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Talking to the shameless? Sexual violence and mediation in intrastate conflicts

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To what extent does sexual violence influence the likelihood of conflict management in intrastate conflicts? Despite a growing body of research that explores conflict-related sexual violence, the literature presents little insight on its effects on conflict resolution. Extending feminist IR theory to intrastate conflicts and applying a gender lens to the power to hurt argument, I argue that when rebel sexual violence is public knowledge the likelihood of conflict management increases because the state perceives it as a threat to its masculinity. I systematically test this argument on all intrastate conflict years from 1990 to 2009 using the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC) and the Civil War Mediation (CWM) dataset. The results provide robust support for the argument. This presents an important refinement of traditional rationalist conflict bargaining theories and opens new avenues for the research and practice of conflict management.

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Introduction

In 2010 the government of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) agreed to peace talks with a local militia called Mai Mai Sheka. These talks began after, in the span of three days, the group reportedly raped 387 civilians (Autesserre 2012, 217). Faced with this massive sexual violence the government decided to negotiate. Some suggest that the DRC government is not an outlier, but that governments are generally more likely to accept peace talks when rebels perpetrate sexual violence that attracts international attention (Autesserre 2012). Accordingly, this article explores the question: to what extent does sexual violence influence conflict management?

Sexual violence in conflict is now widely recognized as a threat to international security and an increasing number of studies explore its causes and variations (Wood 2006, 2009; Cohen 2013, 2016; Cohen and Nordås 2014; 2015). Although sexual violence has often been described as strategic and ‘rape as a weapon of war’ is a dominant narrative (Crawford 2017), there is a robust literature on the diverse reasons behind conflict-related sexual violence.¹ At the same time, we know very little about the effects of sexual violence on conflict processes.

One recent study starts to shed some light on the consequences of sexual violence in conflict by examining the relationship between sexual violence and conflict outcomes (Chu and Braithwaite 2018). Chu and Braithwaite argue that conflicts involving sexual violence are more likely to end in negotiate agreements because actors perpetrating this type of violence are organizationally weak, less likely to secure military victory, and thus more likely to agree on a deal to salvage anything from the conflict. This illustrates that effects of sexual violence can be distinct from perpetrators’ motivations and thus should be examined without conflating observed outcome with underlying intent. In line with this, I focus on effects of rebel sexual violence without assuming strategic intent. Besides contributing to the nascent literature on the effects of sexual violence, this study more broadly adds an innovative argument to the body of literature examining the effects of civilian victimization on conflict processes and outcomes (Wood and Kathman 2014; Thomas 2014; Fortna 2015).

¹ For a comprehensive critique of the ‘strategic argument’ see Wood (2014) and Cohen (2016)

Drawing on feminist IR theory and bringing together disparate literatures on sexual violence, gender, and conflict management, I argue that reports of rebel sexual violence increase the likelihood of mediation because they emasculate the state. This emasculation has two components: first, rebel sexual violence demonstrates states' failure to fulfill their masculine protection responsibility, and second, when reported, this failure becomes a public loss of face. This two-fold humiliation presents a conflict cost that outweighs the costs of accepting mediation. Thus, rebel sexual violence increases the likelihood of mediation. Employing a gender lens refines traditional rationalist bargaining theories. In drawing on feminist IR theory and positivist methodology, this article contributes to the emerging literature bridging these two approaches (Karim and Beardsley 2017).

Mediation offers benefits such as increased legitimacy to non-state actors, while primarily presenting costs to states. Thus, governments are likely to resist the inclusion of an intermediary until expected costs of continued fighting outweigh the costs associated with mediation. Insurgents hoping to overcome the inherent power asymmetry of civil war usually welcome third-party involvement. I contend that when rebel sexual violence is public knowledge, incumbent governments perceive it as particularly costly because it threatens their masculinity. Reports of sexual violence expose states' inability to protect their constituents, which presents an increase in conflict costs. Mediation accordingly should be more likely when there are reports of rebels perpetrating sexual violence.

On the other hand, the asymmetric relationship between belligerents grants governments a veto player function and denies rebels the possibility of initiating a mediation process. This means that if there are reports of state sexual violence and rebels call for mediation, the decision to enter into mediation rests with the government. Thus, I expect that if there are reports of state sexual violence it will not affect the likelihood of mediation.

I begin by discussing what factors contribute to mediation onset in civil wars. Then I examine the gendered dynamics underpinning the power to hurt logic and argue that reports of sexual violence emasculate the government. I quantitatively test my argument using logistic regression models to examine 118 intrastate conflicts drawn from the Uppsala/PRIO Armed Conflict dataset (Gleditsch et al. 2002). The dataset includes 746 conflict years between 1990 and 2009, of these 222 feature a mediation event. Mediation data are drawn from an updated version of the Civil War

Mediation dataset (DeRouen, Bercovitch, and Pospieszna 2011). The Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC) dataset is used to capture reports of sexual (Cohen and Nordås 2014). The analysis indicates that conflict years in which rebels are reported to perpetrate sexual violence are more likely to see the onset of mediation, while reports of sexual violence by the state have no significant influence. Following the quantitative analysis, I discuss Sierra Leone as a crucial case to test the theory.

Conflict management - mediation onset

Why do conflict parties start to talk?

When intrastate conflicts erupt, governments should enjoy military and economic advantages (Gent 2011). Comparing rebel strength to governments' capabilities shows that in 204 intrastate conflicts only approximately 13% of rebel groups are stronger than or can match governments' capabilities (Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2013). This asymmetry is reflected in the fact that rebels win only 9% of conflict episodes (Kreutz 2010). Consequently, insurgents generally have a much stronger incentive to engage in peace talks than the government. This also means that if rebels are stronger and have access to resources, mediation can become less likely (Clayton 2013, 2016). Based on this presumed structural advantage, governments are likely to reject insurgent claims and pursue a military rather than a diplomatic solution. This advantage has the potential to become a disadvantage for governments; opening talks with insurgents can be interpreted as an admission that the government has lost control over its territory and lacks either the resolve or the capabilities, or both, to win the conflict militarily (Kaplow 2016; Melin and Svensson 2009). In effect it signals weakness. This can hurt governments' reputation with key domestic constituents and international partners as well as weaken their bargaining position *versa* insurgents. Furthermore, opening a dialogue recognizes insurgents and grants them legitimacy, which is difficult to obtain on the battlefield alone. Thus they stand to gain significant benefits by participating in a peace process, while the government suffers the cost of losing its position of being the sole legitimate power (Greig and Regan 2008; Melin and Svensson 2009). Consequently, governments will only open peace talks if the potential benefits of resolving a conflict outweigh the associated costs of the process (Melin and Svensson 2009).

Theoretically, peace talks with the government can be costly to insurgents as they might alienate foreign donors, or, more importantly, cause internal splits weakening the group. Empirically, however, external support for rebels increases the likelihood of talks and domestic hardliners seem to have no effect (Kaplow 2016). The asymmetry in terms of legitimacy and military capability enables rebels to frame talks with governments as a success. Insurgents are not bound by audience costs the same way governments are because rebels can claim that their actions have forced the government to the table. Hence rebels generally welcome the opening of talks.

Why do civil war parties use mediation?

