

HER BODY, THEIR BATTLEFIELD

A SCOPING REVIEW OF RAPE AS A WEAPON OF WAR: CONCEPTUALISATION, IMPACTS AND RESPONSES

Elinor Handibode
Student Number: 740097200
MSc Extreme Medicine
University of Exeter

(Image: Akacha, 2026)

INTRODUCTION

Rape in conflict is not only an act of individual violence; it can be used to terrorise, punish, displace and destroy communities. It is widely described as a weapon or strategy of war, although the literature often uses the broader term conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), within which rape is a specific form. This framing remains contested across legal, humanitarian, public health and conflict literature. Evidence is fragmented across disciplines, with inconsistent definitions and uneven attention to survivors' long-term recovery. This review therefore maps how rape as a weapon of war is conceptualised and documented across contemporary conflicts, alongside the reported humanitarian impacts and responses.

AIM

To map and synthesise the existing literature on rape as a weapon of war in contemporary conflicts, examining the conceptualisation, humanitarian impacts and reported responses.

OBJECTIVES

- Map how rape is framed as a weapon and strategy of war.
- Examine how conflict-related sexual violence is documented and recognised.
- Identify reported physical, psychological, social and collective impacts.
- Summarise humanitarian, social, psychosocial and legal responses.

METHODOLOGY

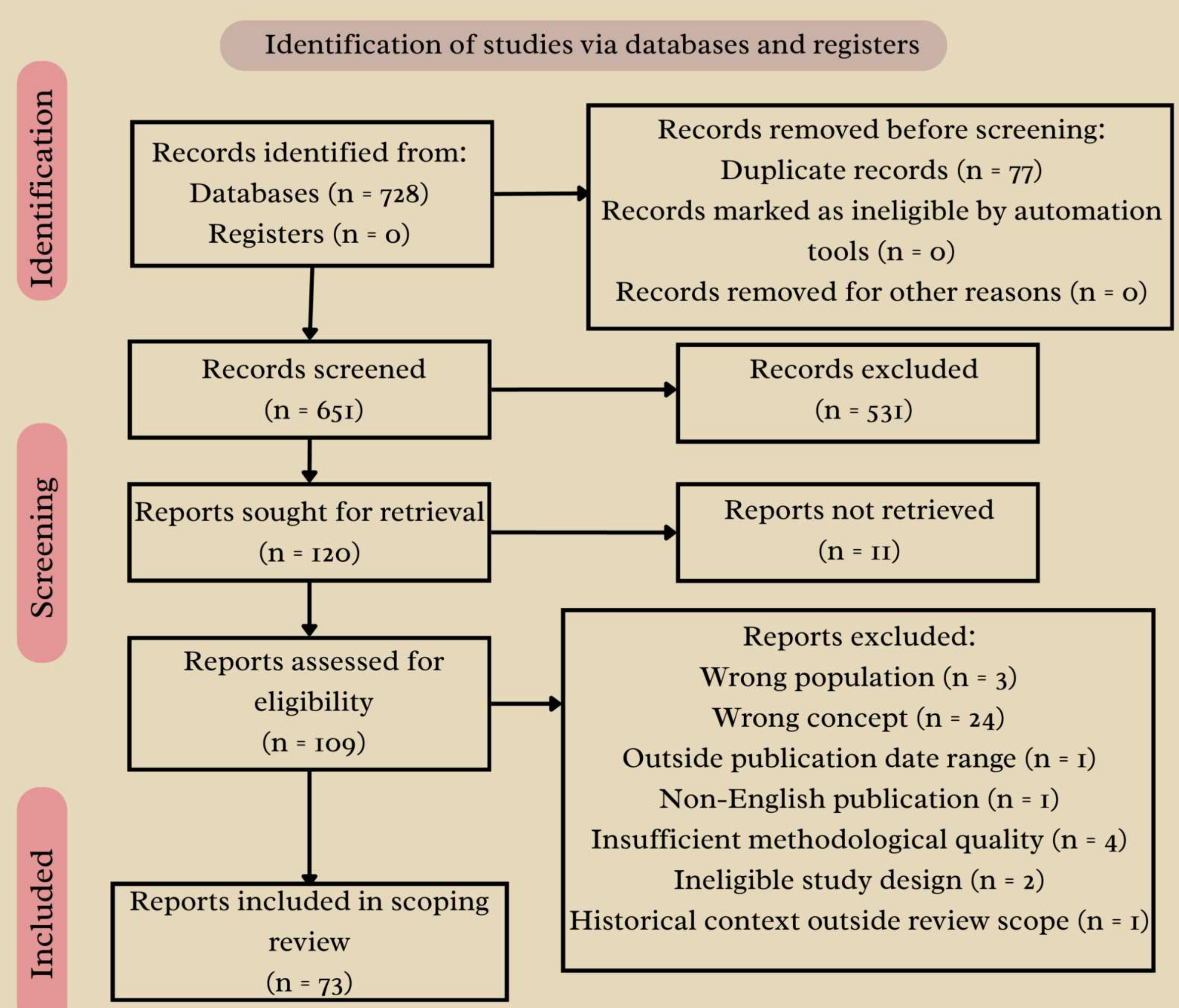
- POPULATION Survivors of rape and conflict-related sexual violence
- CONCEPT Rape and sexual violence framed as a weapon or strategy.
- CONTEXT Contemporary armed conflict.

