GDP Theory: Economic Capacity, Inequality, and Wartime Sexual Violence

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Abstract

Wartime sexual violence remains one of the most devastating features of contemporary armed conflict. While feminist International Relations scholarship has demonstrated that wartime rape reflects deeply embedded gendered systems of power, and strategic explanations have shown how sexual violence can function as a weapon of terror and social control, existing approaches do not fully explain variation in its prevalence across conflict environments. This article introduces Gross Domestic Product (GDP) Theory, a political economy framework that identifies economic capacity and income inequality as structural conditions shaping the likelihood of wartime sexual violence. It asks how Gross Domestic Product impacts the use of wartime sexual violence in conflict. Specifically, the theory argues that low GDP per capita and high inequality weaken military institutional capacity, increase fragmentation among armed actors, and make low-cost forms of violence, including sexual violence, more structurally available. Drawing on theory-building exploratory analysis of conflict-affected Sub-Saharan African states, this article demonstrates patterns consistent with the expectations of GDP Theory. By integrating feminist International Relations and political economy perspectives, the article provides a clearer understanding of how economic structures interact with gendered power systems to shape patterns of wartime violence.

Keywords: Sexual violence, GDP, War, Economy, Sub-Saharan Africa

Introduction

There are many explanations of wartime rape, none of which fully satisfies the academic, the survivor or the global community in general. This paper serves to expand upon already established theories of wartime rape. It does not attempt to ignore the importance of these perspectives, rather, its main attempt is to find an explanation based in empirical evidence to discuss the likelihood of sexual violence in wartime through the marrying of political economy and feminist scholarship. This article begs the question, how does Gross Domestic Product impact the prevalence of sexual violence in wartime? I posit that wartime rape is not only a problem caused by social factors, but instead a byproduct of underfunded and underdeveloped security sector systems that lend themself to gender-based violence. Gross Domestic Product Theory (GDP theory) analyzes wartime rape through the impacts of income disparity and GDP per capita, both of which are key to understand individual buying and in fragile and conflict affected states (FCAS) especially, individual and state protection power. In this article, I have decided to choose case studies in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) with oil production, and without oil production, that have had active conflicts for a few reasons: First, because these countries are geographically similar which means the citizens of these countries deal with similar problems such as drought, lack of clean water and resources; Secondly, the case studies I have chosen have cultural norms that have allowed for gender inequality to flourish under peaceful

times, and exacerbated during wartimes lending themselves to a ground zero of sorts for guerrilla warfare tactics such as sexual violence . Lastly, because oil revenue is a profitable economic resource that the West has commodified and relies upon heavily; thus, ensuring that oil rich SSA states are guaranteed income regardless of other economic ventures possible within the state, and regardless of whether the west is actively exporting oil reserves currently. GDP theory in its essence, is meant to be a model to expand and apply to other case studies outside of SSA and the global south to explain this trend in sexual violence in warfare. In contrast, I believe that GDP theory can be applied to any major export for a country and should be considered from other factors in future like critical minerals, diamonds, wheat, wine, and other desired commodities.

Although there are many other factors to account for, especially in individual instances of sexual violence, at its root, GDP theory offers an explanation of wartime rape recognizing sexual violence as pervasive in countries with less access to individual capital and less government capacity to gain, retain, and prioritize financial mechanisms - especially security forces such as national military and policing forces. It explains that in contexts with lower GDP per capita there is less financial capacity to fund proper military training, and to buy proper weapons; including servicing and maintenance required for the ongoing use of these weapons. But this theory isn't enough alone; GDP theory isn't meant to suggest that social issues are not relevant in understanding instances, or variations to sexual violence in conflict but rather as a complimentary mechanism for understanding the most at risk populations. GDP theory suggests that because of this, soldiers, and militias are trained and authorized indirectly (Wood, 2000: 308) to use less conventional methods of warfare. In particular, in SSA where ethnic tensions tend to be a leading cause for fractures specifically within civil and intra-state wars, rape is one of the most effective methods to evict bloodlines and achieve wartime objectives. Contrastly, this does not equate to territory gain (Meger, 2016: 51). Ethnic tensions are fundamentally intertwined with military objectives, particularly in the case of civil and intra-state wars in SSA making sexual violence in war an effective method of terror and an objective within itself. This isn't to say that SSA countries, or the case studies I've chosen have planned sexual violence in wartime, but it is to say that it is a byproduct of other military objectives which benefit and support para-military organizations' larger goals in complex conflicts.

