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ARTICLE

The gendered costs of stigma: How experiences of conflict-related sexual violence affect civic engagement for women and men

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Abstract

A common understanding emphasizes the destructive effects of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) on social cohesion and community life. Stressing the agency of survivors, we present an alternative argument. Our theory predicts that survivors seek to counteract the stigma attached to CRSV by contributing to the community in the form of civic engagement. Drawing on three original surveys from Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Liberia, and Sri Lanka and relying on list experiments to reduce underreporting bias, we find that survivors of CRSV indeed show increased levels of civic engagement. This civic effect is consistent across the three contexts and very likely causal. We also rule out an alternative mechanism based on posttraumatic growth and dispel concerns that increased civic engagement comes at the expense of decreased intergroup relations. However, looking at sex differences, our results are more sobering. While in line with our prediction, they do not support the optimistic notion that survivors' mobilization results in female empowerment and the closing of existing gender gaps in civic behavior. Our findings have important implications for our understanding of CRSV, the legacy of violent conflict, and the gendered nature of politics.

Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) is one of the cruelest atrocities against civilians and has occurred in half of all armed conflicts over the last two decades (Cohen & Nordås, 2014). Seminal studies have significantly advanced our understanding of the determinants of CRSV across countries, conflicts, and armed actors (Cohen, 2013; Leiby, 2009; Wood, 2009). In recent years, the interest of scholars, international organizations, and human rights groups has turned to better understanding the social, political, and gendered consequences of CRSV (e.g., Atuhaire et al., 2018; Albutt et al., 2017; González & Traunmüller, 2023; Kreft, 2019; Koos, 2018; Koos & Lindsey, 2022; Kelly et al., 2012; Lindsey & Koos, Forthcoming; Nordås & Cohen, 2021; UN, 2021).

In this article, we contribute to this growing interest by establishing the consequences of CRSV for civic engagement. Civic engagement refers to the voluntary commitment of time, effort, and resources to produce beneficial outcomes within a community and is considered a vital ingredient of democratic governance (Putnam, 1993; Uslaner, 2002; Verba et al., 1995). Civic engagement is even more paramount for conflict-affected populations to create local institutions and to provide basic services the state is often unable or unwilling to provide (Easterly et al., 2006; Wood, 2008). As a concept, civic engagement also speaks directly to policy concerns about the adverse impact of CRSV on social cohesion (Atuhaire et al., 2018; UN, 2021).

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A common understanding emphasizes the destructive effects of CRSV on social cohesion. Extensive research on the adverse psychological effects of CRSV provides suggestive evidence for this notion (e.g., Dumke et al., 2021; Kelly et al., 2012; Koos, 2017; Koos & Lindsey, 2022; Peterman et al., 2011; Woldetsadik, 2018). This expectation, however, is at odds with research on the legacies of violence, which suggests that exposure to violence often increases prosocial behavior among conflict-affected populations (e.g., Blattman, 2009; Bauer et al., 2016; Bellows & Miguel, 2006; Gilligan et al., 2013). But this literature has ignored CRSV as a distinct form of violence due to its sensitive nature and the related underreporting problem (Atuhaire et al., 2018; Nordås & Cohen, 2021).

We advance the understanding of the civic effects of CRSV by presenting a novel theoretical argument and a methodological approach. Our theoretical argument is straightforward. Due to the stigma and social costs associated with CRSV, survivors have a strong instrumental incentive to compensate for it by contributing to the community in the form of civic engagement. Survivors' civic engagement signals commitment and provides benefits to the community, which counteracts the risk of social exclusion. Thus, in contrast to a narrative of passive victimhood, our theory stresses the agency of survivors and predicts higher levels of civic engagement.

Our theory of counteracting stigma has significant implications for sex differences in the civic effects of CRSV. Since counteracting social exclusion requires conformity to community norms, male and female survivors—both threatened by stigma, but for different reasons—face quite different constraints. Whereas men's civic engagement is in accordance with traditional gender roles, women's civic engagement poses a challenge to existing community norms. In the absence of outside support, civic engagement is therefore much more costly and less likely for female survivors of CRSV.

We test our theory using original surveys administered to almost 10,000 respondents in three conflict-affected populations: the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Liberia, and Sri Lanka. Importantly, we rely on an indirect, unobtrusive technique known as "list experiment," which grants respondents anonymity and reduces bias when answering sensitive questions (Blair & Imai, 2012). To the best of our knowledge, we present the first comparative study using list experiments to assess the microlevel effects of violence in general and CRSV in particular across multiple postconflict contexts.

Across all three cases, we find that experiences of CRSV are significantly correlated with increased levels of civic engagement. To strengthen a causal interpretation, we control for preexposure social engagement, include local-level fixed effects, and perform sensitivity analyses to assess potential threats of unobserved confounding or sample selection bias. We also rule out an alternative mechanism based on posttraumatic growth (PTG) and dispel concerns that increased civic engagement comes at the expense of decreased intergroup relations. However, looking at sex differences in the civic effects of CRSV, our results are more sobering. While in line with our prediction, they do not support the optimistic notion that survivors' mobilization results in female empowerment and the closing of existing gender gaps in civic behavior.

Our findings contribute to two influential literatures. First and foremost, our article significantly expands social science research on sexual violence in conflict by focusing on survivors rather than on the groups who perpetrate CRSV (e.g., Cohen, 2013; Leiby, 2009; Nordås & Cohen, 2021; Wood, 2009). Challenging narratives of passive victimhood and the inevitable harm to social cohesion, we demonstrate that survivors of CRSV possess the agency to secure community inclusion. However, our findings on sex differences also caution against an overly optimistic view of female empowerment in response to civil wars (e.g., Kreft, 2019; Tripp, 2015) and point to the persistence of traditional norms that privilege men over women. In this sense, strengthened social cohesion cements existing inequalities.

Second, our article also advances and adds important nuance to research on the legacy of violence (Bauer et al., 2016; Blattman, 2009; Bellows & Miguel, 2006; De Juan et al., 2023; Hager et al., 2019). Considering CRSV as particular pernicious form of violence provides substantively new and previously overlooked insights into the nexus of violence and civic behavior (Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood, 2017). Importantly, it demonstrates the crucial importance of a gender perspective when considering the social and political consequences of violent conflict.

CIVILIANS' RESPONSES TO VIOLENCE: RESEARCH ADVANCES AND REMAINING GAPS

Research on civilians' responses to violence has shown that exposure to violence affects prosocial behavior toward ingroup members (Bauer et al., 2016; Bellows & Miguel, 2006; De Juan et al., 2023; Hager et al., 2019; Koos, 2018), nonviolent and violent political activism (Blattman, 2009; De Juan et al., 2023), women's political empowerment (Hadzic & Tavits, 2020), and security and public goods preferences (Berens & Karim, 2023; Lindsey, 2022). In the absence of more suitable data, most studies rely on violent events in geographic units to proxy individuals'

exposure to violence (e.g., De Juan et al., 2023; Gilligan et al., 2013; Hager et al., 2019). Only a handful of studies include direct measures of violent exposure in their surveys (e.g., Blattman, 2009; Koos, 2018). Existing approaches have largely focused on lethal forms of violence and ignored nonlethal types, and in particular CRSV as a distinct and extremely vicious form of violence against civilians.

