement, and mass violence, particularly in Darfur. The current war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF), although not reducible to ethnicity, has reactivated these histories in areas where RSF and allied forces have targeted non-Arab communities. In Cameroon, the relevant boundary is different again. ‘Anglophone’ and ‘Francophone’ are not ethnic groups in a narrow anthropological sense; they are politicized ethnolinguistic and institutional identities rooted in colonial state formation. Yet the Anglophone boundary has become territorialized and securitized in ways that resemble other ascriptive conflict categories. A comparative framework therefore needs a sufficiently precise but not artificially narrow conception of ethnicity.

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The unresolved intersection

CRSV scholarship has become increasingly attentive to variation in perpetration, although much of its empirical foundation continues to concern women and girls. Research on male victimization has established that men and boys experience sexual violence and that masculine norms shape both perpetration and disclosure, but ethnic targeting is not always examined directly. Work on ethnicity and civilian victimization explains how collective identity can structure violence without usually treating sexual violence against male civilians as a distinct outcome. Bringing these literatures together makes it possible to ask whether a survivor was targeted through gendered assumptions about combatancy, through membership in a stigmatized collectivity, through detention or political suspicion, or through an interaction among these positions.

Intersectionality offers a way to address this problem if it is used analytically rather than rhetorically. Crenshaw (1989) developed intersectionality to show how systems of power generate experiences that cannot be understood by adding separate identity categories. Applied to conflict-affected men, the approach does not imply that male vulnerability is equivalent to the structural inequalities originally examined in Black feminist theory. Instead, it directs attention to co-constituted social positions. A young man from a targeted ethnic group may be treated as a probable fighter; a detained man may become vulnerable to sexualized torture because masculinity is attached to bodily control; a boy may be simultaneously read through age, gender, ethnicity, and security suspicion. The unit of explanation is therefore the intersection of categories as interpreted by perpetrators and institutions, not an additive list of identities.

The conflict categories used in this article organize the cases and provide descriptive context for comparison. They are not treated as independent causes of sexual violence. The analysis instead follows the mechanisms visible within each setting, including the salience of collective boundaries, territorial control, presumed combatancy, detention, armed-group organization, and the quality of available documentation.

Defining male sexual violence, ethnicity, and intersectionality

For the purposes of this study, male conflict-related sexual violence refers to acts of a sexual nature, or intentionally sexualized bodily violations, committed against men and boys in

connection with armed conflict or political violence. The operational category includes rape and attempted rape; sexual assault; forced penetration or coerced sexual acts; genital mutilation or genital torture; sexual slavery; forced nudity where it is used for sexualized humiliation, intimidation, or domination; and other sexualized forms of torture. This broad definition follows the recognition that narrow rape-centered measures can obscure male experiences and that sexualized abuse is often recorded under the general category of torture (Sivakumaran, 2007; Sawyer, 2024). The definition does not, however, classify every instance of nudity or bodily abuse as sexual violence. Context, perpetrator conduct, and the humiliating or sexualized character of the act remain necessary for coding.

Ethnicity is conceptualized constructively as a socially produced boundary of collective identity that is treated as inherited or ascribed, becomes politically salient, and organizes distinctions between insiders and outsiders. This formulation includes racialized ethnic categories in Sudan and allows cautious treatment of Cameroon's Anglophone identity as an ethnolinguistic category because language, colonial legal-educational institutions, territory, and political belonging have become fused into an ascriptive conflict boundary. This is an analytical extension, not a claim that Anglophone Cameroonians constitute a single ethnic group in the conventional sense.

Intersectionality refers here to the process through which gendered and ethnicized classifications jointly shape vulnerability. The focus is relational. Male sex or gender does not create a universal vulnerability to sexual violence, and ethnicity does not mechanically produce victimization. Rather, particular combinations can acquire conflict-specific meanings. A civilian man may be targeted because armed actors interpret his body as evidence of potential combatancy and his group membership as evidence of enemy affiliation. Sexualized violence can then operate simultaneously as punishment of the individual, an attack on masculine status, and a message to the collectivity.