Existing scholarship has provided important insights into the causes and functions of wartime sexual violence; however, significant gaps remain regarding the role of structural economic conditions. The following literature review examines these debates and identifies the theoretical space

Literature Review

Sexual violence in wartime has increasingly become recognized as a significant issue within international relations and conflict studies. Rather than focusing extensively on competing definitions of wartime sexual violence, this literature review examines the relationship between political economy and sexual violence during armed conflict.

Nevertheless, defining the subject under analysis remains necessary. This paper adopts the definition of rape as defined by the United Nations (UN) International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), whereby rape means:

> [T]he *actus reus* of the crime of rape in international law is constituted by: the sexual penetration, however slight: (a) of the vagina or anus of the victim by the penis of the perpetrator or any other object used by the perpetrator; or (b) the mouth of the victim by the penis of the

> perpetrator; where such sexual penetration occurs without the consent of the victim. Consent for this purpose must be consent given voluntarily, as a result of the victim's free will, assessed in the context of the surrounding circumstances. The *mens rea* is the intention to effect this sexual penetration, and the knowledge that it occurs without the consent of the victim. (Kunarac et al, Appeal Judgement, 2002).

At the same time, sexual violence exists on a spectrum, and any singular definition inevitably excludes forms of violence that remain difficult to capture through existing legal and reporting mechanisms.

The recognition of rape as a weapon of war marked a significant shift in both policy and academic discourse. Until the early 2000s, wartime sexual violence was largely considered outside the domain of foreign policy (Kirby, 2012: 798). Feminist scholars challenged this separation between the "private" and the "international," arguing instead that gendered violence constitutes a matter of public and political concern. As Enloe famously argues, "the personal is the international" (Enloe, 2014: 37). This shift enabled scholars to conceptualize rape not simply as an individual act of defiance, but as a widespread and systematic tactic of war tied to broader political, social, and economic processes. A feminist political economy approach provides an important framework for understanding these dynamics. Rather than treating sexual violence solely as interpersonal violence, feminist political economy scholarship emphasizes its relationship to structures of power, inequality, and resource extraction. Meger argues that conflicts are frequently characterized by attempts to gain control over productive and reproductive resources, making sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) directly connected to the political and economic drivers of conflict. In this framework, sexual violence operates at multiple levels simultaneously: as interpersonal violence that reinforces socially constructed forms of masculinity; as political violence shaped by structural inequalities; and as part of broader processes of global political economy and accumulation by dispossession (Meger, 2016: 51). Kirby's discussion of feminist epistemologies further demonstrates the complexity of analyzing wartime sexual violence. Drawing on Skjelsbaek, Kirby identifies three primary approaches to understanding victims of wartime sexual violence. Essentialist approaches conceptualize women broadly as victims of militarized masculinity, emphasizing the role of patriarchal structures and aggressive forms of masculinity in conflict. Structuralist approaches adopt a group-based perspective, recognizing that some groups of women are more vulnerable to violence than others due to ethnicity, class, religion, or political affiliation. Finally, social constructionist perspectives challenge fixed understandings of gender categories altogether, arguing that both men and women may become victims of wartime sexual violence, and that femininity and masculinity are socially constructed and fluid within conflict settings (Kirby, 2014: 800; Meger, 2016: 40; West and Zimmerman, 1987: 126). These differing epistemological approaches demonstrate that wartime sexual violence cannot be understood solely through biological or essentialized notions of gender but must instead be situated within broader social and political contexts.

This complexity is reinforced by scholarship emphasizing the variation in wartime sexual violence across conflicts. As Wood argues, sexual violence during war is neither universal nor uniform (2006: 308). Drawing on investigations conducted by international tribunals and UN commissions, Wood demonstrates that some conflicts are characterized by widespread and systematic sexual violence, while others exhibit relatively limited occurrences (2006: 312–314). For example, public rape has been used strategically

following village takeovers, within refugee camps, and by insurgent groups seeking to terrorize civilian populations. In Sierra Leone, sexual violence targeted women and girls broadly, particularly those associated with insurgent factions. In Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda, wartime rape was deployed systematically as a form of ethnic cleansing intended to terrorize, dismantle, and destroy targeted ethnic communities. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, sexual violence is used as a weapon of war in itself, whereby the prevalence and gravity is unparalleled (Meger 2016: 138).

