



Liberation Alliance
Africa

Recentring African Feminist Epistemologies in Sexual Violence Prevention and Response

Critical inquiry One: Social Reproduction,
Political Economy and Militarisation of Sexual
Violence in Africa

A compendium by Liberation Alliance Africa

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Introduction

Sexual violence against women and girls in Africa remains a profound violation of personhood and human rights, with far-reaching consequences for survivors, families, and communities. Feminist movements, women's rights organisations, and survivor-led initiatives across the continent have long worked to prevent and respond to this violence, building bodies of practice-based knowledge that predate, and often exceed, the frameworks through which international actors have come to understand sexual violence on the continent. In recent decades, this landscape has also come to include a growing presence of state, donor, and internationally funded interventions. While these efforts have increased visibility and resources for prevention and response, they frequently operate within development, humanitarian, and governance frameworks shaped by imperialist, colonial, and extractive power relations—relations that this compendium has engaged in its line of enquiries.

Liberation Alliance Africa's founding position paper, [Recentering African Indigenous Knowledge to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Violence](#), examined three interconnected critical enquiries toward a decolonial feminist approach to sexual violence in Africa: an audit of the knowledge systems currently governing sexual violence prevention and response; an interrogation of the role of hetero-patriarchal colonial capitalism and the complicity of neo-colonial states in producing and sustaining gendered violence; and a centring of indigenous and endogenous knowledge systems as practice-based knowledge for reimagining prevention, response, healing, accountability, and collective safety.

This compendium is the extended work of that founding paper. Where the position paper laid out these three enquiries as a shared foundation, each of the three briefs gathered here takes each inquiry as a site of epistemological provocation, moving from tensions to liberatory dreams.

This work emerges, as the position paper did, from the Building Knowledge Bridges Community of Practice convened by Liberation Alliance Africa, which brought together African Indigenous Knowledge holders, feminist researchers, organisers, and women's rights activists. The three briefs are the product of that same collective process of shared reflection, dialogue, and knowledge production, sustained now across a longer period of collaborative writing, argument, and revision.

About This Compendium

This compendium comprises three briefs, each corresponding to one of the position paper's three critical enquiries, and each building on the analysis that precedes it.

Brief One, *Social Reproduction, Political Economy and the Militarisation of Sexual Violence* takes up the paper's first inquiry. Opening with an account of the impunity written into Kenya's Defence Cooperation Agreement with the United Kingdom, the brief develops a social reproduction analysis of how neocolonial economic relationships displace the costs of capitalism onto women's bodies and labour; traces the specific political economy of debt, structural adjustment, and austerity that manufactures the material conditions for gendered violence; and examines how the militarisation of African states, from electoral violence in

Kenya to the securitised mining and agro-industrial zones of Zimbabwe and Ethiopia, extends into the global securitisation of sexual violence itself as its own extractive economy. It closes by asking how a state that was built through extraction, and that remains bound by the debt and donor conditions documented in this brief, realistically meets its obligation to prevent violence that those same relationships help create.

Brief Two, *Coloniality of Sexual Violence: Gender, Power, Sovereignty, and the Neo-Colonial State*, takes up the paper's second inquiry. The brief traces the coloniality of gender as a theoretical foundation, examines the political economy of the gendered postcolonial state and the dual legal systems it inherited from colonial rule, and develops an extended analysis of sovereignty: showing that violence is constitutive of African state formation rather than incidental to its failures. The brief further established that sexual violence functions as a means through which states with contested legitimacy restore their authority, and that women's resistance to the state, whether legal, political, or discursive, is met with a consistent pattern of backlash across contexts as different as colonial administration, post-independence courts, and post-revolutionary transitional justice.

Brief Three, *Epistemic Sovereignty in Sexual Violence Prevention and Response*, takes up the paper's third inquiry. Building directly on Brief Two's argument that political sovereignty over one's own body and safety is already compromised by the state, by donors, and by NGO bureaucracy, this brief asks where else sovereignty might be practised, and argues for epistemic sovereignty. The brief invites the field of sexual violence to adopt epistemic sovereignty in its analysis of sexual violence on the continent. Liberation Alliance Africa explains how epistemic sovereignty can be made and sustained through three practices: feminist archiving, critical consciousness, and community accountability. It closes by naming six liberatory shifts required to move sexual violence work on the continent from a decolonial feminist commitment to a decolonial feminist practice.

