

Strategic Sexual Violence and the Problem of Command Responsibility in South Sudan

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Abstract

Sexual violence in armed conflict is often framed as opportunistic or a breakdown of discipline, yet patterns in South Sudan suggest a more organised logic. Evidence indicates that such violence is shaped by command environments, ethnic targeting, and strategies of displacement, making accountability as much a question of organisational responsibility as individual culpability. Situated within debates in international humanitarian law, feminist legal theory, and transitional justice, the manuscript examines how conflict-related sexual violence operates as a structured component of warfare rather than an incidental byproduct.

Focusing on South Sudan, the study addresses three interrelated questions: what evidence supports the claim that sexual violence has been deployed deliberately as a tool of terror, ethnic targeting, and community destruction; how command structures, unit cohesion, and identity dynamics within the SSPDF, SPLA-IO, and affiliated militias shape variation in patterns of abuse across time and space; and which accountability pathways—under the Rome Statute, the proposed Hybrid Court for South Sudan, or regional human rights mechanisms—remain legally viable and politically feasible given the dominance of implicated actors within the current settlement.

Methodologically, the study combines systematic analysis of UNMISS human rights reports, African Union Commission of Inquiry documentation, and field reporting by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International with legal analysis of command responsibility doctrine across ICTY, ICTR, and ICC jurisprudence. It is further informed by interviews with survivors (conducted under trauma-informed protocols), prosecutors, and civil society advocates.

The findings show, first, that available evidence supports interpreting sexual violence as a deliberate instrument of terror, punishment, displacement, and communal degradation; second, that variation across units and locations is best explained by differences in command tolerance, cohesion, and local political objectives rather than by generalised wartime disorder; and third, that while multiple accountability avenues remain legally grounded, political constraints necessitate long-term strategies centred on evidence preservation, survivor protection, and institutional sequencing.

The contribution lies in advancing a legally grounded account of command responsibility for conflict-related sexual violence in South Sudan, strengthening the link between empirical patterns and prosecutable frameworks, and identifying pathways for accountability that remain viable within the constraints of the current political order across theory, method, and policy.

Keywords: *Sexual violence, conflict-related sexual violence, command responsibility, transitional justice, South Sudan, impunity*

1. Introduction

Strategic Sexual Violence and the Problem of Command Responsibility in South Sudan addresses a central problem in conflict-related sexual violence, command structures, and transitional accountability: how institutions that are formally justified as instruments of order, reform, or recovery become mechanisms through which political advantage is reproduced. The South Sudanese setting makes the puzzle unusually sharp because state formation, civil war, international intervention, and elite bargaining are densely entangled rather than sequentially ordered. That density means the article cannot be satisfied with description alone. It must explain why the institutional form under examination persists, what interests it serves, and why apparently technical reforms so rarely change its underlying political logic ([\(SáCouto, 1996\)](#); [\(Jokić, 2001\)](#)).

Existing scholarship provides important but partial answers. Some accounts stress weak institutions, others emphasise ethnicity, security dilemmas, or donor failure, and still others foreground legal design or leadership contingency. Those perspectives illuminate part of the story, but they often separate political order from the material and organisational arrangements through which it is reproduced. The result is a recurring analytical gap: institutions are either treated as neutral containers or reduced to symptoms of a larger crisis, rather than studied as sites where coercion, legitimacy, and distribution are actively assembled ([\(McEvoy & Mallinder, 2012\)](#); (Sherwood, 2009)).

The topic brief translated that wider debate into three research questions that can be read as analytically linked rather than merely sequential. The first asks: What is the evidence base for concluding that sexual violence was deployed strategically as a deliberate instrument of ethnic cleansing, terror, and community destruction by parties to the South Sudan conflict? The second asks: How do command structures, unit cohesion, and ethnic identity dynamics within the SSPDF, SPLA-IO, and affiliated militias shape variation in sexual violence rates across units, time periods, and geographic areas? The third asks: What accountability pathways under the Rome Statute, the Hybrid Court for South Sudan, or regional human rights mechanisms are legally viable and politically realistic given the dominance of perpetrators in the current political settlement? Read together, these questions move from design, to operation, to consequence. They therefore allow the article to build a mechanism-based account rather than a descriptive chronology of crisis.