Mediation is a voluntary form of conflict management in which both sides grant an intermediary control over some feature(s) of the peace process. Mediation highlights both benefits and costs of bilateral dialogue. Rebels receive boosts in domestic and international legitimacy through the introduction of an intermediary, while experiencing little costs. For the state, however, it illustrates both its inability to control its territory and to withstand rebel pressure (Melin and Svensson 2009). Consequently, rebels might interpret acceptance of mediation as a signal that hard bargaining or continued fighting might lead to further concessions, which could increase support for rebels or encouraging new challengers (Toft 2003; Walter 2006a). Admission of an intermediary implies a loss of autonomy for both belligerents. In sum, for rebels the benefits of mediation largely outweigh the costs. However, for incumbents who stand to lose their exclusive grip on political, economic, and/or territorial control, this presents a substantial cost. It harbors the chance that mediation results in a flawed agreement. These costs present strong disincentives for incumbents to engage in mediation.

Nonetheless mediation also offers benefits to governments. Foremost, it presents an effective tool to get out of violent conflict (Zartman 1995; Bercovitch and Gartner 2006; Beardsley et al. 2006; Beardsley 2011). Of course, the majority of states intend to defeat rebels. However, when defeating insurgents becomes less likely, mediation frequently presents the most effective way of ending the fighting. Contrastingly, governments might accept a mediation offer to re-group, collect information, or attack an unsuspecting adversary (Richmond 1998; Beardsley 2010). As conflict parties weigh expected costs against expected benefits of winning, the likelihood of mediation increases as a conflict becomes costlier (Clayton and

Gleditsch 2014). Accordingly, when governments face a serious threat they are more likely to participate in mediations (Clayton 2013, 2016; Clayton and Gleditsch 2014). Mediation is more likely when the desire to end violent conflict outweighs the costs of mediation. In civil wars the onset of mediation thus depends on the government's desire for peace balanced against the costs of admitting a third party, i.e. governments hold veto power over deciding the onset of mediation.

Power to hurt and sexual violence

Power to hurt is power to bargain

Studies of dyadic interactions in conflict frequently draw on the notion of power to hurt as power to bargain (Hultman 2007; Wood 2010; Wood, Kathman, and Gent 2012; Wood and Kathman 2014; Thomas 2014). This argument posits that the costs one disputant can impose on the other can be understood as leverage in the bargaining process. This implies that rebels do not need to win militarily to achieve their objectives; it can be enough to impose high costs to force incumbents to accept an intermediary. The underpinning idea is that rebels change governments' cost/benefit analysis of continuing armed conflict. In applying a gender lens, I extend this idea to argue that it is enough to publicly expose the state's inability to protect its citizens from sexual violence. The inherent asymmetry between belligerents in civil war and incumbents as de-facto legitimate powers means that the power to hurt is a unidirectional mechanism. Put differently, rebels can employ hurtful tactics to force concessions (i.e. mediation) from states, but states cannot do the same to rebels.

Recent research corroborates the power to hurt argument by illustrating that relatively stronger rebels presenting a serious challenge to governments are more likely to force mediations (Clayton 2013, 2016; Clayton and Gleditsch 2014). Yet, even weak rebels can force governments to the negotiating table by targeting civilians and employing terrorist tactics (Thomas 2014; Wood and Kathman 2014). This is because targeting civilians improves insurgents' bargaining position by signaling information about resolve and future conflict costs (Wood and Kathman 2014, 686). However, not all states are equally cost-sensitive, governments' level of accountability influences their susceptibility to hurtful tactics (Thomas 2014). The targeting of civilians is more likely to lead to talks in more democratic states—but is this true for sexual violence?

Power to hurt through a gender lens

Traditional power to hurt reasoning is gender blind and neglects individual experiences, particularly women who are persistently marginalized (Sylvester 2013). Thus extending feminist international relations theory to civil conflicts offers unique insights on how and why reports of rebels targeting civilians, particularly women, are perceived as hurtful to governments. In fact, feminist IR theory is crucial to understanding the gendered nature of sexual violence and the apparent contradiction of states perceiving reports of rebel sexual violence as hurtful while perpetrating such violence themselves.

Employing a gender lens draws on well-established feminist IR theory that argues that states are gendered (Peterson 1992; Tickner 1992, 2001; Sjoberg 2013). Formal institutions such as states are gendered when they ‘are symbolically and ideologically described and conceived in terms of a discourse that draws on masculinities and femininities’ (Britton 2000, 420). States fit this pattern as they propagate masculine behavior in defending themselves, their citizens, territory, and identity (Sjoberg 2013). A feminist lens highlights that power, strength, and control are inherently tied to the gendered protection norm and the masculinity of states (Sjoberg 2013, 199; Karim and Beardsley 2017). Constituents frequently select for masculine leadership because they want and expect protection, strength, and power and they challenge leaders if they fail to meet these expectations (Sjoberg 2013, 162). This is visible in the executive branch and the defense ministries, which remain overwhelmingly male-dominated (Barnes and O’Brien 2018). However, states’ masculinities are not uniform, but may take different forms such as ‘warrior’, ‘protector’, or ‘emancipator’ (Sjoberg 2013; Karim and Beardsley 2017), meaning a military dictatorship might react differently to rebel sexual violence than a democratic government.

Fundamental to states’ masculinity is the gendered protection norm based on the separation of combatants and civilians along gendered lines (Carpenter 2003, 2005; Sjoberg 2013; Karim and Beardsley 2017). Men are seen as natural protectors that ought to protect supposedly innocent civilians, i.e. women and children who are *beautiful souls* (Elshtain 1987). As such, states frequently (consciously or not) perceive women as both biological and cultural reproducers (Peterson 1999). Consequently, states prioritize the protection of these centers of gravity (Carpenter

2003, 2005). Accordingly, ‘civilian victimization can be read as a proxy for “women,” not *as women per se* but in their roles as the (gendered feminine) symbolic center’ (Sjoberg 2013, 201 emphasis in original). Targeting civilians in conflict to hurt the other side thus is fundamentally gendered.

This, however, does not imply that all victims of civilian victimization have to be female or that perpetrating agents intend to kill only women (Sjoberg 2013, 202). Equally, or even more important is the failed protector. The intentional targeting of civilians is primarily employed to symbolically hurt a presumed protector. A gendered understanding of the power to hurt argument thus posits that victimizing civilians targets the masculinity of one’s opponent. As Laura Sjoberg puts it, ‘intentional civilian victimization is, consciously or not, an attack on the masculinity (and therefore will to fight) of the enemy, carried out by the destruction of the feminine’ (2013, 202). A failure to protect its women emasculates the state.

Sexual violence takes on a particular role in embodying the power to hurt mechanism for two reasons: (1) Unlike the killing of civilians, sexual violence is always committed intentionally (Mitchell 2004; Anderson 2010, 247), (2) sexual violence is inherently gendered as it draws on the gendered protection norm that renders women the center of gravity (Carpenter 2003, 2005; Sjoberg 2013; Karim and Beardsley 2017). The silencing of men as victims and survivors of sexual violence contributes to this framing. Sexual violence establishes both the literal and symbolic domination and subordination of the other in disarming and feminizing both the direct victim and the state (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2009). Benard describes how Serbian fighters raped women and children to shame and demoralize Bosnians by ‘demonstrating them to be incapable of fulfilling their responsibility to protect vulnerable group members’ (1994, 40). To a state this emasculation presents a substantial conflict cost. I contend that sexual violence is so hurtful because it invokes the gendered protection norm to a greater extent than other forms of violence and thereby challenges a core aspect of a state’s masculinity.