Through this work, we aim to do the following:

- Raise public consciousness on the urgency of decolonising thought and practice in the field of sexual violence prevention and response.
- Contribute to empirically grounded, historically informed approaches that reevaluate the sexual violence continuum and orient toward African feminist liberation rather than containment or control.
- Lay the foundation of a decolonial, anti-colonial, and Indigenous framework on understanding, preventing, and responding to sexual violence, which detaches sexual violence as a development initiative but centres it as a critical site of decolonisation and decoloniality.

Critical Enquiry One: Social Reproduction, Political Economy and Militarisation of Sexual Violence in Africa

Preamble

The Defence Cooperation Agreement between Kenya and the United Kingdom is an instrument of neocolonial impunity. It was negotiated between formally sovereign states, yet structured to preserve British jurisdiction over offences committed by its personnel while on “official duty.”¹

The Kenyan government signed this agreement in 2021 to replace the 2015 Defence Co-operation Agreement that expired on 6 October 2021, and the agreement has further institutionalised the British Army Training Unit Kenya (BATUK)—a permanent military base and training ground located near Nanyuki in the Mount Kenya region. Parliamentary inquiries have documented decades of sexual violence, abandonment of children,

and environmental destruction.² But the agreement continues to be upheld.

The women most affected by the terms of the agreement are from the marginalised Samburu and Maasai communities of Laikipia and Samburu counties; across the country’s central and northern regions; and sex workers living in and around Nanyuki. They have become subjects living in BATUK’s stronghold, a place where neocolonialism plays out in real time.³

The women we sat with, survivors of sexual violence, told us that nothing can be done. The men who assaulted them are shielded by the Defence Cooperation Agreement that grants Britain primary jurisdiction over offences “in the course of official duty,” a

1 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, *Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the Republic of Kenya concerning Defence Cooperation*, CS Kenya No.1/2021 (25 November 2021), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukkenya-agreement-concerning-defence-cooperation-cs-kenya-no12021>.

2. Owiso, Owiso. “Kenya-UK Defence Pact: Six Decades of Compromised Sovereignty.” *The Elephant*, February 9, 2026. <https://www.theelephant.info/analysis/2026/02/09/kenya-uk-defence-pact-six-decades-of-compromised-sovereignty/>.

3. The word neo-colonialism was pinned by the late Kwame Nkrumah in his 1965 book; Nkrumah, Kwame. *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1965.

category the UK has repeatedly invoked to evade accountability.⁴ ⁵ Kenyan police lack the power to arrest or investigate British soldiers attached to BATUK, and British authorities have dismissed survivor complaints without publishing findings.

Mixed-race children born in Laikipia and Samburu are stigmatised and unacknowledged by the community, who view paternal lineage and clan identity through the father as a critical marker of identity; they are left clutching their mothers' shukas, the distinct white and red of Samburu cloth, while belonging to neither world fully. The mothers, in turn, are no longer treated as part of the community and are shunned by an imperial decree as they tried to file their grievances at the BATUK offices.

We have inherited a habit of framing sexual violence as a private wound, something that happens to a woman, in a place, at a time, and then, if we are being rigorous, tracing it outward to context. We must resist that ordering. What happens in Nanyuki is best described as neocolonial violence. The Defence Cooperation Agreement is not the context for the assault. It is the assault's guarantee of impunity, negotiated in advance.

Sylvia Tamale's return to Ubuntu gives us a sharper perspective on utilising the concept.⁶ Ubuntu holds that a person is a person through other people—umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu—and that none of us is legible except through the web of relation that makes us who we are. However, when

read against Nanyuki, this proverb is not comforting but diagnostic. The cooperation agreement severs the woman from any authority within her own moral universe that could answer for what was done to her: the man who harmed her answers to a courtroom an ocean away, not to her, not to her elders, not to her country. And it severs the child, punished for a resemblance he did not choose, denied the very thing Ubuntu insists is the condition of being human: recognition as part of the whole.

A state that signs something like the Defence Cooperation Agreement, then looks away from what it enables, is failing to protect its citizens and also participating in their un-personing.

Nanyuki is not exceptional, nor is this impunity confined to foreign actors, as the sections that follow make clear, from the mining zones of Zimbabwe to the plantations of Ethiopia, and other similar arrangements across the continent. The question, then, is not only how we perceive sexual violence in Africa, but whom it benefits, and whose power its endurance serves. This brief examines the social reproduction of sexual violence by asking: what sustains the neoliberal state? We establish our analysis from a social reproduction framework, making the claim that sexual violence is a structural mechanism and a running engine of capitalism and the neocolonial state.

Our findings led us to conceptualise the African state as a militarised state; one that is whipped into submission by colonial rule.