Theoretical anchorage

Feminist conflict scholarship on wartime masculinities provides an important theoretical basis for the analysis. This perspective treats gender as a structure of power that shapes who is expected to fight, protect, endure, or submit. The same norms that privilege some men can

expose civilian males to lethal suspicion and intensify the stigma attached to sexual victimization. Sexual violence against men may communicate domination through coerced helplessness, attacks on sexual or reproductive integrity, or the deliberate use of gendered humiliation. The mechanism concerns the political use of gendered meaning rather than sexual desire.

Constructivist scholarship on ethnicity and security explains how group categories can become proxies for loyalty in conflict. Where an ethnic or ethnolinguistic boundary is politically salient, male civilians identified with an opposing group may be treated as combatants, informants, potential recruits, or supporters. The significance of ethnicity depends on how armed actors use the category in a particular setting. Fluid alliances, cross-community recruitment, ideological tests of loyalty and local political relations can weaken any direct connection between group membership and victim selection.

Research on strategic and organizational variation in wartime sexual violence adds a further qualification. The 'weapon of war' thesis is relevant in some settings but cannot be assumed whenever sexual violence occurs. Wood (2006) shows that armed groups may exercise restraint, while Cohen (2013) and Eriksson Baaz and Stern (2013) demonstrate that perpetration can emerge from organizational processes without an explicit command policy. Ju's (2025) study of secessionist conflicts likewise shows that armed actors facing the same political dispute may have different incentives regarding sexual violence. Perpetrator organization therefore remains necessary to the explanation even where collective identity is highly salient.

Taken together, these perspectives locate the ethnicity-male-CRSV intersection at the point where collective identity, gendered security assumptions, organizational practice, and sexualized coercion meet. Monitoring and classification practices affect whether that intersection becomes visible in the empirical record. The analysis therefore treats documentation as part of the evidentiary problem rather than as a transparent measure of underlying prevalence.

Working typology of conflicts

Civil war is used here to describe sustained armed conflict within a state involving organized contenders for political authority and territorial or governmental control. Sudan fits

this category because the SAF-RSF war is a struggle between major armed formations over the state, even though its violence is regionally differentiated and deeply entangled with ethnicized conflicts, especially in Darfur.

Hybrid transnational war refers to a conflict environment in which domestic insurgency and counterinsurgency are intertwined with transnational violent-extremist organizations, cross-border armed networks, communal self-defence forces, and regional military responses. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are treated as a regional cluster because Jama'atNusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), Islamic State affiliates, national armed forces, foreign or auxiliary security actors, and community militias operate across connected political and social spaces. The label 'hybrid' does not imply an entirely new legal category; it is an analytical device for capturing overlapping local, national, and transnational logics.

Separatist conflict refers to organized armed contestation over territorial separation from an existing state. The Anglophone conflict in Cameroon fits this category because armed separatists seek an independent 'Ambazonia' in the North-West and South-West regions, while the central state seeks to preserve territorial integrity. The conflict is rooted in a politicized Anglophone-Francophone cleavage that combines language, legal and educational institutions, territory, and historical memory.

Propositions

Proposition 1: Where armed actors use ethnic or ethnolinguistic identity as a proxy for enemy affiliation, men and boys from the targeted group are more likely to be exposed to sexualized coercion alongside other forms of collective punishment.

Proposition 2: The association between masculinity and presumed combatancy increases the vulnerability of civilian men and adolescent boys when group identity, residence, age, or political suspicion marks them as potential fighters or collaborators.

Proposition 3: Ethnicity will not always be the immediate targeting logic of male sexual violence. Detention, suspected collaboration, armed-group governance, local rivalry, and organizational practice may mediate or override identity-based selection.