At the same time, Wood cautions that observed variation in wartime sexual violence may partly reflect limitations in available data rather than actual differences in prevalence. She argues that variation may be "merely an artifact of inadequate knowledge about the empirical patterns present in each case" (Wood 2006: 318). Definitional ambiguity further complicates this issue, as understandings of rape and sexual violence vary significantly across societies and cultural contexts. Consequently, unless international organizations employ standardized definitions and investigative mechanisms, substantial instances of wartime sexual violence may remain undocumented. This presents a significant methodological challenge for scholars seeking to measure and compare sexual violence across cases.

This understanding draws from broader theories of political violence. From a Marxist perspective, political violence is not an end in itself but a coercive mechanism used to pursue political objectives, challenge existing hierarchies, and destabilize social structures in pursuit of power (Meger, 2016: 38). Sexual violence in conflict therefore functions not merely as opportunistic brutality, but as a strategic instrument through which armed actors assert dominance, reorganize social relations, and pursue broader political and economic goals.

Barnett and Duvall's conception of power further strengthens this analysis by demonstrating how power operates through material, institutional, structural, and discursive means (Meger 2016: 39). The first form of power involves direct coercion, where one actor forces another to behave in a certain way through physical capabilities or threats of violence. The latter forms are less visible and operate through institutions, social structures, and dominant ideas that shape actors' opportunities, identities, and perceptions of their interests. Applying this framework to wartime sexual violence highlights how such violence is perpetuated not only through direct coercion but also through structural inequalities and discursive norms that normalize gendered violence as an inevitable byproduct of war (Meger 2016: 39).

Within many conflicts, sexual violence also serves economic functions tied to gender inequality and resource competition. Feminist political economy scholars argue that women's bodies and reproductive capacities become linked to broader struggles over labour, land, and property. In several sub-Saharan African conflicts, women's reproductive labour constitutes a critical economic asset that shapes access to land, livestock, and social status. Tershun argues that wartime rape undermines these assets in multiple ways: through forced pregnancies that dilute bloodlines associated with ethnic or communal identity, through social stigmatization that reduces women's access to marriage and land rights, and through physical violence intended to prevent women from bearing children altogether (Tershun 2005:62).

These dynamics are intensified by broader economic transformations associated with privatization and globalization. As Tershun notes, processes such as formal land registration and privatization have increasingly displaced women from traditional land rights while simultaneously empowering men and multinational corporations (2005: 67). Sexual

violence therefore operates not only as a military tactic but also as part of larger systems of dispossession and economic restructuring. Contemporary conflicts frequently rely upon informal economies in which armed groups finance warfare through plunder, black-market trade, and control over valuable commodities. Violence, including SGBV, becomes intertwined with broader processes of capital accumulation and state-building.

The relationship between natural resources and conflict further reinforces this political economy perspective. The "resource curse" thesis suggests that the discovery of valuable resources, particularly oil, often contributes to political instability and violent conflict rather than economic development. Studies by Collier and Hoeffler (2004: 565), alongside United Nations reports, demonstrate that numerous armed conflicts since 1990 have been linked to competition over natural resources in regions such as Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, and the Middle East. These conflicts are often exacerbated by unequal distributions of wealth, corruption, and the exclusion of local populations from resource revenues.

Importantly, violent conflict deepens poverty, erodes social cohesion, and reinforces unequal power relations between core and peripheral states. Meger argues that violence perpetrated during civil wars, including SGBV, helps reproduce hierarchical international relations by facilitating resource exploitation and capital accumulation. In this sense, wartime sexual violence serves not only interpersonal or military objectives, but also broader political-economic processes tied to global inequality (2016: 51).

