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**GENDER, SECURITY, AND THE WEAPONIZATION OF SEXUAL
VIOLENCE**

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Abstract

The systematic use of sexual violence as a weapon of war in African conflicts represents one of the most devastating yet under-examined dimensions of the continent's security crises. This article argues that the weaponization of sexual violence is not a byproduct of conflict but a deliberate strategy of war, a tactic employed to terrorize populations, destroy social cohesion, and assert dominance. Owing to the extensive empirical evidence from Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, and South Sudan, it demonstrates how sexual violence has been systematically deployed as a weapon of war, with devastating physical, psychological, and socio-economic consequences for survivors and communities. The article critically examines the persistent barriers to addressing conflict-related sexual violence, including entrenched impunity, weak legal systems, health system collapse, and socio-cultural stigma. It documents the catastrophic scale of the crisis; in Sudan alone, UN data shows that the number of women and girls requiring gender-based violence services has quadrupled to an estimated 12.7 million in 2026, while verified incidents of conflict-related sexual violence remain "only the tip of the iceberg." The article critically interrogates the gap between the transformative potential of the Women, Peace and Security agenda and the persistent failure to translate policy commitments into tangible action, exposing how geopolitical headwinds, state-centric framings, and a lack of genuine political will systematically undermine implementation. It argues that meaningful security requires centering survivors' experiences, ensuring women's participation in peacebuilding, and addressing the structural inequalities that enable sexual violence in conflict. The article proposes Ubuntu feminism as a theoretical framework for reimagining security, demonstrating how emerging survivor-centered policies in Africa, including Nigeria's new Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration framework and the Rabat

Declaration, represent practical applications of this philosophy. The article concludes with concrete implications for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners, emphasizing the urgent need for survivor-centered approaches, robust accountability mechanisms, and sustained investment in women-led organizations.

Keywords: sexual violence, weapon of war, gender-based violence, Women, Peace and Security, conflict-related sexual violence, impunity, survivor-centered approaches, Ubuntu feminism

Introduction

In the besieged city of El Obeid, Sudan, women and girls face an impossible choice: drone attacks during the day or rape at night. According to UN Women, due to drone strikes targeting water sources and distribution points during daylight hours, women and girls are forced to wait until after nightfall to collect water. Under the perception that darkness offers protection from aerial attacks, these women and girls have been harassed, raped, and subjected to other forms of sexual violence, all while trying to access water, one of life's most fundamental necessities and human rights (UN Women, 2026, para. 4). This is not an isolated horror; it is a defining feature of the weaponization of sexual violence in African conflicts.

The systematic use of sexual violence as a weapon of war has reached unprecedented levels across the continent. In Sudan alone, the UN Human Rights Office verified 546 incidents of conflict-related sexual violence, including gang rape and sexual slavery, affecting at least 838 victims, 539 women, 284 girls, eight men and seven boys across the 16 of Sudan's 18 states between April 2023 and mid-April 2026 (OHCHR, 2026, para. 5). Yet these figures "represent only the tip of the iceberg," as "persistent under-reporting has obscured the full scale of the prevalence of sexual violence" (OHCHR, 2026, para. 6). UN Women data show that the number of women and girls requiring gender-based violence services in Sudan has quadrupled since the conflict began, reaching an estimated 12.7 million in 2026 (UN Women, 2026, para. 5). Sexual violence has been used as a weapon throughout Sudan's three-year war, becoming "one of its most defining features" (UN Women, 2026, para. 5).

The UN Human Rights Office report documents "the coordinated use of conflict-related sexual violence, and recurrent and systematic patterns of its use as a weapon of war" (OHCHR, 2026, para. 3). It has been "widely used as a tactic to terrorize and traumatize the civilian population, and as part of retaliatory attacks and ethnically motivated violence, with profound and long-term impacts on victims, families and communities" (OHCHR, 2026, para. 3). UN Human Rights Chief Volker Türk declared that sexual violence is being used as a "weapon of war," emphasizing that "this is a war crime and, if committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack, a crime against humanity" (BBC, 2026, para. 12).