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Proposition 4: The documented relationship between ethnicity and male CRSV will be reduced where stigma, restrictive sexual norms or laws, weak survivor services, insecurity, and coding practices limit disclosure or classification of male sexual victimization.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative, structured-focused comparative design. The objective is analytical comparison rather than prevalence estimation. Each case is examined through the same set of questions concerning the forms of male sexual violence that are documented, the actors involved, the evidence linking victim selection to ethnic or ethnolinguistic identity, the presence of alternative targeting logics, and the local political and organizational context surrounding the abuse. This common protocol allows comparison while preserving case-specific detail.The comparison is case-based rather than a strict most-different-systems design. The Central Sahel case is itself a regional cluster of three states, and the available documentation varies considerably across the settings. Conflict labels are used to organize the material and describe the political environment in which violence occurs; they are not treated as variables that independently determine the pattern of sexual violence.

The study draws on peer-reviewed scholarship; United Nations reports; documentation by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International; and selected institutional country materials. The analysis prioritizes sources that describe incidents, victim categories, perpetrators, and targeting circumstances. Reputable media reporting is used only for contextual details where higher-order documentation is unavailable. The evidentiary window concentrates on the current phases of the conflicts through August 2026, while earlier scholarship is used to establish theoretical and historical context.

The evidence is coded for the presence of male or boy sexual victimization, the form of sexual violence or sexualized abuse, the perpetrating actor, the role of ethnic or ethnolinguistic identity in selection or treatment, and the degree to which the connection is directly supported by the source. Direct evidence identifies male or boy victims within an identity-targeted pattern of CRSV or explicitly links their treatment to group identity. Contextual evidence may establish male CRSV and identity-based targeting within the same conflict without showing that the same

incident involved both. Where the sources document these elements separately, the paper records an evidentiary gap rather than assigning the case an ordinal score.Where existing sources cannot demonstrate that ethnicity is the immediate or systematic targeting logic of male sexual violence, the relationship is recorded as unestablished rather than treated as evidence that male sexual violence is rare. Silence or incomplete documentation is therefore retained as an evidentiary limitation rather than converted into evidence of absence.

The analysis avoids graphic reproduction of survivor testimony where such detail is unnecessary to the argument. Reports of sexual violence are treated as evidence of coercion and political harm rather than as sensational material. The study also does not infer ethnicity from names or locations when sources do not identify it. These choices reduce descriptive breadth but strengthen analytical and ethical caution.

Case Studies

Sudan

Sudan's war began on 15 April 2023 after escalating tensions between the Sudanese Armed Forces, led by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces, led by Mohamed HamdanDagalo ('Hemedti'), developed into open fighting. At the national level, the conflict concerns control of the state and its coercive institutions. Yet the war is not socially uniform. In Darfur, the RSF's institutional lineage in the Janjaweed and the mobilization of allied Arab militias connect the current conflict to earlier campaigns against non-Arab communities. Consequently, the civil war overlays a pre-existing racialized political geography in which ethnic identity can function as a proxy for presumed military and political affiliation.

Human-rights reports document widespread sexual violence in Sudan and repeatedly note severe underreporting. Human Rights Watch (2024a) recorded extensive sexual violence in Khartoum and noted that men and boys were also victims. Its investigation included cases in which men and a boy were raped or otherwise sexually abused, with both RSF and SAF personnel implicated in different incidents. These cases establish male CRSV within a national pattern that humanitarian and public reporting often discusses mainly in relation to women and girls.

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OHCHR's 2026 analysis of CRSV from 15 April 2023 to 15 April 2026 provides direct evidence relevant to the paper's intersectional focus. OHCHR verified 546 incidents affecting at least 838 victims across 16 of Sudan's 18 states: 539 women, 284 girls, eight men, and seven boys. The report stresses that these figures substantially understate the scale of abuse because insecurity, stigma, fear of retaliation, and limited services restrict verification. It records rape, gang rape, attempted rape, sexual slavery, forced marriage, sexual torture, forced nudity, sexual assault, and trafficking. OHCHR also identifies recurrent ethnically motivated targeting and retaliatory violence based on perceived affiliation, particularly in Darfur (OHCHR, 2026).

