

Not Just a “Weapon of the Weak”: Reframing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence from Past to Present

August 17, 2026

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ABSTRACT

Conflict-related sexual violence is now universally condemned throughout the international community. It is also typically understood as a “weapon of the weak” exploited by resource-poor armed groups and failing states. While not without analytic utility, this understanding is reductive, drawing attention away from instances of conflict-related sexual violence by some of the world’s most powerful actors. This article spotlights three instances of conflict-related sexual violence which serve to caution against too great a reliance on the “weapon of the weak” narrative: colonial sexual violence, sexual violence within military ranks, and sexual violence in detention centers. It reflects on the inadequacies of this trope in light of the Israeli state’s ongoing campaign of genocide against Palestinians, as well as a moment of significant change for global power dynamics.

TAGS:

Conflict-related sexual violence; colonial violence; Palestine; Israeli genocide

CITATION:

Norosky, Jenna, 2026. “Not Just a ‘Weapon of the Weak’: Reframing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence from Past to Present,” Security in Context Policy Paper 26-07. August 2026, Security in Context

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Author’s Disclaimer: All thoughts here are my own and are not reflective of any of my institutional affiliations.

Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: A “Weapon of the Weak”?

In 2014 the UK, led by then-Foreign Secretary William Hague, hosted the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict in London. The event brought foreign ministers, practitioners, and NGOs from around the world to catalyze action around the issue of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). In his speech at the closing plenary, then-US Secretary of State John Kerry had this to say about the crime:

So recently, a friend of mine asked me – he said, “Why now? Why this conference now?” After all, this person, this friend, had been a student of warfare, had fought in a war, and he reminded me that sexual violence against women is a conflict that is as old as conflict itself. Well, there’s a reason why marauding armies, he said, thousands of years ago coined the phrase, “rape, pillage, and plunder” – the norm of battle, the trilogy of terror that reflected the rights of conquerors.

So why now? Because thousands of years after rape was written into the lexicon of warfare, we know that it is time to write it out and to banish sexual violence to the dark ages and the history books where it belongs (Kerry 2014).

Framing CRSV as something antithetical to modern warfare is common in research, policy initiatives such as the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, and in popular lexicon. Often, this framing is bridged to CRSV’s strategic utility for technologically underdeveloped or resource-poor armed groups to explain its pervasiveness throughout history, from the siege warfare of antiquity (Vihervalli 2022) to its use by the dozens of rebel organizations operating in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo as well as the weakened Congolese state itself (Meger 2015). Like terrorism, then, CRSV is typically understood as one of what James Scott famously coined “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985).

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Stakeholders refer to CRSV as “[p]rimitive yet effective” (S/PV.7704 (2016), 45) and “[c]heaper than bullets” because “it requires no weapons system other than physical intimidation, making it low cost, yet high impact” (Department of Peacekeeping Operations 2010, 12, cited in Meger 2016, 152). As WPS researcher Paul Kirby notes, “the cheapness of wartime sexual violence for an economic strategy of resource accumulation in the Democratic Republic of Congo is central for campaigners like Eve Ensler, who has commented that ‘rape is a very cheap method of warfare. You don’t have to buy scud missiles or hand grenades’” (Kirby 2012, 808, citing NPR 2009).

Yet like terrorism (Fortna 2022), understanding CRSV as a “weapon of the weak” may obscure as much as it reveals. This model not only hinders the empirical understanding of CRSV, but contributes to global hierarchies underpinning contemporary approaches to CRSV, and further creates an even easier route for the most powerful actors to evade responsibility for this crime – a crime which already goes unpunished far too often.

I begin this essay by situating the weapon of the weak narrative against the broader literature problematizing discourses on CRSV and the WPS agenda which have emerged in the past few decades. I then highlight three cases which underscore the problem of this narrative: colonial sexual violence, sexual violence within military ranks, and sexual violence in detention centers. I argue that these cases challenge the assumption that CRSV always mitigates a lack of resources. I conclude by laying out the stakes for how we think about CRSV in a moment of geopolitical change, as well as increasing evidence of CRSV perpetrated by the Israeli government against Palestinians, which has once again launched CRSV into the global spotlight. This ongoing case is especially important given the salience of CRSV attributed to Hamas during the October 7 attacks to the genocidal rhetoric of the Israeli government, piecemeal but notable attempts to hold this government accountable for its alleged use of CRSV, and its strong backlash to these attempts.