This emasculation of the state is exacerbated when the state’s failure to protect its women becomes public knowledge. Even isolated reports of sexual violence send a powerful signal because they expose states’ lack of territorial control and inability to protect civilians. Although governments (read elites) might not care about their people being victimized, they do care about their control, reputation, and projected

strength (Walter 2006b).² Rebel sexual violence fundamentally questions the state's power. Thus it is not a concern for citizens that drives government reaction, but it is the perception that the state is 'outmanned' that hurts its pride. This connects to the fundamental self-conception of states that '[lay] claim to the monopoly of legitimate physical violence within a particular territory' (Weber 2004, 33). Hence reports of sexual violence are deeply problematic for the state because they amplify its emasculation by exposing the state's 'incapacity to fulfill the fundamental masculine function of protection' (Sjoberg 2013, 239). Thus it is a two-step process that emasculates the state: (1) the failure to protect its women, (2) the public knowledge of its failure.

So why would emasculation prompt talks? I contend that first, the inherently gendered nature of sexual violence invokes the image of women and children in need of protection (Carpenter 2003, 2005) and triggers the gendered protection norm, which is fundamental to the masculine state identity, to a greater extent than for example one-sided violence. As a result their protection, i.e. cessation of hostilities and thereby an end of the state's ongoing emasculation, becomes more important than retaliating. Second, rebel sexual violence does not occur in a vacuum, but in the context of an already costly conflict. Reports of sexual violence present an additional cost, rather than the only conflict cost. Third, it is not a deterministic argument. Some governments, particularly military regimes, might refuse to accept mediation and decide to fight back. States frequently try and fail to demonstrate strength and virility through fighting. As descriptive data show states are more likely to perpetrate sexual violence than rebels in a given conflict year (see Table I). The ongoing conflict itself illustrates, however, their inability to win militarily. Fourth, the weakness of accepting talks is short-lived while the conflict and sexual violence otherwise could drag on for months or years. Thus current and potential future costs of a prolonged emasculation outweigh the limited costs of a 'feminine' response in accepting talks.

² I acknowledge that it matters which civilians are targeted. Sexual violence against ethnic minority civilians may not matter to the incumbent (if he is himself not of the same ethnicity). That is, the government's masculinity is not necessarily undermined by public knowledge of a failure to protect *those* civilians. I contend, however, that the state's masculinity is bound to its ability to maintain territorial integrity, provide protection, and sole control over the means of violence. Empirically, the data also do not permit such a fine-grained analysis.

Put differently, the government could portray itself as the bringer of peace, stability, and possibly even reconciliation, which would mitigate the legacy of violence.

The conflict in the Côte d'Ivoire that erupted in 2002 illustrates important aspects of this argument including that military and civilian leadership might differ in their responses to sexual violence. On 19 September, the rebellion led by the Mouvement Patriotique de Côte d'Ivoire (MPCI) assaulted three major cities Bouaké, Korhogo, and the capital Abidjan. The government quashed the rebellion in Abidjan the same day, but rebels captured Bouaké and Korhogo. In the course of this, MPCI fighters perpetrated rapes and abducted women into sexual slavery (Amnesty International 2007). The Defense Minister initially ruled out negotiations, which illustrates that militaries' reaction to such public humiliations might be a desire to fight even harder and to defeat the rebels – to prove their strength and virility – rather than engage in talks, which could be seen as being weak or as a further feminization. However, Prime Minister N'Guessan offered talks pledging to protect his citizens: “Ivory Coast has not forgotten them, Ivory Coast has not abandoned them” (Rousseau 2002). On 14 October, President Gbagbo condemned rape in the rebel-held territory calling for the international community to send observer missions to the rebel zones and offering full cooperation and the opening of a dialogue (Peytermann 2002). The talks mediated by the foreign ministers from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) contact group officially began on 17 October in Lomé, Togo (McCathie 2002). Based on this example and above discussion, I expect that mediation is more likely when rebels are reported to perpetrate sexual violence.

Hypothesis 1: Mediation is more likely when there are reports of rebel sexual violence.

Although states and rebels are equally likely to perceive it as hurtful when it is known that the other side victimizes their constituents, the asymmetry between the two sides leads to different effects on mediation. Mediation requires the consent of both belligerents, yet the asymmetry in terms of political legitimacy affords governments veto power regarding the onset of mediation, meaning if it is not willing to talk, there will be no talks. Rebels might call for mediation when government forces perpetrate sexual violence against civilians who expect protection from rebels, but they do not have the political legitimacy or authority to initiate a mediation

process without the government's consent. The power to accept an external mediation offer lies in the hands of the government. Related to the state's role as the sole legitimate political power is not only the implicit belief that it needs to fulfill a protective function, but importantly also the belief that it has a monopoly of force. Sexual violence by the state thus ought to be seen in the context of social and structural power relations (Meger 2016). This also means that sexual violence by the state itself can be in accordance with the state's understanding of existing power relations and in fact expresses them. Violence is the state's prerogative and its use is contingent on the state's approval (Weber 2004, 33). Accordingly, I do not expect that reports of state sexual violence increase the likelihood of mediation.

Hypothesis 2: Reports of state sexual violence do not affect the likelihood of mediation.

Masculinity is not uniform and some governments adhere to more militarized masculinities than others. Hence not every government will respond to a perceived emasculation by engaging in mediation to end the conflict. A highly masculinized state such as a military regime would be more likely to see violence as the appropriate response and seek retaliation, especially as the conflict becomes more gendered and violent. The reaction of the Côte d'Ivoire Defence Minister ruling out talks with the rebels highlights the diverging effects that sexual violence might have on different types of leadership. Accordingly, I expect mediation to be less likely when rebels are reported to perpetrate sexual violence in conflicts against military regimes.

Hypothesis 3: Mediation is less likely when rebels are reported to perpetrate sexual violence in conflicts against military regimes.

Methodology

To test these hypotheses I draw on a mixed method approach using both systematic analysis and a crucial case study of Sierra Leone. For the systematic analysis I use the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC) dataset (Cohen and Nordås 2014), and the Civil War Mediation (CWM) dataset (DeRouen, Bercovitch, and Pospieszna

2011). Originally the unit of analysis of the CWM is conflict episode, whereas the SVAC dataset contains data on all conflict years from 1989 to 2009. To combine these datasets with their different units of analysis I manipulate both datasets. I split each conflict episode in the CWM into conflict years and coded the missing years (2005-2009) and I aggregate the SVAC data to conflict side per year, meaning that the incumbent government, pro-government militias, and supporting states comprise side A, 'state', and that the rebel group(s) and supporting states comprise side B, 'rebels'.

After matching the datasets the unit of analysis is conflict year. I limit the analysis to the post-Cold War period from 1990 to 2009, which includes 746 observations. Besides compatibility, a further benefit of using conflict years rather than conflict episodes is that it enables me to account for the variation in sexual violence over the course of a conflict and its effect on the likelihood of mediation onset. Mediation onset, the dependent variable, is binary. Therefore I use logistic regression models to estimate the likelihood of a mediation attempt in a conflict year. To account for a potential lack of independence of observations from the same country I cluster the standard errors by country.

Dependent variable

I adopt the definition proposed by the CWM of mediation as 'a process of conflict management where disputants seek the assistance of, or accept an offer of help from, an individual, group, or state, or organization to settle their conflict or resolve their differences without resorting to physical force or invoking the authority of law' (Bercovitch, Anagnoson, and Wille 1991, 8). The dependent variable is a dichotomous variable that captures if a mediation process started in a conflict year (0 = no mediation 1 = mediation). Adhering to common practice mediation is only coded 1 for the year of the onset and as missing for subsequent calendar years if the process continues (Clayton 2013). This prevents counting one process multiple times and the analysis is confined to the onset of mediation. Of the 746 conflict years included, 222 featured mediation. I do not include a measurement if the mediation process was concluded. Generally, mediation efficacy is difficult to define relying only on a binary measure of whether a settlement is reached or not (DeRouen, Bercovitch, and Pospieszna 2011).