During the RSF offensive around Zamzam internally displaced persons camp and along surrounding exit routes from mid-April to mid-May 2025, OHCHR verified sexual-violence incidents affecting 114 victims, including three boys, and reported that many victims were from the Zaghawa community. The incident cluster included rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, attempted rape, and sexual assault. The evidence does not establish that all or most Zaghawa victims were male, nor does it provide a male-specific ethnic victim count. It does place boys within a verified episode in which CRSV affected a population identified substantially through ethnic affiliation. This supplies direct evidence for the intersection examined in the paper without extending the claim beyond what the report verifies.

Human Rights Watch's documentation of El Geneina describes ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity directed against the Massalit and other non-Arab communities, including killings, torture, forced displacement, and sexual violence (Human Rights Watch, 2024b). OHCHR's 2026 report similarly describes sexual violence against Zaghawa and other non-Arab populations, sometimes accompanied by racialized insults or assumptions about links to SAF-aligned forces. Sexual violence in these settings occurs within a broader repertoire of group-directed intimidation, punishment, and displacement. Men and boys may be exposed through the presumption of combatancy as well as through sexualized domination directed at persons associated with an opposing community.

The Sudanese evidence supports the proposition that ethnic identity can enter the targeting and meaning of male sexual violence where group membership is used as a proxy for enemy affiliation. In parts of Darfur, sexual violence appears within broader attacks on communities

identified through racialized and ethnic categories. This does not justify treating all sexual violence in Sudan as ethnically motivated. Opportunistic abuse, detention violence, urban predation, retaliation, and different perpetrator practices also appear in the record. The supported claim is narrower: male and boy CRSV is documented in the wider war, and some verified CRSV episodes in Darfur occurred within explicitly ethnicized campaigns.

Central Sahel: Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger

Violence in the Central Sahel involves overlapping insurgent, counterinsurgent, communal, and state-security dynamics. In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, jihadist organizations operate alongside national armed forces, local auxiliaries, and community-based armed groups. Political authority is fragmented in many rural areas, while armed actors impose rules, taxation, recruitment, and punishment on civilian populations. Ethnic identity can be politically salient within this environment, but it is frequently intertwined with locality, livelihood, armed-group affiliation, and accusations of collaboration.

The treatment of Fulani communities illustrates this overlap. Across parts of Mali and Burkina Faso, Fulani civilians have been stereotyped as sympathetic to jihadist groups, exposing men in particular to security-force suspicion and militia violence. Jihadist groups have also recruited among Fulani populations while coercing, taxing, or attacking Fulani civilians who resist them. Benjaminsen and Ba (2021) show that Fulani-Dogon violence in central Mali is inseparable from insurgency and counterinsurgency, while Haidara (2023) emphasizes the interaction between jihadist expansion and local grievances. Ethnicity has material effects in these conflicts, but it operates alongside categories such as collaborator, informant, militia member, taxpayer, and resister.

United Nations reporting from Mali provides direct evidence that men and boys are among CRSV survivors in the Sahelian setting. The report covering 2020 recorded 1,020 cases registered by humanitarian service providers, affecting 510 women, 489 girls, 15 boys, and six men. Reported forms included gang rape, forced marriage, abduction, and sexual slavery, and alleged perpetrators included armed movements, violent extremist groups, unidentified armed men, and Malian security forces (United Nations Secretary-General, 2021). These figures

establish male and boy victimization within a monitoring system that otherwise overwhelmingly records women and girls.

The evidence does not, however, show that the 21 male and boy survivors were targeted principally because of ethnic identity. Nor do more recent UN reports establish such a pattern. In 2024, the United Nations documented sexual violence in Mali primarily against women and girls and emphasized severe monitoring constraints, especially after MINUSMA's withdrawal (United Nations Secretary-General, 2025). This temporal shift cannot safely be interpreted as the disappearance of male CRSV. Given known reporting problems, it is better understood as evidence that male-specific visibility is unstable.