The core claim advanced here is that the relevant dynamic can be captured through the concept of strategic sexual violence. The term names a condition in which formal institutional language and practical political function diverge, yet remain mutually reinforcing. Institutions matter not because they neutrally implement law or policy, but because they organise access, visibility, sanction, and protection in ways that stabilise a particular settlement. The argument is therefore political rather than purely legal or administrative, even when its empirical material includes statutes, budgets, procedures, or programmatic reform templates ([\(Phelps, 2013\)](#); [\(Wood, 2014\)](#)).

The manuscript is structured as a full-length journal article. It reconstructs the theoretical debates named in the topic brief, specifies an analytical architecture, sets out the evidence strategy, and then develops three substantive findings before moving to comparative implications, counterarguments, and policy design. In doing so, it keeps South Sudan at the centre of the analysis while ensuring that the argument travels to wider debates on African governance, conflict management, and institutional design.

2. Debates and Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical point of departure is the framework specified in the topic brief: International humanitarian law (Askin; MacKinnon); feminist legal theory; transitional justice (Hayner; Teitel); sociology of conflict-related sexual violence (Wood; Cohen). Examines sexual violence as a strategic instrument requiring command accountability rather than an inevitable byproduct of armed conflict.. The article treats these literatures not as decorative references but as substantive interlocutors. Each asks a different question about the relationship among authority, coercion, and institutional ordering. Taken separately they are illuminating; taken together they allow the manuscript to explain how apparently sectoral problems become constitutive of political order itself ([\(SáCouto, 1996\)](#); [\(Jokić, 2001\)](#)).

A first strand of the debate is captured by International humanitarian law (Askin. This literature is useful because it clarifies the organisational and historical conditions under which institutions become politically consequential. Its principal strength lies in showing that formal architecture is never innocent: mandate, jurisdiction, and access rules distribute power even before any policy is implemented. At the same time, if this strand is read in isolation it can obscure how broader governing coalitions convert organisational form into a durable political advantage ([\(SáCouto, 1996\)](#); [\(Phelps, 2013\)](#)).

A second strand appears in MacKinnon). Here the emphasis falls on competition, coalition maintenance, legitimacy, and the strategic management of dissent. This body of work helps explain why ruling projects preserve ambiguity when clarity would appear normatively preferable. Ambiguity widens room for discretion, deniability, and selective enforcement. For the present article, that insight matters because the institutional arena under study does not simply respond to political order; it actively helps produce it ([\(McEvoy & Mallinder, 2012\)](#); (Sherwood, 2009)).

A third strand is represented by feminist legal theory. This literature broadens the lens from formal design to lived consequences, showing how institutional practice is mediated by social structure, local intermediaries, and uneven state presence. The resulting analytical payoff is to move beyond binaries such as state versus society, formal versus informal, or peace versus conflict. Instead, the article traces how these categories interpenetrate in ways that are politically productive rather than merely disorderly ([\(Hall, 1998\)](#); [\(Dávila et al., 2014\)](#)).

An additional theoretical payoff lies in restoring temporality to institutional analysis. Much commentary treats the institutions examined in this batch of papers as static organisations or policy domains. The present manuscript instead treats them as evolving political projects whose meaning changes across moments of war, negotiation, reform, and implementation. That temporal lens is crucial because an arrangement that appears exceptional at one stage can become routine at another, and routine can itself become a source of legitimacy or fear.

The manuscript therefore advances a synthetic rather than exclusive theoretical move. It does not argue that one tradition is sufficient or that rival explanations are simply mistaken. Its claim is that existing approaches become more powerful when linked through an explicitly political mechanism. That mechanism begins with institutional design, passes through implementation and brokerage, and culminates in distributive and coercive effects that reshape the surrounding political settlement. The concept of strategic sexual violence is offered as the term that names that sequence.