Table I. Mediation onset

Mediation	Frequency	Percentage
0	524	70.24
1	222	29.76
Total	746	100

Independent variables

Sexual violence can take any of seven distinct forms (rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization/abortion, sexual mutilation, and sexual torture) and is coded for every actor in a conflict year. The SVAC dataset includes three prevalence scores based on the three sources, State Department reports (SD), Amnesty International reports (AI), and Human Rights Watch reports (HRW) for each observation. For my analysis I aggregate these three prevalence scores to one score that takes on the value of 1 if there was any sexual violence reported for any of the three sources (prevalence scores 1, 2, and 3) and 0 if there was none in Model 1 and Model 3. This allows me to establish that sexual violence is in fact public knowledge, while guarding against potential uncertainty in the reported prevalence. It is difficult to reliably identify the prevalence of sexual violence in conflicts. Hence researchers caution against the use of prevalence levels based on SD, AI, and HRW reports for quantitative analysis (Davies and True 2017). For Model 2 I nonetheless disaggregate the measure to distinguish between reports of some sexual violence and reports of widespread or systematic sexual violence. This analysis allows me to examine if the hypothesized relationship holds across reported levels of sexual violence.

Data are available for 716 out of 746 conflict years. There is a pronounced asymmetry between reported sexual violence by states and rebels (Table II). States are reported to use at least some sexual violence in 318 (44.5%) out of 716 conflict years. Rebels on the other hand are reported to use sexual violence in less than 20% of all included conflict years, 133 out of 716.

Table II. Reports of sexual violence by states and rebels (%)

		States		Total
		0	1	
Rebels	0	362 (50.56)	221 (30.87)	583 (81.42)
	1	36 (5.03)	97 (13.55)	133 (18.58)
Total		398 (55.59)	318 (44.41)	716 (100)

For H3, to determine if a government is a military regime, I draw on autocratic regime data (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014). This enables me to distinguish between four different types of autocratic regimes: party regime, monarchy, personalist regime, and military regime. My sample includes 113 conflict years in 12 different military regimes ranging from Algeria to Myanmar. To examine this hypothesis I construct an interaction term multiplying *rebel sexual violence* with *military regime*³. When testing for the effect I thus include both component variables as well as the interaction term *Rebel sexual violence x Military Regime* as is standard practice.

Controls

Conflict-related sexual violence now frequently attracts international attention. States and advocacy groups might bring to bear their normative and material influence to force the government into mediated talks. One potential avenue of influence is foreign aid (Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015). Democratic donor countries might attempt to hold receiving countries accountable for human rights abuses, while autocratic regimes are less likely to care about human rights abuses (Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015). The onset of mediation might not be driven by the government's own desire to end the conflict (and thereby sexual violence), but by the extent of the government's sensitivity to democratic donors. As reports of sexual violence are the crucial factor for donor states rather than the identity of the perpetrator, this implies that substantial foreign aid from democratic donors might prompt mediation if there are reports of sexual violence perpetrated regardless of the perpetrator's identity.

³ This includes military hybrid regimes such as 'party-military' or 'military-personal' (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014).

Hence I control for the sensitivity to foreign democratic aid. To assess this I use Carey, Colaresi and Mitchell's measure for democratic aid dependency: 'the natural log of the sum total of aid received as a proportion of the recipient's gross domestic product' (2015, 858).

I also control for factors known to influence the onset of mediation. Conflict duration presents one way of conceptualizing costs of fighting and has been linked to the onset of mediation (Filson and Werner 2007; Greig 2001). Accordingly, I include duration measured in years and duration squared to account for potential effects of conflicts' longevity on the likelihood of mediation. Besides conflict duration, conflict intensity can shape conflict parties' choice of accepting mediation (Melin and Svensson 2009). Hence, I include the UCDP measure for intensity (0 = conflict years resulting in 25-999 battle-related deaths; $1 \geq 1,000$ casualties).

Parallel conflicts can influence the likelihood of mediation both positively and negatively. Multiple conflicts demand the state to divide its attention and resources, which should improve the rebels' relative position and increase the likelihood of mediation. Multiple conflicts might also enlarge recognition costs of accepting mediation, which should reduce the likelihood of mediation. To account for both options I include a binary variable that indicates whether there are parallel conflicts in a country conflict year (0 = no parallel conflict; 1 = parallel conflicts).

Conflicts that draw in neighboring countries threaten to destabilize regional security and present a concern to the international community. As a result the internationalization of conflict frequently leads to attempts to contain or manage the conflict through mediated talks. Accordingly, I account for the type of conflict (0 = civil war; 1 = internationalized civil war).

Similarly, if there is a conflict in a neighboring country the international community might place greater emphasis on conflict management to stop a further destabilization of the region. Hence I include Carey, Colaresi and Mitchell's (2015) dichotomous variable (0 = no conflict in neighboring countries; 1 = conflict in at least one neighboring country) to account for the effect of a conflict in a neighboring country on the likelihood of mediation.

When governments face strong rebels capable of challenging core government interests mediation becomes more likely (Clayton 2013, 2016; Clayton and Gleditsch 2014). To control for this I use a measure of relative rebel strength from the Non-State Actor Database (Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2013). I use a binary

measure that estimates a rebel group's strength in relation to the government (0 = weaker than the government; 1 = at parity with or stronger than the government).

To account for the possibility that mediation onset is forced through civilian victimization via lethal force rather than sexual violence I include a control for civilian deaths. I measure the impact of lethal violence against civilians on the likelihood of mediation using the natural logarithm of number of civilian deaths based on the UCDP One-sided Violence dataset 1.4-2016 (Eck and Hultman 2007).⁴

As democracies tend to be more peaceful than other forms of government I use the Polity IV data to include a democracy dummy (0 for a score < 6; 1 for a score \geq 6) to control for the possibility that whether a state is a democracy influences the chances of mediation. Lastly, I include the standard controls for economic development (natural logarithms of GDP per capita) and population size (natural logarithm).

Results

The logistic regression model results are reported in Table III (parameters shown are logistic regression coefficients). They offer support for all three hypotheses. All other things being equal, mediation is more likely when rebels are reported to perpetrate sexual violence compared to when there are no reports of rebel sexual violence; government sexual violence shows no significant association with mediation onset; and mediation is less likely when rebels are reported perpetrating sexual violence against a military regime.

Relative rebel strength has a significant impact on the chances of mediation. In line with my theoretical expectations and previous studies rebel strength is a significant predictor for mediation onset, i.e. when rebels are at parity with or stronger than the government, mediation is more likely (Clayton 2013, 2016). One-sided violence, regardless of which side is perpetrating it, does not show a significant association with mediation onset. This supports the notion that rebel sexual violence is particularly hurtful and thus has a unique effect on a government's inclination of accepting mediation.

⁴ When a government is involved in multiple conflicts, the OSV data structure does not allow exact matching of government violence and conflict, hence I include a dummy variable to indicate if the government was reported to have perpetrated OSV against civilians in any of its conflicts.

