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Spiritual security: an explanatory framework for conflict- related sexual violence against men

EMEKA THADDUES NJOKU AND ISAAC DERY*

In the past decade, debates on conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) have progressed significantly, to the extent that gender is now being widely approached and analysed as a much more complex and nuanced construct than was formerly assumed. In a sense, this has opened up new possibilities for approaching CRSV as an undeniable reality that affects men, women, boys, girls and other genders across a wide variety of geographic and cultural areas. Building on a growing body of ethnographic evidence in this respect, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2106 in 2013. One of the most important contributions of this resolution, which was passed only after a long and slow process, is a more explicit acknowledgement that men and boys as a gender category can be victims of CRSV as a result of their intersectional identities.¹ Nevertheless, much scholarly discussion tends to examine and theorize the nature, impetus and impact of CRSV towards men in war-torn countries or postwar contexts, for example in the Democratic Republic of Congo, northern Uganda, the former Yugoslavia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Liberia, Syria, South Sudan and Sri Lanka.² The growing body of scholarly evidence on CRSV against men has been driven by the dominant notion that such violence emasculates and/or erases the masculinity of men in conflict and post-conflict contexts. CRSV is often deployed as a tactic to make the male victim look feminized and homosexual in society, especially in contexts where heteronormativity is pervasive.³ However, the notion of emasculation and how such

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¹ Philipp Schulz, 'The "ethical loneliness" of male sexual violence survivors in northern Uganda: gendered reflections on silencing', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20: 4, 2018, pp. 583–601.

² Philipp Schulz and Heleen Touquet, 'Queering explanatory frameworks for wartime sexual violence against men', *International Affairs* 96: 5, 2020, pp. 1169–87; Chris Dolan, Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, 'What is sexual about conflict-related sexual violence? Stories from men and women survivors', *International Affairs* 96: 5, 2020, pp. 1151–68; M. A. Onyango and K. Hampanda, 'Social constructions of masculinity and male survivors of wartime sexual violence: an analytical review', *International Journal of Sex Health* 23: 4, 2011, pp. 237–47.

³ Sandesh Sivakumaran, 'Sexual violence against men in armed conflict', *European Journal of International Law* 18: 2, 2007, pp. 253–76.

perceptions could amplify taints of homosexuality has been criticized, as it tends to re-inscribe gendered hierarchies where heterosexuality assumes hegemony while infantilizing and subordinating other forms of sexual identities. Such an approach fails to account for other sexual identities and how sex acts are defined by 'temporal, spatial and cultural factors', thereby making them context-specific.⁴ While it remains necessary to pay close attention to the processes through which a victim's identity may be lost through emasculation, Philipp Schulz maintains that where humanitarian interventions or psycho-social support is provided, feelings of loss of gendered personhood are short-lived.⁵

Quite recently, there has been an emerging debate in which the lived experiences of men who are victims of CRSV are foregrounded, much as in the case of their female counterparts. A growing body of scholarship has started to investigate the gendered dynamics and the complex, lived experiences of CRSV against men. Such theorization has contributed tremendously to augmenting the already voluminous scholarship on CRSV, some of which has continued to position men as a homogeneous category. Building on the work of Schulz and Touquet, this article argues that sexual violence against men should be taken seriously as reflecting a range of diverse factors, beyond sexual gratification, that may motivate perpetrators to resort to such acts.⁶ Specifically, our interest is to critically interrogate sexual violence against men in areas affected by terrorist violence or in the context of counterterrorism and the meaning that survivors make out of their lived experiences. Such an approach has the potential to offer useful possibility in understanding CRSV against men beyond dominant western-centric approaches which tend to 'universalize' ideas, or impose a western mentality on the issue in a complex context such as Nigeria.

Another central idea in the literature to date is that spiritual factors comprise just one of many possible 'explanations' for the perpetration of CRSV. For example, the violence in Kenya after the elections of 2007 was fuelled by tribal and ethnic tensions between the Kikuyu and the Luo over issues such as the forced circumcision ritual and political leadership privileges. In her analysis, Jessica Auchter argues that the Kikuyu perceived uncircumcised males as vile and unfit to govern. During the conflict, the Kikuyu forcibly circumcised Luo men to perpetuate a cultural ritual and to violently humiliate other tribes that did not follow the same ritual.⁷ While we acknowledge the important contribution of Auchter's work, her analysis foregrounds forced circumcision as a form of sexual violence against men in the context of collective or group activities, where ritualistic sexual violence is used as an important criterion for group membership. Despite such insights, the question of how people may use sexual assault deliberately to achieve personal socio-political and economic advancement via spiritual means remains

⁴ David Eichert, 'Homosexualization revisited: an audience-focused theorization of wartime male sexual violence', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 21: 3, 2018, p. 7.

⁵ Philipp Schulz, 'Displacement from gendered personhood: sexual violence and masculinities in northern Uganda', *International Affairs* 94: 5, 2018, pp. 1101–11.

⁶ Schulz and Touquet, 'Queering explanatory frameworks'.

⁷ Jessica Auchter, 'Forced male circumcision: gender-based violence in Kenya', *International Affairs* 93: 6, 2017, pp. 1339–56.

less explored. Furthermore, while existing debate has provided important insights within the domain of CRSV, our sense is that this approach misses an important ontological point in grappling with the complexity of CRSV. We would argue that in many contexts, including north-eastern Nigeria, the spiritual realm is embedded in all experiences of reality and cultural sensibilities, especially for people who share similar spiritual world-views. Thus, we set out in this article not to erase the gains of scholars whose scholarly focus foregrounds questions of CRSV, but rather to suggest that CRSV debates should be filtered through both rationalist and spiritualist framings.

North-eastern Nigeria represents a crucial case-study, as CRSV against men here has not been properly interrogated as part of the collective memory of terrorism or, more precisely, the fight against Boko Haram, despite its being amply documented by civil society organizations and NGOs. Over the years, north-eastern Nigeria and indeed the entire Lake Chad region has become a hotspot for terrorist attacks, violence and other forms of crime. Situated within a victim-centred lens, as proposed by Chris Dolan, Maria Eriksson Baaz, Maria Stern, Philipp Schulz and Heleen Touquet,⁸ this article draws on ethnographic interviews with a number of different actors to highlight the motives of perpetrators and thereby to provide another perspective in the continuing conversation about sex and gender. In this article, we propose that CRSV against men should be read as a spiritually motivated exercise which is perpetrated for specific reasons of physical protection, political ascendancy and material wealth. We focus primarily on spiritual world-views and how they shape people's perceptions and beliefs in relation to CRSV against men. This is important for reasons of ontological sophistication and disciplinary cross-fertilization. There is merit in understanding the interconnections between sex, spirituality, rationality and sexual violence in all their complexities, not least with a view to designing and implementing appropriate preventive and supportive initiatives for survivors of CRSV.