This article makes a bold claim: The weaponization of sexual violence in African conflicts is not a byproduct of war but a deliberate strategy, a tactic employed to terrorize populations, destroy social cohesion, and assert dominance. Meaningful security requires centering survivors' experiences, ensuring women's participation in peacebuilding, and addressing the structural inequalities that enable sexual violence in conflict.

The argument proceeds in five parts. First, I document the nature and scale of conflict-related sexual violence across Africa, drawing on empirical evidence from Sudan, the DRC, Ethiopia, and South Sudan. Second, I analyze the weaponization of sexual violence as a deliberate strategy of war, examining its strategic purposes and devastating consequences. Third, I critically examine the persistent barriers to addressing conflict-related sexual violence, including entrenched impunity, weak legal systems, health system collapse, and socio-cultural stigma. Fourth, I explore the transformative potential of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, while exposing the gap between policy commitments and tangible action, theorizing the structural, geopolitical, and ideological

reasons for this persistent failure. Finally, I propose a survivor-centered approach to security, grounded in Ubuntu feminism and the lived experiences of African women, as a pathway toward meaningful justice and peace.

The Nature and Scale of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

A Continental Crisis

Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) has reached alarming levels across Africa, devastating women, girls, and entire communities. Survivors face rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, forced marriage, and other abuses, used as gendered weapons of war and tools of terror. Rooted in patriarchal norms, militarisation, and entrenched impunity, these crimes are widespread in Sudan, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Somalia, and Somaliland (SIHA, 2025, para. 2).

A scoping review published in *BMC Public Health* (2025) documented diverse forms of sexual and gender-based violence across African conflict zones, ranging from sexual slavery, rape, and torture to intimate partner violence and child marriage (Springer, 2025, p. 1). The review identified "multiple and overlapping forms of SGBV across conflict-affected regions in Africa," shaped by "the intersection of conflict-related instability, entrenched gender inequalities, and socio-political oppression" (Springer, 2025, p. 10). It found that sexual violence has been "systematically employed as a strategic weapon of war to terrorize, humiliate, and destabilize communities" (Springer, 2025, p. 12).

A systematic review and meta-analysis published in *BMC Public Health* (2024) found alarmingly high prevalence rates of gender-based violence among refugee and internally displaced women in Africa. In Uganda, the prevalence was 51.45%; in Kenya, 63.90%; and in Ethiopia, 41.97% (Springer, 2024, Table 3). Among refugee populations specifically, the prevalence was 56.86%, highlighting the extreme vulnerability of displaced women and girls (Springer, 2024, Table 3).

Sudan: The World's Worst Protection Crisis

Sudan has been described as "the world's worst protection crisis" (SIHA, 2025, para. 8). The war between the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) has created what the UN Secretary-General calls "the world's worst protection crisis." Hospitals lie in ruins; at least 80 to 90 percent of Sudan's health infrastructure has been destroyed, leaving survivors without urgent medical or psychological care (SIHA, 2025, para. 9).

The scale of the crisis demands urgent attention. Between January 2024 and November 2025, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) documented that at least 3,396 survivors sought treatment in facilities in North and South Darfur, with survivors frequently identifying the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) as the perpetrators. MSF's report explicitly states that "sexual violence is being used as a weapon of war and a systematic means of controlling civilians" (MSF, 2025). This represents a shocking escalation in documented cases and underscores the systematic nature of the violence.

Adla Abubker, a Sudanese women's rights activist, reported that "rape, abduction, and collective assaults occur daily" (SIHA, 2025, para. 11). "Violations target all ages, from children as young as one to the elderly," she stressed. "The RSF is using sexual violence as a weapon of war, just as it did in Darfur since 2003" (SIHA, 2025, para. 11). Abubker noted that grassroots groups, often underfunded and harassed, provide safe havens and emergency support where the state has collapsed. Laws like Sudan's "Formula 8" force survivors to report crimes to the police before accessing healthcare, something extremely difficult in conflict zones (SIHA, 2025, para. 12).

The UN Human Rights Office report documents survivors' accounts of "dehumanizing and derogatory language used by perpetrators during ethnically motivated attacks" (OHCHR, 2026, para. 15). One woman described being told, "If you are Masalit, we will slaughter you today," before being subjected

to gang rape. In another account, a survivor recalled being told: "You will be our wives," "You slave," "You are our women," and "This year, all of you Masalit girls deliver our children" (OHCHR, 2026, para. 15).