DATABASE SEARCH

MEDLINE · Web of Science · Global Health · Overton
2010-2026 | English language | Academic and grey literature

Records were screened against predefined criteria; data were charted and synthesised descriptively across recurring themes.

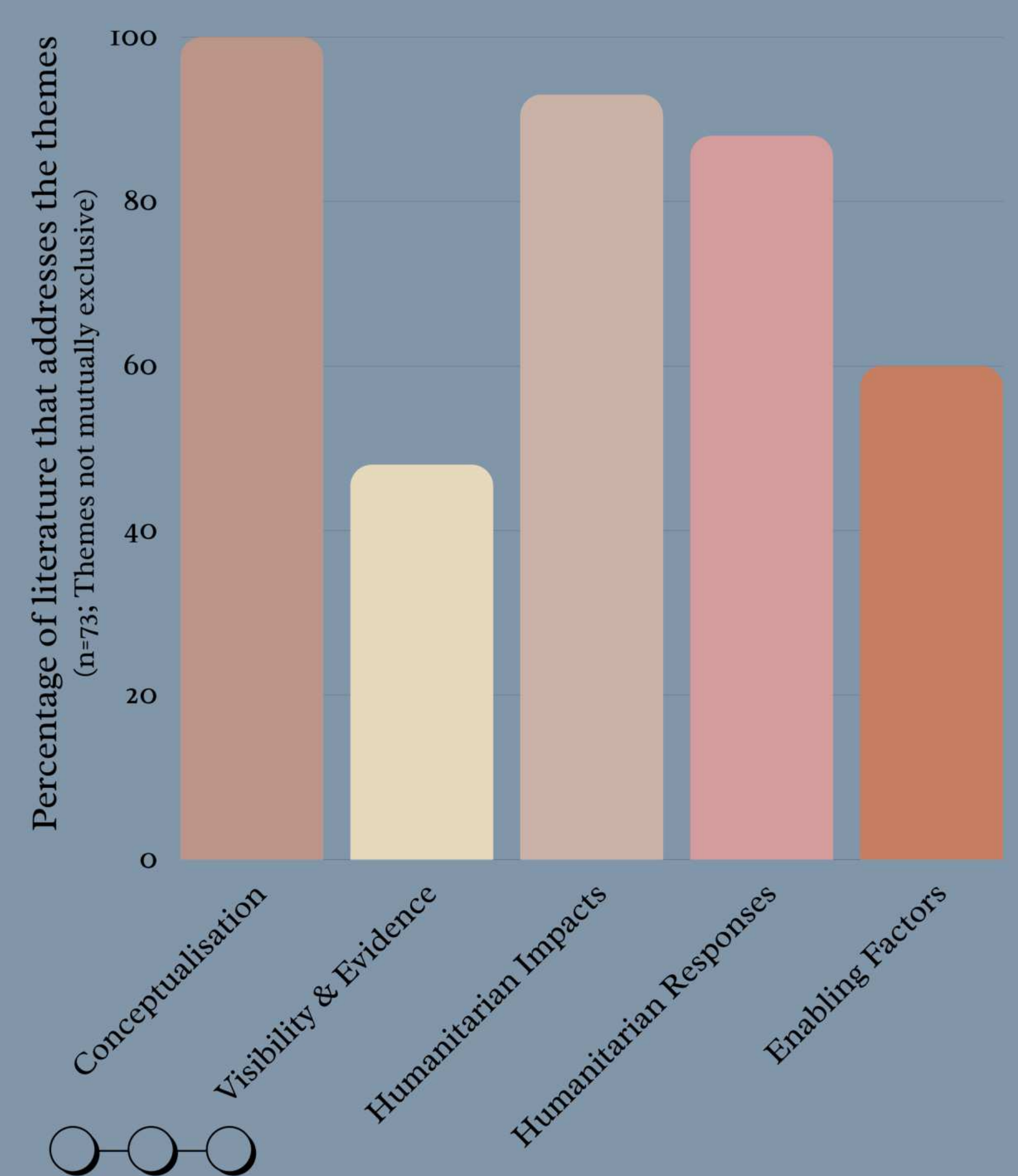
PRISMA DIAGRAM



QUESTION

How is rape conceptualised and documented as a weapon of war across contemporary conflict settings, and what impacts and responses are reported in the existing literature?