This literature raises important questions regarding the relationship between oil wealth, gender hierarchies, and wartime violence. While resource wealth is often associated with corruption and inequality, it may also reinforce existing gender hegemonies and social structures that reduce incentives for certain forms of gender-based violence used to assert masculine dominance during conflict. Nevertheless, scholars such as Darkwah caution that oil wealth rarely translates into equitable social development due to corruption and unequal redistribution. Consequently, resource wealth may simultaneously reinforce patriarchal structures while exacerbating inequalities that contribute to violence and instability (5).

These debates are important for understanding the relationship between wartime sexual violence and political economy. Existing literature frequently explains wartime rape as a strategy used to terrorize and destabilize communities, yet feminist political economy scholarship argues that such violence must also be understood in relation to broader economic structures and inequalities. This article argues that economic conditions may shape the likelihood and forms of wartime violence. In contexts characterized by weak state capacity, low GDP per capita, inadequate military funding, and limited professional training, armed actors may rely more heavily on guerrilla warfare tactics that deliberately target civilian populations through terror and sexual violence.

However, reducing wartime rape solely to economic deprivation or insufficient military discipline risks oversimplifying the issue. Wartime sexual violence emerges from a combination of structural inequality, militarization, gender norms, identity politics, and economic marginalization. Income disparity, weak institutional capacity, social fragmentation, and unequal distributions of wealth all contribute to conditions in which sexual violence becomes normalized or strategically useful during conflict. Feminist political economy therefore emphasizes that wartime sexual violence represents a systemic issue operating across interpersonal, institutional, and global levels simultaneously.

The relationship between natural resource wealth and conflict further complicates these dynamics. Resource curse literature suggests that oil wealth and valuable natural resources can contribute to corruption, inequality, and intra-state violence despite increasing national GDP. Nevertheless, resource-rich states may also experience different gender and social dynamics due to stronger state revenues and greater economic capacity. This raises important questions regarding whether higher levels of economic development and state capacity may reduce reliance on forms of guerrilla warfare associated with widespread wartime sexual violence, even while maintaining existing patriarchal hierarchies. Consequently, examining the relationships between GDP per capita, income inequality, oil production, and wartime sexual violence may provide important insights into how political economy shapes both the prevalence and forms of conflict-related sexual violence in sub-Saharan Africa.

The linking of political economy and sexual violence in wartime requires an understanding of how social cohesion is tied to political and economic wealth, recognizing that social cohesion isn't formed from only informal agreements, but from tangible agreements made between individuals, governments, security services and insurgencies. In an unequal social contract, whereby gender inequality is pervasive, it is evident that political and economic wealth is skewed due to competing and intersecting forms of discrimination (i.e. gender, race, ethnicity, religious).

While Oil rich countries may have more GDP per capita, Darkwah astutely acknowledges that corruption is the main cause of the lack of redistribution of wealth to individuals or to services necessary for increased quality of life (7). Further, oil money may contribute to earlier ideas presented by Meger of increased gender hegemony whereby the motivation for gender-based violence in wartime is reduced due to increased perceived value in men's positions in the situational context.

Building on feminist International Relations scholarship and political economy approaches, this article advances GDP Theory as a structural explanation for variation in wartime sexual violence. The following section outlines the mixed-methods methodology used to examine this relationship across selected Sub-Saharan African cases.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design that combines quantitative economic indicators with qualitative comparative analysis to explore the structural relationship between economic conditions and wartime sexual violence. The methodological approach draws on the work of Creswell and Plano Clark, who argue that mixed-methods research allows scholars to integrate quantitative and qualitative forms of evidence in order to develop more comprehensive social scientific explanations. Quantitative data from the World Bank, the WomanStats Project, and worldometer are used to identify broader structural patterns relating to GDP, inequality, and wartime sexual violence, while qualitative comparative analysis provides interpretive insight into the institutional and gendered dynamics shaping conflict environments. The study also adopts a theory-building comparative approach informed by George and Bennett, whose work emphasizes the value of case studies in developing and refining theoretical explanations within complex political contexts. This approach is particularly appropriate given the multidimensional and context-dependent nature of wartime sexual violence.

