

Food Insecurity and Conflict-related Sexual Violence

The Links between Conflict and Hunger

Examples from Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, the DRC, Nigeria, South Sudan and Sudan

May 2023



Key findings

- Food-related livelihood activities such as tending fields, foraging for food or fetching water make women and girls vulnerable to conflict-related sexual violence attacks in conflicts where conflict parties use such violence.
- The scarcity of food during conflict forces women and girls to travel further from their villages in search of food or water, increasing the likelihood of their encountering armed groups operating in the area who may use sexual violence as a form of weapon or for other related reasons.
- Some conflict actors use sexual violence as part of their strategy in attacks on communities and their livelihoods, together with looting and burning food stocks or fields.
- Both the threat and actual experience of conflict-related sexual violence impact the well-being of women and girls (as well as their wider families), and affect their ability to provide food and care for their families.

On a Tuesday evening in December 2020 in Ogun state, Nigeria, armed herdsmen set fire to and destroyed crops and barns storing the harvest during an attack on a village. On the following day, as the village's women went down to the river to fetch water, the same attackers raped several of them. This event occurred in the context of conflict between settled farmers and migratory herders (or pastoralists) over land rights. Settled communities want to use land for farming, while herding communities seek to use it to graze their cattle. In this conflict, armed herdsmen have killed and maimed civilians and burned farmland to drive people off their lands, while settled farmers have burned pastoralist markets and killed their livestock to keep them out of their (i.e. the farmers') agricultural areas.¹ Such conflict incidents have a lasting impact on local economies and food production. Insecurity has forced farmers out of their villages or has made them hesitant to work their land, while herders, who are also displaced because of insecurity, find it challenging to provide sufficient fodder for their herds.²

The example from Nigeria's Ogun state illustrates how sexual violence can be part of conflict strategies used to attack communities' livelihoods. In conflicts where violence is used to attack food supplies or livelihood activities, women and girls are targeted with sexual violence as they pursue such activities, e.g. farming or fetching water.

This report examines 81 examples of sexual violence committed by conflict parties across Africa, the Middle East and Asia between January 2020 and January 2023 to better understand the complex links between conflict-related sexual violence and food insecurity. The main focus is on Africa. The report is part of a **series** that looks at the connections between conflict and hunger and highlights one complex gendered aspect of such dynamics.

Background and method

In May 2018 the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2417, which acknowledges the link between violent conflict and food insecurity. This resolution called on all parties to armed conflict to comply fully with international humanitarian law (IHL) and to protect civilian infrastructure critical for the proper functioning of food production and supply systems. IHL sets out measures to mitigate the impact of armed conflict on civilians. The connections between conflict and food insecurity are complex, and better information is needed on the issue, including how conflict violence aggravates the political and structural violence that contributes to food insecurity. Insecurity Insight analyses conflict events that directly and indirectly impact access to food to increase understanding of the connections between conflict and food insecurity.³

This report examines one specific aspect of gendered conflict-related violence and food security by looking at the links between conflict-related sexual violence and food insecurity. Previous work on gender dynamics and food insecurity has primarily focused on women's access to and control over resources, their mobility and ability to move freely outside of the home, and gender-based violence within families.⁴ Additionally, in periods of hunger, women and girls often eat last and they are most at risk of becoming malnourished.⁵ The report aims to contribute to knowledge by analysing how conflict-related sexual violence targeting women is linked to accessing food.

The report is based on an analysis of reported incidents of sexual violence that occurred in the context of livelihood-related activities. The incident analysis focuses on the patterns of behaviour among conflict parties who use sexual violence by considering the location and context of such attacks, with a view to better understanding the links between such conflict-related violence and livelihood activities. The report focuses on a sample of 81 reported incidents in which conflict parties attacked and sexually assaulted individuals while they reportedly pursued food-related livelihood activities. The sample includes all the incidents from Insecurity Insight's conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) dataset (consisting in total of 920 reported incidents) that included information on a food-related context in the incident description. Conflict-related sexual violence occurs in many different contexts, and not all such violence is linked to livelihood strategies.⁶ During these incidents 180 women and girls were attacked while they engaged in food-related activities and then subjected to sexual violence. No reports of sexual violence affecting men and boys with links to food-related contexts could be identified in the available information.