I also control for democracy, population size, GDP per capita, and sensitivity to international pressure via democratic foreign aid. The natural logarithm of the population size shows a negative association with the onset of mediation, meaning the bigger a country's population the less likely mediation. Of the country-based control variables only democratic aid has a positive and significant effect on the likelihood of conflict management. This offers support to the notion that international pressure increases the likelihood of mediation. To further examine the relationship between sexual violence and international pressure I run interaction analyses. The interaction terms are all insignificant indicating that the effect of foreign aid on mediation onset is not connected to sexual violence and that the influence of international pressure and the influence of rebel sexual violence on mediation onset are independent of each other (see Appendix A for tables).

In Model 2 I disaggregate the measures of sexual violence to examine if the effect persists across reported levels of sexual violence. In this model I distinguish between reports of some sexual violence and reports of widespread/systematic sexual violence by the rebels or the government. The results show that the effect indeed holds for both reported levels of sexual violence. This also indicates that the results are neither driven by the majority of cases (83) in which rebels are reported to perpetrate some sexual violence nor the minority of cases (50) in which rebels are reported to perpetrate widespread or systematic sexual violence. Similarly, reports of government sexual violence remain insignificant regardless of the reported scale.

Examining *H3* Model 3 shows that rebel sexual violence generally has the expected positive, statistically significant relationship with mediation onset. Whereas military regimes show no statistically significant relationship with mediation onset, i.e. they are not significantly less or more likely than other governments to engage in mediation. Importantly, however, the interaction term *Rebel sexual violence x Military regime* shows a negative, statistically significant association with mediation onset. This offers supports for *H3* that mediation is less likely when rebels perpetrate sexual violence in conflicts against military regimes.

Table III. Logistic regression models 1-3 (DV = mediation onset)

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Rebel SV	0.746** (0.280)		1.044*** (0.293)
Gov't SV	0.115 (0.268)		0.139 (0.270)
Some rebel SV		0.696* (0.291)	
Widespread rebel SV		0.921* (0.402)	
Some gov't SV		0.129 (0.266)	
Widespread gov't SV		0.035 (0.436)	
Military regime			0.378 (0.675)
Rebel SV x Military regime			-3.579** (1.354)
Duration	0.058 (0.060)	0.058 (0.060)	0.053 (0.059)
Duration ²	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)
Intensity	-0.102 (0.332)	-0.094 (0.332)	-0.065 (0.321)
Parallel conflict	0.505 (0.414)	0.505 (0.416)	0.499 (0.413)
Type of conflict	0.532 (0.440)	0.491 (0.457)	0.327 (0.405)
Neighbor civil war	-0.157 (0.348)	-0.153 (0.349)	-0.282 (0.352)
Rebel strength	1.520** (0.576)	1.529** (0.571)	1.496** (0.545)
Rebel one-sided violence	0.002 (0.058)	-0.002 (0.059)	-0.005 (0.054)
Gov't one-sided violence	0.274 (0.311)	0.301 (0.304)	0.270 (0.310)
Democracy	0.660 (0.426)	0.673 (0.428)	0.874* (0.415)
Democratic aid	0.180* (0.080)	0.179* (0.079)	0.133 ^t (0.073)
Autocratic aid	-0.042 (0.047)	-0.041 (0.047)	-0.049 (0.048)
GDP per capita (ln)	0.347 (0.235)	0.351 (0.237)	0.164 (0.244)
Population (ln)	-0.628*** (0.172)	-0.625*** (0.170)	-0.670*** (0.166)
Constant	7.940**	7.878**	8.824***

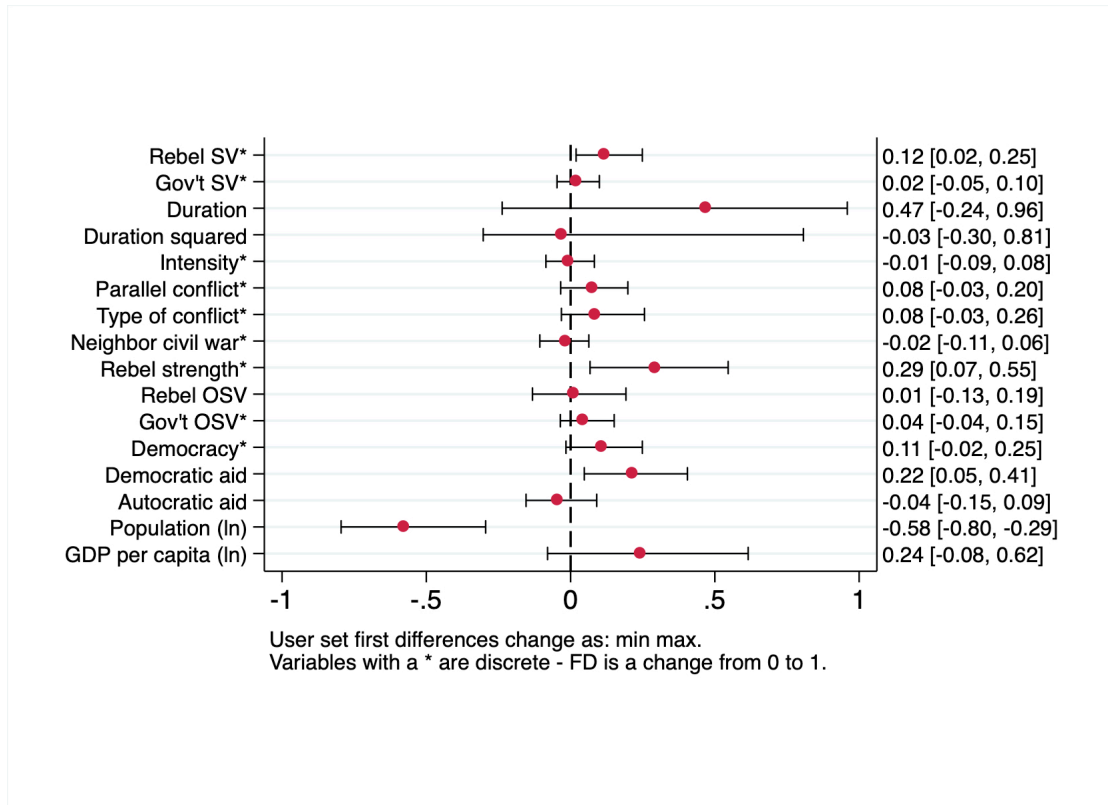
	(2.613)	(2.575)	(2.535)
AIC	619.457	623.114	599.359
Area under ROC	0.760	0.761	0.778
Wald- χ^2	76.23(16)	76.37(16)	85.25(18)
Prob > χ^2	0.000	0.000	0.000
Log likelihood	-292.729	-292.557	-280.679
N	564	564	554

Standard errors in parentheses

$t p < 0.1$, $*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$, $***p < 0.001$