"Sexual slavery was also used to generate income and to compel victims to perform domestic and other forms of servitude in support of fighters' daily activities. These violations were frequently committed collectively and in conjunction with other human rights violations," the report said (OHCHR, 2026, para. 16). Many victims of sexual violence suffered severe medical complications, particularly following gang rape, and were unable to access timely and adequate medical services due to the absence or non-functioning of health facilities, and insecurity and movement restrictions (OHCHR, 2026, para. 17).

In El Obeid, the situation is particularly dire. UN Women reported that "drone attacks during the day and sexual violence at night have left no safe window for women and girls to collect water, mirroring the atrocities documented in El Fasher last year" (UN Women, 2026, para. 1). Access to food, healthcare, and other essential services is also severely limited, particularly in displacement sites (UN Women, 2026, para. 2). With cholera already spreading (1,330 cases reported by WHO in early July), the combination of malnutrition and lack of access to healthcare is exposing women and girls to the risk of severe illness and death (UN Women, 2026, para. 3).

More than 6,000 people were killed in just three days when the RSF seized El Fasher, according to a UN report released in February (BBC, 2026, para. 21). The UK and six other European powers have warned that El Obeid is on the "precipice of atrocity" (BBC, 2026, para. 8).

The Democratic Republic of Congo: Sexual Violence as Ethnic Cleansing

In the Eastern DRC, armed groups have weaponized rape as a tactic for ethnic cleansing and asserting dominance (Springer, 2025, p. 12). The conflict has displaced more than 2.5 million people in North Kivu between February 2022 and January 2024. Women and girls are "particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and other forms of sexual abuse and exploitation, especially in and around camps for displaced people" (Springer, 2025, p. 15). Armed groups were thought responsible for 61 per cent of violations, with some 700 new victims of sexual violence recorded in a single period (Springer, 2025, p. 15). "Armed groups abduct, hold captive and subject women and girls to sexual slavery" (Springer, 2025, p. 15). Women who work in artisanal mining areas face high risks of sexual violence, with "over 60% of women interviewed in artisanal mining areas hav[ing] experienced some form of violence related to their activity" (UN Women, 2025, para. 8).

The situation in the DRC has also been shaped significantly by external actors. A 2025 study argues that Rwanda has been a key external actor enabling sexual violence as a tactic in the eastern DRC since 1996, using it to control armed groups and reinforce "hegemonic and militarized masculinities" to weaken the local population and seize mineral-rich land (Muvumba Sellström & Wai, 2025). This geopolitical dimension adds a critical layer to understanding how sexual violence is strategically employed and sustained, demonstrating the need to examine both local dynamics and regional power structures.

Ethiopia's Tigray: Systematic Sexual Violence

The Tigray war in northern Ethiopia (2020–2023) witnessed widespread reports of sexual violence, underscoring the urgent need for effective interventions (Springer, 2025, p. 5). Evidence shows that sexual violence was deliberately used to inflict terror on civilians, erode family bonds, and disrupt social cohesion, leaving deep psychological scars on survivors and their communities (Springer, 2025, p. 12). "Survivors of the Rwandan genocide described rape and sexual torture as deliberate acts aimed at destroying cultural identity, particularly targeting Tutsi women" (Springer, 2025, p. 12).

Nigeria: Boko Haram and the Weaponization of Sexual Violence

The Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria represents another devastating example of how non-state actors weaponize sexual violence. Between 2009 and 2017, approximately 7,000 women and girls were victims of rape or sexual violence in the context of the insurgency (Oluwaniyi, 2021). Boko Haram has systematically used abduction, forced marriage, and sexual slavery as tactics to terrorize communities, generate revenue through ransom and trafficking, and sustain fighter morale. The infamous Chibok kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls in 2014 brought global attention to this crisis, yet the scale of sexual violence perpetrated by the group remains staggering. This demonstrates that the weaponization of sexual violence is not confined to state-based conflicts but is also a deliberate strategy employed by terrorist organizations.