The incidents were reported from 15 countries⁷, but the analysis focuses primarily on case studies from four contexts – Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Nigeria and Sudan – due to the higher number of conflict-related incidents of sexual violence with links to livelihood activities reported during the analysed time period between January 2020 and January 2023. The vast majority (86%) of the included attacks were perpetrated by non-state armed groups, often by groups of men of the same armed unit, and the analysis will reflect these groups' conflict objectives.

Insecurity Insight's CRSV project

Insecurity Insight monitors and analyses the patterns and dynamics of conflict-related sexual violence in selected contexts. Available incident reports are examined to better understand the possible conflict-related driving forces for such violence and to further the development of policy responses directed at the perpetrators to prevent such violence through mitigation, protection and accountability. The database is continuously expanded. At the time this analysis was carried out it contained a total of 920 reported **incidents**. Access the **data**.

Number of reported incidents in the CRSV database	Number of analysed CRSV incidents with links to livelihood activities	Number of countries where CRSV incidents with links to livelihood activities were reported	Number of women and girls affected
920	81	15	180

The report's findings highlight that sexual violence is used as a strategy of war or conflict, together with the looting and burning of food stocks, and that such violence often take place at the time when women and girls pursue livelihood activities outside of the home. These findings point towards an important and often-overlooked gendered dynamic of conflict and food insecurity that has wide-ranging impacts on households and communities during conflicts.

Conflict-related sexual violence and attacks on livelihood strategies

In many conflict contexts conflict actors have carried out raids and attacks on villages and communities, targeting livelihoods by destroying farmland and looting crops, food or livestock. In several conflicts such attacks on communities' food supplies also include attacks on civilians involving sexual violence, often in the form of mass and gang rapes. Beyond the physical and mental impact of such violent attacks, these actions have both immediate and long-term consequences for communities and their access to food.

The intentions of armed groups are not always clear. Some conflict actors loot and harvest food stocks in order to provide for the members of their armed group, particularly if they are low on resources. For example, in South Sudan in October 2022 members of the Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO) were accused of carrying out attacks on civilians in various villages in Central Equatoria state and of raping at least two women during these attacks. They also looted goats and cows and harvested food produce. Their ground commander claimed that no food had been supplied to these forces since January 2022, indicating that the attack was possibly a result of a lack of food resources among SPLA-IO members. The attack led to the mass displacement of affected communities.

Armed groups have also used stolen livestock, which in many rural communities is a valuable resource, to fund their activities. The risk of livestock theft in turn forces communities to arm themselves in order to protect their animals.

In other such incidents in Nigeria and Sudan armed members of herder/pastoralist communities destroyed and burned agricultural land and threatened people working the land, which is believed to be part of a strategy to force settled farming communities out of an area.⁸ During these attacks women were sexually assaulted while working on their agricultural land or travelling between their villages and farms. In turn, herder/pastoralist communities were also attacked after their cattle destroyed crops through their grazing.

There are very few reported cases of women from herder communities being sexually attacked in the context of these conflicts. It remains unclear whether this is linked to the fact that the herding activity that is targeted is usually a male occupation or whether the absence of such information is the result of biases in reporting.⁹

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Sexual violence also functions as part of the terror strategy employed against communities that contributes to displacement and, as a result, food insecurity. For example, in one incident in Sudan's Central Darfur state ten armed men attacked a group of farmers who were working in an agricultural area. The attackers fired shots into the air, causing the farmers to flee, and a female farmer was raped and beaten during the attack.

Not all conflict-related sexual violence is necessarily driven by external conflict objectives (such as depriving communities of resources) or intended to cause displacement. Observers have pointed out that some armed groups have used sexual violence as an informal mechanism that strengthens commitment among a group's fighters. In other words, armed groups may reportedly use sexual violence as a form of socialisation and social control within the group to strengthen group loyalty and cohesion.¹⁰ It is possible that armed groups who commit violent acts to strengthen power and control among their fighters take advantage of women pursuing livelihood strategies away from the home without intending to target their victims' food-related activities in particular.