CRSV stands out as a particularly pernicious form of nonlethal violence. We follow Wood (2015, 459) and Cohen and Nordås (2014, 194) who refer to CRSV as rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, mutilation, or other forms of sexual violence perpetrated by state or nonstate armed actors. Although rooted in patriarchal norms and related to sexual violence during peace (Boesten, 2014; Enloe, 1998), CRSV is often more brutal (Ritholtz, 2022) and carried out performatively to shock bystanders (Fujii, 2021). This may involve multiple perpetrators, rape with objects, forced rape by family members, and rape in public spaces to maximize humiliation and signal domination (Wood, 2009; Cohen, 2013). It is the deliberate violation of emotive values such as intimacy, sexuality, and dignity, which is particularly traumatic and the reason why scholars emphasize the destructive effects of CRSV on interpersonal relations (Albutt et al., 2017; Atuhaire et al., 2018; Kelly et al., 2012).

CONFLICT-RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE, PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS, AND THE NARRATIVE OF VICTIMHOOD

Clinical and ethnographic research has documented that male and female survivors experience elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and stigmatization (Dumke et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2010; Koos & Lindsey, 2022; Lindsey & Koos, Forthcoming; Peterman et al., 2011). Since CRSV violates traditional chastity norms, survivors are often considered morally contaminated and excluded from their communities (Albutt et al., 2017). Fear of sexually transmitted diseases further contributes to survivors' experienced and anticipated social stigmatization and self-blame (Koos & Lindsey, 2022; Lindsey & Koos, Forthcoming). When wartime rape results in pregnancy, both mother and child face rejection (e.g., Albutt et al., 2017; Mukamana & Brysiewicz, 2008). Some forms of CRSV—for example, public and multiple perpetrator rape—are deliberately used to shame or emasculate victims and to shock communities (Kelly et al., 2012). These practices further aggravate psychological distress and stigma, particularly when traditional norms of sexuality, gender roles, and family honor are an integral part of community culture (Gottschall, 2004).

The accumulated evidence on the adverse psychological effects and stigmatization of CRSV has contributed to a narrative of victimhood, marginalization, and social exclusion. This view is particularly evident in policy debates (UN, 2021) and the practice of advocacy groups or humanitarian organizations (Meger, 2016; Quillard, 2016). However, it is not backed by systematic research into the civic consequences of CRSV as we aim to show in the following.

A THEORY OF CONFLICT-RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Our theoretical argument focuses on a distinctive feature of CRSV, which sets it apart from other forms of violence: the threat of stigma and exclusion (Albutt et al., 2017; Koos & Lindsey, 2022). The key idea is that CRSV survivors who are threatened by stigma are not passive victims, but purposeful actors who possess agency and try to avert the negative implications of stigma by means of civic engagement in their communities. The logic of our theoretical argument, which runs counter to the established victimhood narrative, is as follows.

Counteracting the costs of stigma

According to the seminal civic voluntarism model of Verba et al. (1995), civic engagement is explained by three factors: resources, networks, and motivation. Since survivors of CRSV tend to be low in resources (see our consistent findings on risk factors further below) and stigma implies their social exclusion from networks, their civic engagement derives from a strong personal motivation.

Like others, CRSV survivors prefer community inclusion. Community inclusion provides individuals with vital resources ranging from emotional support to material benefits (Easterly et al., 2006; Wood, 2008). This is why stigma and the threat of exclusion it implies is so costly in the first place and why survivors want to avoid it (Lindsey & Koos, Forthcoming). The costs of stigma are even higher if credible exit options (e.g., moving to another village) or alternatives to community inclusion (e.g., support by the state or NGOs) are not available. We return to the importance of these conditions when discussing alternative mechanisms.

Given the threat of social exclusion, survivors have a strong instrumental motivation to counteract the costs of stigma by compensating for it. One obvious way to compensate for stigma is to raise one's value for the community by contributing time, effort, and resources to its benefit. Faced with the

threat of stigma, survivors of CRSV therefore have the choice between two options: (a) to withdraw from the community and minimize social engagement with all its adverse implications, including the loss of vital resources, or (b) to contribute to the community by getting civically engaged, hoping to stay included. This stigma-averting behavior is purposeful because it anticipates the likely reactions from the community.

Reacting to the survivor's behavior, the community also faces a choice between two options: (a) to shun the survivor or (b) to include the survivor. Stigma and social withdrawal incentivize community members to shun the survivor who is perceived as having violated social norms. But a survivor's civic engagement counteracts stigma because it signals commitment to the community. Since the community benefits from the time, effort, and resources contributed by the survivor, it now has a material incentive to include, accept, and reintegrate the survivor. Note that the community is not a unitary actor. But our argument does not rest on the unrealistic idea that *all* members of the community will accept the survivor. To motivate civic engagement, it fully suffices that the survivor can expect that enough members will weigh the contribution made to the community higher than the stigma attached to CRSV.

Our theoretical argument on counteracting stigma is consistent with an established but overlooked literature in social psychology that demonstrates how stigmatization and exclusion motivates social reconnection (Molden & Maner, 2013; Shih, 2004). Even under low-risk laboratory conditions, individuals primed with stigma have been shown to conform to a group's view by agreeing to obviously false statements, underscoring the importance of group belonging and the willingness to pay a cost for membership (e.g., Bonanno et al., 2011). In other experiments, simply priming participants to think about social exclusion has been observed to increase their interest in making new friends and working in groups (Maner et al., 2007). These findings demonstrate how even artificially manipulated stigma in low-risk environments promotes a desire to be part of a group.

Despite the established psychological connection between stigma and social reintegration, the possibility that CRSV can increase civic engagement via stigmatization has not received much attention. Yet, four studies suggest that our argument is plausible. Koos (2018) finds that sexual violence–affected households in Sierra Leone donate more money and display more prosocial behavior. González and Traunmüller (2023) show that survivors of CRSV in Sri Lanka are mobilized into political action. Annan et al. (2011) find that girls abducted and abused by rebels in Uganda have been reintegrated, not shunned, by their communities. Finally, Lindsey and Koos (Forthcoming) find that sexual violence victimization correlates with sociopolitical mobilization at the grassroots level despite higher levels of stigma and self-blaming. Based on these findings and the theoretical logic outlined above, we derive the following hypothesis:

H1. The experience of CRSV increases civic engagement.

