

A Gendered Weapon of War:

Sexual Violence against Women in Haiti through an Intersectional Feminist International Relations Approach

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Abstract

Wartime sexual violence is systematically under-theorized in both realist international relations (IR) and mainstream feminist IR frameworks. Realism's state-centric lens renders gendered violence invisible, while universal feminist approaches fail to account for the complex intersections of race, class, displacement and postcolonial history that shape women's lived experiences of sexual violence. This paper argues that an intersectional feminist perspective, applied through a multifactorial analytical framework, more adequately addresses wartime rape as a deliberate weapon of war. Using Haiti as a case study, the analysis examines how gang-perpetrated sexual violence in Port-au-Prince operates at the intersection of poverty, postcolonial state failure, anti-Haitian racism and gender. Drawing on testimony from Haitian grassroots organizations, survivor accounts and human rights documentation, it demonstrates that wartime rape in Haiti is not an unfortunate by-product of conflict, but a calculated instrument of territorial domination and social control that demands an intersectional analytical response.

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Introduction

Wartime sexual violence is as old as the act of war.¹ The continued neglect by scholars and institutions of wartime rape as a weapon of war reveals significant gaps in how gendered security issues and political events are analytically framed by mainstream feminist and international relations (IR) theories. Traditional peace and security scholarship often ignores the link between war and rape, as the prominence of wartime sexual violence only became widely recognized in 1993.² For example, approximately 30,000 to 50,000 women were raped in the Bosnian war,³ illustrating how a European conflict was one of the first situations to draw attention to the tangible problem of wartime rape,⁴ which itself exemplifies the gendered racial ignorance embedded in traditional scholarship. Traditional approaches to IR are dominated by realism, where women as a group are rendered invisible. Realism argues that it is not "sensible" to talk about gendered problems like wartime rape.⁵; instead, many scholars argue that research should consider security threats external to the state, as the state is the referent object. Even feminist theories rely on a broad discourse about the universal struggles of women, which fails to account for the nuances of gendered power and sexual violence in war crimes.⁶ I argue that traditional realist and mainstream IR feminist theories do not sufficiently address the weapon of wartime rape and its gendered implications

¹ Katrina Lee Koo, "Confronting a Disciplinary Blindness: Women, War and Rape in the International Politics of Security," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 37, no. 3 (2002): 525.

² Nicola Henry, Tony Ward, and Matt Hirshberg, "A Multifactorial Model of Wartime Rape," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 9, no. 5 (2004): 535–536.

³ Adriana Kovalovska, "Rape of Muslim Women in Wartime Bosnia," *ILSA Journal of International and Comparative Law* 3, no. 3 (1997), <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/ilsajournal/vol3/iss3/8/>.

⁴ Nicola Henry, Tony Ward, and Matt Hirshberg, "A Multifactorial Model of Wartime Rape," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 9, no. 5 (2004): 535; Katrina Lee Koo, "Confronting a Disciplinary Blindness," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 37, no. 3 (2002): 525.

⁵ Smith, 1996, cited in Koo, "Confronting a Disciplinary Blindness," 526.

⁶ Elora Halim Chowdhury, "Locating Global Feminisms Elsewhere: Braiding US Women of Color and Transnational Feminisms," *Cultural Dynamics* 21, no. 1 (2009): 53.

for lived experiences. The broad, universal, state-centred lens of conventional IR and feminist theories overlooks sexual violence in internal conflicts, such as those in Haiti, where an intersectional feminist perspective can better investigate the complexities involved in this gendered act of war.

Haiti is a particularly urgent and theoretically revealing case study for this argument. The country offers a concentrated site where the limitations of both realist and universal feminist frameworks are most visible: a context of near-total state collapse, gang control of the majority of Port-au-Prince, deep colonial legacies and extreme poverty converge to produce a form of wartime sexual violence that cannot be explained through state-centred or single-axis lenses. Since the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in 2021 and the subsequent political vacuum, criminal organizations have seized control of an estimated 80 percent or more of the capital.⁷ In this environment, rape functions not as an unfortunate by-product of disorder, but as a calculated instrument of territorial domination, community terror and social control. Understanding why specific Haitian women are targeted requires examining how gender intersects with class, geography, displacement status and the postcolonial architecture of state failure. This paper integrates intersectional feminist theory with a multifactorial analytical framework to examine wartime rape in Haiti, arguing that only through this lens can the full complexity of gendered sexual violence be properly understood.

Conceptual Framework: Intersectionality and the Multifactorial Approach

⁷ Human Rights Watch, *"Living a Nightmare": Haiti Needs an Urgent Rights-Based Response to Escalating Crisis* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2023), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/08/14/living-nightmare/haiti-needs-urgent-rights-based-response-escalating-crisis>.

The conceptual framework of this paper integrates two key analytical tools to address the theoretical dimensions of wartime rape. I adopt the systematic theoretical approach to wartime rape from Henry et al.,⁸ derived from White and Kowalski's 1998 multifactorial model. They describe it as a "multifactorial" approach in which individual, sociocultural and situational aspects are analyzed together.⁹ Building on the multifactorial model, I centre intersectionality as the paper's overarching framework, drawing on Crenshaw's¹⁰ nuanced, foundational work on how gender interacts with race, social status, ethnicity and other identity markers on a global scale in relation to politics.¹¹ In the case of Haiti, this combined framework allows for the exploration of individual women's experiences, the dissection of sociocultural factors and the country's current political state and the interpretation of the different situational contexts in which wartime rape of particular Haitian women occurs. I analyze Haiti through this intersectional lens to understand the unique experiences of sexual violence and terrorism and to challenge the traditional narrative of universal womanhood.