In 83% of analysed incidents used in the current report, multiple men acted together in the reported sexually violent attacks. This strongly suggests that these attacks form part of a strategy of the armed groups involved. Even though attacks may be driven by complex dynamics linked to multiple objectives among individuals operating within violent armed groups, they all have in common that they adversely impact on food security. Sexually violent attacks on women carried out when they are engaged in livelihood activities affect communities and increase concerns about food-related activities in much the same way, irrespective of whether the attacks were conducted with the intention to specifically target the food-related activities or for other motives.

The use of sexual violence in farmer-herder conflict in Sudan

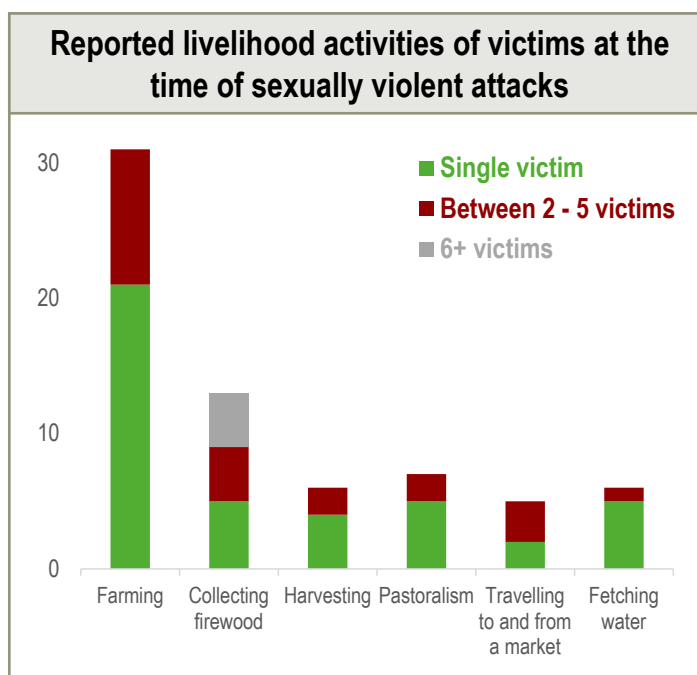
In the Darfur region of Sudan tensions and conflict between settled farmers and migratory herders/pastoralists over access to land has long plagued communities. Herders in search of grazing land and water have been accused of destroying agricultural areas populated by settled farmer communities and damaging harvests, affecting these communities' livelihoods.¹¹

In the midst of these tensions, conflict parties use conflict-related sexual violence against civilians, particularly women and girls. In one example in Sudan's Central Darfur region in January 2023, following threats by herders in the area to move their livestock onto farmland cultivated by a recently displaced and newly arrived community, a 20-year-old displaced female farmer was raped and killed on her way home from the fields. The crops on her farm were also destroyed. It is likely that this attack was used to scare farmers from their fields so that it could be used by herder/pastoralist communities who believe their land rights to be under attack from a rise in settled farming activities.

Vulnerabilities to attacks from conflict-related sexual violence during livelihood activities

The incidents included in this report occurred in 15 countries, but what they all have in common is that the reported conflict-related sexual violence attacks happened during livelihood activities such as fetching water, collecting firewood, foraging for food, tending the fields or going to a market. In the available cases, all the reported victims or survivors were women and girls. This highlights a key connection between individual vulnerability to being sexually attacked and engaging in food-related livelihood activities away from the home or, in the case of displaced women and girls, outside of their refugee camps.

In many of the societies in this sample, women often play a key role in food production and are often the ones responsible for feeding their households.¹² Some important livelihood activities require women and girls to travel away from home, increasing their vulnerability to being attacked. However, no further details are available about other aspects of gendered or socioeconomic work distribution that may influence which community members leave the home to work the fields or fetch water and food and which ones stay behind to carry out activities such as cooking or cleaning, and therefore do not feature in the reported incidents of conflict-related sexual violence with links to food.