As mentioned in the introduction to this article, I have chosen to use publicly available data from the World Bank GDP Data Sets, Women Stats, and Worldometers to analyze the impact of GDP per capita on wartime sexual violence. Importantly to note, as

Woman Stats has significant data, I have decided to use LRW-Scale-11, which is a comprehensive rape scale which combines other data (LRW scales 4 through 10) for a comprehensive picture of rape within a country; this is because in recognizing the feminist international relations perspective along with other feminist scholarship cited in the above literature review, simply choosing one of the LRW scales would mean contributing to the problem at large whereby rape is seen as a passive action of the past rather than something in which institutions uphold and support by ignoring the social impacts of gender inequality. I have however, chosen to include LRW-Scale-4 in addition to LRW-Scale-11, as LRW-Scale-4 measures per hundred thousand the reported rapes in each country. However, in the case of South Sudan, no data is available.

The qualitative component uses comparative exploratory analysis to examine patterns across conflict-affected Sub-Saharan African states. The study investigates whether lower GDP per capita and higher levels of inequality correspond with environments characterized by weaker institutional control, fragmented armed actors, and higher prevalence of wartime sexual violence. Rather than treating wartime sexual violence solely as an individual or cultural phenomenon, the analysis focuses on how structural economic conditions shape the strategic and institutional contexts in which violence occurs.

I selected Sub-Saharan African cases because the region contains substantial variation in economic development, institutional capacity, inequality, and documented levels of conflict-related sexual violence. This regional focus allows for comparison across relatively similar postcolonial and conflict contexts while still capturing important economic and political variation.

This mixed-methods approach allows for a fulsome understanding of wartime sexual violence; because wartime sexual violence is shaped by interacting structural, political, and gendered dynamics that cannot be fully explained through either quantitative or qualitative analysis alone. Quantitative indicators help identify broad structural patterns, while qualitative analysis allows for interpretation of the institutional and gendered mechanisms linking economic conditions to wartime sexual violence. The goal of the study is therefore theory development and explanatory refinement rather than deterministic causal prediction.

Collectively, these cases provide sufficient variation in economic development, institutional capacity, and conflict dynamics to explore the structural relationships proposed by GDP Theory while maintaining a shared regional context within Sub-Saharan Africa. Together, these cases provide variation in GDP per capita, inequality, state fragility, and conflict intensity, allowing for exploratory comparison consistent with the theory-building goals of GDP Theory.

To examine these relationships, this study utilizes a comparative data table and scatter plot analysis to illustrate the association between wartime sexual violence, GDP per capita, and income inequality across selected Sub-Saharan African states. The analysis also incorporates levels of oil production as an additional political economy variable, given that resource-producing states may experience different developmental and conflict trajectories. In some cases, increased economic capacity associated with resource wealth and state development may contribute to higher living standards, stronger institutional capacity, and reduced levels of intrastate conflict. Consequently, wartime sexual violence may become less structurally prevalent in contexts where governments and populations possess greater economic resources and institutional stability.

The study also recognizes several limitations. Wartime sexual violence remains significantly underreported across many conflict settings due to stigma, insecurity, and institutional weakness. In addition, national GDP measures cannot fully capture localized wartime economies or informal systems of resource extraction. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory and theory-generating rather than definitive causal proof.

Using the methodological framework described above, the following section presents the results of the comparative and statistical analysis in order to assess the exploratory expectations of GDP Theory.

Results

GDP per capita ($USD)	**Country**	**Rape per 100,000 (LRW-Scale-4)**	**Comprehensive Rape Scale (LRW-Scale-11)**	**Estimated Gini Coefficient**	**Oil production**	**Distribution of income (Highest 20 per cent share of wealth)**
516	Central African Republic	4	17	43	0 per cent	49.2 per cent
649.4	Democratic Republic of the Congo	4	16	44.7	0.03 per cent	51.1 per cent
Data not available	South Sudan	Data not available	Data not available	44.0	0.15-0.20 per cent	49.5 per cent
629.5	Somalia	1	13	Data not available	0 per cent	Data not available
2727.9	Cote D'Ivoire	1	14	35.3	0.036-0.05per cent	43.3 per cent
1084.2	Nigeria	0	13	33.9	1.5-1.7 per cent	39 per cent
2390.8	Ghana	1	9	43.5	0.2-0.3 per cent	48.8 per cent
961	Chad	4	17	37.4	0.15-0.17 per cent	44.9 per cent

Table 1: Economic Indicators and Wartime Sexual Violence in Selected Sub-Saharan African States

The findings presented in Table 1 suggest a relationship between wartime sexual violence, income inequality, and economic capacity across the selected Sub-Saharan African cases. While GDP per capita initially appeared to provide a useful measure for evaluating GDP Theory, the comparative analysis indicates that wealth distribution, as measured by the Gini coefficient and the concentration of wealth among the highest income groups, may provide a more accurate explanation for variation in wartime sexual violence across conflict environments.