Critical Approaches to the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

Global attention to CRSV today has come a long way from previous depictions of rape as an inevitable spoil of war. After witnessing mass rapes in the Balkans and Rwanda, in 1998, feminist advocates made history by ensuring that the Rome Statute underpinning the creation of the International Criminal Court included sexual violence as a potential war crime, crime against humanity, and crime of genocide. Feminist advocacy is also responsible for the passage of Resolution 1325 (also known as the WPS agenda) in 2000, which further recognized the gendered contours of armed conflict. While sexual violence was mentioned within Resolution 1325, it constitutes just one piece of the agenda: more broadly, it concerns not only the vulnerabilities experienced by women and girls during conflict, but their involvement in preventing and responding to it.

Some feminists, however, express concern that the WPS agenda has been co-opted away from its radical roots. In departure from the antimilitarist commitments which

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informed much feminist advocacy throughout the twentieth century (Wright and Achilleos-Sarll 2024), state interpellations of the WPS agenda tend to focus on “making war safe for women” (Shepherd 2016) rather than ending war itself. In focusing on the inclusion of women in security forces, for example, women’s capacities are absorbed into the same militarist, masculinist structures which perpetuate gender inequality in the first place (Musina 2023; Bell and Wegner 2025).

A parallel line of critique concerns the coloniality of the WPS agenda. The WPS agenda as it is institutionalized within the UN system fails to reflect the complex localities in which it attempts to intervene, instead promoting a Eurocentric and neoliberal vision of women’s empowerment (Hooser 2025; Manchanda 2020). This narrow focus reflects a broader tendency of Western feminism to “discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/re-presenting a composite, singular ‘Third World Woman’” (Mohanty 1988, 334), and to presume the voicelessness of this composite image (Spivak 1988).

This is not without contestation. Actors from the Global South have regularly intervened to expose the prejudicial ways the WPS agenda as well as other international policy instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women are interpreted and applied (Basu 2016, Mageza-Barthel 2016). Nevertheless, Global North actors tend to fashion themselves as the *de facto* leaders of this agenda (Davies and True 2017; Shepherd and True 2014). This is reflected in how Global North states focus predominantly on how they can build the capacities of Global South women, as opposed to turning inwards (Achilleos-Sarll 2020; Haastrup and Hagen 2020). This practice locates the West on the “outside” of WPS, implying that gender equality is something it has already achieved.

Just as racial-colonial logics inform Western constructions of the simultaneously empowered/protected “local” woman, so too do they shape constructions of the “local” man (Achilleos-Sarll 2020; Duriesmith 2017; Wright 2020). The narrative of “saving” racialized women hinges the depiction of racialized men as especially inclined towards misogynistic violence (Bhattacharyya 2009). This becomes especially evident in the case of CRSV. Reflecting on when the Democratic Republic of Congo became the “quintessential reference point of sexual violence in conflict” during the 2000’s and 2010’s, Lewis contends that emergent discourses reified “the ‘Congolese woman’ as always-already defined by her ‘victim-survivorhood’ at the hand of the ‘Congolese man,’ always-already defined by his ‘perpetratorhood’” (Lewis 2022, 56-57; see also Baaz and Stern 2013; Mertens 2019; Oruh 2015). The coloniality of the Western gaze on sexual violence in Congo reflects a pattern observable in Global North approaches to CRSV more broadly: CRSV is depicted as fundamentally *external* to the Global North and *intrinsic* to the countries in which organizations from the Global North intervene (Norosky 2024).

In line with critiques of WPS more generally, the fixation on CRSV may also function to perpetuate militarism. Some argue that representing sexual violence as a “weapon of war” misleadingly disaggregates CRSV from patriarchal structures and everyday

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gendered violence which prevail throughout “peacetime” (Gray 2019; Kreft 2020; Meger 2016). The tendency to isolate and hyper-fixate on CRSV indeed plays into the militarization of the anti-CRSV agenda, given that it obscures the ways in which women’s lives are routinely threatened by not only (or even most frequently) CRSV, but the war system as a whole.