Women carry out farming and food-fetching activities either alone or in groups of other women. In around 42% of attacks, multiple women were sexually attacked in groups by groups of armed men in mass rapes, highlighting the extent to which these attacks are targeted at communities and their livelihood strategies rather than selected individuals.

Women collecting firewood or harvesting foods often travel in large groups of six or more, particularly in rural areas where the depletion of resources close to their homes forces them to travel for several kilometers every day.¹³ It is likely that women move in larger groups for security, but this does not deter perpetrators from attacking women they encounter. In one incident in Cameroon's Far North region eight women and six girls searching for firewood were attacked and raped by Boko Haram militants.

Similarly, in Chad a group of 12 Sudanese female refugees between the ages of 13 and 17 were raped by cattle herders after they left their refugee camp in search of firewood. Often the women are accompanied by their children, who then also witness the attacks and in some incidents were also injured, killed or subjected to sexual violence during the attacks.

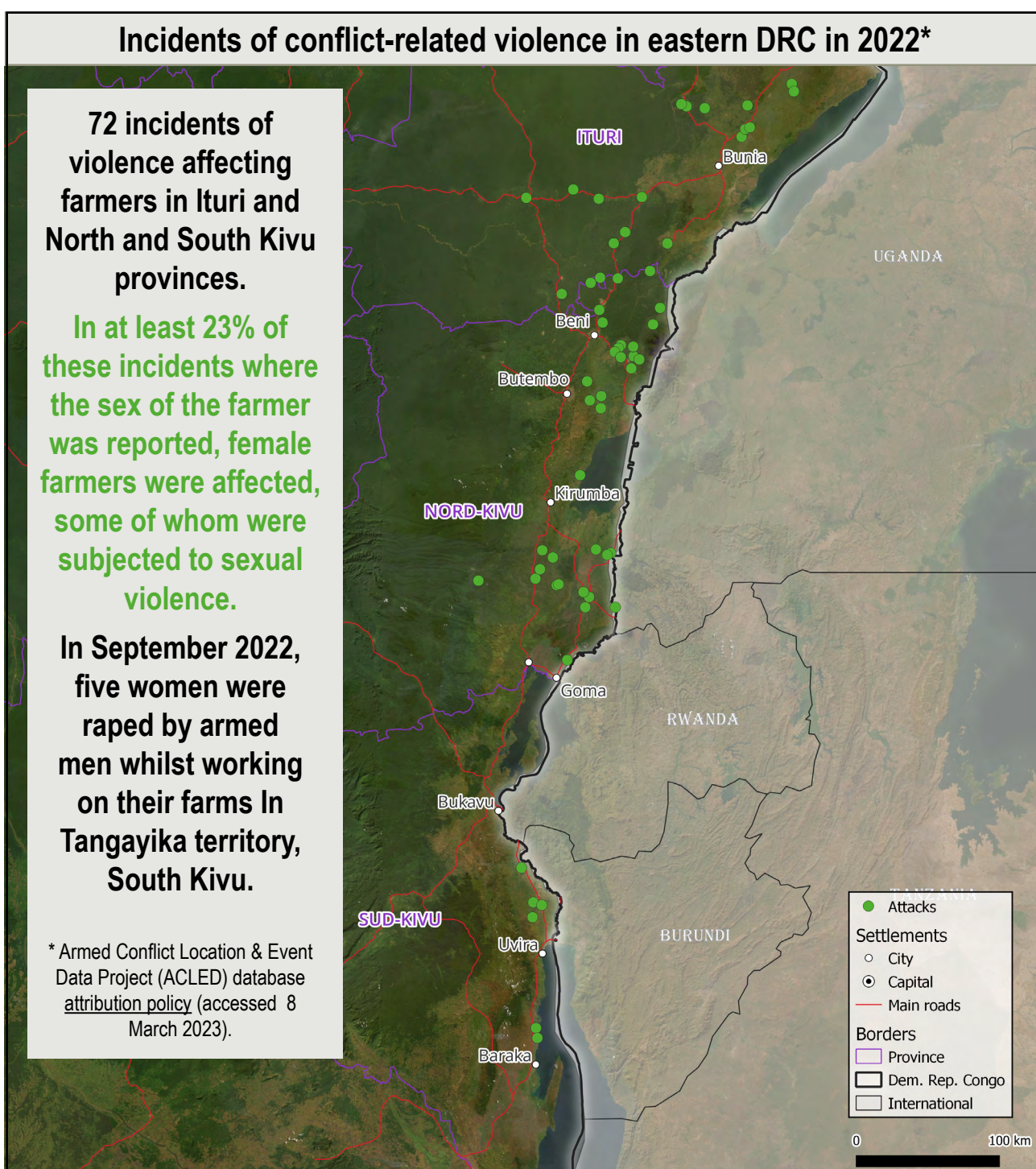
In the few cases where women were accompanied by a male at the time of the attack, it was the woman who reportedly suffered from sexual violence, while the men were often physically assaulted or in some instances killed.