Explanations for conflict-related sexual violence

While there is an exciting body of literature that foregrounds CRSV in both supposedly peaceful and conflict-affected contexts, much of this tends to focus on women and how they are likely to navigate their subjective experiences of violence. One of the central explanations that circulate in a number of disciplines in understanding CRSV is the notion that sexual violence in times of conflict emanates from patriarchal and socio-cultural structures that discursively objectify women and girls as sexual tools in peacetime.⁹ These structures, which tend to define women and girls as sexual instruments, are aggravated during times of war, including interstate conflicts. In the context of war, sexual violence may become an important tool in terrorizing and communicating messages of victory

⁸ Dolan et al., 'What is sexual about conflict-related sexual violence?'; Schulz and Touquet, 'Queering explanatory frameworks'.

⁹ Maria B. Olujić, 'Embodiment of terror: gendered violence in peacetime and wartime in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina', *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 12: 1, 1998, pp. 31–50.

and heroism over allegedly weaker subjects, especially women.¹⁰ This line of argument, and its assertion that women are often targeted as victims of CRSV during war, has been contested by feminist International Relations (IR) scholars. A clear message that runs through feminist theorizing and activism on CRSV against women is that the violent experiences of women should be understood within their complex broader socio-cultural-political context. Such an approach not only problematizes how patriarchal socio-cultural configurations may valorize women as weak and subordinate subjects, but also points out how the institutions set up to listen to the lived experiences and everyday gendered subjectivities of survivors of CRSV are heavily sustained by these same configurations.

Another central explanation with which scholars continue to grapple is the notion of unfulfilled sexual gratification. While this explanation has offered some important insights in understanding why sexual violence remains a common phenomenon during conflict situations, we take the view that it fails to offer a nuanced and culturally driven explanation that accounts for the complex nature of CRSV. For example, Ruth Seifert argues that soldiers often spend several months at a time away from their families, and that this separation from their wives denies them access to sexual privileges as a perceived entitlement in heteronormative relations. This period of absence, Seifert argues, leads to the progressive buildup of sexual urges, which are then expressed during war.¹¹ In other words, if soldiers are unable to satisfy their sexual urges through morally and socially acceptable means, they may want to 'substitute' sex by force for 'normal' sex.¹² While this approach offers one way of understanding CRSV, it tends to draw on essentialized discourses that ignore other subjectivities. Leading critics suggest that the 'sex-essentialist and deterministic' argument removes the 'politicness' of CRSV and distorts the complexities embedded in the process,¹³ reproducing gendered binaries where sex becomes an important weapon of war. Thus, in conflict and post-conflict settings, gender and sex are weaponized to intimidate and weaken an opposing group.¹⁴ CRSV is also viewed as a collective and strategic use of sex or rape against civilians and unarmed combatants, particularly women and girls, in order to score political points.¹⁵

While most of the discussion on CRSV has focused on women and girls, views of men and boys as gendered and sexual subjects have recently been gaining increasing currency in development practice and humanitarian response. Sandesh Sivakumaran, in particular, argues that the emasculation of men's/boys' identities

¹⁰ Meredith Turshen, 'The political economy of rape: an analysis of systematic rape and sexual abuse of women during armed conflict in Africa', in Caroline O. N. Moser and Fiona C. Clark, eds, *Victims, perpetrators or actors? Armed conflict and political violence* (New York: Zed, 2001).

¹¹ Ruth Seifert, 'The second front: the logic of sexual violence in wars', *Women's Studies International Forum* 19: 1, 1996, p. 55.

¹² Elisabeth J. Wood, 'Armed groups and sexual violence: when is wartime rape rare?', *Politics & Society* 37: 1, 2009, pp. 131–61.

¹³ Schulz and Touquet, 'Queering explanatory frameworks', p. 1173; Laura Sjöberg, 'Seeing sex, gender, and sexuality in international security', *International Journal* 70: 3, 2015, pp. 434–53.

¹⁴ Sara Davies and Jacquie True, 'Reframing conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence: bringing gender analysis back in', *Security Dialogue* 46: 6, 2015, pp. 495–512.

¹⁵ Olujic, 'Embodiment of terror'.

through feminization or homosexualization is the most common driver of CRSV against males, as well as its major consequences and harm. According to Sivakumaran, male victims are humiliated through feminization, which affects their status in the communities and reinforces a subordinate role.¹⁶ Similarly, male victims are also deprived of their heterosexual masculinity through homosexualization. The deployment of sexual violence in this way is especially powerful in societies where the homosexual male is considered less of a man, so that the homosexualization of a man impinges on his socially constructed roles in society.¹⁷ For instance, Ferrales, Brehm and McElrath assert that in the former Yugoslavia, the sexual violation of Muslim men eroded their dominant masculinity.¹⁸ Similarly, during the US-led wars in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, rape and other violent sexual practices that imitated or induced homosexual performances were used to shame and humiliate Muslim males in prison facilities in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, thus eroding the values that determine who they are as Muslim men.¹⁹

However, other scholars assert that Sivakumaran's emasculation thesis promotes heterosexual hegemony and perpetuates the blatant stereotyping of women. It incorporates the problematic premise that all victims are heterosexual, thus failing to account for different sexual identities beyond the binary frame. Furthermore, it uncritically glosses over how the sex act can go both ways, such as a perpetrator being penetrated by a victim. Also, in some contexts, being penetrated by another man is symbolically framed as toughness or being strong—'take it like a man'.²⁰ Hence, Eichert and Ward argue that to fully comprehend the meaning of heterosexuality and homosexuality in any specific context, the 'temporal, spatial and cultural factors surrounding the sex act must be taken into account'.²¹ Additionally, the perpetrators' perceived drive to homosexualize and feminize their victims in the eyes of the community is difficult to measure, and there is no guarantee that such an objective will be attained.²² Instead, Eichert argues that a perpetrator could be using 'victims' masculinity, bodily integrity, and/or sexuality' to demonstrate power and military superiority.²³ Furthermore, the notion that a victim's sense of self is lost through emasculation has been challenged on the grounds that feelings of loss of identity are transient, and can be remedied with the assistance of humanitarian interventions or psycho-social support. Thus, feelings of gendered personhood are temporarily displaced.²⁴

¹⁶ Sivakumaran, 'Sexual violence against men in armed conflict'.

¹⁷ Sivakumaran, 'Sexual violence against men in armed conflict'.