The Weaponization of Sexual Violence

A Deliberate Strategy of War

The systematic use of sexual violence as a weapon of war is not a byproduct of conflict; it is a deliberate strategy. Flavia Mwangovya of Amnesty International stated that "CRSV is not an isolated incident, it is a deliberate strategy of oppression" (SIHA, 2025, para. 7). The UN Human Rights Office report documents "the coordinated use of conflict-related sexual violence, and recurrent and systematic patterns of its use as a weapon of war" (OHCHR, 2026, para. 3).

The strategic purposes of sexual violence in conflict are multiple:

1. **Terrorizing populations:** Sexual violence instills fear, forcing displacement and breaking community resistance. In Sudan, "sexual violence has been used as a weapon throughout Sudan's three-year war, becoming one of its most defining features" (UN Women, 2026, para. 5). The MSF documentation from Darfur confirms this is a "systematic means of controlling civilians" (MSF, 2025).
2. **Destroying social cohesion:** By targeting women and girls, perpetrators attack the fabric of communities. In Ethiopia's Tigray conflict, sexual violence was "deliberately used to inflict terror on civilians, erode family bonds, and disrupt social cohesion" (Springer, 2025, p. 12).
3. **Asserting dominance and ethnic cleansing:** In the DRC, armed groups "weaponized rape as a tactic for ethnic cleansing and asserting dominance" (Springer, 2025, p. 12). In Sudan, survivors reported perpetrators using dehumanizing and derogatory language during ethnically motivated attacks (OHCHR, 2026, para. 15). The Rwanda-DRC study further demonstrates how external actors enable the use of sexual violence to reinforce militarized masculinities and weaken populations to seize territory and resources (Muvumba Sellström & Wai, 2025).
4. **Generating income and servitude:** "Sexual slavery was also used to generate income and to compel victims to perform domestic and other forms of servitude in support of fighters' daily activities" (OHCHR, 2026, para. 16). In Nigeria, Boko Haram similarly used sexual violence to generate revenue through ransom and trafficking (Oluwaniyi, 2021).
5. **Rewarding fighters and sustaining morale:** Sexual violence is often used to reward combatants and sustain military morale. In Nigeria, Boko Haram used forced marriage and sexual slavery as incentives for fighters, embedding sexual violence into the group's operational structure (Oluwaniyi, 2021).

The Devastating Consequences

The consequences of sexual violence are devastating and long-lasting. "Beyond the violence, the consequences last a lifetime and across generations," said Li Fung, UN Human Rights' Representative in Sudan. "Victims have lost their lives. Survivors live with physical injuries, psychological trauma, unwanted pregnancies, discrimination, family separation and exclusion from their communities" (OHCHR, 2026, para. 4).

The scoping review found that survivors endure "severe physical, psychological, and socio-economic consequences, often compounded by disrupted social systems, limited access to justice, and heightened exposure to violence" (Springer, 2025, p. 3). The review documented that "stigma, fear of retribution, and a lack of adequate infrastructure, including healthcare and justice systems, deter survivors from seeking help, perpetuating cycles of silence and injustice" (Springer, 2025, p. 5).

Barriers to Addressing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

Entrenched Impunity

Impunity remains pervasive, fueling continued violations and abuses. The UN Human Rights Office report "calls for independent and impartial investigations into conflict-related sexual violence, in line with international human rights standards, and for accountability for all perpetrators, including those exercising command responsibility" (OHCHR, 2026, para. 20). It underlines that "there should be no amnesty provisions for sexual violence or other international crimes" (OHCHR, 2026, para. 20). In South Sudan, "the absence of functioning courts compounds the crisis. Military courts have handled most cases, but they are largely ineffective" (SIHA, 2025, para. 14). "Protections for witnesses and survivors are crucial as they often face humiliation, harassment and threats" (SIHA, 2025, para. 14).

Weak Legal Systems and Health System Collapse

The scoping review identified "weak legal systems" and "health system collapse" as key barriers to addressing SGBV in conflict zones (Springer, 2025, p. 1). In Sudan, "at least 80 to 90 per cent of Sudan's health infrastructure has been destroyed, leaving survivors without urgent medical or psychological care" (SIHA, 2025, para. 9). Laws like Sudan's "Formula 8" force survivors to report crimes to the police before accessing healthcare, something extremely difficult in conflict zones (SIHA, 2025, para. 12).