Sexual violence has far-reaching impacts on women, their families, communities and food security. It can result in severe physical and psychological trauma that greatly impacts women's well-being, and therefore their ability to care for and feed their families. Following an attack, individuals may alter their daily practices to avoid having to visit the locations of the attack, which affects farming and food collection practices. Moreover, the stigma attached to sexual violence often tears families and communities apart, with complex impacts on how food is provided. When sexual violence is used as a means of instilling fear, it directly contributes to displacement.

Case Study 1: Disruption and restriction of agricultural activities

Sexually violent attacks on farmers in the DRC

In the DRC – and particularly in the eastern DRC, where war and unrest are protracted and where many armed groups operate – direct attacks on farmers working on agricultural land and crops are frequent.¹⁴ Armed groups often prey on civilians and prevent them from accessing their farms. Sexual violence is also widespread in these areas; in fact, a third of the sample included in this report occurred in the DRC, and in most cases women were working in fields during such attacks, which were carried out by groups of fighters who belonged to various armed groups. In many of these attacks individual women were gang-raped by multiple men. In some incidents they were also first kidnapped and then held in captivity, where they were subjected to sexual violence. Beyond the trauma of these attacks, the insecurity triggered by such violence makes it harder for women and girls to tend their fields. Several communities were forced to abandon agricultural lands, contributing to widespread displacement that in turn triggered further food insecurity.