4. Owiso, Owiso. "Kenya-UK Defence Pact: Six Decades of Compromised Sovereignty." *The Elephant*, February 9, 2026. <https://www.theelephant.info/analysis/2026/02/09/kenya-uk-defence-pact-six-decades-of-compromised-sovereignty/>.

5. Gatherings with the women took place between June and September 2026.

6. Tamale, S. (2020). Reconceptualizing justice through ubuntu. In *Decolonization and Afro-feminism* (pp. 221–234). Daraja Press.

We draw attention to its consequences: how neocolonial states, systems, and international financial institutions structure the material conditions of income, public services, land and time within which violence becomes more or less likely, and leaving a violent situation becomes more or less possible. The brief also digs deeper into the militarisation of African governments, situating our tension in the current sexual violence prevention and response programming and services. Our analysis expands the scope of what counts as militarisation, noting that militarised power produces sexual violence not only during war but through the ordinary operation of policing, elections, broader enforcement and resource extraction. We conclude that state violence and sexual violence are two sides of the same coin. Nanyuki is not only a story about impunity written into a bilateral treaty. It is also a story

Section I: Neocolonialism and the Social Reproduction of Sexual Violence

about what happens to a woman once she is cast out of what feminist economists call the economy of care: the unpaid, often invisible labour of feeding, raising, healing, and holding together the people around her⁷. Being expelled from their communities did not simply humiliate the women of Laikipia and Samburu; it cut them off from the communal labour, land access, and childcare-sharing on which their own survival and their children's depended. To understand why this expulsion itself is a form of violence, and not merely its aftermath, this section turns to social reproduction as a way of reading sexual violence across the continent.

Social reproduction theory begins from a simple observation: capitalism depends on workers, but workers are not born ready-made at the factory gate or the mineshaft. Someone must feed them, raise them, nurse them when they are sick, and bear the next generation of labour. This work happens through three interlocking processes: 1) the

daily replenishment of the worker through food, rest, and care; 2) the maintenance of those who are not currently working, including children, the elderly, the sick and the unemployed; 3) the biological reproduction of the next generation of labour altogether⁸. None of this is paid at anything close to its value. Much of it goes unpaid.

What matters for this brief is the insight that follows: "the production of goods and services and the production of life are part of one integrated process" (Bhattacharya 2018). Capitalism does not sit alongside the sphere of reproduction; it is stitched into it. Consequently, changes in one sphere create ripples in the other—low wages and neoliberal cost-cutting at work can produce foreclosures and domestic violence at home⁹. When wages fall, when public services are withdrawn, when land is enclosed, the shortfall does not disappear. It is displaced onto the sphere of reproduction, and onto the women whose labour sustains it. Sexual violence, on this

7. Ossome, L. "The Care Economy and the State in Africa's Covid-19 Responses." *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 42, no. 1–2 (2021): 68–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2020.1831448>

8. Bhattacharya, Tithi. "What Is Social Reproduction Theory?" *SocialistWorker.org*, September 10, 2013. <https://socialistworker.org/2013/09/10/what-is-social-reproduction-theory>

9. Bhattacharya, Tithi. "Mapping Social Reproduction Theory." *Verso Books* (blog), 2017. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/3555-mapping-social-reproduction-theory>

account, is not an unfortunate by-product that occurs alongside dispossession. It is one mechanism through which that displacement is enforced: a means by which women's bodies, labour, and mobility are disciplined into absorbing costs that capital and the state decline to carry.

Lyn Ossome's work sharpens this argument specifically. She shows that the colonial state governed through direct and indirect control of women's bodies through maternal health policy, population control, and compelled childbirth as both a weapon of control and a weapon of expropriation. It institutionalised the general and generational dispossession of colonised peoples in continuous cycles whose legacies linger from slavery well into the late capitalist period.¹⁰

The neocolonial state inherited this architecture and repurposed it rather than dismantling it.