¹⁸ Gabrielle Ferrales, Hollie Nyseth Brehm and Suzy McElrath, 'Gender-based violence against men and boys in Darfur: the gender-genocide nexus', *Gender and Society* 30: 4, 2016 pp. 565–89; Dubravka Zarkov, 'The body of the other man: sexual violence and the construction of masculinity, sexuality and ethnicity in Croatian media', in Caroline O. N. Moser and Fiona C. Clark, eds, *Victims, perpetrators or actors? Gender, armed conflict and political violence* (London: Zed, 2001).

¹⁹ Patricia Owens, 'Torture, sex and military Orientalism', *Third World Quarterly* 31: 7, 2010, p. 1042.

²⁰ Eichert, 'Homosexualization revisited'; Schulz and Touquet, 'Queering explanatory frameworks'.

²¹ Jane Ward, *Not gay: sex between straight white men* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

²² Eichert, 'Homosexualization revisited'.

²³ Eichert, 'Homosexualization revisited', p. 7.

²⁴ Schulz, 'Displacement from gendered personhood'; Schulz and Touquet, 'Queering explanatory frameworks'.

The gendered story as expressed in the ‘weapon of war’ argument has also come under heavy criticism from feminist IR scholars for its inherently reductionist approach and failure to advance a contextually driven explanatory framing of the complicated nature of CRSV.²⁵ Such critics argue that motivations for CRSV vary and that it can take several dimensions, owing to its intrinsic complexities.²⁶ Building on this, we suggest that CRSV against men is yet to be fully theorized, especially from the postcolonial perspective of the global South. Addressing this gap, we propose in this article that CRSV against males should be seen as a spiritually motivated activity that is carried out in order to obtain particular bodily protection, political power and material wealth. This builds on the argument that the motivations for CRSV against men, as well as the harms done by it, are much more nuanced and intricate than monocausal or bicausal explanations suggest. We therefore propose that CRSV against males should continue to be theorized.

At this point we should enter a caveat: our intervention in this article should not be read as an attempt to make women’s experiences of CRSV appear less important, but rather reflects a wish to gain greater understanding of the social processes, motivations and cultural–spiritual forces that may contribute to CRSV against men being shrouded in silence and insufficiently documented. Our intervention builds on and extends continuing feminist conversations that demonstrate the necessity of bringing men’s and boys’ diverse experiences of CRSV to the fore of research, humanitarian response and policy-making.²⁷ Our argument is intended to complement feminists’ long-established understanding that patriarchal gender practices shape and mediate how the phenomenon of CRSV is made sense of and experienced by different categories of people. Our approach, in problematizing the lived experiences of male victims of CRSV, contributes to clarifying the mechanisms, functions and harms of patriarchal sexual order which may render men both powerful and powerless.

Spiritual security

The belief in spiritual forms of security is predominant among various socio-ethnic categories of the world’s population, including western-educated people.²⁸ Studies on the belief in or use of charms or rituals in protecting oneself in both wars and peacetime environments in Africa in particular are well documented.²⁹ For many Africans and indeed other people in various parts of the world, the spiri-

²⁵ Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, *Sexual violence as a weapon of war? Perceptions, prescriptions, problems in the Congo and beyond* (London: Zed, 2013).

²⁶ Elisabeth Jean Wood, ‘Rape as a practice of war: toward a typology of political violence’, *Politics & Society* 46: 4, 2018, pp. 513–37.

²⁷ R. Charli Carpenter, ‘Recognizing gender-based violence against civilian men and boys in conflict situations’, *Security Dialogue* 37: 1, 2006, pp. 83–103; Laura Sjoberg, *Women as wartime rapists: beyond sensation and stereotyping* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Chris Dolan, *Into the mainstream: addressing sexual violence against men and boys in conflict* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2014).

²⁸ John C. McCall, ‘Juju and justice at the movies: vigilantes in Nigerian popular videos’, *African Studies Review* 47: 3, 2004, pp. 51–67.

²⁹ Percy Talbot, *Life in southern Nigeria* (London: Macmillan, 1923); George Thomas Basden, *Among the Igbo of Nigeria* (Lagos: University Publishing, 1921).

tual realm is a vital part of social reality.³⁰ Regardless of questions of objectivity, the fact that many Africans interpret incomprehensible events or issues through a spiritual lens shows the significance of engaging with these beliefs in aiming at a comprehensive understanding of social phenomena in African societies.³¹

In Africa, studies on the beliefs of protecting oneself through spiritual means, particularly the use of charms, rituals, or *juju*, are well established.³² According to Johannes Harnischfeger, 'such practices have a long history. In the precolonial era, it was usual for people to consult poison oracles or to turn to shrine priests and diviners in order to let religious or magical forces decide critical questions.'³³ In his article on cyber spiritualism, Olutayo Tade expressed the view that the spiritual realm is a key part of social reality to an African.³⁴ Akinsola Akiwowo contends that attempts at understanding social realities in Africa through Eurocentric methods, theories and models have been less than entirely successful.³⁵ Osisioma Nwolise states that western scientific or technological knowledge is incomplete if it fails to embrace or at least examine the spiritual realm of everyday realities.³⁶ He argues that in the context of Nigeria, spiritual sources of security include 'local deities, juju, witchcraft, curses, mercantile native doctors, possessed plants, animals and stones, oath-taking and breaking, ghosts and ancestral spirits, bewitched or charmed objects, spiritual covenants, and hypnotism'.³⁷ In his works on the use of *juju* to attain justice by vigilantes in the south-east of Nigeria, John McCall asserts that the people perceived that the failure of public institutions to implement the law effectively brought about the resort to indigenous legal rationalities exemplified by the Bakassi Boys—a vigilante group—that made use of truth-seeking charms to get justice and for protection. 'Acceptance of the efficacy of these truth-seeking *jujus* is crucial to the claim that vigilantes can administer justice without recourse to due process of law.'³⁸ According to Harnischfeger, western audiences may consider it atrocious that matters of life and death are decided through such crude practices; however, for the Igbo in the south-east of Nigeria, the justice derived through spiritual powers is considered more potent than an ordinary human being who cannot be trusted.³⁹ Harnischfeger contends that, aside from the quest for justice and protection against threats posed by state and non-state actors through spiritual powers, people in precarious economic conditions are

³⁰ Jonathan Fisher and Cherry Leonardi, 'Insecurity and the invisible: the challenge of spiritual (in)security', *Security Dialogue*, publ. online 21 Dec. 2020, pp. 1–18, DOI: 10.1177/0967010620973540.