I fully concur with these critiques of what Meger (2016) calls the “fetishization” of CRSV. However, it’s also important to push back against the persistent narrative that CRSV is not a problem of the West or of other wealthy states with strong militaries. Not only does the trope of sexual violence as a “weapon of the weak” reify the racial-colonial logics discussed above, but it obscures perpetrators and forms of CRSV which challenge this stereotype. This contributes to the global inequalities embedded within the broader WPS agenda, to which I will return in the final section.

Colonial Sexual Violence

While rarely placed in the lexicon of CRSV, there is documentation of sexual violence perpetrated by colonizers against colonized peoples throughout history, such as during the European colonization of North America (Smith 2003 and 2015) and the Japanese occupation of East and Southeast Asia during the Second World War (Chung 1997; Yang 2008).

Recovering traces of colonial sexual violence during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is challenging, not least because colonial administrators often concealed sexual violence in their archives by refusing to name it as such (Heath 2016) or failed to prosecute it (Cunningham 2020; Lauro 2021; Smith 2022). Nevertheless, the available evidence indicates that sexual violence is constitutive of colonial practices rather than an aberration from them (Mertens 2023; Smith 2003).

That colonial powers frequently perpetrated sexual violence against colonized peoples is especially notable given how central imposing gender and sexual norms was to the broader colonial project. Meiu (2015, 1) puts it succinctly: “Sexuality represented a central domain of colonial imagination and intervention through which various social actors, who were involved in the politics of the empire, constructed and contested arguments about race and culture, difference and sameness, superiority and inferiority, morality and indecency.” Colonizers represented the sexualities of the colonized as “backwards” and saw colonialism, in part, as an opportunity to bring them into alignment with modernity (Lauro 2021).

However, colonialism entails an inherent instability in that this “modernity could be realised only through coercive means” (Levine 1999, 44). The intrinsic violence of colonialism remains at tension with the assertion of colonial benevolence, especially when considering colonial sexual violence.

Yet colonial sexual violence is rarely considered to be relevant for contemporary efforts to prevent and respond to CRSV. When postcolonial states have raised the issue of

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reparations for postcolonial states at the UN, former colonial powers rejected drawing attention to the past, arguing it distracts from the pressing issues of the present (see, i.e., Ho 2021).

However, given the degree to which contemporary framings of CRSV are beset by colonial logics, recognition of colonial sexual violence is important in perpetuating a more balanced and holistic view of CRSV, particularly when that violence occurred in contexts now presently experiencing CRSV in new forms. This is most starkly evident in the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo, named the “rape capital of the world” by onlookers hoping to catalyze attention to wartime sexual violence there in the West (Lewis 2022; Mertens 2023). The essentialization of CRSV in Congo, read against the loud silence on the sexual violence perpetrated by Belgian colonizers, reveals that each move constitutes the other: as Mertens (2023, 545) argues, “[a]cknowledging colonialism as an enduring force in policy reports, scholarship, and media on CRSV would de-exceptionalize sexual violence in eastern Congo. It would enable us to see sexual violence not as inherent in or ‘typical’ of the region, but as part of a continuum of gendered violence.”

Sexual Violence within the Armed Forces

Generalizing CRSV as a “weapon of the weak” also obscures sexual violence perpetrated by members of the armed forces against their own military colleagues (known as military sexual violence, or MSV) and leads to its exclusion from CRSV research and policy. MSV is hardly, if ever, raised at international forums discussing CRSV. Addressing MSV as a form of CRSV would not only force countries which routinely constitute themselves as on the outside of CRSV to look inwards, but also potentially challenge their ability to take the lead on this issue diplomatically.

Research on MSV disproportionately focuses on the US context (Godier and Fossey 2018). However, studies with substantial population sizes are also available for Canada, France, and South Korea, all three of which constitute the top 15 military spenders of 2024.