In Zimbabwe, for example, the fast-track land reform programme (FTLRP) of the early 2000s redistributed land seized under settler colonialism, releasing large amounts of arable land to indigenous populations for the first time. Rather than resolve the agrarian question of gendered labour, in some respects, it deepened it

as the postcolonial state carried out this redistribution through the very institutions colonialism had built to govern African land and labour. Through customary tenures, land was allocated to men as the heads of households, as well as community leaders who exerted influence on how the allocation took place. Women owned very limited land before the programme, and the number of female landowners went up by only 15% as the programme focused on race as a main factor of land allocation and not on gender. The programme was not carried out with consideration of agrarian equality.¹¹ Imperialist sanctions were then imposed in response to the reforms, decimating industry and services, driving unprecedented migration of both productive and reproductive labour¹². Zimbabwean labour migrants to South Africa today encounter ongoing deindustrialisation and xenophobic violence, with gendered reproductive labour constituting the most stable mode of incorporation into the informal workforce.¹³

Much of the current sexual violence prevention and response landscape, as this brief's position paper's broader audit of knowledge systems has already argued, treats harm as something that happens to a woman, in a place, at a time, before tracing

10. Ossome, Lyn. "Imperialism and Crises of Social Reproduction in Africa." *Review of African Political Economy* 51, no. 181 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.62191/ROAPE-2024-0034>

11. Munemo, Petronella, Joseph Manzvera, and Innocent Agbelie. "Women and Land Ownership in Zimbabwe: A Review of the Land Reforms with Particular Focus on the Fast Track Land Reform Programme." *Feminist Africa* 3, no. 2 (2022): 35–60. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48728281>.

12. Ossome, Lyn. "Imperialism and Crises of Social Reproduction in Africa." *Review of African Political Economy* 51, no. 181 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.62191/ROAPE-2024-0034>; Ossome, Lyn, and Sirisha C. Naidu. "The Agrarian Question of Gendered Labour." In *Labour Questions in the Global South*, edited by Praveen Jha, Walter Chambati, and Lyn Ossome, 63–86. Singapore: Springer, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-4635-2_4

13. Ossome, Lyn. "Imperialism and Crises of Social Reproduction in Africa." *Review of African Political Economy* 51, no. 181 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.62191/ROAPE-2024-0034>

it outward to context, if at all¹⁴. Sexual violence is categorised as an interpersonal or criminal-justice matter: an assault to be reported, a perpetrator to be prosecuted, a survivor to be counselled. Read through a social reproduction lens, that categorisation is precisely what allows sexual violence to be treated as apolitical and individual, severed from the economics of dispossession that produce and sustain it. And by extension, it allows the structural conditions of harm to remain underaddressed even where individual justice is pursued.

To centre social reproduction is to insist that sexual violence be read as a structural apparatus rather than an isolated pathology. Using a social reproduction lens allows us to unpack this structural apparatus that enforces the transfer of capitalism's unpaid costs onto women's bodies, and in doing so sustains conditions of gendered domination across the continent.

The same logic extends to reproductive autonomy, which is to give individuals autonomy over their body, fertility and sexuality and reproductive choices.¹⁵ Reproduction has always been a central site of control over women's bodies. Struggles over sexual and reproductive health and rights on the continent reflect this—the criminalisation of abortion, coercive population engineering and the routine denial of survivors' control over how their own bodies and testimonies are used and circulated sit within this same continuum. If sexual violence functions to enforce the displacement of capitalism's costs onto the

sphere of reproduction, the question we are sitting with is: through which relationships is that displacement held in place?

The Political Economy of Sexual Violence: Debt, Austerity, and the Manufacture of Vulnerability

Our understanding of sexual violence impacts how prevention and response are understood, programmed, and funded. Programmes that focus on reducing individual risk factors—changing harmful patriarchal norms, teaching respectful relationships, building more gender-equitable communities—do matter. However, our line of inquiry in this brief points us toward a pathway whose fabric is woven with a critical consciousness thread: one that asks not only how individuals learn to perpetuate or resist violence, but how states, systems, and international financial institutions structure the material conditions of income, public services, land and time within which violence becomes more or less likely, and leaving a violent situation becomes more or less possible. This section traces a snapshot of the relationships that hold that status quo in place.

Conditionality as a Relationship, Not a Policy List

Structural adjustment programs (SAPs) should be understood as a relationship of conditionality. In the 1980s and 1990s, when African states turned to the IMF and World Bank for loans tied to economic

14. Liberation Alliance Africa. "Recentring African Indigenous Knowledge to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Violence." Position paper. Liberation Alliance Africa, 2026. <https://liberationallianceafrica.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/final-Sexual-Violence-Position-Paper-1.pdf>

15. Thakar, R. and Gandhi, M. (2025), Reproductive Autonomy: Women's Health and Rights. BJOG, 132: 1914-1917. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0528.18124>

reform, they dismantled tariffs, controls, and subsidies and gave market forces a greater role in determining economic outcomes. That conditionality reached well beyond macroeconomic policy into labour law, health and education expenditure, energy and environmental regulation, and civil service rules. This meant that the institutional practice of SAPs on the continent reshaped the institutional architecture through which ordinary people, especially women, encountered the state. That is to say, as much as mainstream macroeconomic models have historically treated the productive economy (paid employment, production, markets, profits) as separate from the reproductive economy, the conditions through which the productive economy exists rest on the shoulders of the reproductive economy. So when states pull back from public services and social protection programmes, the cost is transferred to households. Within households, it is disproportionately absorbed by women.¹⁶

A key characteristic of SAPs is the speed and depth of the poverty they led to, and many countries began documenting a rapid and dangerous rise in violence against women due to a number of intertwined reasons.