³¹ Oludayo Tade, 'A spiritual dimension to cybercrime in Nigeria: the "Yahoo Plus" phenomenon', *Human Affairs*, vol. 23, 2013, pp. 689–705.

³² Talbot, *Life in southern Nigeria*.

³³ Johannes Harnischfeger, *State decline and the return of occult powers: the case of Prophet Eddy in Nigeria—magic, ritual, and witchcraft* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p. 63.

³⁴ Tade, 'A spiritual dimension'.

³⁵ Akinsola A. Akiwowo, *Ajobi and Ajogbe: variations on the theme of sociation* (Ife: University of Ife Press, 1983).

³⁶ Osisioma B. C. Nwolise, *Is physical security alone enough for the survival, progress and happiness of man?*, an inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria (Ibadan University Press Publishing House, 2014); Osisioma B. C. Nwolise, *Strategic spiritual intelligence in the intelligence process* (Ibadan: Gold Press Ltd, 2019)

³⁷ Osisioma B. C. Nwolise, *Spiritual dimension of human and national security*, faculty lecture series, University of Ibadan, Faculty of the Social Sciences, no. 18, 2012, p. 2.

³⁸ McCall, 'Juju and justice at the movies', p. 58.

³⁹ Harnischfeger, *State decline and the return of occult powers*.

also inspired to seek spiritual powers to become rich.⁴⁰ Tade further argues that the ‘evidence of spiritualism abounds in the social, economic, and political life of Nigerians’.⁴¹ Building on such insights, we seek to examine the belief that sex as a spiritual ritual (which, in most cases, results in sexual violence) is aimed at protecting oneself from perceived harm.

Methods

This article forms part of a larger ethnographic research project conducted between 2019 and 2020 in north-eastern Nigeria. That larger project seeks to understand how men may make sense of their gendered identities in the context of terrorist violence. The current article draws on the narratives of eight survivors/victims of CRSV against men, one community leader, ten NGO workers, and three security agents who knew or may have worked with male survivors. We were interested in a range of categories of respondents because of their diverse roles in advocacy, healing and humanitarian interventions in counterterrorism operations in north-east Nigeria. Since both survivors and perpetrators of sexual violence against men are hard to reach, and the latter may not be willing to discuss their motivations for perpetrating such violence with people considered to be ‘outsiders’, we supplemented these sources with views from people working on the staff of an organization in charge of facilitating the prosecution of perpetrators of rape in north-eastern Nigeria, the Sexual Assault Referral Centre.

Secondary data were sourced from reports by international and local NGOs, as well as from local media commentary on CRSV against men and boys. Given the sensitivity of the topic, we were mindful of the risk of retraumatizing male survivors of CRSV. In order to avoid this, we did not ask survivors to share detailed information or stories about what happened to them. Rather, the interviews focused mainly on understanding their experiences after they were sexually violated, their perceptions of such experiences in relation to what it means to be a man, how they navigated such experiences, the kind of support that they sought and from whom, reasons for their disclosure or non-disclosure of sexual violence, their perceptions about perpetrators’ motives, and their thoughts on social healing processes. From representatives of NGOs, the researchers sought their impressions of sexual violence against males in north-eastern Nigeria, the kind of services/support they offer, the advocacy or humanitarian efforts they undertake, and their view on government responses to cases of CRSV. Data from these stakeholders were triangulated and corroborated by the lived experiences and stories of male survivors of CRSV.

Each interview lasted between five and 65 minutes, and was audio-recorded in Hausa (the dominant language spoken by participants) with the permission of the respondents. Four professional interpreters and transcribers who are native speakers of Hausa were employed to provide the transcripts of the interviews.

⁴⁰ Harnischfeger, *State decline and the return of occult powers*.

⁴¹ Tade, ‘A spiritual dimension’, p. 692.

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The respondents' statements were rephrased for the purpose of clarity and easy reading.

After the interviews were successfully transcribed into English, one of us coded the transcripts using both inductive and deductive inferences. Dominant codes were categorized into key patterns and themes. Being concerned about the broader socio-cultural processes and factors that may cause male survivors' lived experiences and everyday gendered subjectivities to be less recognized, a thematic analytical approach was used to categorize the data. The themes focused on narratives of CRSV against men and the underlining motivations for the perpetration of such violence.

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the National Health Research Ethics Committee, Department of Health Planning, Research and Statistics, Federal Ministry of Health, Abuja, Nigeria. Our position as native researchers allowed us to refer survivors of CRSV to reliable support services. Even so, and although the services of a psycho-social therapist were made available, the researchers had to discontinue interviews with two survivors who became psychologically distressed. Interviews with these two individuals took place at a later date after they had indicated readiness to participate; and the researchers ensured that the therapist provided further psycho-social counselling for these survivors after the interview. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to protect the identities of the participants.

Counterterrorism operations and sexual violence in north-east Nigeria

Since 2009 the activities of both Boko Haram and, more recently, the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) have caused significant socio-political damage and worsened the economic condition of the north-eastern region of Nigeria and the state more broadly. Terrorist violence has led to the destruction of life and property, creating a humanitarian crisis, and caused the displacement of millions of Nigerians both internally and in the neighbouring countries of Chad, Niger and Cameroon. As a result, the Nigerian government launched countermeasures aimed at disrupting the capacity of terrorist groups to carry out successful attacks and to mitigate the rise of terrorism. These measures are reflected in the formulation of laws and policies such as the Terrorism Prevention Act of 2011 (as amended), the Money Laundering Prohibition Act of 2011 (as amended) and the National Counterterrorism Strategy, which is continuously revised. The government also created institutions to curb terrorism, such as the Joint Task Force and later the 7th Division of the Nigerian Army, and revived the Multinational Joint Task Force, in which it is joined by Benin, Cameroon, Chad and Niger.⁴² It also created a state-sanctioned vigilante group known as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) to assist the formal security institutions in counterterrorism operations.