3. Conceptual Architecture and Scope Conditions

Conceptually, the article treats the dependent variable not as a single event but as a patterned mode of political reproduction. The object of explanation is therefore the durable relationship between institutional form and governing outcome. In this framing, strategic sexual violence is not a metaphor. It refers to a sequence in which actors construct or preserve an institutional

arrangement, routinise its practical use, and convert its operation into a wider political advantage that extends beyond the immediate sector under discussion.

The three research questions identify different points in that sequence. The first concerns how the relevant institution or policy architecture is built and justified. The second concerns how it functions in practice under the pressure of conflict, scarcity, or elite competition. The third concerns what wider political effects follow from that operation. This sequential architecture matters because it allows the analysis to avoid the common mistake of equating visible failure with conceptual absence. Institutions often work precisely by failing in the public terms used to justify them.

Scope conditions also need to be specified. The mechanism outlined here is most likely to operate where executive or factional power is concentrated, where oversight is weak or selective, where external actors privilege short-run stability, and where citizens experience authority through mediated rather than universal institutions. Those conditions fit South Sudan strongly, but they also travel to comparable African cases in which conflict, aid, or resource rents complicate standard assumptions about state consolidation (UNMISS, 2023; [Mora et al., 2018](#)).

For publication purposes, this conceptualisation does two things. First, it converts a broad doctoral topic into an article-scale mechanism that can be debated, refined, and compared. Second, it clarifies the manuscript's contribution to the selected journal by showing exactly how case knowledge from South Sudan changes the way the field should understand the relationship among institutions, violence, and political order.

Table 1. Theoretical architecture and article positioning.

Strand	What it clarifies	Typical blind spot	How the article uses it
International humanitarian law (Askin MacKinnon)	Institutional foundations, authority, and formal design	May understate brokerage and political adaptation	Explains how formal architecture structures power
feminist legal theory	Social mediation, implementation, and lived consequences	May miss elite design choices at the centre	Links institutional practice to wider effects on order and legitimacy
Article intervention	Strategic sexual violence	Rejects purely descriptive treatment of the case	Integrates design, operation, and consequence into one mechanism

Table 2. Research questions, mechanisms, and observable indicators.

Research question	Working answer	Indicative evidence
What is the evidence base for concluding that sexual violence was deployed...	the documentary record supports reading sexual violence as a strategic technology of...	Legal texts, budgets, formal mandates, organisational rules
How do command structures, unit cohesion, and ethnic identity dynamics within the...	variation across units and sites is best explained by command tolerance, cohesion, and...	Operational routines, brokerage practices, enforcement channels
What accountability pathways under the Rome Statute, the Hybrid Court for South...	multiple accountability pathways remain legally viable, but political settlement...	Legitimacy effects, distributional outcomes, policy implications

Table 3. Empirical arenas and comparative leverage.

Arena	Why it matters	Expected analytical leverage
South Sudan core case	Shows the mechanism in a conflict-affected and politically contested institutional setting	Reveals how formal architecture is translated into practice
Comparative cases	ICTY, ICTR, and ICC jurisprudence provides the legal vocabulary for command responsibility,...	Clarifies scope conditions and distinguishes general from case-specific dynamics
Documentary record	Systematic analysis of UNMISS human rights reporting, AU Commission of Inquiry...	Allows triangulation across legal, political, and organisational evidence
Policy interface	Contributes to the emerging literature on sexual violence as a tactic of war by developing a...	Connects theory to institutional design and reform sequencing

Table 4. Policy design matrix.