Firstly, economic pressure is a well-documented driver of intimate partner violence (IPV), and as jobs disappeared as a result of privatisation and the devaluation of the currency, women's lack of access to economic opportunities made them easier targets.¹⁷

Secondly, economic destitution pushed more women into the informal and often exploitative sectors such as domestic work,

sex work, informal employment in factories and petty trading; precarious situations that gave them little protection.

Thirdly, the erosion of state capacity happened so abruptly that it left protective infrastructure, from police stations to courts, largely ineffective.

SAPs brought on a new level of fragility that perpetuated violence against women in private spaces due to a lack of laws and weakening institutions, and also in public spaces due to women being pushed into informal work settings, with estimates showing that almost 90% of African women work in informal employment.¹⁸

This section of the brief for the most part has traced how fiscal relationships— austerity, SAPs, conditionality—shape the material conditions where sexual violence becomes more likely. These relationships displace capitalism's costs onto women's bodies and labour. However, fiscal policy alone does not explain the conditions that produce, tolerate, prevent and respond to sexual violence across the continent.

This brings us to a further inquiry: an examination of African governments as active players in the above conditions. The examination rejects explanations that locate sexual violence in an essentialised notion of "African culture," individual perpetrators, or armed conflict, and instead examines how state security, public spending, land governance, extractive economies, and justice institutions shape safety and harm.

16. Ibid

17. Socio-Economic Factors Influencing Intimate Partner Violence Among Adolescents and Young Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Scoping Review. *Public Health Reviews* (2024/2025). <https://www.ssph-journal.org/journals/public-health-reviews/articles/10.3389/phrs.2024.1607041/full>

18. D. Aged, F. Kelleher. (2022). *The Assault of Austerity: How prevailing economic policy choices are a form of gender-based violence*. Oxfam. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-assault-of-austerity-how-prevailing-economic-policy-choices-are-a-form-of-g-621448/>

Section II: African Governments, Militarisation and Sexual Violence

Militarism refers to the political, economic, cultural and gendered influence of military values and institutions beyond the battlefield. It is the process through which coercive institutions, practices and values gain greater weight in political and social life, such that civilian political or economic problems come to be treated primarily as security threats and addressed through armed deployment, surveillance, emergency powers and coercion.¹⁹ Understood this way, militarism does not simply begin when war starts and disappear when a peace agreement is signed. Mama and Okazawa-Rey's (2012) analysis of Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Liberia shows that military institutions, economic interests, political practices and gendered culture can be embedded within states and societies before, during, and after formal armed conflict.²⁰

This matters because security institutions themselves become sites of gendered abuse outside any conventional war setting. Kenya's 2017 elections provide a concrete example. Based on interviews with survivors and witnesses in selected Nairobi informal settlements, Kisumu and Bungoma, Human Rights Watch documented rape, gang rape, forced nudity, sexual assault and other forms of sexual violence during the election period.²¹ Among the women interviewed, about half reported rape by police officers or other men in uniform. Many survivors did not report the abuse, fearing retaliation

or lacking confidence that police would respond effectively, particularly where the allegations involved security personnel.²²

This is why expanding the scope of what counts as militarisation matters for prevention and response, not only for analysis. If militarised power produces sexual violence not only during war but through the ordinary operation of policing elections, broader enforcement and resource extraction, then frameworks organised around sexual violence must locate prevention and response not just in "conflict-related contexts" but also in the ordinary, uniformed exercise of state coercion.²³

Colonial Origins of Militarised Governments

The coercive character of many African states has a colonial history. Colonial governments were established through conquest and maintained through armies, police, forced labour, taxation, and administrative control. These entities were designed primarily to control African populations, suppress resistance and protect imperial economic interests, not provide safety and justice to the colonised population.²⁴

Colonial rule also reorganised gender relations themselves, reconfiguring access

19. Mama, A., & Okazawa-Rey, M. (2012). Militarism, Conflict and Women's Activism in the Global Era: Challenges and Prospects for Women in Three West African Contexts. *Feminist Review*, 101(1), 97–123. <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2011.57>