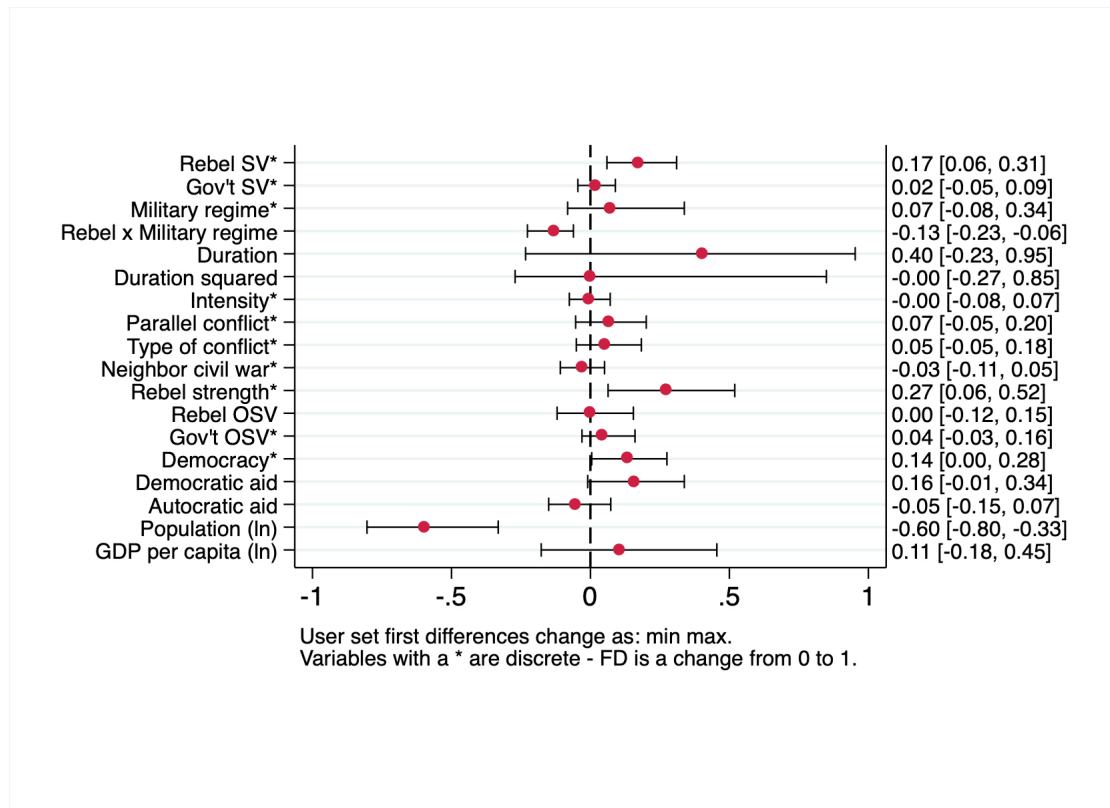
Logistic regression coefficients in raw form are difficult to interpret. They only provide substantial information on the direction and significance of the relationship, which in line with my argument is positive and significant, i.e. reports of sexual violence by rebels increase the likelihood of mediation. To provide further insight I present quantities of interest in the form of first differences as substantive effects based on Model 1 (Figure 1). The first difference plot shows changes in the predicted probability for mediation as the predictors move from minimum to maximum, while holding all else equal. In Model 1 rebel sexual violence is a dichotomous variable, i.e. it shows the change in the predicted likelihood between no reports of rebels perpetrating sexual violence and reports of rebels perpetrating sexual violence. The likelihood of mediation increases by 12% when rebels are reported to perpetrate sexual violence. Conflict years in which rebels are at least at parity with the government are 29% more likely to see the onset of mediation. Democratic aid also has a substantive effect; a change from the lowest amount of foreign aid from a democratic country to the highest amount increases the likelihood of mediation by 22%.

Figure 1. First difference plot Model 1 (95% confidence interval)



To fully understand the substantive effects of the interaction between rebel sexual violence and military regimes I also provide the first difference plot for Model 3 (Figure 2). Reports of rebel sexual violence in general maintain a positive and statistically significant relationship with mediation onset (Table III). However, when rebels are reported to perpetrate sexual violence in a conflict against a military regime it shows a statistically significant negative association with mediation onset. In such cases mediation onset is 13% less likely. Rebel strength and democratic aid show the same pattern of substantively increasing the likelihood of mediation. Figure 2 also shows that democratic countries are more likely to engage in mediations, further underscoring the importance of regime type.

Figure 2. First difference plot Model 3 (95% confidence interval)



Robustness checks

To ensure the robustness of my findings, I run the principal models with different specifications and controls (see Appendix A for all tables). Control variables could insert a bias (Clarke 2005), therefore I run first a model limited to the independent variables rebel sexual violence and state sexual violence. This presents the same pattern as the principal models, positive and significant coefficient for reports of rebel sexual violence ($p < 0.001$) and an insignificant coefficient for reports of state sexual violence.

Theoretically, it is possible that when a government accepts mediation, thereby appearing weak, it reduces its ability to deter rebels from perpetrating sexual violence. I address this potential endogeneity by running models with lagged independent variables. The analysis shows the same pattern, positive and statistically significant coefficient for reports of rebel sexual violence ($p < 0.05$) and an insignificant coefficient for reports of government sexual violence.

To control for further endogenous effects of mediation, i.e. mediation while not succeeding in ending the conflict prompting a new mediation in the following

year, I include a dichotomous variable indicating whether there was mediation in the previous year (0 = no mediation previous year, 1 = mediation previous year). I run models using the same specifications as in Model 1 and Model 2. Mediation in the previous year is a significant predictor of mediation onset ($p < 0.001$), the binary measure of reports of rebel sexual violence is significant at the 0.1-level ($p = 0.089$). The analysis of the disaggregated measure of rebel sexual violence shows that if mediation occurred in the previous year, a renewed mediation onset is more likely when there are reports of widespread rebel sexual violence ($p < 0.05$), but not for lower levels of reported sexual violence. This is in line with the costly nature of mediation and the power to hurt argument. Once mediation has failed in the previous year, it takes a bigger cost, i.e. reports of widespread sexual violence, for the state to agree to mediation again.

The descriptive analysis shows rebel sexual violence is reported in less than 20% of all conflict years under investigation. This implies the possibility that a small number of conflicts in which rebels are reported to perpetrate sexual violence might bias the results. Thus I run the models after excluding the five conflicts with the highest number of years featuring reports of sexual violence.⁵ The main results remain robust ($p < 0.01$).

Military interventions can influence the balance of power and conflict costs. This can shape forms and levels of violence, for example, biased interventions are associated with increasing levels of sexual violence (Johansson and Sarwari 2017) as well as the duration and outcome (Linebarger and Enterline 2016). Hence I run a robustness check controlling for biased interventions using data from Johansson and Sarwari (2017). Interventions do not show a statistically significant relationship with mediation onset and the association between rebel sexual violence and mediation remains unchanged.

Previous work on civilian victimization shows that terrorist attacks increase the likelihood of peace talks (Thomas 2014). To further examine this logic I replace rebel one-sided violence with measures of terrorist attacks in civil wars (Polo and Gleditsch 2016). Terrorist attacks do not show a statistically significant relationship with the onset of mediation. Results for rebel sexual violence remain virtually

⁵ The five excluded conflicts exhibiting highest number of years featuring reports of rebel sexual violence: Burundi, Sudan, Uganda, India's Kashmir conflict, and Sierra Leone.

unchanged. This further supports the argument that rebel sexual violence is uniquely costly and thereby facilitates the onset of mediation compared to other forms of civilian victimization that could be hurtful to governments.

In line with previous work (Thomas 2014), the main results show that the type of government matters for the onset of talks. To ensure that this is not simply a matter of autocratic governments being less cost sensitive and that military regimes are different to other autocratic regime types, I also run models interacting rebel sexual violence with *democracy* and replace *military regime* with *personalist regime*⁶. The democracy interaction term is insignificant suggesting that democratic accountability does not influence if reports of rebel sexual violence lead to mediation. In a personalist regime the dictator's reputation is directly bound to his/her ability to offer protection and guarantee safety, meaning public reports of rebel sexual violence are personal humiliations. As a result I expect a personalist regime to be more susceptible to the emasculation effect of reported rebel sexual violence. The interaction term is positive and statistically significant at the 0.1-level ($p = 0.08$), suggesting that mediation is more likely when rebels are reported to perpetrate sexual violence in conflicts against personalist regimes. Taken together these results strongly support the emasculation argument.