Male ethnicized victimization outside the sexual-violence category is also well documented. Counterinsurgency operations have repeatedly exposed Fulani men to suspicion, arbitrary detention, torture, disappearance, and killing, while jihadist and communal actors target civilians on the basis of alleged collaboration and local identity. These conditions make the possible misclassification of sexualized torture especially relevant to Sawyer's (2024) argument. The available evidence, however, does not permit that possibility to be converted into a verified ethnic pattern of male CRSV. In Mali, male CRSV and ethnicized male targeting are both documented, but their direct connection remains inconsistently established.

Burkina Faso has experienced intense violence by JNIM, Islamic State-affiliated groups, state forces, and Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP). Human Rights Watch reporting through 2026 describes atrocities by jihadist groups and abusive counterinsurgency operations, including patterns in which Fulani communities are collectively stigmatized or targeted. Men are frequently prominent among those killed or detained as suspected fighters or collaborators. Yet available CRSV reporting for the country continues to centre women and girls. The United Nations' 2026 reporting on the broader regional pattern notes abduction, rape, and sexual slavery by armed groups in remote areas of Burkina Faso, but does not provide a comparable male-specific ethnic pattern. The result is a large evidentiary gap between what is known about ethnicized male vulnerability and what is known about male sexual victimization.

Niger exhibits a similar disjuncture. Jihadist violence in Tillabéri and Diffa, state counterinsurgency, and communal insecurity have generated severe risks for civilians. Boys and

men are heavily represented in recruitment, killing, and security detention, while UN child-protection reporting has documented sexual violence primarily against girls. This does not justify the conclusion that boys or men are untouched by sexual abuse; rather, it shows that available surveillance does not permit a confident ethnicity-male-CRSV inference.

Across Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, ethnic identity can shape profiling, communal insecurity, and assumptions about collaboration, while male CRSV is directly documented in Mali. The sources do not establish a consistent pattern in which ethnicity itself is the immediate basis for selecting male victims of sexual violence. Ideology, detention, suspected collaboration, armed-group governance, recruitment, and changing local alliances often enter the same episodes of violence. This evidence supports the proposition that multiple targeting logics can operate alongside ethnicity and also reinforces the importance of underreporting and classification practices when interpreting the male-specific record.

Anglophone Cameroon

The Anglophone conflict emerged from long-standing grievances concerning the political and institutional position of Cameroon's English-speaking North-West and South-West regions. In 2016, lawyers and teachers mobilized against the increasing use of Francophone judges and teachers in institutions shaped by English common law and an Anglophone educational tradition. State repression, radicalization, and the emergence of armed separatist groups transformed the 'Anglophone problem' into sustained armed conflict over an independent state of Ambazonia (Besseng, Crawford, & Annan, 2023). The conflict's identity boundary is therefore not ethnicity in a narrow genealogical sense. It is an ethnolinguistic and territorial identity produced through colonial history, legal and educational institutions, political exclusion, and the experience of conflict.

Young men in Anglophone areas are frequently treated by government forces as suspected separatists, while separatist groups punish civilians accused of disobeying lockdowns, attending government schools, cooperating with the state, or betraying the separatist cause. Human Rights Watch (2018) documented torture and extrajudicial killing of suspected separatists, including young men, and later reporting continued to record abuses by both state and separatist forces. A

male Anglophone civilian may therefore be read as a potential fighter through the interaction of gender, age, residence, language, and presumed political identity.