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Country	Year(s) of Sample Collection	% female respondents reporting MSV	% male respondents reporting MSV	Total military spending for 2024	Global ranking for % of 2024 GDP as military spending	Source
Canada	2013	15.5% (n=8,920)	0.8% (n=55,480)	\$29.3 billion	15	Watkins et al. 2017
France	2014-2015	12.6% (n=232)	3.5% (n=1,268)	\$64.7 billion	9	Moreau et al. 2021
South Korea	2003	n/a	15.4% (n=671)	\$47.6 billion	11	Kwon et al. 2007
US	2009-2011	10% (n= 4,352)	0.5% (n=16,211)	\$997 billion	1	Barth et al. 2016
US (meta-analysis)	Varies	23.6%	1.9%	\$997 billion	1	Wilson 2016
US (meta-analysis)	Varies	24%	1.9%	\$997 billion	1	Greenburg 2024

Prevalence studies with large sample sizes for reported MSV in the armed forces in Canada, France, South Korea, and the US. In accordance with national privacy laws the study on Canada was weighted; the unweighted number of respondents is n=6696 (Watkins et al. 2017). The statistics included in this table represent measures of reported physical sexual violence, of which precise definitions varied; measures of reported verbal sexual harassment are not included in this table. Military spending estimates are from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI 2025).

Data on MSV likely vastly underestimates the extent of the problem due to chronic underreporting for both women and men resulting from fears of interpersonal and professional retaliation and the mishandling of their cases (Mengeling et al. 2014; Turchik and Wilson 2010). Estimates for men are likely to fall especially short; one study estimates that no more than 13% of male survivors report MSV, compared to 40% of female survivors (Swords to Ploughshares 2015, cited in Greenburg 2024, 16-17). Another study suggests that “one in three men who are sexually assaulted in the military describe the offense as hazing or bullying — twice the rate reported by women who are sexually assaulted” (Calvert and Philipps 2019).

One might object that conceptualizing MSV under the CRSV umbrella risks drifting towards “conceptual bloat” in the sense that if CRSV means everything, it means nothing. The most blatant reason to keep this issue in a separate conceptual box is that oftentimes it takes place far removed from the context of conflict itself, such as at training camps.

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However, evidence suggests that it might be precisely while facing active combat that soldiers’ vulnerability to MSV increases: a US-based study identified that “[m]en reporting combat exposure had more than three times the risk for sexual assault compared with those with no combat exposure” (Barth et al. 2016, 81). Another study found that deployed women “with combat-like experiences had significantly greater odds of reporting sexual harassment or both sexual harassment and assault” (LeardMann et al. 2013, 219).

What explains MSV? Rather than constituting a weapon of war ordered from the top with the goal of advancing strategic aims, or on the opposite end of the spectrum amounting to sheer opportunism, research indicates that much CRSV better resembles what Wood calls a “practice,” which is “when commanders do not order or authorize rape but tolerate it (Wood 2018, 516; see also Cohen 2013). In terms of where this practice emerges from, feminist literature demonstrates how military cultures are constituted by a hegemonic form of masculinity which “requires and produces gender inequality” (Sjoberg and Via 2010, 10). However, it is the category of femininity as a whole which is denigrated, such that “casting the subordinated as feminine devalorizes not only the empirical gender category of women but also sexually, racially, culturally, and economically marginalized men (e.g., “lazy migrants,” “primitive natives,” “effeminate gays”) (Peterson 2010, 19).

To explain the prevalence of MSV in the US military, Wood and Toppelberg apply the theory of rape as a practice to suggest that the informal and formal socialization processes of recruits “establish sexual abuse as an appropriate punishment, including of those whose gender or sexual identities are seen as transgressing military gender norms” and promote impunity for it (Wood and Toppelberg 2018, 629-630). While some elements of US military culture appear antithetical to sexual violence, such as discipline (Titunik 2008), they nonetheless coexist with other elements which perpetuate it.

When perpetrated by members of state militaries (rather than nonstate armed groups), the problem of sexual violence is often attributed to a failure of state capacity. Yet with the world’s largest military budget, sexual violence in the US military prevails at high levels. As the author of one prevalence study concludes, “[t]he persistence of violent misogyny within military culture speaks to the difficulty of changing how gender operates within an existentially violent institution. It is also another reminder of the contradiction of achieving greater gender and racial equality within an institution whose wars contribute to global poverty and inequality around the world” (Greenburg 2024, 28).