Evidence from the Sierra Leone civil war (1991-2002)

The civil war in Sierra Leone is a crucial case for the proposed theory because rebels' widespread perpetration of rape makes it the most likely case to observe the causal link between sexual violence and mediation onset. The evidence illustrates that the civilian government explicitly drew on the gendered notion of protecting vulnerable groups to justify its decision to hold peace talks with rebels, although they had brutalized civilians, unlike the temporary military regime, which hired a mercenary company to fight the rebels. A close examination of the temporal variation in sexual violence also helps address potential problems of reverse causality in the statistical analysis. The case study relies on data from a multitude of sources, including speeches by the President of Sierra Leone, data of violations reported by the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Gohdes and Ball 2010), memoirs, international organization and NGO reports.

⁶ This refers to pure personalist regimes and excludes any personalist hybrid regimes.

Summary of the war

Sierra Leone's civil war erupted in 1991 when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) supported by Liberian rebel-leader Charles Taylor attacked areas around the eastern border with the goal of overthrowing the one-party state and holding multiparty elections. In 1992 disaffected soldiers staged a coup that overthrew the government and installed the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) led by Captain Valentine Strasser with the primary goal of stopping the rebels. The military regime of the NPRC failed to stop the rebels and in the mid-1990s the RUF started controlling diamond-rich regions as they closed in on the capital Freetown. In response the NPRC hired the mercenary company Executive Outcomes to fight the RUF. In 1995, the Sierra Leone Women's Movement for Peace emerged as a crucial civil society actor that helped create the conditions for democratic elections (Kaldor and Vincent 2006). In 1996, relying on Executive Outcomes the NPRC established enough stability to hold elections that elected a civilian government, which signed an ECOWAS-mediated peace agreement in Abidjan in November 1996. In 1997, however, the side-lined military staged another coup exiling President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah to establish the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and inviting the RUF to join them. The same year an ECOMOG peacekeeping mission liberated Freetown and re-established President Kabbah's civilian government. In January 1999, still controlling large portions of the country the RUF launched what is now remembered as the 6 January invasion. The Civil Defence Forces and ECOMOG troops ultimately repelled the assault, but the two-week siege resulted in the highest numbers of reported rapes of the conflict and thousands of deaths. In July 1999, the government and the RUF signed a peace agreement mediated by ECOWAS leaders in Lomé, Togo. Despite continued instability over the next two years, this proved to be a fundamental step towards the official end of the war in 2002.

Wartime sexual violence and mediation

Analysis of data obtained from the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission demonstrates that while lethal and sexual violence seem to be correlated, the highest number of killings was reported in the first year of the war 1991, and the

peak reported rapes in 1999 (Figure 3).⁷ This difference of incident numbers suggests that the effects of lethal and sexual violence might also differ. While sexual violence was reported in every year of the conflict, analysis shows two distinct peaks with large increases during two of the most intense years of the conflict: 1995 and 1999. In both cases the civilian government initiated mediation processes following peaks of rebel sexual violence (Figure 4). In 1995 intensive civil society mobilization, especially from women, was influential in creating conditions for democratic elections and impressing upon the NPRC the need to engage in a mediation process (Hayner 2007; Kaldor and Vincent 2006). Whereas the NPRC sought to win by all means including hiring mercenaries, the democratically elected government in 1996 signed the ECOWAS-mediated agreement, which nonetheless failed to stabilize the country.

Throughout 1998 the government attempted to defeat the rebels on the battlefield, rejecting the notion of peace talks. This abruptly changed after the RUF offensive in January 1999, in which rebels raped and abducted thousands of girls and women (Hayner 2007). The offensive was widely regarded as the ‘most intensive and concentrated period of human rights violations’ in the civil war (HRW 1999). Throughout the offensive rebels perpetrated widespread sexual violence including individual and gang rape, sexual assault with objects, and sexual slavery. This sparked a strong response from international organizations (HRW 2001). Under pressure from the international community, faced with relatively strong rebels, and its weakness exposed, the government renewed its peace efforts.

⁷ Data obtained from Gohdes and Ball (2010) Benetech/ABA-CEELI/Human Rights Data Analysis Group database of violations reported by the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As per the user agreement for the TRC dataset, I note that: “These are convenience sample data, and as such they are not a statistically representative sample of events in this conflict. These data do not support conclusions about patterns, trends, or other substantive comparisons (such as over time, space, ethnicity, age, etc.)” Similar to Cohen (2016) I do use the data – combined with the other sources – to draw such conclusions.