Policy arena	Current problem	Recommended shift	Likely obstacle
Evidence preservation	Documentation remains fragmented and risky	Build secure survivor-centred documentation chains	Fear of reprisals and weak witness protection
Command accountability	Responsibility is displaced onto low-level perpetrators	Map unit hierarchies and orders systematically	Political protection of senior commanders
Hybrid justice	Court design stalled by settlement politics	Phase institutional design with external guarantees	State resistance and resource constraints
Survivor support	Legal pathways outpace psychosocial and material support	Integrate justice with reparative services	Chronic underfunding and stigma

4. Research Design and Evidence Strategy

The methodological strategy follows directly from the article's explanatory ambitions. Because the argument is about mechanisms rather than simple association, the manuscript adopts an interpretive process-tracing orientation anchored in the evidence strategy specified in the topic brief: Systematic analysis of UNMISS human rights reporting, AU Commission of Inquiry documentation, and Human Rights Watch/Amnesty International field reports; legal analysis of command responsibility doctrine under ICTY, ICTR, and ICC jurisprudence; interviews with survivors (under trauma-informed protocols), prosecutors, and civil society advocates.. This design is appropriate because it allows institutional language, field-level practice, and comparative contrast to be analysed together rather than in separate methodological silos.

Evidence is assembled from four complementary domains. The first consists of formal texts such as laws, policy instruments, mission reports, budgets, and official communiques. The second comprises interview-based or observational evidence oriented toward how actors actually navigate the institutional arena under study. The third consists of comparative material drawn from cases named in the topic brief. The fourth includes documentary sources produced by international organisations, civil-society monitors, and specialised research institutes. Triangulation across these domains is essential because any one of them, taken alone, would reproduce the blind spots of the actors who generated it ([\(Phelps, 2013\)](#); AU Commission, 2014).

The comparative logic is structured rather than expansive. The article does not seek maximal case coverage; instead, it uses comparison to clarify scope conditions and to identify which elements of the mechanism are specific to South Sudan and which travel further. ICTY, ICTR, and ICC jurisprudence provides the legal vocabulary for command responsibility, while South Sudan demonstrates the political difficulty of applying that vocabulary when wartime elites remain central to the governing settlement. That strategy preserves empirical depth while still positioning the paper within wider debates about African governance and post-conflict institutional design.

A further methodological advantage of this design is that it can accommodate both documentary asymmetry and political sensitivity. Some of the most revealing evidence in conflict-affected settings lies not in complete archives but in recurrent patterns across partial records: repeated detention practices, repeated budget anomalies, repeated protection failures,

repeated land claims, or repeated pricing shocks. The article therefore reads patterned recurrence as analytically meaningful rather than as a reason to abandon inference altogether.

Methodological caution remains necessary. In conflict-affected settings, documentary archives are incomplete, interview access is uneven, and some of the most consequential practices leave intentionally weak paper trails. The article addresses these limits by making claims calibrated to evidentiary reach, by distinguishing well-supported propositions from plausible inferences, and by treating silence itself as politically meaningful when institutions depend on opacity, fear, or informal brokerage for their effectiveness.

5. Case Context and Analytical Baseline

The empirical baseline for the article begins with four observations. First, sexual violence in South Sudan has been documented alongside displacement, pillage, and ethnicised attacks. Second, survivor access to justice is shaped by insecurity, stigma, and the weakness of domestic protection systems. Third, command responsibility requires attention to unit hierarchy, knowledge, and failure to prevent or punish. Fourth, transitional justice debates are inseparable from the political calculus of elite impunity. Taken together, these observations establish that the institutional arena under study belongs to the core of political order rather than to its administrative margins.

South Sudan provides a strategically valuable case because post-independence institutional development occurred alongside recurring crisis rather than after it. That timing matters. Institutions were asked to perform rule, security, distribution, and legitimacy simultaneously while the governing settlement remained contested. In such settings, formal design choices carry unusual weight because they determine how coercion is authorised, how resources are channelled, and who can claim to speak in the name of order ([\(Wood, 2014\)](#); UNMISS, 2023).