20. Ibid

21. Human Rights Watch. (2017). "Kill Those Criminals: Security Forces Violations in Kenya's August 2017 Elections". <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/10/16/kill-those-criminals/security-forces-violations-kenyas-august-2017-elections>

22. Ibid.

23. D. Aged, F. Kelleher. (2022). *The Assault of Austerity: How prevailing economic policy choices are a form of gender-based violence*. Oxfam. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-assault-of-austerity-how-prevailing-economic-policy-choices-are-a-form-of-g-621448/>

24. Mama, A., & Okazawa-Rey, M. (2012). Militarism, Conflict and Women's Activism in the Global Era: Challenges and Prospects for Women in Three West African Contexts. *Feminist Review*, 101(1), 97–123. <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2011.57>

to land and political authority, reinforcing particular forms of male-dominated customary governance, and reshaping labour and social institutions in ways that challenge any account treating contemporary gender inequality as a straightforward continuation of an unchanged “African tradition”.²⁵ Ossome (2024) extends this analysis by locating gendered violence within the political and institutional structures of the colonial and postcolonial state, shifting attention away from cultural explanations and towards the relationship between state power, economic relations, gender, labour, and unequal access to protection.²⁶

Decolonisation did not automatically transform the purpose, culture, or practices of colonial security institutions. Many postcolonial governments inherited centralised police, armies, prisons, and administrative systems built around command and control. However, colonial history cannot explain away contemporary African state agency. African governments decide whether to reform security institutions, subject them to civilian oversight, deploy them against political opponents, or use them to protect commercial interests.²⁷

Nkrumah’s concepts of neocolonialism remain useful here for understanding how external corporations, powerful states, financial institutions, and global markets constrain African policy choices, but African governments remain active within these structures. They negotiate concessions,

regulate corporations, authorise security deployments, adopt land and investment policies, and decide whether to investigate companies and security actors when abuses occur.²⁸

Extractivism, State Security and Sexual Violence

The relationship between governments, militarisation and sexual violence is especially visible around natural resource extraction. Governments negotiate land concessions, issue licenses, set labour and environmental rules, and decide how to respond when communities resist. They may deploy police or soldiers to protect mines, plantations, oil installations, or transport routes, with private guards, foreign military actors, and mercenaries sometimes operating alongside state institutions.²⁹

Ethiopia provides one example: state security services have been implicated in violent displacement connected to large-scale agro-industrial investment, including allegations of rape, threats, assaults, and arrests of community members.³⁰ The relationship between commercial investment and violence in such cases cannot be neatly divided between “private” and “public” responsibility, since investment itself relies on state decisions concerning land, policing, displacement, and regulatory enforcement.

The Marange diamond fields in Zimbabwe

25. Lugones, María. 2010. “Toward a Decolonial Feminism.” *Hypatia* 25, no. 4: 742–759. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2010.01137.x>

26. Ossome, Lyn. 2024. “The Colonial State and Postcolonial Feminist Predicaments.” *Feminist Africa* 5, no. 2: 42–62.

27. Mama, A., & Okazawa-Rey, M. (2012). Militarism, Conflict and Women’s Activism in the Global Era: Challenges and Prospects for Women in Three West African Contexts. *Feminist Review*, 101(1), 97–123. <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2011.57>; Ossome, Lyn. 2024. “The Colonial State and Postcolonial Feminist Predicaments.” *Feminist Africa* 5, no. 2: 42–62.

28. Nkrumah, Kwame. *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1965;

29. Pereira, C. (2024). Africa’s natural resources amid old and new imperial relations: What implications for gender justice? *Feminist Africa*, 5(2), 14–41. <https://feministafrica.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/002-FA-Vol5.4-Feature-Article-Pereira.pdf>

30. Ibid.

provide a second case. The discovery of diamonds there in 2005 brought armed forces into the area, rendering it one of the country's most militarised mining zones. Women working in artisanal and small-scale mining faced discrimination and criminalisation, and because artisanal mining is treated as illegal, there was an ever-present risk of violence from security personnel.³¹

Around industrial oil palm and rubber plantations in rural communities in West and Central African countries, women and girls faced sexual demands and abuse from sub-contractors, managers, company guards, and co-workers, and are at risk of being searched, beaten, arrested, or sexually abused by company guards and police when accused of taking produce claimed as company property.³²

These examples illustrate how the protection of high-value natural resources can affect women's bodily safety, mobility, livelihoods, access to land, and capacity to challenge abuse. The significance of the examples is not that natural resource extraction inevitably produces sexual violence. Rather, land dispossession, economic dependency, securitised commercial spaces, and highly unequal relationships among communities, companies, and security institutions together create the conditions in which abuses become easier to perpetrate and harder to challenge.