While our argument on counteracting stigma focuses on survivors' purposeful responses to a specific feature of CRSV, an alternative explanation is PTG (e.g., Bauer et al., 2016; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). PTG describes positive changes after a traumatic experience and provides an alternative, psychological account for a positive link between trauma and civic engagement. This theoretical argument is not specific to CRSV but leads to the same prediction as our H1. We rule out this alternative mechanism in the empirical analysis below.

Sex-differential effects of conflict-related sexual violence on civic engagement

Our theory on counteracting stigma has direct implications for sex differences in the civic effects of CRSV between women and men. Stigma and the threat of exclusion arise because of a violation of sex and gender norms, which are important to the survivor's community. This norm violation is what makes CRSV the pernicious form of violence that it is (Albutt et al., 2017; Koos & Lindsey, 2022). But this also means that stigma cannot be compensated by *further* violating existing community norms. Instead, stigma is counteracted by adhering to and reaffirming existing group norms (Molden & Maner, 2013; Shih, 2004). Hence, the signal that survivors of CRSV need to send to other members of the community is a motivation to contribute to, not to question or even challenge the values of the community.

Many scholars argue that violent conflict creates a culture of "militarized masculinity" where societies fall back to rigid traditional gender norms (Enloe, 1998; Goldstein, 2001; Page & Whitt, 2020). In the presence of traditional gender norms, female and male survivors face quite different incentives and constraints. If civic engagement is considered a predominantly male behavior—which it is in many traditional contexts (Boesten, 2014) and as our results confirm—only male survivors will benefit from compensating stigma by increasing their civic engagement. Female survivors, conversely, are left with the option to withdraw, or to challenge the gendered norms of civic engagement. The latter option of getting civically engaged is much more costly, if not outright risky for women. Therefore, our theory of counter-acting stigma predicts that male

survivors will be more likely to get civically engaged than female survivors, thus reinforcing an already existing gender gap in civic engagement.

H2. The effect of experiences of CRSV on civic engagement is stronger for men than for women.

As always, this prediction holds under the ceteris paribus assumption. We acknowledge that a growing literature suggests that violence creates conditions for women's empowerment. First, women can take on traditional male roles during conflict, for instance, as combatants or heads of households when their spouses fight or have died (Hadzic & Tavits, 2020; Wood, 2008). Second, international assistance programs geared toward gender equality and women's empowerment can directly promote women's social, economic, and political engagement in their communities (Berry, 2018; Tripp, 2015). Third, Kreft (2019) suggests that CRSV mobilizes women around their collective identity as women and results in protest. We discuss the validity of these alternative predictions in the empirical section.

DATA AND METHODS

Population-based data on CRSV are scarce.[1] Cohen (2013) assembled the first large data set on CRSV by coding country reports from the US State Department. A related data project resulted in the sexual violence in armed conflict (SVAC) data set (Cohen & Nordås, 2014), which codes reports from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the US State Department into an ordinal measure of CRSV occurrence. Dumaine et al. (2022) built on this data set to code specific forms of sexual violence and Krüger and Nordås (2020) suggest a latent variable model to address the low correlation between the three sources. While the SVAC data are an invaluable source on armed groups' use of sexual violence, they do not provide population-based prevalence estimates and are not designed for the study of individual risk factors or consequences of CRSV. For these purposes, survey data are critical.

Our empirical strategy builds on three original survey experiments from a diverse set of conflict-affected populations: DRC, Liberia, and Sri Lanka. Our research design was not planned as a systematic cross-national comparison with a standardized methodology. Instead, it results from pooling studies that were conducted independently by the two authors and, therefore, differ in methodological characteristics such as geographic context, sample size, design of list experiment, and measurement of outcome variables. Nonetheless, all three studies allow us to test hypotheses on the civic effects of CRSV. If these disparate methods converge on the same inference, our findings are unlikely to be the result of narrow methodological design choices. Varied evidence for a hypothesis confirms it more strongly than less varied evidence, ceteris paribus.[2]

Study contexts

All three country cases in our study have recently experienced armed conflicts with documented sexual violence against civilians. Since they vary across multiple dimensions (e.g., the scale of sexual violence or main perpetrators, see Table 1 for an overview), they allow for a broad test of the civic effects of CRSV under varying conditions. To clarify what we can learn from each case, we rely on the distinction between "most-likely" and "least-likely" cases (Levy, 2008). If we find support for our hypotheses in a least-likely case, this lends considerable credibility to our theoretical argument. If we fail to find support even in a most-likely case, this would put our theory into question.

We consider Sri Lanka to be a most-likely case for both our main prediction (H1) and for sex-differences in the civic effects of CRSV (H2) to operate. While the war ended in 2008, several factors related to the war outcome—for example, military victory of the state, limited transitional justice, no UN peacekeeping—limit the exit options for survivors and thus require the counteracting of stigma to ensure community inclusion (H1). The fact that among the three cases, Sri Lanka has by far the lowest per-capita aid funding for gender equality and women's empowerment programs (USD 0.40 at the time of the survey, see Online Appendix B.1) and only 5%–6% of female legislators between 2007 and 2017[3] provides unfavorable conditions for women. It is thus a most-likely case for higher rates of civic engagement among male survivors (H2).

Liberia qualifies as a least-likely case for both hypotheses. Liberia has been largely peaceful for the past 20 years, thus providing alternative options to community inclusion (Mvukiyehe & Samii, 2021). This in turn should reduce the need for counteracting

[1] Exceptions include psychological studies reviewed above (Johnson et al., 2010; Koos, 2018; Peterman et al., 2011) but with the exception of Koos (2018) none of these studies assess the social and political consequences of CRSV. Moreover, none of these studies deal with nondisclosure of sexual violence due to stigmatization.

[2] This notion is known as the "variety-of-evidence thesis" in philosophy of science (e.g., Hempel, 1966). It also closely resembles the logic of sensitivity analyses, "in which a neighborhood of alternative assumptions is selected and the corresponding interval of inferences is identified. Conclusions are judged to be sturdy only if the neighborhood of assumptions is wide enough to be credible and the corresponding interval of inferences is narrow enough to be useful" (Leamer, 1985, 308).

[3] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS?end=2017&locations=LK-LR-CD&start=2007

TABLE 1 Conflict overview.

	Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)	Liberia	Sri Lanka
Conflict dimensions	Political and economic marginalization of eastern provinces	Political and economic marginalization of native Liberian population by Americo-Liberians	Religious and ethnic marginalization of Tamil population
Start/end and outcome	1998–2003 (First/Second Congo War, peace agreement and elections, UN peace mission)	1989–1997 (First Liberian Civil War, peace agreement and elections)	1983–2009 (Sri Lankan Civil War, military victory by Sri Lankan army)
	2004–ongoing (Kivu conflicts)	1999–2003 (Second Liberian Civil War, peace agreement and elections)	
Domestic belligerent types	Congolese government/armed forces vs. dozens of ethnic militias and regional rebel groups	Liberian government/armed forces vs. rebel militias with regional recruitment base	Sri Lankan government/armed forces (Senhalese) vs. Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)
CRSV perpetrators[a]	Congolese armed forces, local ethnic militias (Mai Mai fractions) and larger rebel groups (Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie, Forces Nationales de Libération, Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple, Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda, M23)	Liberian armed and special forces, rebel groups (Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, Movement for Democracy in Liberia)	Sri Lankan armed forces and LTTE rarely
Case function for H1	Intermediate	Least likely	Most likely
Case function for H2	Intermediate	Least likely	Most likely

[a]Reported perpetrator groups according to sexual violence in armed conflict (SVAC) data set (Cohen & Nordås, 2014) when across three sources (US State Department, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch) average score was at least 0.6 indicating at least "isolated" (value 1) sexual violence by an armed actor according to SVAC's prevalence scale (0, none; 1, isolated; 2, numerous; 3, massive).

stigma in general (H1) since alternatives to community inclusion are available. Moreover, since the end of the war, many women's empowerment programs have been implemented across the country. Note that Liberia has the highest per-capita funding on gendered aid (3.20 USD). Moreover, Ellen Sirleaf Johnson was the first democratically elected female president in Africa, for two terms, thus symbolizing women's empowerment at a high political level and the share of women in the parliament is varied between 10% and 13% between 2007 and 2017, hence significantly higher than in Sri Lanka. Hence, we would expect that our gendered hypothesis (H2) is least likely to hold here.

We believe DRC to be an intermediate case. Local violence regularly flares up in different locations in eastern DRC making community inclusion vital (H1). In addition, this strengthens traditional gender norms and reduces opportunities for women. Despite this, the presence of almost 15,000 UN troops (MONUSCO) has established areas of relative security and provides both security and logistical support for international and national nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to carry out humanitarian assistance, including large programs to assist sexual violence survivors (2.00 USD per capita). The share of women in the parliament between 2007 and 2017 moved between 8% and 11%, and we therefore consider the conditions for women's compared to men's civic engagement (H2) worse than in Liberia but better than in Sri Lanka.

Data collection and samples

In total, our analyses rely on more than 10,000 individual observations across the three postconflict contexts. Below, we describe the primary purpose of each survey and its sample characteristics. A detailed discussion of survey methodology and subnational intensity of violence is available in Online Appendix C starting on p. 11.

DRC

We implemented the DRC survey in 2017 as part of a research project on the social and political consequences of conflict-related sexual violence. The data were collected by Research Initiatives for Social Development, a Congolese survey organization in Bukavu, under the supervision of one of the authors. The DRC survey builds on a representative sample of

1000 respondents in 100 villages in South Kivu in eastern DRC.

Liberia

The Liberia survey data were collected during a baseline survey for a randomized controlled trial in 2019 and included three out of 15 counties: Grand Gedeh, River Gee, and Maryland. The data collection was implemented by Welthungerhilfe, a humanitarian organization with presence in the area since 2003. The sample includes 7500 respondents in 121 villages.

Sri Lanka

We collected the Sri Lanka survey as part of a research project on violent conflict and social cohesion in 2016. The survey was implemented together with the University of Colombo, just 7 years after the civil war had ended, and included a random sample of 1800 respondents from *all* 25 districts in Sri Lanka, including the Northern and Eastern province at the center of the conflict.

Ethics

Our research demanded conscious ethical reflections on several critical aspects. We provide an extensive ethics discussion on necessity, power differentials, voluntary and informed consent, potential harm, confidentiality, impact, and regulations and ethics approval in Online Appendix A starting on p. 3.

Measuring conflict-related sexual violence in surveys

A general concern with surveys on sexual violence (e.g., Johnson et al., 2010; Koos, 2018; Peterman et al., 2011) is that respondents may not disclose their experience due to stigmatization or fear of reprisal. Beber et al. (2017) partially address this concern by allowing respondents to self-report on electronic devices. Relying on list experiments, we suggest an alternative approach, which provides anonymity and results in prevalence rates at least twice as high as those from conventional direct questions.

List experiments

To address potential underreporting bias on CRSV, all three surveys included list experiments, an unobtrusive method to measure sensitive experiences by granting respondents anonymity (Blair & Imai, 2012; Glynn, 2013; Traunmüller et al., 2019). Each respondent was randomly assigned either to a control or treatment condition during the survey. The respondent was then read the list of experiences in Table 2. After all three (control group) or four (treatment group) experiences have been read, respondents were asked to only report the *total number* of items experienced, not *which ones*. Because they were not asked to report sexual violence exposure directly, the list experiments circumvent sensitivity bias. To estimate the prevalence of CRSV, we simply calculate the difference in the average number of reported items between the treatment and control group.

Direct survey questions

For the purpose of comparison, we also included direct survey questions on CRSV in the surveys (Table 3). These direct questions are consistent with the list experiments and aim to measure the same concept within each survey.

Substantive limitations

It is important to note that except for the list experiment in DRC—which explicitly refers to "rape by an armed group"—the sensitive items used in both Liberia and Sri Lanka remain more general than the legal definition of the International Criminal Court (Wood, 2015, FN 1). Like Wood (2009) and the SVAC data set (Cohen & Nordås, 2014), these may also capture sexual mutilation and sexual torture. Similar to Leiby (2009), they may include experiences of sexual humiliation and sexual coercion. Thus, they are likely to establish a low-threshold baseline of CRSV in these contexts. In addition, the list experiments in Liberia and Sri Lanka remain silent about the perpetrators. While they refer to experiences that "happened during the war," they are not restricted to sexual violence committed by armed groups but may elicit experiences of opportunistic sexual violence committed by strangers. Last, in the DRC, respondents were asked about whether they themselves or household members have experienced CRSV, which we expect to generate larger prevalence rates than asking for individual victimization.

In part, these differences in wording are due to adaptions to the local context and local ethics advice. For instance, in DRC the presence of gender-based violence programs made questions on sexual violence a comparatively insensitive topic (Quillard, 2016), while in Liberia and Sri Lanka our local partners advised

TABLE 2 List experiment.

	Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)	Liberia	Sri Lanka
Control	(1) I moved away from my original place of birth.	(1) I had to flee because of fighting.	(1) I won money in a lottery or competition.
	(2) I have lost a family member in an armed group attack.	(2) I have lost family members.	(2) I was involved in an accident.
	(3) I have experienced looting or theft of my house or property.	(3) I killed someone to protect myself.	(3) I received help from a stranger.
Treatment	(4) I or a member of my household has been raped by an armed group.	(4) I was a victim of sexual violence.	(4) I was personally sexually assaulted.

TABLE 3 Direct questions.

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)	Liberia	Sri Lanka
Have you or anyone else in your household ever been raped by armed groups since 2002, that is physically forced to have sexual intercourse?	Were you a victim of sexual violence during the civil war?	During the period of war, from 1983 to 2009, which of the following things did you personally directly experience, see or witness with your own eyes and ears, directed at you, your family, or community: You becoming sexually assaulted?

to frame the questions less explicitly. These differences in sensitivity are in line with our findings below.