States such as Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Chad demonstrate relatively low GDP per capita alongside high levels of income concentration and elevated wartime rape indicators. These findings are broadly consistent with the expectations of GDP Theory, which argues that weak economic capacity and unequal distribution of resources contribute to institutional fragility, limited military professionalism, and greater reliance on low-cost forms of violence, including sexual violence.

The findings also suggest that GDP per capita alone does not fully capture how economic resources operate within conflict-affected states. In several oil-producing states, national GDP figures may obscure significant internal inequality and uneven access to wealth. As a result, GDP per capita may overestimate actual economic capacity at the societal level, particularly in contexts where wealth remains concentrated among political elites or resource-dependent sectors. The distribution of income variable therefore provides additional insight into how economic resources are concentrated within these states and how this concentration may shape conflict dynamics.

At the same time, the analysis indicates that oil production does not necessarily correspond with lower levels of wartime sexual violence. Although some resource-producing states experience increased economic activity, these benefits are not always distributed evenly across the population or translated into stronger institutional capacity. In some cases, resource wealth may coexist with political instability, armed group fragmentation, and persistent inequality (Darkwah, 6). This finding suggests that the relationship between resource wealth and wartime sexual violence is mediated by governance structures and patterns of wealth distribution rather than economic output alone.

The comparative findings further suggest that GDP Theory must account not only for state-funded militaries, but also for non-state armed actors, militias, and rebel organizations operating within intrastate conflicts. In economically fragile environments, armed groups often lack access to formal military resources, training, and equipment. Under such conditions, sexual violence may become a low-cost and accessible mechanism of intimidation, coercion, and social control. However, the findings do not suggest that wartime rape occurs simply because armed actors lack alternative weapons or resources. Consistent with the work of Wood, wartime sexual violence is also shaped by leadership structures, organizational discipline, ideological objectives, and the absence of accountability within armed groups (308). Economic inequality and institutional weakness therefore interact with broader gendered and strategic dynamics rather than functioning as independent causal explanations on their own.

Overall, the findings provide exploratory support for GDP Theory by demonstrating that political economy conditions, particularly inequality and uneven resource distribution, may contribute to environments in which wartime sexual violence becomes more prevalent during intrastate conflict.

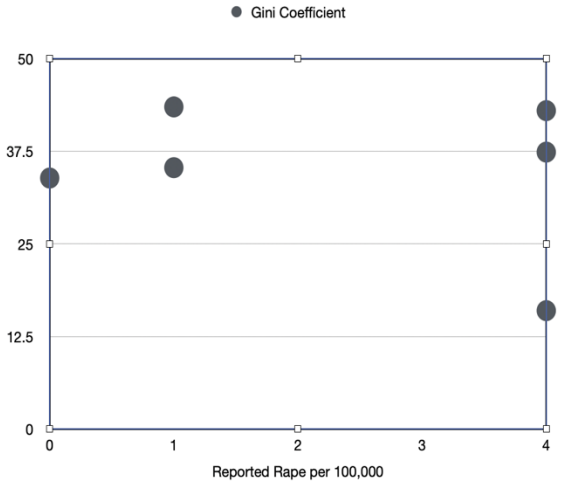


Table 2: Relationship between Income Inequality

The scatter plot in Table 2 is used as an exploratory visual tool to examine the relationship between income inequality and wartime sexual violence across the selected cases. While the limited sample size prevents definitive causal conclusions, the visualization assists in identifying broader structural patterns consistent with GDP Theory.