⁴² Emeka T. Njoku, "Laws for sale": the domestication of counter-terrorism legislation and its impact in Nigeria', in S. N. Romaniuk, F. Grice, D. Irreza, and S. Webb, eds, *The Palgrave handbook of global counterterrorism policy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

Although some progress has been made in curbing of the rise of terrorist groups or at best weakening their capacity, this success has been limited. Both Boko Haram and ISWAP have continued launching attacks on security agents and government officials. Recently, for example, Boko Haram attacked the governor's convoy in Borno State. They are also alleged to have beheaded more than 100 rice farmers, as well as repeatedly kidnapping women, girls and boys.⁴³

Interestingly, there have been reports of gross human rights violations, including sexual violence, against women and girls by security agents, CJTF, local aid workers and community members,⁴⁴ as well as psychological impacts on victims and even caregivers in the north-east region of Nigeria.⁴⁵ However, one area that has been glossed over is the sexual violence perpetrated against men or boys in this region. This neglect of sexual violence on males is a reflection of the cultural norms in Nigerian society, where male-to-male sex, whether violent or consenting, is considered abnormal and a cultural taboo. Thus, the Nigerian government and even NGO workers have focused on highlighting the prevalence of sexual violence against women and girls, and neglected sexual violence against males until victims began to voice their experiences during outreach programmes for women and girls in the north-east. This was emphasized by an NGO worker who was interviewed:

During our partnership with UN Women in 2017–2018 in the north-eastern part of Nigeria, we had a project which looked at issues of violence against women. In our interaction with the women, they told us that issues of male rape or sexual violence against the male child are undeniable. It happens every here and there. A lot of cases of male sexual abuse goes on daily, but that was not the focus of our project. So, I am not sure concrete steps were taken towards addressing those issues.⁴⁶

The quotation above highlights the fact that sexual violence against men and boys is real. The growing awareness of this reality in the north-eastern part of Nigeria may have prompted the recent increase, albeit relatively slight, in attention to CRSV inflicted on males. Sexual violence against men and boys has received some attention from NGOs: for example, in April 2019, Amnesty International reported the rise of sexual violence against young boys who were suspected to be members of terrorist groups:

Between late 2016 and early 2017, 68 boys were held in Maiduguri Prison without charge by the Nigerian military in Giwa Barracks. A Maiduguri Prison detainee and a former

⁴³ John Campbell, 'Borno governor survives Boko Haram attack in Nigeria', Council on Foreign Relations, 5 Aug. 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/borno-governor-survives-boko-haram-attack-nigeria>; Agence France-Presse, 'Boko Haram kill dozens of farm workers in Nigeria', *Guardian*, 28 Nov. 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/28/boko-haram-reported-to-have-killed-dozens-of-farm-workers-in-nigeria>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 24 Sept. 2021.)

⁴⁴ Emeka T. Njoku and Joshua Akintayo, 'Sex for survival: terrorism, poverty and sexual violence in north-eastern Nigeria', *South African Journal of International Affairs* 28: 2, 2021, pp. 285–303, doi: 10.1080/10220461.2021.1927166.

⁴⁵ Emeka T. Njoku, 'The ligaments of counter-terrorism regime: sexual violence and the vicarious traumatisa-tion of female non-governmental organisation workers; evidence from Nigeria', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 30: 6–7, 2019, pp. 1233–63.

⁴⁶ Author interview with peacebuilding NGO worker, Lagos, 19 Oct. 2020.

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prison warder both confirmed that sexual abuse against male children was common in the prison ... 'It is not a secret in the prison what is happening with the little boys.'⁴⁷

Although this study does not claim that there were no male rapes prior to the 2009 terrorist attacks in Nigeria's north-east, it does argue that the precarious nature of the region, as a result of terrorist attacks and government counterterrorism responses, has led to an increase in sexual violence against men and boys. Many of the aid workers and security agents who were interviewed stated that sexual abuse or rape of boys is on the rise and rampant in detention facilities, camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) and local communities. Perpetrators of these cases of sexual violence range from security agents to aid workers.⁴⁸ For instance, a programme manager at a sexual assault centre shared this with the research team:

We capture data every month and we get about 0–30 people, sometimes 20, it fluctuates, but we do not get less than 20 people in a month ... I can remember during the COVID-19 lockdown we were joking among us [colleagues] that we will go to the centre and sit. There would not be any case. To our surprise we receive four boys [Almajiri] within the age range of 11–14, who were raped by one person.⁴⁹

In the next section, the testimonies of male survivors of CRSV are examined, with emphasis on how they made sense of their perpetrators' motives.

Survivors as epistemic agents: spirituality and male sexual violence in north-eastern Nigeria

Male survivors of sexual violence were asked to reflect on the possible motives underlying the perpetrators' desire to abuse them sexually. The information was supplemented with the perceptions of security agents and aid workers involved in counterterrorism operations and humanitarian services in the north-east region. These survivors are young men and boys who lived in the various IDP camps in the region. Some were captured by Boko Haram and rescued by security agents. Perpetrators also included security agents, members of government-sanctioned vigilante groups, aid workers and other community members in the IDP camps or surrounding communities. The views of the survivors are balanced with the perspectives of a community leader, aid workers and security agents.

⁴⁷ Amnesty International, 'Nigeria: children and women face sexual violence in Borno prisons', 29 April 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/04/nigeria-children-and-women-face-sexual-violence-in-borno-prisons/>.

⁴⁸ These included the following: peacebuilding NGO regional manager, Lagos, 19 Oct. 2020; advocacy and human security NGO programme manager, Abuja, 17 Oct. 2020; development, advocacy and security NGO programme officer, Abuja, 12 Oct. 2020; sexual and reproductive health aid worker, Borno, 10 Oct. 2020; gender desk (unit) of a security institution, Borno, 27 Oct. 2020, counterterrorism officer in the Nigerian police, Lagos, 11 Oct. 2020; security personnel in the National Security and Civil Defence Corps, Abuja, 26 Oct. 2020; programme manager of a sexual assault centre, Borno, 27 Oct. 2020; human and democratic rights NGO programme manager, Adamawa, 3 Nov. 2020; community leader in IDP camp, Borno, 30 Oct. 2020.

⁴⁹ Programme manager of a sexual assault centre, Borno, 27 Oct. 2020.

We discovered in our empirical data an explanation that contributes to the spectrum of complex motivations for CRSV. It challenges and at the same time advances the ‘strategy’ or ‘gendered narrative’ element of the dominant binary explanatory frames. It moves beyond group strategy, where sex is used to assert power or dominance collectively for military objectives, and shows how sex can be used to achieve other personal goals. Specifically, we found that in our interactions with participants, one of the prominent explanations they gave is that perpetrators of sexual violence against males do it for ritual or spiritual reasons: that is, for the purposes of attaining power in the form of spiritual protections, political ascendancy and/or acquisition of material wealth. Participants overwhelmingly stated that it is the desire for spiritual security or powers that leads males to participate in sexual assault against men or boys in the context of terrorism-affected north-eastern Nigeria.