Sexual Violence in US Black Sites during the Global War on Terror

The perpetration of sexual violence in state-run detention centers also contradicts the characterization of CRSV as a weapon of the weak. Crucially, as with MSV, evidence of this kind of sexual violence is not exclusive to resource-poor states but can also be

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found in contexts where security infrastructure is well-funded and technologically advanced.

The significant involvement of medical professionals in the design and implementation of torture protocols is a noted attribute of the infamous Guantánamo Bay Detention Camp (GITMO), but it was common throughout CIA-run “black sites” which cropped up during the Global War on Terror. Less noted, however, are the racial-sexual logics underlying some of these practices which reveal their function as not only a form of torture, but racialized sexual violence intended to humiliate detainees. Underscoring the sexual dimensions of what we know of the wider US torture program and recasting Abu Ghraib as a potential indicator of a wider pattern rather than a one-off further throws the merits of the US’ self-appointed leadership into question.

“Rectal feeding” and “rectal rehydration” describe the administration of an enema containing nutrients or water via the rectal cavity in situations where a patient cannot eat or drink normally. Today, enemas are not typically used for this purpose, given the scientifically demonstrated ineffectiveness of the technique compared to oral or intravenous methods, as well as their documented side effects (Barr et al. 2021).

As compellingly argued by Neel Ahuja, however, rectal feeding and rehydration regimes imposed by the CIA against detainees constitute rape conveniently concealed by medical jargon. Oftentimes, this method of torture was used against detainees when they refused food or drink (Ahuja 2020, 24-5). Ahuja’s reading of US Senate’s “torture report,” as it’s often known, demonstrates how logics of racial control based on essentialisms of Muslim and Arab masculinity shaped these practices (see also Puar 2004). Internal memos reveal how psychologists developing torture programs considered, “whether the techniques should be tailored to address specific forms of cultural resistance” (Ahuja 2020, 29).

The CIA claimed that rectal feeding and rehydration is a “well acknowledged medical technique” (Ahuja 2020, 31). But as Ahuja clarifies, while this would have been true in the 19th century, today the practice is medically obsolete. Despite this, the heavy involvement of medical and psychological professionals and the apparently extensive time and resources devoted to refining these methods of torture works to distance them from the sexual violence of “the dark ages and the history books” (Kerry 2014).

Unlike the Abu Ghraib atrocities, the violence outlined in the torture report could not be dismissed as the actions of a few “bad apples,” given the paper trail demonstrating how a preference for particular forms of torture originated within the upper echelons of the US government and were rebranded with the euphemism of “enhanced interrogation,” as illustrated in the infamous Bybee Memo (Chwastiak 2015).

However, even Abu Ghraib is rarely raised within the typology of CRSV. Of course, the sexual dimension of the torture at Abu Ghraib did not go unnoticed, and in fact saturated discussions in both the media and much of academia. Yet in advocacy from human rights NGOs on Abu Ghraib, “torture” and “prisoner abuse” are the dominant frames through which this violence is represented (see, i.e., Human Rights Watch 2004).

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On the other hand, during the same timeframe that the Abu Ghraib atrocities were leaked the international community was also beginning to pay attention to the violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and Darfur, where the label of sexual violence as a “weapon of war” was deployed frequently by the same organizations (see, i.e., Amnesty International 2004).

Ongoing Sexual Violence in Israeli Detention Centers

The example of Abu Ghraib additionally illustrates how applications of the CRSV label are limited not only by the form that sexual violence takes, but even more simply, by the actor accused of perpetrating it. Scholarship points to the under-acknowledgment of evidence of sexual violence perpetrated against Palestinian women, men, and children by Israeli soldiers as symptomatic of the coloniality embedded within mainstream approaches to CRSV (Madar 2023; Medien 2021; for a post-October 7 account, see Mhajne 2026). In the present moment where claims about sexual violence are being used to justify genocide, these critiques are especially salient.

Numerous accusations of sexual violence against Palestinians have been made against Israel. Notably, in March of 2025, the UN Human Rights Council received a report from the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel (IICIOPT) describing what it refers to as “the systematic use of sexual, reproductive and other gender-based violence” against Palestinian women, men, and children, spanning from rape and other forms of sexual violence during arrest and detention to the impacts of starvation on pregnant and lactating women (IICIOPTI 2025).