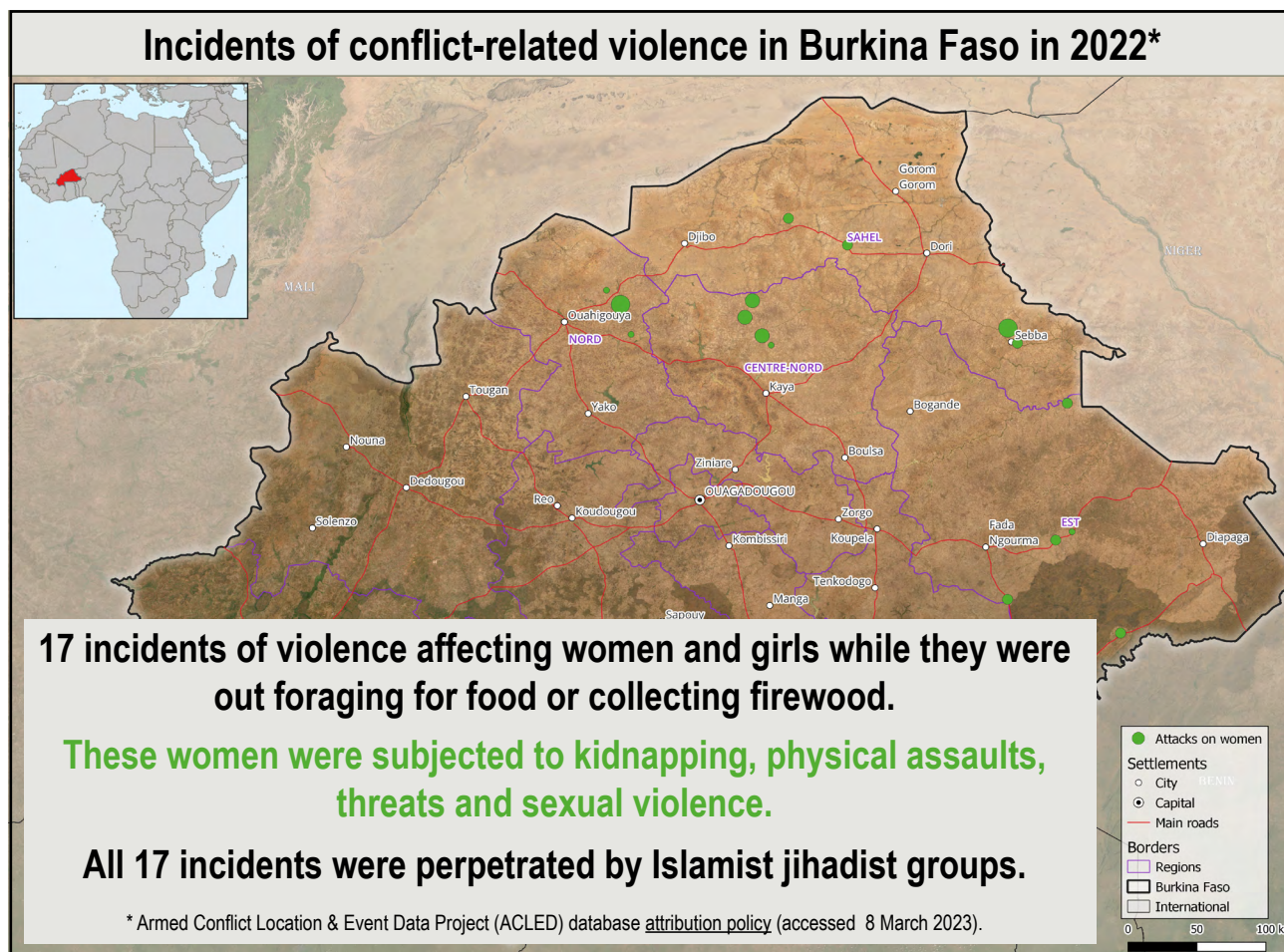


Case Study 2: Limited access to food sources

Mass attacks on women while harvesting crops in Burkina Faso

In Burkina Faso the frequency of reported attacks on women and girls while they performed food-related activities increased in 2022. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), in 2022 at least 79 women and girls were attacked while gathering food supplies in nine separate incidents, while in 2021 four incidents were reported affecting at least 17 women and girls.¹⁵ Such attacks occurred against a background of increasing food scarcity that forced women and girls to venture further to get food supplies and thus placed them at greater risk of violent attack.¹⁶ For example, between 12 and 13 January 2023 unnamed armed militants kidnapped around 62 women (including four babies) while they were foraging for wild fruit and leaves outside two villages in Soum province.¹⁷ This incident attracted a lot of international attention due to the large number of women kidnapped in a single incident. Between 2020 and 2022 attacks on women while they were out foraging for fruit or collecting firewood were reported in Centre-Nord, Est, Nord, and Sahel provinces and directly affected at least 118 women. The reported perpetrators of all these incidents were Jama'ah Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) or Islamic State Sahel Province militants.¹⁸

There are also numerous reports of these groups preventing food trucks from using roads and seizing carts used to transport food items or straw from women as they travelled to and from markets. Women were also prevented from reaching markets or were attacked as they were trying to get to markets. Local communities reported women being threatened during food-related activities in the context of growing food scarcity. Such violence directly contributes to displacement. For example, in one incident in Est region, residents residing in two villages were forced to leave their homes after JNIM militants assaulted and threatened women who were looking for mangoes in the area.¹⁹