Socio-Cultural Stigma

Socio-cultural stigma emerged as a major barrier across all studies. The scoping review identified "deep-rooted socio-cultural stigma" as a key barrier to effective response (Springer, 2025, p. 1). The IGAD consultation found that "women's participation in community decision-making is majorly constrained by social and cultural norms" (IGAD, 2024, p. 4). The most common norms "discouraging women from speaking in public, limiting women's roles to domestic responsibilities, women's opinions and contributions being devalued, and stigmatizing women who participate in politics" (IGAD, 2024, p. 5).

The Women, Peace and Security Agenda

Progress and Promise

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has made significant strides in Africa. The Windhoek Declaration of 2000 "led to the birth and adoption of UNSCR 1325" (IGAD, 2024, p. 1). Africa has adopted six Regional Action Plans and thirty-five National Action Plans, "making Africa the continent with the highest number of NAPs and RAPs" (IGAD, 2024, p. 1). The African Union has "demonstrated a deep commitment to the WPS agenda" through the establishment of FemWise-Africa (2017) and the Office of the Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security (2014) (IGAD, 2024, p. 2).

The Windhoek+25 Declaration, adopted in October 2025, reaffirms "Africa's unwavering commitment to women's full, equal, and meaningful participation in peace and security processes" (UN Women, 2025, para. 3). The Declaration outlines a comprehensive roadmap including commitments to "institutionalize women's leadership in peacebuilding and governance," "address gender-based violence in conflict and fragile settings," and "promote survivor-centered approaches and access to justice" (UN Women, 2025, para. 9).

The Gap Between Promise and Reality: Theorizing the Failure

Despite these commitments, the gap between policy and reality remains vast. A global consultation known as "From Asking to Action," engaging over 6,500 women across 14 conflict-affected countries, found that "women affected by conflict are repeatedly denied their fundamental right to meaningfully participate in decision-making" (IGAD, 2024, p. 2). "Efforts to include them in policymaking are too often tokenistic" (IGAD, 2024, p. 2).

To move beyond merely documenting this gap, it is essential to theorize why it persists. Three interconnected factors explain this failure:

First, geopolitical headwinds: The WPS agenda faces challenges from a global order marked by "geopolitical tensions, a rise in authoritarian politics and escalating anti-feminist sentiment," leading to "dwindling donor funding and shifting global priorities" (UN Women, 2025, para. 2). This erosion of international commitment undermines the financial and political resources necessary to translate WPS commitments into action.

Second, the state-centric and neo-colonial framing of WPS: A critical feminist perspective highlights that the WPS agenda can be seen as a "colonial and imperialist framing of the Global South," where women are portrayed as "other" in need of protection, rather than as agents with their own knowledge and solutions (IGAD, 2024, p. 2). This framing positions African women as passive victims requiring Western intervention, rather than recognizing their existing agency, expertise, and grassroots peacebuilding work. It perpetuates a hierarchical relationship that undermines the very participation it purports to promote.

Third, lack of genuine political will: A study on Ethiopia and Sudan argues the core challenge is that there is "no genuine interest in addressing women's interests in conflict times at the political level," as implementing UNSCR 1325 would require "seeking justice and holding accountable" perpetrators, which countries avoid (Tadesse, 2023). The WPS agenda demands accountability for human rights violations and meaningful power-sharing with women—both of which threaten the interests of political and military elites who benefit from the status quo.

The consultation found that women's participation is "majorly constrained by social and cultural norms" (IGAD, 2024, p. 4). Women's organizations face severe funding shortages; two-thirds of women's organizations surveyed in Sudan report that "safe spaces and gender-based violence services have either closed or been significantly reduced" in their communities (UN Women, 2026, para. 7). Half of the organizations surveyed "report that, without urgent financial support, they expect to suspend their operations or close entirely within the next year" (UN Women, 2026, para. 8).