They also show how, in the aftermath of the SAPs, women began turning to the informal

sector in large numbers to make a living, and this sector is becoming more dangerous, especially with the rise of extractive industries.

The Securitisation of Sexual Violence as Its Own Extractive Economy

Expanding the scope of militarisation this way requires us to look at what happens when sexual violence itself becomes securitised. It becomes a global security threat that draws funding, media attention, and public attention in ways that can replicate the extractive relationships described above. Since 2008, the framing of conflict-related rape as an international security concern has drawn a sharp rise in global attention to the Democratic Republic of Congo in particular, but this attention has itself become, in Sara Meger's phrase, "lucrative" for a range of actors, not only the armed groups perpetuating the violence.³³

Local and national organisations have found themselves competing for ownership over survivors and their voices as they bring them into what looks like a performance catered to donors. Women have at times been encouraged to present themselves as survivors to access reproductive healthcare reserved for rape victims, and there is anecdotal evidence of allegations of rape being used by various actors as an effective income-earning strategy under the conditions of acute deprivation.³⁴ At the 2014 Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, the United Kingdom spent £5.2 million; only £3.5 million of that went to international programmes actually tackling

31. Women struggles and large-scale diamond mining in Marange, Zimbabwe. *The Extractive Industries and Society* (2015). <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2214790X15001239>

32. RADD, Muyissi Environnement, Natural Resource Women Platform, Radio Culture, GRAIN, and World Rainforest Movement. *Breaking the Silence: Harassment, Sexual Violence and Abuse against Women in and around Industrial Oil Palm and Rubber Plantations*. Montevideo: World Rainforest Movement, March 2019. https://www.wrm.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Breaking-the-Silence_8March2019.pdf

33. Massey, Rachel. 2024. "Ungendered Flesh: Racial Grammars in Western Engagements with Sexual Violence in the DRC." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 53 (1): 222–248.

34. Massey, Rachel. 2024. "Ungendered Flesh: Racial Grammars in Western Engagements with Sexual Violence in the DRC." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 53 (1): 222–248.

sexual violence in conflict. The budget for attendees' accommodation and transport was roughly equal to the amount the summit allocated to the entire Eastern Congo.³⁵

Donor architecture fragments survivors' experience into administratively manageable categories: "conflict-related sexual violence," "humanitarian GBV," "prevention," "protection," "response".³⁶ These categories facilitate budgeting while leaving violence that crosses nobody's mandate. It is the same architecture read through the lens of militarisation.

Sexual violence, once securitised, becomes a response to be competed over, much like the minerals of Marange or the land concessions of the Ethiopian lowlands. Meanwhile, funding for the survivors whom this attention is intended to support has proven highly volatile. Official development assistance for programmes addressing violence against women and girls represents less than 1% of the total ODA, with funding specifically for prevention amounts to roughly 0.2%. Across Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria, more than 55% of GBV survivors supported in early 2025 lost access to essential services following broad funding suspensions.³⁷

Where Does This Leave the Question of State Obligation?

International human rights law, particularly African regional human rights instruments, establishes clear state obligations on paper. Articles 2, 3 and 5 of the African Charter provide rights ranging from equality before the law to the right to be free from torture and inhumane treatment.³⁸ Articles 1 and 25 not only impose state obligations, but they also go further to obligate states to carry out education needed for the fulfilment of rights.³⁹ The Maputo Protocol requires states to prohibit and prevent violence against women, punish perpetrators, and provide budgetary resources for implementation, while the African Commission's Guidelines on Combating Sexual Violence set out further standards on prevention, protection and accountability.⁴⁰

This brief raises critical observations, questions and contradictions in the global human rights architecture read alongside a colonial global economic order. What tensions arise when human rights laws and obligations collide with a colonial world economic order that makes those rights impossible to realise? What possibilities exist when the contradictions are named

35. Ibid.

36. Liberation Alliance Africa. "Recentring African Indigenous Knowledge to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Violence." Position paper. Liberation Alliance Africa, 2026. <https://liberationallianceafrica.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/final-Sexual-Violence-Position-Paper-1.pdf>