Methodological caveats

While the three list experiments all include three control items, these items differ in their topical proximity to the sensitive item. While a general advice is "to choose baseline items that do not seem out of place with the sensitive item" (as in the Sri Lanka list experiment), it is realized that "an attempt at coherence between the sensitive and baseline items may lead to concerns that the baseline items are themselves sensitive" as is in the Liberia list experiment (Glynn, 2013, 163). Another methodological difference is that for the list experiments in DRC and Liberia, respondents were handed small stones as an aid for counting (and remembering) the number of items that apply. In addition, enumerators were instructed to turn away from the respondent to avoid seeing hand movement. No such additional devices and instructions were used in the Sri Lanka list experiment.

On a more general note, list experiments are no panacea. Their implementation can go wrong if enumerators or respondents are confused by the procedure. To ensure that respondents understood the logic of the list experiment, both the DRC and Liberia survey included a "practice" list experiment (without treatment group) just before the actual list experiment on CRSV. No such practice was included in the Sri Lanka survey. However, a pretest did not reveal any implementation problems. The practice protocol is documented in Online Appendix C.4 on p. 17.

Even if all goes well, list experiments still rely on important assumptions that may be violated. Next to randomization, the validity of list experiments rests on two assumptions (Blair & Imai, 2012). First, we must assume that our participants respond truthfully to the sensitive item. Unfortunately, this "no non-disclosure" assumption cannot be directly tested. Instead, we will provide a sensitivity analysis for its potential violation. Second, we have to assume that the presence of the sensitive item does not affect the answers to the remaining control items. A test of this "no design effect" assumption fails to reject the null for all three list experiments and thus supports the assumption (see Online Appendix Table E.4). Balance tests are provided in Table D.3 on p. 19 in the Online Appendix.

Outcome variables

Although our outcome measures all tap into the construct of civic engagement, the question formulations differ between surveys. Therefore, we caution against direct comparisons.

The DRC survey asked: "Many people are active in different kinds of groups of people with whom they share similar interests. The next few question will be about your involvement or membership in such groups." There were a total of eight items indicating whether the respondent or a family member is a member of different local associations ranging from farmer's associations, education committees, to local NGOs. We use a binary indicator of being a member in at least one organization (65.5% in the sample).

The survey in Liberia only included the following proxy variable for civic participation: "Is your commu-

nity able to mobilize resources for minor repair work by collecting user fees?" This proxy indicator is a simple binary variable (77.2% say "yes"), which reflects a community's collective action potential and thus captures the construct of interest. But we also tested an alternative measure on individuals' willingness to donate to charitable organizations, which captures the same construct (Falk et al., 2018, 1681): "Imagine the following situation: You won 10,000 LRD [Liberian Dollars] in a lottery. Considering your current situation, how much of it would you donate to a charitable organization?" In both instances, we found positive associations with experience of CRSV.

In the Sri Lanka survey, the civic engagement question read: "Now I am going to read of a list of voluntary organizations. For each organization, could you tell me whether you are an active member, a passive member, or not a member of that type of organization?" Respondents chose from among 10 different organizations, ranging from those involved in charity and social welfare work to sport and outdoor activities. Some 35% are active members of at least one organization.

Additional variables

Next to measures of CRSV and civic engagement, we control for other war-related traumatic experiences (e.g., killings, injuries), key sociodemographics (gender, age, education, income, and household size), as well as local-level fixed effects. To preclude reverse causality, where those who were civically active were more likely to be targeted with CRSV, we also control for preexposure civic engagement. Measures for preexposure civic engagement are only available for DRC and Sri Lanka, but not for Liberia.[4]

Statistical analysis

The key methodological challenge is to relate the unobtrusively measured experience of CRSV to individual civic engagement, while controlling for potential confounding factors. To this end, we rely on statistical techniques that incorporate the answers to list experiments in regression analyses (Blair & Imai, 2012). Specifically, we include the (latent) experience of sexual violence as an explanatory variable in regression models for civic engagement using the regression approach in Imai et al. (2015). While we of course cannot observe the individual experience of sexual violence, the list experiment allows us to identify the *joint distribution* of this experience and the control items.

This possibility is then used in a multivariate modeling strategy that simultaneously models the response to the sensitive list item, the control list items, and civic engagement. We provide more technical details and some formal intuition on how this modeling approach works in Online Appendix F on p. 22. We estimate these joint models using the R package `list` (Blair et al., 2010). For comparison, we also analyze the prevalence and effects of the direct question items using logistic models of the same specification.

RESULTS

The prevalence of conflict-related sexual violence

One of the most fundamental questions about CRSV concerns its prevalence. Figure 1 presents the estimates from our three list experiments. To illustrate the benefits of this approach, we compare the estimates to the direct items. We also quantify the degree of sensitivity when asking respondents about their experiences with CRSV.

According to the list experiments, 12% of the respondents from DRC (90% CI = [1, 23]), 14% from Liberia (90% CI = [11, 17]), and 13% from Sri Lanka (90%CI = [8, 18]) are survivors of CRSV. This suggests that roughly similar population shares in these contexts have experienced sexual violence and survived at the time of each survey. Given the delicate nature of CRSV, it is not surprising that unobtrusive measures yield a higher share of survivors than the direct question items. Only 6% in DRC (90% CI = [5.1, 7.7]), 5% in Liberia (90% CI [4.9:5.7]), and 1% in Sri Lanka (90%CI = [0.9, 1.9]) openly report their experience of sexual violence. This means that list experiments elicit prevalence rates of CRSV between two and 10 times higher than direct questioning. We find significant sensitivity bias in Liberia (−9, 90% CI = [−12, −6]) and Sri Lanka (−12, 90% CI = [−7, −17]) but not in DRC. These differences in sensitivity correspond to our experiences in the field.

Comparison to other studies

The fact that list experiments at least double the prevalence rates of CRSV strengthens our confidence that they outperform direct questions in terms of validity. This difference matches in magnitude Cullen's (2020) comparison of list experiments and direct items on intimate partner violence. We provide further

[4] In DRC, respondents were asked: "Compared to 20 years ago are you today more or less active in the community you live in?" To avoid missing values, we coded those respondents to whom the question did not apply (e.g., due to their age) using a middle category ("about the same"). Results remain robust if we exclude them from the analysis instead. In Sri Lanka, respondents were asked: "Before the war, did you or any member of your close family work as humanitarian worker or for an NGO?" While misreporting due to misremembering cannot be ruled out, it is unlikely given the behavioral nature of these measures. They remain rough proxies, nonetheless.