A Survivor-Centered Approach to Security

Ubuntu Feminism and Relational Security

The African philosophy of Ubuntu, "I am because we are", offers a powerful foundation for a survivor-centered approach to security. Ubuntu emphasizes relationality and mutual care, challenging the individualistic assumptions of Western security theory. Gendered human security "as a focus for protracted violence against women in a society in transition calls for urgent attention" (Du Plessis, 2019, p. 1). "Ubuntu feminism, rooted in African philosophy, emphasizes interconnectedness, collective healing, and relational justice" (Du Plessis, 2019, p. 5).

Ubuntu feminism centralises African meso-level epistemes of human co-responsibility for well-being, emphasizing a "mutually obligated life" that moves beyond an individualistic, rights-based approach. This is a direct and powerful counter to the critiques of the WPS agenda as a state-centric or neo-colonial project. Rather than positioning African women as passive recipients of protection, Ubuntu feminism recognizes them as active agents within webs of communal responsibility, offering a framework that is both culturally grounded and transformative.

A survivor-centered approach requires:

1. **Centering survivors' experiences:** Security policy must begin with the lived experiences of survivors. As the scoping review found, "survivor-centered and trauma informed care models" are essential (Springer, 2025, p. 1).
2. **Ensuring women's participation:** Women must be "fully, safely, and meaningfully included in peace processes, humanitarian decision-making, and recovery efforts" (UN Women, 2026, para. 10).
3. **Addressing structural inequalities:** The root causes of sexual violence, patriarchal norms, militarisation, and entrenched impunity—must be addressed (SIHA, 2025, para. 17).
4. **Providing comprehensive support:** Survivors need "access to justice and comprehensive support services" (UN Women, 2026, para. 10).
5. **Holding perpetrators accountable:** "Perpetrators of violations must be held accountable" (UN Women, 2026, para. 10).

From Theory to Practice: Emerging Survivor-Centered Policies

Importantly, there is tangible evidence of a shift toward the survivor-centered approach proposed in this article. In late 2025, Nigeria moved to adopt a national Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) framework with a "renewed focus on victims, communities and former survivors of violent extremism." It is described as "one of Nigeria's most people-centred peacebuilding tools" and explicitly prioritizes "restoring dignity to victims" (Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, 2025). This represents a significant departure from traditional DDR models that focus almost exclusively on ex-combatants, instead centering the needs of those harmed by conflict. Similarly, a conference on African Victims of Terrorism in late 2025 adopted the Rabat Declaration, which "reaffirms the central position of victims in national and regional responses to terrorism" and "calls for a comprehensive and solidarity-based approach built on the rights, dignity, and participation of victims" (African Union, 2025). This continental commitment to victim-centered approaches demonstrates growing recognition that sustainable peace requires addressing the harm done to communities, not merely demobilizing fighters.

Practical innovations are also emerging. In Nigeria, the "BackUp" web application has been deployed to help survivors document incidents and coordinate access to care, representing a practical, survivor-oriented tool that leverages technology to overcome barriers of stigma and geographic isolation (Okafor, 2025).

A Novel Contribution: Reframing DDR Through a Survivor-Centered Ubuntu Lens

The argument that traditional DDR models focus on ex-combatants while the WPS agenda demands survivor-centeredness is not merely a critique but points toward a transformative contribution. Emerging, people-centered DDR frameworks in Africa (like Nigeria's) represent a pragmatic application of Ubuntu feminist principles. This article positions its work as the theoretical and moral framework for this practical shift, arguing that:

1. A just peace is not only about demobilizing fighters but about restoring the social fabric and the dignity of those harmed.
2. This requires a process of communal healing and restorative justice, moving beyond individual criminal accountability (though that is also important).
3. By centering survivors and their communities, such a framework breaks the cycle of trauma and revenge, creating the conditions for sustainable peace.

This reframing of DDR through a survivor-centered Ubuntu lens offers a unique and powerful contribution. It demonstrates how an African feminist philosophy can guide concrete policy reform, shifting security discourse from state-centric protection to community-centered healing and justice.

The Role of Women-Led Organizations

Women-led organizations are "the lifeblood of the humanitarian response," often reaching communities others cannot and providing critical support to women and girls (UN Women, 2026, para. 6). In Burundi, the Association des Femmes Actrices de Paix et de Dialogue (AFAPD), a national network of 534 trained women mediators and 516 communal mediators, resolved over 34,000 conflicts with an impressive 82% success rate (UN Women, 2025, para. 14). In the DRC's Kasai province, more than 200 women are resolving disputes and stepping into leadership roles once considered out of reach (UN Women, 2025, para. 15).