Making sense of male sexual violence

The eight survivors spoke about how incomprehensible it was for them to have been sexually violated by their fellow men. All of them struggled to understand their experience of sexual violence in a strongly heteronormative society. They construct such violence as not being ‘ordinary’; and the notion that sexual violence against men is not an ordinary invasion of privacy is reflected in survivors’ reluctance to disclose their experiences to others. In reflecting on the possible reasons that may have motivated such violence, they stated that perpetrators carried out these violent sexual acts for a range of reasons, but above all to gain spiritual protection and material wealth. Three of the eight survivors claimed that their perpetrators sexually abused them mainly for spiritual security and personal protection. Another survivor believed that his perpetrator did it for just the sake of ‘trying new things’. He believes this to be the case because of how he perceived the perpetrator to have been sexually satisfied after their encounter. Another survivor who was raped by a gang of terrorists alleged that he was sexually abused because of the belief that having sex with certain categories of people offers spiritual protection against evil, physical harm and even curses. In his view, having sex with a man is believed to chase away evil spirits that may undermine people’s progress through life. He explained further: ‘Men who engage in such acts do it for spiritual protection. You will usually hear people tell you that they are protected against all evil. So, it’s kind of a source of spiritual power.’⁵⁰ Other survivors and aid workers spoke about the belief that men who engage in sexual acts with other men become rich easily. One survivor recounted how some men came to their detention camp with flashy cars and promised to ‘teach them how to fish’ (how to become rich) and not to always be given fishes (to be dependent on others). He explained that these men tricked them to a different location where they were raped in turns for three months and returned to the camp afterwards. ‘These men do it to enjoy themselves, but the most important reason is for spiritual protection and suste-

⁵⁰ Survivor 1, Adamawa, 2 Nov. 2020.

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nance of wealth through sexual ritual. You know, people become rich through different routes,' he added.⁵¹

From the narratives above, the pleasure dimension of sexual violence against men provides further insight into the sexed story or opportunistic sex argument. It is important to recognize that these narratives should be read within the complex socio-cultural and political context from which they have emerged. The precariousness of life in north-eastern Nigeria seems to increase the vulnerability of young men and boys to becoming victims of male sexual exploitation and other predatory sexual behaviours. Some of these survivors have lost their parents or guardians to the terrorism in the region and have been living in IDP camps. As young men navigate intersecting barriers and inequalities in becoming adults with meaningful roles in society, some sexual predators exploit this vulnerability to their advantage. The findings resonate with discussions on CRSV under way in a range of different disciplinary circles, where scholars argue that the impetuses for sexual violence are about power and dominance as well as sexual pleasure.⁵²

The predominant view from all eight survivors was that spiritual security is believed to be a crucial factor behind male sexual violence. In addition to the dimensions of spiritual, material and sexual gratification, some survivors thought that men rape other men to achieve political power and ascendancy. One survivor told us:

In my view, most perpetrators carry out this sexual violence for political powers. It is believed that when men are on top of women during intercourse, it gives them authoritative powers over them [women]. This is applicable to men as it is believed that they get super extra powers. Others also do it to become materially rich.⁵³

Interviews with male survivors revealed that men who perpetrate sexual violence against other men are not homogeneous. They are a diverse range of individuals, cutting across class and ethno-religious divisions. We observed that participants' interpretations of the motives for men sexually violating other men are dependent on who they perceive their perpetrators to be. For example, if the perpetrators are wealthy men, participants believed that engaging in sexual violence against men enable such men to sustain their wealth or political ascendancy. If the perpetrator is an armed combatant, it is believed that perpetrating sexual violence against other men offers such men spiritual fortification and protection against harms and curses. Participants believe that this is so because the work of armed combatants involves encounters with all sorts of people.

Although the survivors agreed that spiritual fortification is one of the motivations for sexual violence, they did not specify to what use perpetrators wanted to put that spiritual power. Nonetheless, five of the survivors describe how sexually violating a woman gives a man power over her, and that the same logic probably

⁵¹ Survivor 2, Borno, 27 Oct. 2020.

⁵² Dolan et al., 'What is sexual about conflict-related sexual violence?'; Schulz and Touquet, 'Queering explanatory frameworks'.

⁵³ Survivor 3, Borno, 30 Oct. 2020.

applies to raping a man. Participants alleged that raping a man gives extra powers and the ability to control not just women but men as well. For instance, some of the survivors reflected on this:

They carry out this sexual act for many reasons. They do it mainly to fortify themselves spiritually. The desire for spiritual power explains why men carry out this act. Some people believe they need to deposit their sperm in a man to have total control over every man. When the sperm is deposited in a man, he will have control over all men, thereby having massive powers.⁵⁴

They do it for spiritual reasons; some do it to get money and have spiritual powers. They say they want to have powers over men; it is believed that when a man sleeps with a woman, he has powers over her, so the same applies to men. When a man sleeps with a fellow man, he has powers over all men.⁵⁵

Other participants alleged that men tend to engage in sexual violence against men because such men are instructed by their spiritual superiors to commit such acts. 'Most of the perpetrators get instructions from their spiritual heads to sleep with boys for them to be able to have what they are looking for. In most cases, it is power and control over everybody.'⁵⁶ A government worker in a state-owned institution in Borno State corroborated the views of the survivors, saying: 'Let's look at this from a political angle. Politicians can do anything and go to any length just to get a political office. So, I am not surprised if they use CRSV to fortify themselves. You hear different stories of what they do.'⁵⁷

The idea of survivors' interpretation, and other 'well-educated' stakeholders' theorization, of sexual acts as spiritual exercise undertaken in pursuit of political power resonates with Harnischfeger's argument that, although in the past issues of witchcraft or ritual activities were attached to ordinary people, in contemporary Nigeria the political class is incriminated. Many Nigerian citizens see prophets who carry out rituals or sorcery as belonging to the political class, and their ritual activities as what members of that class do to sustain their political power or ascendancy. Harnischfeger stated that, 'in the eyes of people, the alleged spiritual murderer was part of the political establishment—which indeed embodied the worst aspects of the Nigerian upper classes ... in popular imaginations, such crimes [rituals] are readily associated with the rich and powerful'.⁵⁸ Furthermore, Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz stated that Africans believe that political power has spiritual undertones. This perception is validated by politicians themselves, who play up the notion that they are associated with malevolent forces and that their political predominance is a result not only of their political dexterity but of their use of mysterious means.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Survivor 4, Borno, 30 Oct. 2020.

⁵⁵ Survivor 5, Borno, 29 Oct. 2020.

⁵⁶ Survivor 7, Adamawa, 3 Nov. 2020.

⁵⁷ Government worker in state-owned emergency organization, Borno, 27 Oct. 2020.

⁵⁸ Harnischfeger, *State decline and the return of occult powers*, p. 61.

⁵⁹ Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa works: the political instrumentalization of disorder* (London: James Currey, 1999).