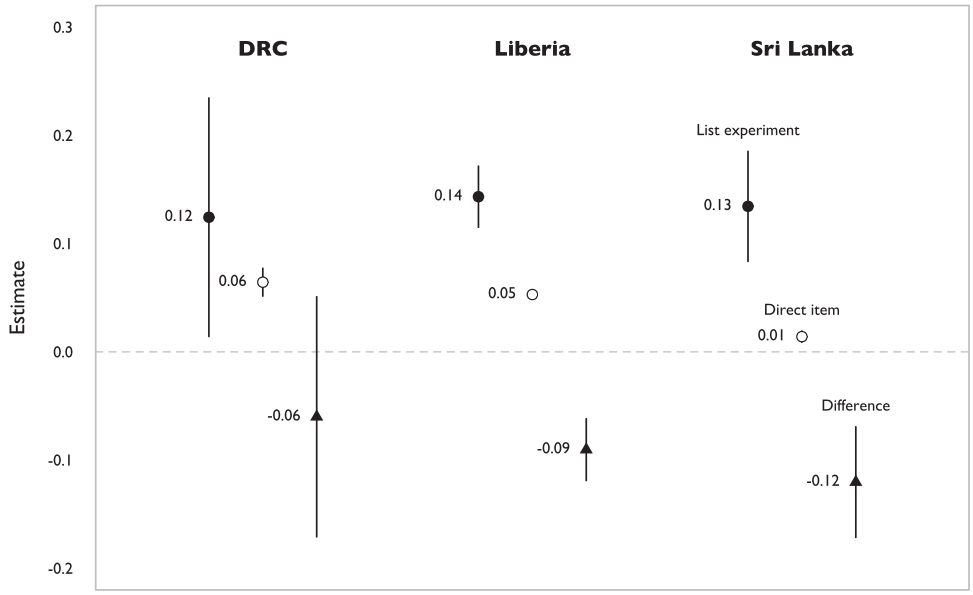

FIGURE 1 Estimated prevalence rates of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). *Note*: Different estimates of CRSV prevalence with 90% confidence intervals: List experiments, direct survey question, and their difference (i.e., degree of sensitivity). DRC $N = 1000$, Liberia $N = 7493$, Sri Lanka $N = 1800$. The regression table is available in Online Appendix G.8 on p. 42.

comparisons to other data sources in Online Appendix B.2 on p. 10.

Individual risk factors of conflict-related sexual violence

Tables G.5, G.6, and G.7 in the Online Appendix, starting on p. 24, regress the sensitive outcome and its misreporting on key sociodemographic variables (see Eady, 2017, for methodological details). In all three contexts, the risk of sexual violence is evenly distributed across age, education, and household size. However, poorer respondents are disproportionately affected in all three cases. This supports our argument that survivors' civic engagement is due to motivation, not to resources.

Reporting experiences of CRSV may come with different costs for different groups, which would be reflected in differences in underreporting. However, as the misreporting equations reveal, underreporting is a behavior common to all sociodemographic groups. We only find significant differences in Liberia, where more educated and economically better off respondents are less likely to underreport an experience of CRSV.

Sex differences

It is often assumed that CRSV mostly affects women, whereas men suffer more from battle-related violence. We find that women are indeed more likely to report sexual violence victimization in DRC, but not in Liberia and Sri Lanka, where both men and women report sexual violence at similar rates (see Tables G.5, G.6, and G.7 starting on p. 24 in the Online Appendix). A plausible explanation is that our measures in these contexts capture forms of CRSV beyond rape, including forms that may affect males to a larger degree (e.g., sexual torture in custody). The gender difference in DRC would not have appeared using a direct survey item and no such differences are found in Liberia and Sri Lanka. Women and men also do not differ in their tendency to underreport experiences of sexual violence. This is an important finding because it suggests that both male and female survivor of CRSV face similar levels of stigma (albeit for different reasons).

The effect of conflict-related sexual violence on civic engagement

We now turn to our first hypothesis, which predicts that CRSV increases civic engagement (H1). Figure 2 presents differences in averaged predicted probabilities of civic engagement. For each country, we report two effects: (i) the effect of the indirect *list experiment* and (ii) the effect of the conventional *direct item* of sexual violence. Full regression tables are available in Online Appendix G.5 on p. 34.

We find no evidence for the notion that CRSV destroys the social fabric of communities. Instead, the results suggest a mobilizing effect of CRSV. When looking at the effect of sexual violence elicited from list experiments, we find positive effects on civic engagement in all three countries. The probabilities increase

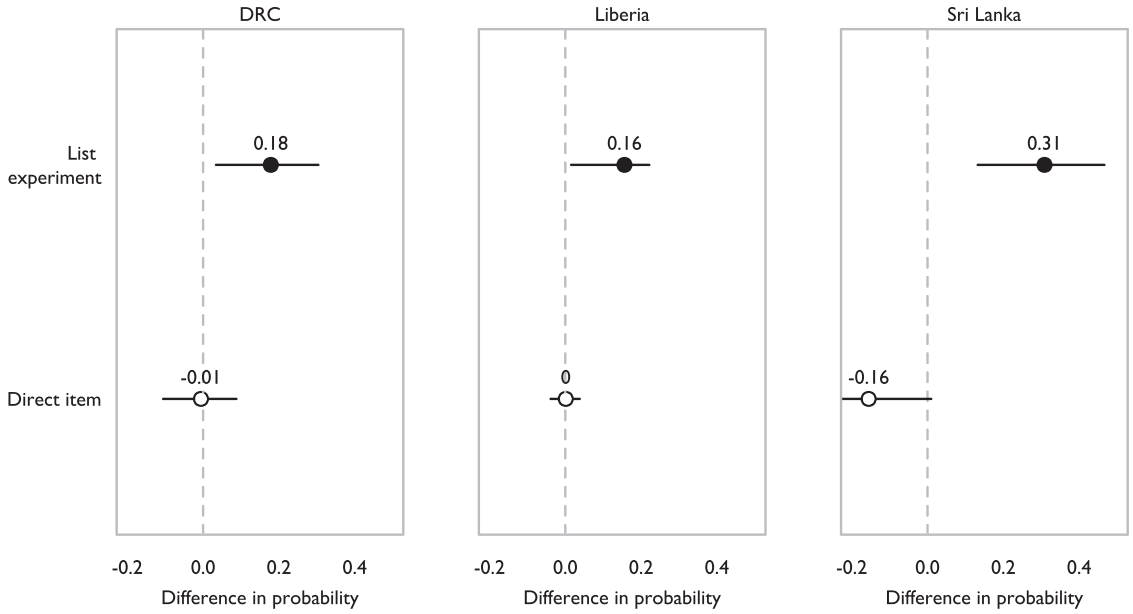

FIGURE 2 Effect of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) on civic participation. *Note*: Averaged differences in predicted probability along with 90% intervals. Effects are adjusted for other wartime trauma, preexposure civic participation (Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC [and Sri Lanka only), sociodemographics, and region fixed effects. Full results can be found in Online Appendix G.5 starting on p. 34.

by +.18, 90%CI = [.03,.30] in DRC, +.16 [.02,.23] in Liberia, and +.31 [.02,.33] in Sri Lanka. Since the item capturing civic engagement in Liberia is only a proxy, we also looked at the willingness to donate, another dimension of civic engagement. An item on donation was also included in the DRC (but not in the Sri Lanka) survey. In both cases, we find that experiencing CRSV increases an individual's willingness to donate money or resources to the community (see Section G.6 on p. 36 in the Online Appendix.)