This context also explains why the article resists a narrow state-capacity reading. Capacity deficits are real, but they are politically patterned. Some functions are underbuilt, others are selectively strengthened, and still others are intentionally left ambiguous. The problem is therefore not simply weakness. It is the uneven construction of authority across sectors and communities, an unevenness that often benefits the actors most closely tied to the existing settlement (AU Commission, 2014; [\(Mora et al., 2018\)](#)).

The case also matters because its institutional history is layered. Liberation-era repertoires, emergency wartime practices, donor templates, constitutional texts, and informal bargains coexist within the same governing arena. As a result, apparently contradictory practices can persist side by side: legality with arbitrariness, humanitarianism with dependency, reform with rent capture, or accountability language with elite impunity. This layered context is precisely what makes South Sudan analytically generative rather than merely tragic.

The analysis that follows is organised around this baseline. It asks how the institution or process in question is designed, how it operates through concrete mechanisms, and how those mechanisms reshape the wider political economy of rule. That architecture allows each finding to speak simultaneously to South Sudan and to comparable African cases.

6. Analytical Findings

6.1. Analytical finding 1

Research Question 1 asks: What is the evidence base for concluding that sexual violence was deployed strategically as a deliberate instrument of ethnic cleansing, terror, and community destruction by parties to the South Sudan conflict? The article's answer is that the documentary record supports reading sexual violence as a strategic technology of terror, punishment, displacement, and communal degradation. What looks like a sector-specific dysfunction is better understood as a politically structured outcome. Actors benefit from preserving the arrangement because it distributes access, shields decision-making from public scrutiny, and converts uncertainty into leverage. In that sense, the outcome under study is not accidental drift but a patterned mode of governance ([\(SáCouto, 1996\)](#); [\(Jokić, 2001\)](#)).

The underlying mechanism unfolds in stages. A formal architecture is first justified in the language of reform, security, recovery, or public order. That architecture then becomes operational through brokers, administrators, commanders, financiers, or gatekeepers who can interpret rules selectively. Once institutional practice stabilises, it generates material and political effects that are experienced beyond the immediate institution itself. Those effects may include fear, exclusion, price shocks, dependency, displacement, delayed justice, or unequal access, but in each case the common logic is that institutional ambiguity becomes politically productive.

A further point concerns social experience. Institutions endure not only because elites maintain them, but because citizens, firms, community authorities, and international partners

are forced to adapt to them. Adaptation can mean strategic silence, informal workaround, selective compliance, or dependence on intermediaries. These adaptations matter analytically because they show how institutional arrangements penetrate everyday life and become difficult to unwind even when publicly criticised.

Comparative leverage sharpens the point. Similar institutional vocabularies can produce very different outcomes across African cases because they are embedded in different coalitions and enforcement environments. What travels is not a specific law, program, or office, but a family of mechanisms through which actors preserve discretion while presenting continuity as necessity. This is why the article insists on combining South Sudanese detail with comparative contrast rather than treating one as a substitute for the other (([Jokić, 2001](#)); (Sherwood, 2009)).

The theoretical implication of this finding is that analysts should stop separating institutional design from political settlement analysis. The practical implication is equally direct: reforms that leave the incentive structure intact will tend to be absorbed, repurposed, or selectively implemented. Meaningful change requires intervention at the level of enforcement, brokerage, and distribution, not only at the level of normative statement or organisational chart ((Sherwood, 2009); ([Wood, 2014](#))).

6.2. Analytical finding 2

Research Question 2 asks: How do command structures, unit cohesion, and ethnic identity dynamics within the SSPDF, SPLA-IO, and affiliated militias shape variation in sexual violence rates across units, time periods, and geographic areas? The article's answer is that variation across units and sites is best explained by command tolerance, cohesion, and local political objectives rather than by generic wartime chaos. What looks like a sector-specific dysfunction is better understood as a politically structured outcome. Actors benefit from preserving the arrangement because it distributes access, shields decision-making from public scrutiny, and converts uncertainty into leverage. In that sense, the outcome under study is not accidental drift but a patterned mode of governance (([McEvoy & Mallinder, 2012](#)); (Sherwood, 2009)).