Visually this table shows the patterns between income inequality (calculated through the Gini coefficient) and LRW-Scale-4 (Reported rape per 100,000), strengthening the argument for considering political economy in wartime rape beyond descriptive narrative. The higher Gini Coefficients tend to align with increased wartime rape indicators; while lower inequality generally shows lower prevalence. Given the small-N exploratory design, statistical tests are used descriptively rather than inferentially. P-values are interpreted cautiously and used to assess general patterns rather than to confirm causal relationships. The Pearson correlation test between income inequality (Gini coefficient) and wartime sexual violence indicators shows a positive but statistically non-significant relationship ($r \approx 0.38$, $p \approx 0.45$). While the direction of the relationship is consistent with GDP Theory's expectations, the limited sample size and missing data reduce the statistical power of the analysis. As a result, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than confirmatory.

While exploratory in nature, the findings suggest a possible relationship between wartime sexual violence and income inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient. This indicates that political economy variables may complement existing feminist approaches by helping explain how structural economic conditions shape patterns of gendered violence in conflict settings.

Cautiously, this could mean that there is an explanation in a rooted empirical method as to how wartime rape can be reduced. Future research should build on this exploratory analysis by employing more robust quantitative and longitudinal methods to further test GDP Theory. In particular, the use of event-based datasets such as those provided by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project would allow for more precise measurement of conflict-related sexual violence over time and across cases. Expanding the analysis beyond Sub-Saharan Africa to include a larger global sample of conflict-affected states would also improve the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, future studies could incorporate multivariate regression models that include GDP per capita, income inequality, resource dependence, and measures of state fragility to better isolate the structural mechanisms proposed by GDP Theory. Finally, in-depth case studies using process tracing could complement quantitative analysis by examining how economic structures interact with armed group organization and gendered power relations in specific conflict settings.

Overall, the findings suggest that wartime sexual violence is shaped not only by gendered and strategic dynamics, but also by broader structural economic conditions. The following conclusion considers the implications of these findings for feminist International Relations scholarship, political economy theory, and

future research on conflict-related sexual violence.

Conclusion

This article has argued that wartime sexual violence cannot be understood solely through strategic or gendered explanations without also considering the structural economic conditions that shape conflict environments. By introducing GDP Theory, this study demonstrates how low GDP per capita and high levels of income inequality may contribute to weakened institutional capacity, armed group fragmentation, and the increased prevalence of low-cost forms of violence, including wartime sexual violence. Drawing on a mixed-methods comparative analysis of conflict-affected Sub-Saharan African states, the findings suggest a meaningful relationship between political economy conditions and patterns of wartime sexual violence.

The analysis does not seek to reduce wartime sexual violence to economics alone, nor to replace existing feminist International Relations scholarship. Rather, it demonstrates that political economy factors and gendered systems of power are deeply interconnected. Economic instability, inequality, and weak state capacity may create conditions in which militarized gender violence becomes more structurally available and difficult to prevent. Integrating political economy perspectives into feminist analyses therefore provides a more comprehensive understanding of how wartime sexual violence emerges and persists across different conflict settings.

The literature reviewed throughout this study demonstrates that wartime sexual violence is shaped by multiple interconnected dynamics, including patriarchal power structures, militarization, strategic coercion, and institutional instability. Feminist International Relations scholarship has shown that wartime rape is not incidental to conflict but rather reflects broader systems of gendered domination and violence. At the same time, strategic approaches have emphasized the use of sexual violence as a tool of intimidation, social control, and ethnic homogenization during armed conflict. However, the literature also reveals a relative absence of sustained political economy analysis within existing explanations of wartime sexual violence. This study builds upon these scholarly contributions by arguing that economic inequality, weak institutional capacity, and uneven development may interact with gendered systems of power to shape the prevalence of wartime sexual violence across conflict settings.

At the same time, this study remains exploratory and theory-building in scope. Limitations including underreporting of wartime sexual violence, uneven data availability, and the complexity of conflict environments mean that the findings should not be interpreted as deterministic or universally causal. Future research could expand the dataset beyond Sub-Saharan Africa, incorporate longitudinal statistical analysis, and further examine how resource wealth, governance capacity, and armed group organization influence patterns of conflict-related sexual violence.

Ultimately, this article contributes to broader debates in feminist International Relations and conflict studies by demonstrating that wartime sexual violence is shaped not only by ideology, militarization, and patriarchal power structures, but also by the economic conditions within which conflicts occur. Understanding these structural dynamics is essential for developing more effective approaches to conflict prevention, institutional reform, and the protection of vulnerable populations during armed conflict.

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