Sexual and gender-based violence is also part of the conflict, but male-specific evidence is more limited. Human Rights Watch's 2024 country reporting notes sexual and gender-based violence among abuses experienced by civilians in the Anglophone regions. A 2022 investigation provides a particularly relevant example of sexualized humiliation by separatists: eleven students aged 14 to 18 were ordered to strip naked, beaten, threatened with death, and punished for attending school during a separatist-enforced boycott. Video reviewed by Human Rights Watch showed at least one male and one female student being beaten and the group being forced to undress (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Under this study's operational definition, forced nudity imposed to humiliate and coerce can qualify as sexualized violence when the context supports that interpretation. The incident therefore establishes that male students were exposed to a sexualized bodily violation within the separatist conflict.

Other documentation requires greater caution. Reports of nakedness during detention and torture of suspected separatists demonstrate severe bodily humiliation, but not every instance can be coded as sexual violence without evidence of sexualized intent or conduct. Likewise, evidence that state forces have committed rape against civilians does not establish that male Anglophones are routinely raped because they are Anglophone. This distinction matters because the paper's research question concerns the intersection, not the co-existence, of male vulnerability, identity-based targeting, and sexual violence.

The Cameroon evidence shows how an ethnolinguistic boundary can shape male security suspicion without automatically establishing a pattern of male CRSV directed at the group. Male civilians are frequently treated as potential separatists or collaborators, and sexualized humiliation of students is directly documented. Broader CRSV also occurs in the conflict, but current sources do not demonstrate that male sexual violence is systematically deployed against Anglophone men because of their ethnolinguistic identity. Ju's (2025) analysis is useful here because it directs attention to differences among perpetrators rather than assuming a single pattern across all actors in a secessionist conflict.

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The available documentation therefore supports a limited claim for Anglophone Cameroon. Ethnolinguistic identity clearly enters the securitization of male civilians, and at least some sexualized bodily abuse involving males is documented. What remains uncertain is the frequency with which those elements coincide in the same incidents and whether perpetrators use male sexual violence specifically to target Anglophone identity. That uncertainty is retained rather than resolved through comparison with the other cases.

Cross-Case Comparative Analysis

Across the cases, the relationship between collective identity and male CRSV is documented in different ways. Sudanese sources provide incident-level evidence that places boys within CRSV episodes affecting communities identified by ethnicity, while the Central Sahel record more often documents male CRSV and ethnic profiling in parallel rather than in the same incidents. In Anglophone Cameroon, male securitization follows the ethnolinguistic conflict boundary and sexualized humiliation is documented, but the male-specific CRSV record remains sparse. The comparison records these evidentiary differences without converting them into an ordinal ranking or treating them as effects of conflict type. Table 1 summarizes what the available sources establish in each setting.

Table 1

Cross-case comparison of ethnicity and male conflict-related sexual violence

Case	Salient collective boundary	Male/boy CRSV evidence	Evidence connecting identity to CRSV	Current evidentiary position
Sudan	Racialized ethnic identities, especially non-Arab groups in Darfur; perceived SAF/RSF affiliation	Verified men and boys among CRSV victims; rape, sexual torture, forced nudity, and other forms documented	Some verified CRSV episodes occurred within attacks affecting communities identified by ethnicity, including Zaghawa victims around Zamzam	Direct links are documented in specific Darfur episodes, although male-

				specific ethnic counts remain limited
Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger)	Fulani, Dogon, Tuareg, Arab, and other identities interact with jihadist, communal, and counterinsurgent categories	Mali documents men and boys among CRSV survivors; male-specific data in Burkina Faso and Niger are sparse	Ethnic profiling of men is well documented, but sources seldom connect ethnicity directly to male CRSV at incident level	Male CRSV and identity-based targeting are both present, but their direct relationship remains incompletely documented
Anglophone Cameroon	Politicized Anglophone ethnolinguistic-territorial identity and central-state authority	Forced nudity and sexualized humiliation include male students; broader sexual violence is documented	Male Anglophones are frequently securitized as suspected separatists, but direct male-specific ethnolinguistic CRSV evidence remains limited	The evidence links identity to male security suspicion and documents sexualized abuse, but does not establish a systematic male CRSV pattern

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				based on Anglophone identity

Boundary clarity helps explain how ethnicity can enter victim selection. In Darfur, racialized and ethnic categories are socially legible, historically militarized, and connected to territory. Armed actors can use those categories as proxies for political affiliation, making men from targeted communities visible as civilians, potential fighters, or representatives of an opposing group. In the Sahel, ethnic categories also matter, but insurgent recruitment, local alliances, pastoralist-farmer relations, and accusations of collaboration frequently cut across them. The same identity can carry different political meanings from one locality to another.