Indicators of sexual violence by Israeli forces came prior this, however. In the initial months of Israel’s incursion into Gaza, photos circulated showing IDF soldiers posing with lingerie taken from the homes of Palestinian women (Fernández 2024; Shirbon and Grzanka 2024). Other photos, seemingly taken from far away, depict dozens of detained Palestinian men surrounded by IDF soldiers and stripped to their underwear (Salman 2023; Simon and Langfitt 2023). An IDF spokesperson told CNN those in the photos were “ Hamas members and suspect Hamas members,” and were “without clothes in order to make sure they’re not carrying explosives” (Salman 2023). In 2024, human rights NGO B’Tselem published an analysis of reported deaths and torture, including sexual violence, of detained Palestinians (B’Tselem 2024).

Most recently, the Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor released its own report on sexual violence in Israeli detention centers in April of 2026. The report describes “a targeted pattern against cultural and religious identity, such as forcibly removing the hijab from female detainees, photographing them naked or half-naked, and threatening to share these images online to humiliate and socially blackmail them” (Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor 2026, 21). It alleges that perpetrators “aim[ed] to weaken the social incubator of

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prisoners by exploiting cultural sensitivities around ‘honour’ and ‘dignity’” (Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor 2026, 56). There are striking parallels here with the architects of the CIA torture program musing about whether they could “address specific forms of cultural resistance” (Ahuja 2020, 29) through certain torture techniques.

Israel is not the only actor in the conflict facing accusations of sexual violence. Allegations that members of Hamas perpetrated sexual violence during and after the October 7 attacks received significant media coverage. Notably, Israel invited the Office for the Special Representative to the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict (OSRSG-SVC) to investigate these claims, marking the first time the OSRSG-SVC conducted its own independent fact-finding mission (OSRSG-SVC 2024).

Troublingly, the report released by the Human Rights Council in 2025 purports that “Israeli officials have used sexual violence committed on Israeli women on 7 October to mobilize support for the [Israeli Security Forces] military operations in the Gaza Strip and continue the war, referring to Hamas as ‘a rapist regime’” (IICIOPT 2025, 19). For example, in one statement to the Security Council, an Israeli delegate states that “[t]he demilitarization and disarmament of Hamas and the deradicalization of the Gaza Strip through education for peace and coexistence are key to ensuring that the abhorrent crimes carried out on 7 October will not be committed again against the women and girls in Israel and beyond. There will be no peace as long as children are taught to hate” (S/PV.9614 (Resumption 2), 2). A social media post from the American Israel Public Affairs Committee similarly warns: “A ceasefire now keeps these rapist monsters armed and in power in Gaza” (cited in Mhajne 2026, 115).

However, it’s not only accusations of sexual violence against Hamas which provide recourse for Israel to justify its genocide against Palestinians. The Israeli delegate continues:

As for the allegations of misconduct against Palestinians in detention mentioned in the report, those allegations have regretfully been made in a clear attempt to balance Hamas’s crimes with Israeli misconduct, as conflict-related sexual violence was never part of the conflict prior to Hamas’s brutal and atrocious attack. Nonetheless, Israel is a transparent democracy with all necessary mechanisms to evaluate any claims of misconduct. Such allegations are reviewed by Israel in accordance with the robust procedures and instruments it has in place for that purpose (S/PV.9614 (Resumption 2), 2).

Indeed, as noted by Medien (2021, 707), much of the literature on CRSV portrays the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a context from which CRSV is notably absent. Yet Medien, Madar (2023), and Mhajne (2026) point out that this is puzzling, given the available evidence to the contrary, which indicated patterns of sexual violence in Israeli detention centers *before* October 7 (see, i.e., Weishut 2015). Madar (2023, 74) asks: “Why did knowledge of these cases not lead to their consideration as the tip of the iceberg in relation to what we know about Israeli state sexual violence? Why, instead of exploring the silence around Israeli state sexual violence against Palestinians, was this silence used to acquit Israel?”