Figure 3. Comparison of number of sexual violence and killing incidents

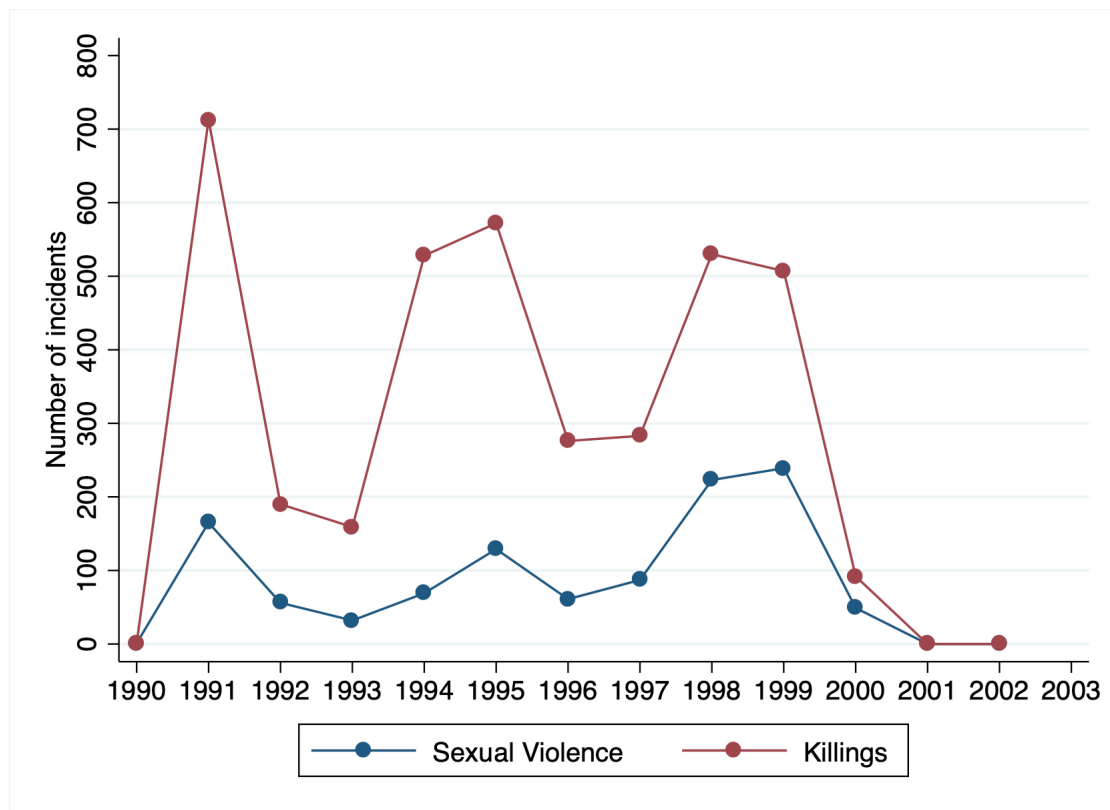
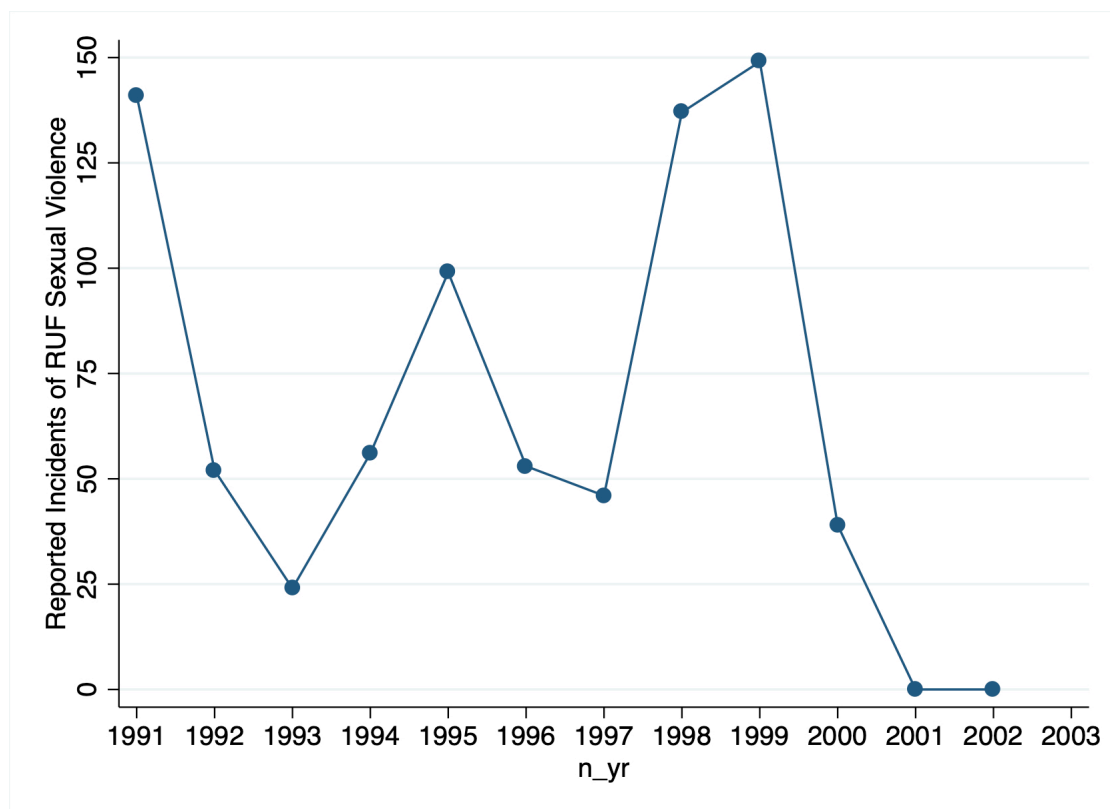


Figure 4. Incidents of RUF sexual violence



Two weeks after RUF invasion of Freetown and throughout the following months President Kabbah repeatedly addressed the nation and the RUF calling for peace talks. His speeches reminded citizens of the ‘heinous barbarity’ of the RUF, explicitly addressing the traumatizing rapes and the calls for surrender from government supporters. Carefully treading the line justifying both use of force and peace talks, the President above all stressed the importance of protecting citizens and finding a long-term solution: “Let me reassure you that while security and protection of our citizens have been and continue to be our primary concern, especially during the past few weeks, Government has never, ever abandoned the search for a peaceful settlement of the conflict” (Kabbah 1999a). He appealed to the RUF to free abducted children, emphasizing their status as innocent civilians. Such calls for the protection of vulnerable groups, i.e. women and children, are deeply gendered (Carpenter 2005) and serve to reinforce the paternal protector position of the government (Young 2003). In these speeches the invasion of Freetown was a constant reminder of how the RUF had exposed the government’s weakness and inability to protect its citizens:

“This is why we appeal to the RUF, their allies, arms suppliers, and supporters, to immediately release our children, including those whom they abducted during their invasion of our capital in January this year. We say to them: PLEASE, LET OUR CHILDREN GO! RELEASE THEM IMMEDIATELY!” (emphasis in original Kabbah 1999b)

The widespread sexual violence during the two-week siege intensified international pressure for a peaceful resolution. Starting in late January 1999, regional, international actors such as the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Sierra Leone, and civil society actors including the Inter-Religious Council and Women’s Movement lobbied both President Kabbah and RUF leader Sankoh to negotiate (Okai et al. 2014). In May, ECOWAS-mediated talks began in Lomé, Togo, which ended in the July agreement. President Kabbah took an 8-year old girl whose mother had been murdered and who had an arm amputated by rebels with him to the signing ceremony (Penfold 2012, 151), a gesture that reminded the people of Sierra Leone of the horrors of the civil war and his role as their protector in ending the atrocities. Observers deemed Kabbah sincere and righteous, but politically

inexperienced and weak (sic!) for relenting to international pressure to accommodate RUF demands (Penfold 2012). Human Rights Watch held the lenient amnesty provisions in the Lomé agreement responsible for creating an atmosphere of impunity (2001). Importantly, however, the timeline clearly shows that neither the mediation nor the agreement caused the sexual violence.

Discussion

This study contributes to both the expanding body of literature focusing on mediation in civil wars and sexual violence in armed conflict. Mediation is more likely when rebels are reported to perpetrate sexual violence because public knowledge of this victimization threatens states' masculinity by exposing governments' lack of control and power. Accordingly, governments seek to stop the conflict and thereby sexual violence via mediation, which supports preceding work that shows that governments respond to the victimization of their citizens (Thomas 2014; Wood and Kathman 2014). This study provides more evidence of the importance of analyzing the dyadic interactions within conflicts and the value of detailed disaggregated data in furthering this cause. It also fills an important gap in our understanding of how sexual violence affects the outcome of civil wars (Chu and Braithwaite 2018) and the role of sexual violence in conflict more generally.

The findings indicate a perverse incentive structure whereby rebels benefit from perpetrating sexual violence, while not supporting the notion that international pressure is more influential in conflicts in which belligerents use sexual violence. The results, however, also show that third party interventions do take place in response to abuses by rebels. This indicates a general willingness to intervene in the face of severe human rights abuses, particularly when perpetrated by rebels, which highlights the need to pay more attention to states' abuses. The dominant narrative of sexual violence as a weapon of war gained international prominence over the past decade after the UN Security Council passed resolution 1820 in 2008, which explicitly named sexual violence as an instrument of war (Crawford 2017). As this study is limited to conflicts up to 2009, it will be important for future studies to examine what effect this increased attention has on the prevalence of sexual violence or any unanticipated effects of exacerbating sexual violence by rebels (Autesserre 2012; Meger 2016). It

also highlights the importance of gendered analyses of conflicts and strengthens calls for greater gender sensitivity in mediation efforts (O'Reilly and Ó Súilleabháin 2013).

Identifying the best moment for a diplomatic intervention is crucial to its success (Greig 2001). Reports of rebel sexual violence seem to be an important indicator of 'ripeness' as conflict management and negotiated agreements are significantly more likely (Chu and Braithwaite 2018). Potential intermediaries thus should pay close attention to international reports of sexual violence by rebels and coordinate their mediation offers accordingly to maximize the chances of initiating a process. Although mediation cannot and should not be equated with 'ripeness' or conflict resolution, often reaching the table is a critical first step towards comprehensive resolution.

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