These examples demonstrate that women-led organizations are not merely service providers but are central to building sustainable peace. They embody the Ubuntu principle of communal responsibility, working within communities to heal divisions, resolve disputes, and support survivors.

Conclusion

The systematic use of sexual violence as a weapon of war in African conflicts represents one of the most devastating yet under-examined dimensions of the continent's security crises. The evidence is overwhelming. In Sudan, an estimated 12.7 million women and girls require gender-based violence services, a quadrupling since the war began (UN Women, 2026, para. 5). The UN has verified 546 incidents of conflict-related sexual violence, yet these figures represent "only the tip of the iceberg" (OHCHR, 2026, para. 6). MSF's documentation of 3,396 survivors seeking treatment in Darfur between January 2024 and November 2025 further underscores the catastrophic scale of the crisis (MSF, 2025). In the DRC, armed groups have weaponized rape as a tactic for ethnic cleansing, a dynamic enabled by external actors such as Rwanda (Springer, 2025, p. 12; Muvumba Sellström & Wai, 2025). In Ethiopia's Tigray conflict, sexual violence was deliberately used to inflict terror and disrupt social cohesion (Springer, 2025, p. 12). In Nigeria, Boko Haram has abducted and raped approximately 7,000 women and girls, demonstrating that non-state actors similarly weaponize sexual violence (Oluwaniyi, 2021).

The article has demonstrated that the weaponization of sexual violence is not a byproduct of conflict but a deliberate strategy, a tactic employed to terrorize populations, destroy social cohesion, assert dominance, generate income, and reward fighters. It is a war crime and, when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack, a crime against humanity (BBC, 2026, para. 12). The article has also demonstrated the persistent barriers to addressing conflict-related sexual violence: entrenched impunity, weak legal systems, health system collapse, and socio-cultural stigma (Springer, 2025, p. 1; SIHA, 2025, para. 14; OHCHR, 2026, para. 20).

The Women, Peace and Security agenda offers a transformative framework, but the gap between promise and reality remains vast. Women's participation is still "majorly constrained by social and cultural norms" (IGAD, 2024, p. 4). This gap is not accidental but reflects deeper structural failures: geopolitical headwinds eroding political will, a state-centric framing that reproduces colonial hierarchies, and a lack of genuine political interest in accountability. Women's organizations are facing severe funding shortages, with two-thirds reporting that safe spaces and gender-based violence services have either closed or been significantly reduced (UN Women, 2026, para. 7).

Yet there is hope. The emerging survivor-centered policies in Africa, Nigeria's DDR framework focused on victims, the Rabat Declaration centering victims of terrorism, and practical tools like the BackUp application, represent concrete steps toward the Ubuntu feminist vision this article proposes. These initiatives demonstrate that the theoretical framework of Ubuntu feminism is not abstract; it is already guiding policy in tangible ways. This article positions itself as the essential theoretical lens to understand and advance this practical policy shift, arguing that a just peace requires restoring social fabric, communal healing, and centering the dignity of survivors.

For policymakers, this means investing in women-led organizations, ensuring women's participation in peace processes, and holding perpetrators accountable. It means recognizing that survivor-centered DDR is not a peripheral concern but central to sustainable peace. For scholars, it means centering African feminist thought, engaging with Ubuntu feminism, and challenging the epistemic violence of Western security theory. For practitioners, it means designing peacebuilding interventions that prioritize survivor-centered approaches, restorative justice, and community ownership.

As the Windhoek+25 Declaration affirms, "peace processes inclusive of women are more sustainable and transformative" (UN Women, 2025, para. 5). UN Women Representative Letty Chiwara emphasized: "We must ensure women's participation is not optional, but integral to peace and political processes" (UN Women, 2025, para. 12). The task is urgent. The potential is enormous. The question is whether Africa has the will to embrace this vision, a vision grounded not in external frameworks imposed from above, but in the lived realities and relational philosophies of African women themselves.

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