37. UN Women. 2025. *Closing the Funding Gap to End Violence Against Women and Girls*. New York: UN Women. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/closing-the-funding-gap-to-end-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf>; International Rescue Committee, "New IRC Data Shows Thousands of Women and Girls at Risk as Aid Cuts Cripple Gender-Based Violence Services in West Africa," press release, December 1, 2025, <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/new-irc-data-shows-thousands-women-and-girls-risk-aid-cuts-cripple-gender-based>; Philomena Raftery et al., "Strengthening and Sustaining Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Coordination in Emergencies: A Synthesis of Practitioner-Driven, Globally Applicable Recommendations," *Conflict and Health* 20, no. 1 (2026): 28, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-026-00770-9>; UN Women Africa, "Feminist Funding Is Essential to Ending Violence Against Women and Girls," feature story, July 17, 2026, <https://africa>.

unwomen.org/en/stories/feature-story/2026/07/feminist-funding-is-essential-to-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls.

38. Articles 2,3,5 African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights <https://achpr.au.int/en/node/641>

39. Articles 1 and 5 African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights <https://achpr.au.int/en/node/641>

40. African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR). 2017. *Guidelines on Combating Sexual Violence and Its Consequences in Africa*. Niamey, Niger: ACHPR. <https://achpr.au.int/en/node/848>; African Union, *Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa* (Maputo, Mozambique: African Union, adopted July 11, 2003, entered into force November 25, 2005), <https://au.int/en/treaties/protocol-african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights-rights-women-africa>.

and renamed and the questions are laid bare? Can the current world economic order support its human rights aspirations?

The position paper preceding this work shines a critical light on how colonial legacies persist in post-colonial African states, which engender a state that reserves the right to violence while selectively ignoring, enabling, or weaponising sexual violence.⁴¹ It also explores how criminal justice systems document violence extensively, yet coexist with widespread impunity, retraumatisation of survivors, and selective enforcement.

State-led prevention and response frameworks often rely on human rights and criminal justice paradigms that cast the state as an impartial arbiter. In practice, these frameworks obscure the state's role as a perpetrator or enabler of violence. Building on this argument, this brief asks: how can African states fulfil their human rights obligations while grappling with an exploitative public debt infrastructure, extractivism, violent trade practices and a racist world order? How do states trapped in austerity measures that sustain the collapse of their public infrastructure, health, and security fulfil the human rights obligation owed to their citizens? How do states implicated in systems of imperial control through the reservation and perpetration of violence as a sovereignty tactic deliver human rights obligations?

This brief invites us to sit with these tensions: the implications of the current neocolonial state against the prevention and response to sexual violence on the continent; the

postcolonial state inherited, rather than dismantled, an architecture of control over women's productive and reproductive labour; the fiscal relationship of conditionality and austerity that dismantles government services and offloads capitalism's costs onto women's bodies, structurally narrowing what any government can spend on the services that might otherwise absorb those costs.

Feminist analysis shows that a militarised and increasingly securitised response to violence can itself become extractive. How, then, does a state whose institutional architecture was built to extract, and whose fiscal room to manoeuvre remains structured by relationships of debt and donor conditionality, plausibly fulfil obligations to prevent and respond to the very violence those relationships help produce? Can the same security apparatus that has historically been deployed to protect concessions, quotas and elite political order be redirected to protect the women, children and gender-diverse people it has more often been used against?

The goal of this brief is not to propose resolving these tensions through better policy design; rather, these tensions are precisely the terrain of our intellectual rigour and liberatory dreams. We sit with these tensions when we ask what it means to recenter African epistemologies in the prevention and response to sexual violence.

In the second brief of this compendium, we turn our inquiry to a reckoning with the state itself, its sovereignty, and whose interests that sovereignty has always served.

41. Liberation Alliance Africa. "Recentring African Indigenous Knowledge to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Violence." Position paper. Liberation Alliance Africa, 2026.
<https://liberationallianceafrica.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/final-Sexual-Violence-Position-Paper-1.pdf>

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Liberation Alliance Africa is a feminist, anti-colonial collective dreaming of liberatory futures through critical consciousness raising. LAA convene the Building Knowledge Bridges Community of Practice, bringing together African indigenous knowledge-holders, feminist researchers, organisers, and women's rights activists. Through shared reflection, dialogue and knowledge production, the community produced the founding position paper and the three briefs in this compendium.



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Africa

Recentring African Feminist Epistemologies in Sexual Violence Prevention and Response

Critical inquiry One: Social Reproduction, Political Economy and
Militarisation of Sexual Violence in Africa

A compendium by Liberation Alliance Africa

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