Although civic engagement constitutes an important source of inclusive and democratic societies (Putnam, 1993), so-called "bonding social capital" can foment in-group favoritism at the expense of out-group hostility and distrust. We test this potential implication but find no support for the "dark side" of social capital in response to CRSV (see Online Appendix G.7 on p. 38).

Highlighting our methodological contribution, the use of direct question items would either have missed these civic effects of CRSV (as is the case for DRC and Liberia) or assigned the wrong sign leading to wrong conclusions (as for Sri Lanka). There is a straightforward explanation for this discrepancy. We may view stigma as an 'unobserved confounder' with a positive relation to civic engagement and negative relation to the direct item on CRSV. As is well understood, an unobserved confounder with differently signed relations leads to an underestimation or a complete reversal of an effect.

The indirect measure of CRSV using a list experiment adjusts for the underreporting due to stigma and therefore reveals the true relation between CRSV and civic engagement. A different way to think about this is that, due to stigma, directly asking about CRSV overestimates $Pr(engage|noCRSV)$, that is, the "share of civically engaged without experience of CRSV." Accounting for underreporting in a list experiment reduces this share because it correctly assigns the survivors to contribute to $Pr(engage|CRSV)$, that is, the "share of civically engaged with experience of CRSV." Thus, by using a list experiment, the ratio $Pr(engage|CRSV)/Pr(engage|noCRSV)$ will increase and therefore produce a stronger effect estimate.[5]

Sensitivity to violation of "No Non-disclosure," unobserved confounding, and sample selection bias

The results of the list experiment build on the crucial assumption that participants respond truthfully to the sensitive item on CRSV. Using the simulation approach proposed by González and Traunmüller (2023), we find that it is unlikely that *nondisclosure* jeopardizes our main results (see Section H.1 and Figure H.2 in the Online Appendix on p. 43 for technical details and full results).

Our *causal* interpretation of the effect of CRSV on civic engagement rests on the assumption of no unob-

[5] Note that this holds if experiencing CRSV increases civic engagement (our theoretical argument) and does not require that survivors who choose to remain silent have higher engagement rates than those who disclose their experience in a direct question (in which case, the numerator stays the same and the denominator decreases).

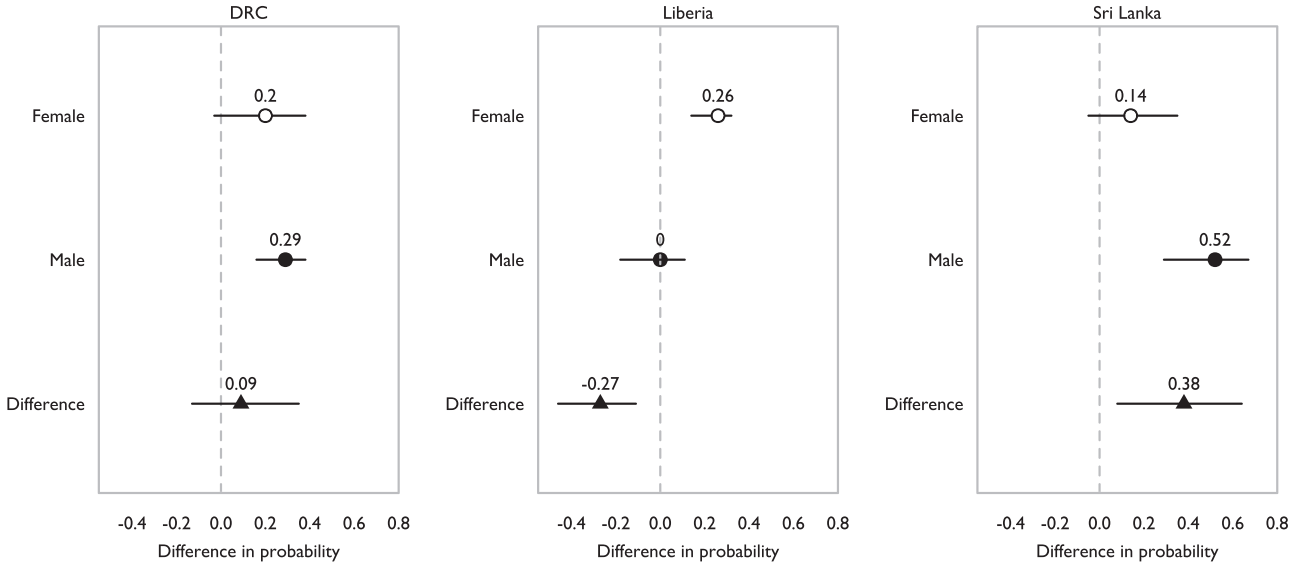

FIGURE 3 Gender differences in the effect of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) on civic participation. *Note*: Averaged differences in predicted probability along with 90% intervals. Effects are adjusted for other wartime trauma, pre-exposure civic participation (Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC] and Sri Lanka only), sociodemographics, and region fixed effects. Full results can be found in Online Appendix G.3 on p. 30.

served confounding. Using the approach to sensitivity analysis suggested by Cinelli and Hazlett (2020), we find that it is unlikely that an unobserved confounder threatens our inference (see Section H.2 and Figure H.3 in the Online Appendix on p. 47 for technical details and full results).[6]

Another potential threat to causal inference is the possibility that less civically engaged individuals are more likely to die, be displaced, or flee the country (Gilligan et al., 2013). But accounting for the potential issue of *sample selection* does not nullify (let alone reverse) the effect of experiencing CRSV on subsequent civic engagement (see Section H.3 and Table H.26 on p. 48 in the Online Appendix for technical details and full results).

Sex differences in the civic effect of conflict-related sexual violence

Hypothesis 2 suggests that the mobilization effect of CRSV is mainly driven by male survivors. Our analyses on the gendered effects of CRSV are broadly in line with this prediction (see Figure 3).

In DRC only male survivors of CRSV are significantly mobilized into civic engagement. For men, it increases by +29 [16, 38] percentage points. The increase of +20 (90% CI = [−4, 38]) for women remains insignificant. However, the resulting gender difference is itself not significant (+9 [−13, 35]). In Sri Lanka, male survivors are more likely to mobilize as a consequence of CRSV (+53 [28, 67]). But we do not find a significant mobilizing effect for female survivors of sexual violence (+15 [−5, 35]). This gender difference is itself statistically significant (+38 [8, 64]). Only women survivors in Liberia[7] increase their civic engagement by 26 percentage points (90% CI = [14, 32]). No such effect is found for male survivors (−.004 [−18, 11]), leading to a significant gender difference of −27 [−46, −11]. We find roughly the same pattern when looking at propensity to donate to the community.