Concluding remarks

The links between food insecurity and conflict-related sexual violence highlight that such violence needs to be understood not as an unavoidable consequence of warfare, but as a deliberate conflict strategy used by conflict parties to instil fear, to hurt and wound communities and individuals, and to strengthen the group cohesion of attackers. Acts of sexual violence rarely occur randomly or in isolation. The examples discussed here show that such violence is often targeted at individuals with essential family roles related to the underlying conflict drivers. Acts of sexual violence are part of a pattern of violence that also uses looting, killing and abductions, and the destruction of property. Sexual violence can also be used as a form of reprisal, to create fear, or as a means of torture. It may also be used systematically as a strategy of warfare to destroy the social fabric.²⁰ When used in conjunction with looting and the destruction of crops, sexual violence is deployed to drive people off their land. In the instances discussed in this report, sexual violence is a specific gendered form of violent conflict action with direct links to food insecurity.

While it has long been recognised that some people are more vulnerable to conflict-related sexual violence than others, this report has highlighted that women working in fields and searching for food or water are among the groups at high risk of attack. It remains unclear whether this is opportunistic in the sense that livelihood activities performed away from the home make individuals more likely to encounter armed groups prone to sexually attacking civilians or to what extent the locations of attack are no coincidence in contexts where access to food and livelihoods forms part of conflict drivers and sexually violent attacks on women producing or collecting food and water for their families are a central part of attacks on livelihoods.

While sexual violence against boys and men in conflict remains underreported, the data identified for this report suggests that in terms of links between conflict-related sexual violence and livelihood strategies, women and girls appear to be the primary target, with men who are present being forced to watch the sexual violence or otherwise physically assaulted or killed. The report's findings raise a number of complex questions as to how gender-based expectations affect food-related activities and sexual violence in specific conflicts. Further work is needed to better understand how these issues affect boys and men.

It also appears from some context-related information that the risk of sexually violent attacks increases in periods of food scarcity that force women to venture even further than usual from their homes in search of food. This highlights that food insecurity can increase the risk of exposure to sexual violence, underlining how conflict and hunger are linked in complex spirals of cause and effect. The selected incidents illustrate how sexual violence in conflict exacerbates difficulties in accessing food among affected communities.

Overall, however, and despite the pervasiveness of sexual violence in many armed conflicts, the use of such violence as a strategy frequently remains invisible, as the low number of incidents available for this report suggests. Feelings of guilt and shame, fear of retaliation, or taboos surrounding the traumatising experience contribute to fewer cases being reported. As a result, the full extent to which sexual violence is a common and deliberately chosen conflict action remains concealed.

However, the examples discussed here show a clear connection between household food security strategies and sexual violence in contexts where conflict parties target community livelihoods.

Limitations of the report

This document was compiled as part of the incident-based approach to analysing publicly available incidents involving conflict-related sexual violence. Incident descriptions from multiple sources were cross-checked and consolidated into a single dataset and coded using standard definitions. The resulting analysis, which was limited to attacks that inflicted sexual violence during food-related activities, over-represents the experience of some African women compared to women in other parts of the world where attacks that inflicted sexually violence were rarely reported in the context of food-related activities.

Among the analysed incidents of conflict-related sexual violence that occurred in the context of food-related activities, the vast majority (91%) occurred on the African continent. Slightly over one-third of these incidents were reported in the Sahel region, while nearly half of the women and girls whose stories were analysed lived in this region. The highest number of cases in specific countries were reported from the DRC (27 incidents) and Sudan (18 incidents). There are few examples in this sample from Myanmar (five incidents), the Philippines and Syria (one incident each). Data in Insecurity Insight's CRSV dataset from other countries, including Ukraine, Iran and Colombia, was not included because there was no indication of a link between conflict-related sexual violence and livelihood- and food-related activities. The reported incidents only covered sexual violence against women and girls. It remains unclear whether sexual violence against boys and men was not reported or whether the gendered nature of work distribution in relation to food acquisition strategies explains why sexually violent attacks in the context of livelihood strategies targeted women and girls.