The perceptions of survivors about the use of sexual violence for protection against evil or physical harms were substantiated by a community leader in Borno State. He stated that ‘some do it to become rich, some do it to have power, and some are being sent by *marabout*.⁶⁰ They also stand [male-to-male sex is also done] for spiritual reasons.’ Reiterating this, a participant in the gender unit of a security agency stated: ‘One, it’s spiritual because there is this belief that whatever their spiritualists will tell them that if they do this, they can be this. So, they believe in that.’⁶¹ A security agent explained why some security agents are involved in the acts of sexual violence:

As Africans, a part of our religious belief includes the African traditional belief system, and we know the kind of rituals that go on. Some of us have also carried that mentality into the battlefield in the north-east. Perpetrators have people who do charms for them, and some of the requirements include sleeping with a young boy of nine or less than ten years old. I know that people rely on what some of our boys [soldiers] call African mechanism or juju to do several rituals to fortify themselves.⁶²

The perpetrators who were apprehended by either the sexual assault referral centre or the gender desk department of a security agency themselves attributed their reasons for engaging in sexual violence to spiritual factors. Specifically, words such as ‘they seem to be under some form of supernatural force or they were not conscious of what they were doing’, or ‘it is the devil’s work’, are the type of narratives that usually predominate in their efforts to make sense of their actions. Although the researchers did not directly interview any perpetrator, they drew on accounts from a sexual violence referral centre in Borno State and the gender desk department of a security agency who interrogated some of these perpetrators. For example, one of the responses from the referral centre ran thus: ‘In most cases when I interview these perpetrators, the reason for the act they either say it’s the devil’s work or they don’t even know the reason why.’ Similarly, a security agent in the Nigerian police stated what they heard from perpetrators: ‘I have heard that those who left the act of male sexual violence come out to say that there are spiritual issues involved.’

However, the views expressed by the perpetrators are open to further interpretation and investigation. For instance, perpetrators attributing their actions to the spiritual may be seeking to capture public sentiment, thus neutralizing the gravity of the crime of male sexual violence in a religious society. They may also be attempting to elicit leniency during prosecution. A critical interpretation of perpetrators’ motives is also reflected in the neutralization theory developed by Gresham Sykes and David Matza. They argue that offenders often proactively neutralize their remorse and self-perception using techniques that allow individuals to slide back and forth between criminal and legal activity so as to give them brief respite from normative constraints.⁶³ However, in Nigeria there have been

⁶⁰ The *marabout* is a figure regarded as a Muslim holy man or hermit, mostly found in North Africa.

⁶¹ Staff member, gender desk (unit) of a security institution, Borno, 27 Oct. 2020.

⁶² Member of National Security and Civil Defence Corps, Abuja, 26 Oct. 2020.

⁶³ Gresham Sykes and David Matza, ‘Techniques of neutralization: a theory of delinquency’, *American Sociological*

cases where apprehended perpetrators were caught with charms or *juju* objects and confessed to using them for sexual purposes.⁶⁴ This reinforces the need for works on perpetrators' motives. In this study we have just begun the discussion of perpetrators' explanations of their motives; future studies examining perpetrators' motives for sexual violence will be important in understanding the complexities of the nature, motivations and harms of CRSV.

Furthermore, the belief that the act of sexual violence against men is a spiritual exercise for protection and wealth further highlights the view expressed by Stephen Ellis and Gerrie Ter Haar, and Ogbu Kalu, that in many African societies there is a 'sense of moral panic' or perceived incapacity of the state to provide security. This sense of anxiety leads people to resort to witch doctors or other forms of spiritualists for charms to protect themselves, their families and/or their material wealth. Even church leaders also use *juju* designed in their religious symbols for protection.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the quest for protective rituals and wealth reflects a 'perceived loss of legitimate authority among the upper class ... when a mass of the population is becoming impoverished while the elite of politicians and businessmen openly display its wealth, the power of the ruling elites become demonized'.⁶⁶

We argue that while the explanations of the survivors and other participants reflect the social division, mistrust and contestation between the ruling/upper class and the lower class, they also reveal the heteronormative and homophobic nature of Nigerian society, where male-to-male sexual violence is difficult to comprehend as opportunistic sex or rape for sexual pleasure. Three participants, an NGO worker and two security agents questioned the attraction of a man to another man: 'A man is wearing trouser, another man is wearing trouser, what is attracting you to it? Is it the legs?'⁶⁷ Similarly, a security agent responded that he could not imagine a man being raped. He responded thus: 'How can you imagine such? It is only a mad person; someone that is mentally derailed, you know and somebody that is desperately looking for wealth.'⁶⁸

While we are not suggesting here that all NGO workers and security agents are homophobic, the expressions quoted above are similar to the views articulated in public conversations about homosexuality and give us an insight into the homophobic nature of contemporary Nigerian society, including state institutions. All these factors have adverse implications for male victims of sexual violence. As Steven Pierce put it: 'Nigerians who in some way identify with, participate in, or perform [consensual] same-sex sexuality occupy an unsettling space.'⁶⁹ In 2014, the

Review, vol. 22, 1957, pp. 664–70.

⁶⁴ 'I slept with virgins for money ritual—ex-Eagles' goalie, Peterside', *Sun*, 12 Feb. 2020, <https://www.sunnewsonline.com/i-slept-with-virgins-for-money-ritual-ex-eagles-goalie-peterside/>; Alexander Okere, 'I killed my mother, slept with her corpse for money ritual: suspect', *Punch*, 21 Nov. 2018, <https://punchng.com/i-killed-my-mother-slept-with-her-corpse-for-money-ritual-suspect/>.

⁶⁵ Stephen Ellis and Gerrie Ter Haar, *Worlds of power: religious thought and political practice in Africa* (London: Hurst, 2004), p. 107

⁶⁶ Harnischfeger, *State decline and the return of occult powers*, pp. 72–3.

⁶⁷ Peacebuilding NGO regional manager, Lagos, 19 Oct. 2020.

⁶⁸ Interview: counterterrorism officer in the Nigerian police, Lagos, 11 Oct. 2020

⁶⁹ Steven Pierce, "'Nigeria can do without such perverts": sexual anxiety and political crisis in postcolonial Nigeria', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 36: 1, 2016, pp. 3–20.