Apart from our sex-specific findings for the civic effects of CRSV in both DRC and Sri Lanka, the plausibility of our theoretical argument is further supported by the empirical fact that *baseline* civic engagement—that is, civic engagement absent of CRSV experiences—is significantly higher for males than for females in two out of three cases (see tables in the Online Appendix G.4 starting on p. 32). Thus, rather than equalizing or even reversing traditional gender roles and gender gaps in civic engagement, experiences of CRSV seem to reinforce existing gender differences. This contradicts previous studies, which find that women mobilize in response to CRSV (Kreft, 2019) or violent conflict more generally (Hadzic & Tavits, 2020; Tripp, 2015).[8]

[6] For a similar approach, see Bellows and Miguel (2006) and Blattman (2009).

[7] To avoid convergence problems, these models were estimated using a Bayesian approach as detailed in Lu and Traunmüller (2021).

[8] Our results also hold when focusing on a subset of "female friendly" civic organizations. In Sri Lanka, the share of females among the active ranges from 17% ("Leisure or hobby organization") to 63% ("Charity or social welfare organization" and "Environmental or human rights organization," respectively). When restricting the analysis to more gender balanced civic organizations (i.e., social welfare, human rights), we find no effect of CRSV for female

The deviating findings in Liberia point to important scope conditions of our theory. Liberia has been largely peaceful for the past 20 years (Mvukiyehe & Samii, 2021), had a female President for two terms, and has received the largest gendered aid funding among the three cases (see Online Appendix B.1). Such favorable conditions can reduce the costs and facilitate women's civic engagement.

Ruling out post-traumatic growth as alternative mechanism

Arguably the greatest competitor to our argument on counteracting stigma is PTG theory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Although PTG is a prominent explanation in the legacy of violence literature (Bauer et al., 2016; Blattman, 2009), it is only rarely tested empirically. Since both, the DRC and Sri Lanka surveys (but unfortunately not the Liberia survey) include measures of PTG, we are able to test the link between CRSV, PTG, and civic engagement using causal mediation analysis (González & Traunmüller, 2023, see Online Appendix I on p. 49). We find that, counter to this alternative theory, PTG does not mediate the effect of CRSV on civic engagement. As shown in Online Appendix Figure I.4, the mediated, indirect effects are both negligible in size and statistically insignificant. The average causal mediation effect (ACME) in DRC is 0.01, 95% CI = [−0.1, 0.12] and the ACME in Sri Lanka is −0.05 [−0.28, 0.18]. This disqualifies the alternative mechanism based on PTG and lends further support to our theoretical argument.

Comparing the effect of conflict-related sexual violence to other forms of violent exposure

Our theory on counteracting stigma has important implications for research on the legacy of violence (Bauer et al., 2016; Bellows & Miguel, 2006; Blattman, 2009), which generally finds positive effects of violence on prosocial behavior, but has not considered CRSV. Since these alternative forms of violence do not carry the same levels of stigma, our argument would predict that survivors are much less compelled to engage in compensatory behavior in the form of civic engagement.

Indeed, in the vast majority of our models (with the single exception of Liberia) only CRSV, but no other experiences of violence significantly predict civic engagement. In further analyses, we show that it is unlikely that the effect of CRSV, when omitted, is picked up by other forms of violence. The other forms remain insignificant (see Online Appendix G.4 on p. 32). The differences in effects between CRSV and other forms of violence are also not driven by their gendered nature or that they affect different subsets of the population. Considering the witnessing of killings or being displaced, we find no consistent gender differences in exposure across the three contexts (see Online Appendix G.2 on p. 27).

Although this remains speculative, we believe that there are three plausible reasons why we fail to replicate earlier findings on the civic effects of violent exposure other than CRSV. First, while we employ measures of individual experiences of violence, the bulk of the previous literature (De Juan et al., 2023; Gilligan et al., 2013; Hager et al., 2019) relies on context-level measures of violence. Whereas we capture direct exposure, those context measures are assigned to individuals who may only have been indirectly affected. Second, the lack of replication may simply be due to different country cases under study. In fact, we do find results for Liberia. Third, we cannot rule out the file drawer problem in the publication process. Given the provocative nature of positive civic effects of violence, it could be that these studies had a higher chance of getting published, whereas opposite or plain null findings would have been considered less worthy of publication.

CONCLUSION

Bridging research on CRSV (Cohen, 2013; Koos & Lindsey, 2022; Wood, 2009) and the legacy of violence (Bauer et al., 2016; Blattman, 2009; De Juan et al., 2023), we have demonstrated that CRSV is associated with increased civic engagement. This civic effect is independent of other experiences of violence and consistent across three diverse postconflict contexts, likely causal, cannot be explained by PTG, and does not come at the cost of reduced intergroup trust. Despite the horrific nature of CRSV, our results therefore challenge pessimistic notions that CRSV inevitably destroys prospects for social cohesion. Instead they support a novel theory of civic engagement as survivors' strategy to counteract the stigma of CRSV and to ensure community inclusion (see also González & Traunmüller, 2023; Koos, 2018).

Needless to say, there remain several important avenues for future research. First, while our surveys included contextualized list experiments and rigorous sampling designs, differences in question wordings

survivors (coefficient of 0.58 with standard error of 0.60) but a strong and significant effect for male survivors (coefficient of 2.96 with standard error of 1.01). In DRC, the share of female members ranges from 19% ("Water committee") to 52% ("Church or prayer") and 68% ("Women's association"). When restricting the analysis to gender balanced organizations (i.e., prayer, women), we again find no effect for female survivors (coefficient of 0.15 with standard error of 0.83) but a strong and significant effect for males (coefficient of 1.35 with standard error of 0.68).

complicate direct comparisons. Future research would therefore benefit from a more standardized comparative design. Second, while we have demonstrated the utility of list experiments in overcoming the underreporting problem in CRSV, future research could test alternative unobtrusive methodologies, such as randomized response designs or endorsement experiments. Third, we widened the repertoire of violence by studying CRSV but limited ourselves to civic engagement and intergroup relations as outcomes. CRSV is likely to affect other social, political, and gendered outcomes differently. Therefore, future research should systematically explore the effects of violence and CRSV for a wider set of social, political, and economic outcomes.

On a more general note, we have demonstrated the importance of a gendered perspective on the legacies of violence. As we have shown, the civic effects of CRSV are driven largely by male, not female survivors. This finding dampens optimistic notions of women's empowerment as suggested by previous cross-country studies (e.g., Bakken & Buhaug, 2020; Hughes & Tripp, 2015; Kreft, 2019). Instead it points to the persistence or even reinforcement of traditional gender norms in response to violence. In sum, therefore, social cohesion may be much less vulnerable to violence than expected among scholars and policy makers, but also more ambivalent in its consequences for women than previously thought.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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