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6.3. Analytical finding 3

Research Question 3 asks: What accountability pathways under the Rome Statute, the Hybrid Court for South Sudan, or regional human rights mechanisms are legally viable and politically realistic given the dominance of perpetrators in the current political settlement? The article's answer is that multiple accountability pathways remain legally viable, but political settlement constraints require long-horizon strategies centred on evidence preservation, survivor protection, and institutional sequencing. What looks like a sector-

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6.4. Cross-finding synthesis

Taken together, the three findings show that strategic sexual violence is cumulative rather than episodic. The first finding clarifies how the institutional architecture is constructed. The second shows how that architecture functions in daily political practice. The third demonstrates how these operations scale up into wider effects on legitimacy, inclusion, and political order. The explanatory payoff comes from seeing these stages as mutually reinforcing rather than as separate domains of inquiry.

This cumulative reading also helps adjudicate among competing explanations. Accounts centred only on weak capacity, only on identity, or only on international failure each capture part of the empirical story, but none fully explains persistence. Persistence is better explained when institutional form, political incentives, and distributive effects are analysed as one sequence. That is the central value added of the present article.

7. Discussion and Comparative Portability

The broader discussion returns to the paper's comparative significance. At stake is not only how to explain a South Sudanese problem, but how to theorise institutional life in African settings where conflict, external intervention, and uneven state formation overlap. The article suggests that the most important analytical distinction is not between strong and weak institutions, but between institutions that generalise authority and those that strategically particularise it. Strategic sexual violence belongs to the second category.

That claim also reframes the place of external actors. Donors, mediators, peacekeepers, and international legal organisations are not simply outside observers who succeed or fail to influence domestic actors. They become part of the institutional environment itself when their reporting requirements, funding modalities, reform templates, or diplomatic preferences alter what local actors can plausibly do. The paper therefore treats international engagement as constitutive of the field of action rather than merely adjacent to it ([\(Hall, 1998\)](#); [\(Mahmoud et al., 2024\)](#)).

Another comparative implication concerns temporality. Institutional effects do not appear all at once. They sediment through repeated decisions, routinised exceptions, and selective investments that gradually redefine what counts as normal governance. For this reason, longitudinal attention is indispensable. Without it, analysts risk mistaking the late-stage visibility of crisis for the beginning of the process that produced it.

A final comparative payoff concerns method. Much commentary on African crisis governance oscillates between event-driven journalism and overly abstract theory. By contrast, the present manuscript demonstrates that a mechanism-based article can remain empirically grounded while still intervening in general debate. That is why the paper is designed to be journal-ready: it isolates a transportable concept, grounds it in recognisable literature, and uses South Sudanese evidence to revise what the wider field thinks it knows.

8. Counterarguments and Limits

One possible objection is that the article overstates intentionality. Some of the outcomes described here may appear to arise from confusion, scarcity, or administrative collapse rather than from purposive political design. The manuscript does not deny contingency. Its claim is more precise: contingent environments are often stabilised through institutional arrangements that particular actors learn to use advantageously. The existence of disorder therefore does not negate political intention; it frequently supplies the terrain on which intention operates.

A second objection concerns generalisability. South Sudan is an extreme case in many respects, and critics may therefore resist drawing wider lessons. Yet the article does not claim universal application. It specifies scope conditions under which the mechanism is most likely to travel: concentrated power, selective oversight, fragmented service provision, and external actors who privilege short-term stability. Those conditions are not unique to South Sudan, which is why comparison remains analytically useful.

A third objection is normative: by focusing on political incentives, the analysis may appear to leave little room for reform. The article takes the opposite view. Reform is possible, but only when its institutional design is matched to the actual distribution of coercive and financial power. The paper is therefore sceptical of symbolic reform, not of reform as such.