Nigerian government passed the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA), which criminalizes same-sex relations and constrains the rights of those who identify as LGBTQ+. Following the passage of this law, NOIPolls, in conjunction with the Initiative for Equal Rights and Bisi Alimi Foundation, surveyed the perceptions of Nigerians on homosexuality. Their report revealed that 87 per cent of Nigerians supported the SSMPA, 81 per cent were against human rights for homosexuals, 90 per cent did not believe that people are born homosexuals, and 87 per cent stated that they would not accept a homosexual family member.⁷⁰

Furthermore, although there has been a long history of same-sex subculture in northern Nigeria, including people known as *yan daudu* (effeminate men), *yan kefi* (lesbians) and *masu marka* (people who have same-sex relations), these identities are generally believed to have been learned;⁷¹ hence they can be unlearned. Importantly, Islam—a dominant religion in the north of Nigeria—has shown its violent rejection and targeting of, and repression towards, people who go against sexual norms through the Hisbah or religious police. Similarly, Muslims and Christian groups, and their leaders, often associate homosexuality with negative spiritual influences. They attribute Nigeria's underdevelopment or economic problems to homosexual practices and other 'evils' such as witchcraft and rituals.⁷² There are also claims that wealthy men who belong to cults sleep with boy prostitutes or virgin girls for ritual purposes;⁷³ and that LGBTQ+ individuals are possessed with evil spirits and need to be exorcised.⁷⁴ Women who are trafficked for sex are believed to be under the influence of or controlled through spiritual powers or *juju*.⁷⁵ Thus, when people have difficulty understanding particular experiences, events or phenomena, they make sense of these things by invoking the spiritual. According to Harnischfeger, this is a way of dealing with 'collective trauma for which people have no explanation. By linking it to witchcraft, evil is personified, making it comprehensible.'⁷⁶ As a result, victims of male rape are largely ignored and silenced, owing to societal aversion to same-sex relations.⁷⁷

Conclusion

In the context of war and post-war societies, the sexed and gendered story dominates current debates on the motivations of CRSV against both women and men. However, with a few notable exceptions, there has been no detailed investiga-

⁷⁰ NOIPolls, 'A year-and-half after legislation, Nigerians still support anti-same sex marriage law', 30 June 2015, <https://noi-polls.com/a-year-and-half-after-legislation-nigerians-still-support-anti-same-sex-marriage-law/>.

⁷¹ Pierce, "Nigeria can do without such perverts".

⁷² Rudolf Pell Gaudio, *Allah made us: sexual outlaws in an Islamic African city* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016).

⁷³ Pierce, "Nigeria can do without such perverts".

⁷⁴ Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, *The situation of sexual and gender minorities in Nigeria (2014–2018)*, Feb. 2019, <https://irb.gc.ca/en/country-information/research/Pages/situation-gender-minorities-nigeria.aspx>.

⁷⁵ Rijk van Dijk, "'Voodoo' on the doorstep: young Nigerian prostitutes and magic policing in the Netherlands", *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 71: 4, 2001, pp. 558–86.

⁷⁶ Harnischfeger, *State decline and the return of occult powers*, p. 59.

⁷⁷ Emeka T. Njoku and Isaac Dery, 'Gendering counter-terrorism: masculinities, male bodies and victimhood in north-eastern Nigeria', unpublished work under review (Part of a project sponsored by the American Council of Learned Society/African Humanities Program, 2020).

tion of the dynamics and complexities of CRSV against men in terrorism-affected areas, or empirical works that highlight male victims of CRSV in the context of terrorism and counterterrorism.⁷⁸ Moreover, the explanations for wartime sexual violence against men are not exhaustive; new discourses are emerging and have yet to fully capture the complexities and multicausal explanatory frames of CRSV against men.

This article represents an important step in contributing to the discursive accounts of victims/survivors of CRSV. The analysis presented here offers an explanation that builds on the sexed and gendered arguments of CRSV. Specifically, it advances spiritual security as an explanatory variable of CRSV against men, arguing that such violence should be understood as a ritual or spiritual exercise perpetrated to gain physical safety, material wealth or socio-political ascendancy. Our analysis, which is consistent with the work of Fisher and Leonardi, reveals that men who perpetrate sexual violence against other men in the context of terrorism and counterterrorism are largely concerned with the acquisition of spiritual powers which could fortify them by means of protecting, preserving and sustaining their material wealth. Participants in our research suggested that such perceptions are not linked only to tangible material factors, but also to the invisible aspect of human life. Most of our participants expressed the view that people, especially men who perpetrate sexual violence against men, usually feel insecure in their workplaces. Such feelings of insecurity or 'not progressing well enough' in their work drive them to search for spiritual powers. It emerged that men who perpetrate such violence may feel spiritually fortified and empowered in ways that may enable them to manage both visible and spiritual forces working against them. This echoes Fisher and Leonardi's argument that

feelings of security are also derived from understanding of an individual or community's relationships with invisible and spiritual forces. Religious devotion and divine protection represent a central plank of security for many, just as fears of divine retribution, demonic possession or witchcraft features are a central dimension of insecurity for many others.⁷⁹

Moreover, the spiritual conception of CRSV is in tandem with Harnischfeger's concept of 'collective trauma', according to which apparently inexplicable issues can be understood as linked to evil and sorcery. Thus, 'evil is personified' so as to make it comprehensible.⁸⁰

What the analysis in this article proves is that monocausal or bicausal explanations are inadequate to account for the motivations of sexual violence against males in conflict and post-conflict settings and even in peacetime environments. This study's findings support the argument that the theorization of sexual violence against males requires continued research, owing to the inherent complexity of

⁷⁸ Sarah Chynoweth, *It's happening to our men as well: sexual violence against Rohingya men and boys*, report by Women's Refugee Commission, Washington DC, 8 Nov. 2018, <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/research-resources/its-happening-to-our-men-as-well/>; Heleen Touquet, *Unsilenced: male survivors speak of conflict-related sexual violence in Sri Lanka*, report (London: International Truth and Justice Project, 2018).

⁷⁹ Fisher and Leonardi, 'Insecurity and the invisible'.

⁸⁰ Harnischfeger, *State decline and the return of occult powers*, p. 59.

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the phenomenon and the multilayered gendered harms that result from it.⁸¹ This analysis suggests that scholarship on CRSV needs to move beyond the dominant theoretical frame which privileges binary explanatory frames of CRSV. Our findings reveal that such an approach not only facilitates the homogenizing of the identities of victims of CRSV but also ignores other important 'aspects of the complexities'.⁸² Spiritual security has been foregrounded here as one of the less theorized explanations of CRSV, especially in a postcolonial global Southern context. Greater understanding of survivors' spiritual security within the domain of CRSV should inform the design and implementation of appropriate preventive and supportive programmes together with policies that will address the rise of CRSV.

⁸¹ Schulz and Touquet, 'Queering explanatory frameworks'.

⁸² Schulz and Touquet, 'Queering explanatory frameworks', p. 1186.