Additionally, this analysis focused on reported cases of conflict-related sexual violence occurring in the context of food insecurity and during activities related to livelihood strategies. It does not look at other types of food-security-related violence, e.g. murder or extortion, and can therefore not be regarded as a complete picture of the links between threats against women undertaking food-related activities outside the home and conflict-related violence.

Definitions used in this report

Food insecurity is defined as the absence of “physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food” to meet “dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”.

The report discusses how conflict-related sexual violence affects people's household-level ability to access food in the context of conflict and how it thereby contributes to food insecurity. For more information on the analytical framework, see [here](#).

Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time.

Conflict-related sexual violence is defined as strategic violence used by conflict parties to achieve their political or military objectives and includes acts of sexual violence such as rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution or any other form of sexual violence against women, men, girls or boys.

Categories of sexual violence:

- **Mass rape** refers to an incident where multiple survivors or victims were subjected to sexual violence in the same location at the same time.
- **Gang rape** refers to an incident where a single survivor or victim was sexually assaulted by multiple perpetrators.
- **Survivor** refers to an individual who has experienced sexual violence and survived.
- **Victim** refers to an individual who has been killed during or after an act or acts of sexual violence.

Footnotes

- ¹ <https://humanglemedia.com/farmers-herders-crisis-killings-reprisals-persist-in-ogun-communities/>
- ² <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/262-stopping-nigerias-spiralling-farmer-herder-violence#:~:text=Violence%20between%20Nigerian%20herders%20and,Adamawa%2C%20Nasarawa%20and%20Taraba%20states>
Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), accessed 15/10/2022.
- ³ bit.ly/FoodMethodology
- ⁴ www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/GBV-food-security-brief_EN.pdf.
- ⁵ www.actionagainsthunger.org.uk/why-hunger/gender-inequality.
- ⁶ While it is worth noting that less than 10% of all reported incidents in Insecurity Insights' CRSV database provided indication of a connection between food insecurity and sexual violence in conflict, it is not clear how representative this proportion is. Because all information on conflict-related violence depends on such incidents being reported, neither the CRSV dataset nor the subset of food-security-related incidents is a representative sample. At present no information is available on whether links to food security are under-represented, because those reporting the incidents may not include information that would indicate such a link, or whether links to food insecurity are over-represented because such incidents are for some reasons more frequently reported than other types.
- ⁷ Countries included in this report are Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, Philippines, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Syria.
- ⁸ bit.ly/SOMFoodFeb2023
- ⁹ Women and girls from herder communities tend to remain in villages, where they produce milk and butter that are sold to meet their daily needs, while men move with the grazing cattle. The extent to which sexual violence is used during attacks on herder settlements is unclear. Often herder settlements have less access to basic social amenities such as health-care facilities and this may also impact the extent to which attacks involving sexual violence are reported; see <https://theconversation.com/insights-from-fulani-pastoralists-and-host-communities-in-southwestern-nigeria-154196>.
- ¹⁰ sudantribune.com/article266704/.
- ¹¹ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0022343317713559>.
- ¹² www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/46460857.pdf.
- ¹³ <https://forestsnews.cifor.org/68924/firewood-collection-a-heavier-burden-for-women-in-refugee-settings?fnl=en>.
- ¹⁴ www.wfp.org/countries/democratic-republic-congo.
- ¹⁵ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database attribution policy (accessed 8 March 2023).
- ¹⁶ www.nytimes.com/2023/01/16/world/africa/kidnapping-burkina-faso.html.
- ¹⁷ www.nytimes.com/2023/01/20/world/africa/women-kidnapped-burkina-faso.html.
- ¹⁸ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), accessed 8 March 2023.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ www.icrc.org/en/document/sexual-violence-armed-conflict-questions-and-answers

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Suggested citation: Insecurity Insight. 2023. 'Food Insecurity and Conflict-related Sexual Violence'. May 2023. Switzerland: Insecurity Insight. bit.ly/SVHungerMay2023