WHAT THE LITERATURE SHOWS



KEY FINDINGS

WEAPONISATION

Sexual violence served identifiable wartime functions.
Terror · punishment · control · collective harm

HARM EXTENDS BEYOND THE ASSAULT

Physical, psychological and social harms were interconnected and enduring.
Body · identity · family · community

SILENCE IS PRODUCED, NOT CHOSEN

Stigma, insecurity and weak systems restricted disclosure and documentation.
Fear · rejection · invisibility

A RESPONSE GAP REMAINS

Legal and accountability responses dominated the literature, while medical and psychosocial recovery received substantially less attention.
77% legal/accountability vs 37% medical and 29% psychosocial

ENABLING AND SUSTAINING FACTORS

Command structures · militarisation · institutional tolerance · impunity



(Image: Akacha, 2026)

WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS MEAN?

Weaponisation is defined by function, not only by orders

Across disciplines, there was broad agreement that rape can serve identifiable wartime functions, including terror, punishment, control, humiliation and the destruction of families or communities. However, sources differed over whether weaponisation requires explicit command or intent, or may also arise through encouragement, tolerance and impunity.

The harm remains embodied

Traumatic injuries, including traumatic fistula and reproductive injury, psychological trauma and social exclusion demonstrate how physical, psychological and social harms become interconnected and enduring.

Invisibility compounds harm and impunity

Stigma, insecurity, disbelief and evidential barriers restrict reporting, contribute to the underestimation of humanitarian need and weaken access to both care and justice.

Accountability is prioritised, but rarely realised

Justice is widely presented as the ideal response, yet instability, state or military involvement and weak institutions frequently prevent meaningful accountability or survivor recovery.

OVERALL CONCLUSION

Taken together, the evidence shows that rape is weaponised through the wartime functions it performs, not solely through formal orders. Its enduring harms are intensified by stigma, invisibility and impunity, while responses remain disproportionately focused on accountability rather than sustained survivor recovery.

BEYOND THE ASSAULT

“After I was raped by soldiers, people ignored me as if I were a sinful person.”

Participant 2, survivor testimony reported by Bekele et al. (2025)

This testimony illustrates the stigma, rejection and social isolation repeatedly identified across the included literature.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

- Develop clearer definitions and standardised approaches for documenting weaponised rape.
- Increase research in underrepresented conflicts and include survivor and local perspectives.
- Evaluate the effectiveness and long-term outcomes of humanitarian responses.
- Strengthen trauma-informed, culturally appropriate and multisectoral services.
- Improve collaboration between researchers, humanitarian organisations, health services and justice mechanisms.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

- 1- Inconsistent definitions may affect recognition, documentation and comparison across conflict settings.
- 2- Narrow or fragmented responses risk overlooking survivors' interconnected health, social, legal and economic needs.
- 3- The findings support treating weaponised rape as both an immediate humanitarian emergency and a long-term public health issue.
- 4- Clearer evidence could strengthen service planning, advocacy, accountability and resource allocation.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

STRENGTHS

- Uses a transparent JBI scoping review methodology and PRISMA-ScR reporting framework.
- Provides a focused map of how rape as a weapon of war is conceptualised, documented and addressed.
- Integrates peer-reviewed and grey literature across humanitarian, legal, health, and conflict disciplines.
- Integrates fragmented legal, humanitarian, health and conflict evidence, identifying areas of convergence, conceptual disagreement and response gaps.

LIMITATIONS

- Restricted to English-language evidence published from 2010-2026.
- Searches were limited to selected databases and Overton, so relevant evidence may not have been accessed.
- Single-reviewer screening and charting may have increased the risk of selection and interpretation bias.
- Narrow focus improved relevance but may have excluded broader conflict-related sexual violence literature with indirect value.

REFERENCES

Reference list



Screening Log

SCREENING LOG AND DATA CHART

Data Chart



(Image: Akacha, 2026)