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In this regard, the tendency to focus disproportionately on nonstate perpetrators of CRSV has significant implications. The previous statement provided by the Israeli delegate implies that IDF-perpetrated CRSV is implausible because of Israel's democratic institutions. Yet as the CIA torture program reminds us, when individuals are represented as inhumane, as monsters, and as fundamentally “other,” it doesn't matter what institutions and legal protections are in place, because those “others” will be subjected to different rules.

In March of 2026, the Israeli government dropped charges against five soldiers accused of sexually violating a Palestinian detainee (Associated Press 2026). In response to the news, executive director of the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel, Sari Bashi, told the Associated Press that “Israel's military advocate general just gave his soldiers license to rape – so long as the victim is Palestinian” (Frankel 2026). This comment came shortly before the Knesset adopted a law instating mandatory death sentences for Palestinians accused of “terrorism related offenses” (Bedard 2026).

However, there are signs that Israel's “acquittal” (Madar 2023, 74) by the international community might finally be starting to unravel. The UN Secretary-General's most recent annual report on sexual violence in conflict, released May 29, 2026, directly attributes CRSV to Israeli forces for the first time. Annual reports from 2024 and 2025 mentioned evidence of IDF-perpetrated CRSV but did not include Israel in its annex of “parties credibly suspected of committing or being responsible for” CRSV (S/2024/292; S/2025/389). Hamas is also included in the newest list, as it was in 2025. In response to the listing, Israel stated that it would sever diplomatic ties with Secretary-General António Guterres, calling the accusation “disconnected from facts and reality” and the decision to place Hamas and Israel on the same list “unacceptable” (Livni 2026).

Reshaping Approaches to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence amidst Change and Turmoil

Despite constituting a relatively specific concern, CRSV receives disproportionate attention in policy, advocacy, and scholarship compared to problems which arguably have an even wider impact. This is in no small part, as many have remarked, due to the highly affective nature of the topic: it promotes an emotional response, is easy to sensationalize, and grabs attention more than other impacts of war typically perceived as more mundane.

Nonetheless, given this significant attention, the application of the CRSV label is highly political. CRSV is thought of, in the words of an Australian general, as “distinguishing between the soldier and the brute” (Norosky 2024, 552). If CRSV represents humanity at its most depraved, then it matters greatly who is, and who is not thought to be capable of it. The examples that I have detailed here demonstrate that CRSV is not exclusively a “weapon of the weak” but rather can appear in any context which is sufficiently militarized.

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Some might object that now is not the time to worry about narratives. Funding for CRSV prevention and response along with the entire WPS agenda is the most scarce it has been since global attention to this set of issues first emerged. Humanitarian aid is also stretched thin; for all the critiques which can be fairly directed at USAID, its dissolution exacerbates crises around the world as funding which many conflict-affected individuals have come to rely on is now gone. The US is also fronting an international backlash against gender work which it previously supported (Norosky 2026), which only emboldens others to contest the very legitimacy of the WPS agenda.

The immediate concern is to cope with these catastrophic effects by identifying alternative sources of funding. But it's also clear that moving forward, the international landscape is not going back to the way it was. What form it will take remains unclear, but NGOs should begin to consider how they can leverage the WPS agenda in the absence of US leadership.

At the international level, the WPS agenda has reinforced global power dynamics and failed to challenge the militarism underlying the insecurity of women, men and children around the world. The retreat of the US from many of the global governance institutions and issue areas it once dominated will leave a power vacuum in terms of agenda-setting and leadership; the question is, who will fill it? In terms of CRSV and the WPS agenda more generally, European states need to act in equal partnership with the global majority, not “lead from the front,” as one UK bureaucrat suggested (Norosky 2024, 549-550).

If there has ever been a time to challenge double standards on CRSV, it is now. While the inclusion of Israel in the Secretary-General's CRSV “blacklist” is symbolic, it is also unprecedented; what Israel's allies will do with this information is yet to be seen. With Israel's staunchest backer no longer interested in setting the WPS agenda, global actors who have held their tongue have an opportunity to step up and demand accountability for the full scale of sexual harms committed, not just those perpetrated by Hamas. Failing to do so plays into Israel's genocidal logic.

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Security in Context was formally launched in October 2020 with generous support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