Territorial politics can intensify the meaning attached to collective identity when armed actors seek to determine who belongs in a contested area and whose presence is treated as politically threatening. Sexual violence may then appear within intimidation, punishment, displacement, or humiliation directed at civilians. Territoriality does not by itself predict perpetration, however. Ju (2025) shows that armed organizations involved in secessionist wars can face different incentives regarding sexual violence, and the Cameroon evidence likewise varies by actor and incident.

Competing targeting logics are especially visible in the Central Sahel. Jihadist groups may classify civilians through religious conformity, cooperation, taxation, local governance, intelligence, or resistance, while counterinsurgents often rely on suspected militant affiliation. Ethnicity may function as a heuristic inside these processes without serving as the immediate rationale for every act of violence. This helps explain why ethnic profiling of men can be extensive even when direct evidence of ethnically targeted male CRSV remains limited.

Organizational practice also affects whether sexual violence becomes part of an armed group's repertoire. Command structures, recruitment systems, discipline, ideology, and internal norms differ across perpetrators (Cohen, 2013; Wood, 2006). A politically salient ethnic cleavage therefore does not imply that every armed organization will use sexualized violence in the same way. Some actors may prohibit it, others may tolerate opportunistic abuse, and others may use it in detention or collective punishment.The reporting environment shapes what can be established

from the cases. Sudan's 2026 OHCHR report provides unusually detailed verification of victim sex, age, location, and some ethnic contexts, whereas comparable male-disaggregated evidence is not consistently available for the Central Sahel or Cameroon.

Discussion of Findings

The findings reinforce a broader shift in CRSV research from universal assumptions toward disaggregated explanation. Male sexual violence should not be treated as an exceptional add-on to a field defined by female victimization, but neither should the recognition of male survivors displace the overwhelming evidence concerning violence against women and girls. A more complete gender analysis asks how different bodies become vulnerable through different configurations of power. For male victims, this requires attention to presumed combatancy, detention, masculinity, sexuality, age, and collective identity.

The comparison also shows why prevalence and targeting logic must be kept separate. A conflict may contain extensive sexual violence without incident-level evidence that ethnicity shaped victim selection, while ethnic persecution may be well documented even where male-specific sexual-violence data are sparse. Analytical precision requires evidence that connects identity to selection wherever possible. Sudanese reporting shows the value of disaggregating victims and recording ethnicized context; the Central Sahel and Cameroon show the uncertainty that remains when those dimensions are documented separately.

Masculinity is not simply a source of privilege in conflict. It can also become a liability when armed actors equate adult or adolescent maleness with combatant potential. Intersectional analysis helps avoid the opposite error of treating all men as equally vulnerable. The male body acquires different meanings when combined with Zaghawa, Massalit, Fulani, Anglophone, adolescent, detainee, displaced, or suspected-collaborator status. These categories do not merely accumulate; they transform one another. A Zaghawa boy fleeing an RSF offensive, for example, may be interpreted through age, gender, ethnicity, displacement, and presumed affiliation simultaneously.

At the same time, scholars should avoid treating emasculation as a universal survivor experience. The concept is most useful when it describes perpetrator scripts or social

expectations that sexualized violence is designed to exploit. Survivor-centred research may reveal different meanings, including fear, bodily injury, betrayal, spiritual harm, family disruption, or political persecution. Future work should therefore distinguish the social grammar of perpetration from the subjective interpretation of survivors.