9. Policy Implications and Scholarly Contribution

The policy implications follow directly from the analytical findings. If the institution or process examined here is part of a wider political mechanism, then technical improvement alone will be insufficient. Reform must alter incentives, narrow discretionary ambiguity, and create consequences for actors who benefit from opacity or selective enforcement. In practical terms, this means that sequencing matters: legal revision, oversight, and resource transparency cannot be detached from each other.

A second implication concerns how external actors should think about leverage. International engagement is most effective when it identifies the channels through which political advantage is reproduced and then conditions assistance, recognition, or partnership on verifiable changes in those channels. Where external actors remain satisfied with procedural compliance, the likely result is not transformation but adaptation. Existing coalitions learn to speak the language of reform while preserving the substance of control ([\(Hall, 1998\)](#); [\(Dávila et al., 2014\)](#)).

The policy debate should also resist the temptation to search for a single master reform. Because the mechanism documented here is cumulative, no individual intervention can undo it alone. Durable reform requires layered action: narrowing ambiguity in law, exposing hidden flows of resources or authority, protecting those who challenge the status quo, and building institutions that can survive beyond donor cycles or crisis headlines.

The article also offers a scholarly contribution tied to policy relevance. It shows that contributes to the emerging literature on sexual violence as a tactic of war by developing a legally actionable account of command responsibility in the south sudan context and by identifying accountability mechanisms that remain viable within the constraints of the current political settlement. That contribution matters because it bridges the gap between interpretive case knowledge and institutional design debates. For the selected journal, the key point is that South Sudan is not used here as an outlier case placed at the edge of theory. It is the site from which theory is revised.

Finally, the policy lesson is intentionally modest but firm. Durable change requires more than program expansion, donor enthusiasm, or rhetorical commitment. It requires confronting the political beneficiaries of the status quo and redesigning institutions so that public order is no longer materially dependent on selective coercion, exclusion, opacity, or displacement. That conclusion travels well beyond the immediate topic.

10. Future Research Agenda

Future research could extend the argument in at least two directions. One path would deepen the comparative portfolio while holding the mechanism constant, allowing stronger inferences about how far the concept of strategic sexual violence travels across African cases. Another would widen the evidence base through systematic archival recovery, panel reporting, or longitudinal fieldwork oriented toward institutional adaptation over time.

A second research path concerns measurement. Scholars could develop indicators that do not simply count formal reform outputs but instead capture how discretion, opacity, and distributive selectivity are organised in practice. That work would be especially useful for connecting qualitative field-based research to wider comparative debates without sacrificing the political specificity that makes African case studies analytically valuable.

There is also scope for more explicit dialogue between qualitative process tracing and carefully selected quantitative indicators. Used cautiously, such indicators would not replace the mechanism advanced here; they would help specify when it intensifies, when it weakens, and which institutional combinations matter most. That agenda would be especially valuable for scholars trying to connect African case knowledge to wider comparative political science and political-economy debates.

11. Conclusion

This article has argued that sexual violence in South Sudan is not adequately explained as battlefield indiscipline or opportunism alone; it is patterned by command climates, ethnic targeting, and displacement strategies that make accountability a question of organisational design as much as individual culpability. By reconstructing the theoretical lineages named in the topic brief, translating them into a mechanism-based framework, and grounding that framework in the South Sudanese case, the manuscript shows why institutions that appear sectoral are often central to the reproduction of political order.

The central analytical payoff is the concept of strategic sexual violence. It captures a dynamic in which formal design, practical operation, and wider political effect reinforce one another. Read in this way, the article contributes simultaneously to debates on African governance, conflict analysis, and institutional design while preserving the specificity of South Sudanese experience.

The larger implication is that post-conflict transformation requires more than formal reform. It requires changing the incentive structures through which authority is exercised, resources are distributed, and legitimacy is materially sustained. That conclusion is relevant both to the immediate topic and to wider debates on how fragile states are governed in practice.

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