Documentation practices need to capture more than victim sex and age. Monitoring instruments should also record, where it is safe to do so, the identity categories invoked by perpetrators, the circumstances of detention or capture, the language used during abuse, and whether sexualized acts were recorded under torture rather than CRSV. Confidential systems should be able to detect intersectional patterns without forcing survivors into a single gender or ethnicity variable or requiring disclosure that increases risk.

Survivor services should be genuinely gender-inclusive. Medical care, post-rape treatment, psychosocial support, legal assistance, and referral systems should be available to men and boys without requiring them to identify with stigmatized sexual categories. Staff training should address the possibility that male survivors present with injuries or narratives initially described as torture. Safe referral pathways are especially important where same-sex activity is criminalized or heavily stigmatized.

Protection analysis should incorporate the gendered presumption of combatancy. Civilian men and adolescent boys are often screened, detained, or attacked because armed actors assume that maleness signals military relevance. Where that presumption overlaps with ethnic or ethnolinguistic identity, prevention frameworks should flag elevated risk, particularly at checkpoints, detention facilities, displacement routes, and communities subjected to collective punishment.

Transitional-justice and accountability mechanisms should avoid gender-exclusive definitions of sexual harm. Prosecutors and truth commissions need to recognize rape, forced nudity, genital torture, and coerced sexual acts against male victims and, where the evidence supports it, situate those harms within patterns of ethnic persecution. This can reveal connections that disappear when sexual violence and identity-based crimes are investigated in separate institutional categories.

Attention to men and boys should not be framed as a competition for recognition or resources with women and girls. The empirical record remains overwhelmingly gendered against women and girls in many forms of CRSV. Gender-inclusive protection is better served by recognizing differentiated vulnerability while retaining the gender analysis that made sexual violence visible in the first place.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article examined how ethnicity intersects with conflict-related sexual violence against men and boys in Sudan, the Central Sahel, and Anglophone Cameroon. The comparison was used to identify how collective identity enters victim selection, security suspicion, sexualized coercion, and the documentation of abuse. It was not intended to rank conflict categories or to infer patterns of sexual violence from conflict labels.

In Sudan, recent reporting documents men and boys among CRSV victims and places some sexual-violence episodes in Darfur within attacks directed at identified ethnic communities. In the Central Sahel, male CRSV is documented in Mali and ethnicized male targeting is widespread in the regional conflict environment, but available sources rarely establish that ethnicity was the immediate basis for male sexual victimization. Anglophone Cameroon shows sustained ethnolinguistic securitization of male civilians and documented sexualized humiliation, while evidence linking male CRSV systematically to Anglophone identity remains limited.

Across the cases, the central analytical issue is whether available evidence connects group identity to the selection or treatment of male victims. That connection is most persuasive when sources identify the victim category, the perpetrator, the surrounding identity-based targeting, and the sexualized nature of the abuse within the same incident or episode. Where those elements are documented separately, the paper retains the uncertainty rather than inferring a relationship from the broader conflict setting. This approach also keeps underreporting and classification bias visible in the interpretation of male CRSV.

The study has significant limitations. It relies on secondary and institutional documentation from active conflicts, cannot estimate prevalence, and is constrained by unequal monitoring across cases. The absence of male-specific reports, particularly in the Central Sahel and

Cameroon, cannot be read as evidence of absence. Future research should combine survivor-centred qualitative fieldwork with systematic event coding, disaggregate perpetrators and forms of sexual violence, and examine a wider range of conflict settings. Particular attention should be paid to detention, forced nudity, genital torture, and the institutional boundary between 'torture' and 'sexual violence.'

Recognizing male sexual victimization does more than add another victim category to conflict studies. It exposes how gendered ideas about combatancy and masculinity interact with collective identities to make some bodies simultaneously threatening, punishable, and difficult to recognize as victims. A fuller account of African political violence must therefore examine not only who is attacked, but how the meanings attached to gender and group belonging combine to shape the form that violence takes.

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