I use a qualitative methodology, building from critical feminism, intersectional feminism, the multifactorial model and the case study of women in Haiti, to assess how different international lenses view wartime rape and their implications for women's security. Contrary to a traditional top-down lens which looks at conflicts from a statist level, I view Haiti from a bottom-up perspective

⁸ Henry, Ward, and Hirshberg, "A Multifactorial Model of Wartime Rape," 536.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 537.

¹⁰ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989), article 8.

¹¹ Celeste Montoya, "Intersectionality," in *Gender Matters in Global Politics: A Feminist Introduction to International Relations*, 3rd ed., ed. Laura J. Shepherd and Caitlin Hamilton (London: Routledge, 2023), 47.

and consider the micro factors (such as social status or income groups) involved with wartime rape and how it is weaponized.¹² I seek to dissect the binary understanding (“us” versus “them”) of mainstream IR¹³ and embrace the lived experiences of different women to understand the micro-political complexities faced by marginalized communities.¹⁴ As the grassroots Haitian organization KOFAVIV (Commission of Women Victims for Victims) demonstrates, survivors themselves are the most authoritative voices on how gendered violence operates. Founded in 2004 by women from poor neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince who were raped during the 1991-1994 military dictatorship, KOFAVIV's testimony is essential to any genuine bottom-up analysis.¹⁵ Their co-founder Eramithe Delva has described how women in displacement camps lived in "harsh and degrading conditions" with no lighting, no security and no recourse; conditions that directly enabled serial sexual violence.¹⁶

Traditional IR and the Limits of Realism

Realist IR theory view the state as the main object of security, often leaving little room for, or completely neglecting, the human perspective of war and conflict, especially gendered sexual violence. The idea of human security, which shifts the

¹² J. Ann Tickner, "Feminist Responses to International Security Studies," *Peace Review* 16, no. 1 (2004): 45.

¹³ Roxanne Krystalli, "Feminist Methodology," in *Gender Matters in Global Politics: A Feminist Introduction to International Relations*, 3rd ed., ed. Laura J. Shepherd and Caitlin Hamilton (London: Routledge, 2023), 37–38.

¹⁴ Swati Parashar, "What Wars and 'War Bodies' Know about International Relations," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 4 (2013): 624.

¹⁵ MADRE, "Meet MADRE's New Partner: KOFAVIV Supports and Seeks Justice for Rape Survivors in Haiti," ReliefWeb, September 6, 2006, <https://reliefweb.int/report/haiti/meet-madres-new-partner-kofaviv-supports-and-seeks-justice-rape-survivors-haiti>.

¹⁶ Eramithe Delva, cited in "Group Founded by Rape Survivors Lifts Up Haitian Women," Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti, March 2012, <https://reliefweb.int/report/haiti/group-founded-rape-survivors-lifts-haitian-women>.

main object of security from the state to the individual, directly objects to this realist blind spot by recognizing that threats to individual safety, agency and basic dignity are as politically important as threats to state autonomy.¹⁷ This traditional perspective is partially due to realist scholarship's exclusive focus on the state's external behaviour, rather than internal peace and security.¹⁸ Realist IR scholarship has historically been dominated by men who focus on the "high politics" of weapons of mass destruction, international organizations and states in an anarchical system.¹⁹ The standard of realism in IR portrays the state as the primary actor in every conflict, which reroutes every problem back to statehood.²⁰ Women, who are not seen as individuals but as a "gendered grouping," of an issue, are not taken seriously and therefore cannot be seen outside of the realist state-centred lens.²¹ Conventional IR approaches directly silence gendered issues such as wartime rape. The state-centric approach fails to understand the diverse insecurities of individual women, which relocates them outside of the international realm and actively depoliticizes them.²²

When traditional approaches define security and conflict only in terms of state security, they dismiss the lived experiences of people, especially women, whose bodies become either battlefields or weapons of war themselves. Traditional

¹⁷ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 1994* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 22–23,

<https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/hdr1994encompletenostats.pdf>.

¹⁸ Swati Parashar, "What Wars and 'War Bodies' Know about International Relations," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 4 (2013): 624.

¹⁹ Ibid.; J. Ann Tickner, "Feminist Responses to International Security Studies," *Peace Review* 16, no. 1 (2004): 44.

²⁰ Koo, "Confronting a Disciplinary Blindness," 526.

²¹ Ibid., 526.

²² Ibid., 525–527, 530–532.

IR theories view war as an "event,"²³ with a distinct beginning and an end, removed from everyday life.²⁴ This conventional perspective neglects the "omnipresence of militarism," where its deep, everyday impacts on women and other marginalized communities are ignored.²⁵ Waltz's (1979) "technical realism" argued that only facts which can be scientifically proven or objectively verified (such as number of casualties, for example) should be taken seriously.²⁶ The problem with this lens is that it would accept a gang member's deceased body as evidence of conflict but question the legitimacy of a woman's rape survival testimonial, because it may not have physical evidence. Realist scholars only believe what they see and dismiss individual lived experiences like sexual violence as anecdotal. This credibility issue directly limits IR's analytical applicability to a context like Haiti, where the violence is continuous, inescapable and cannot be separated from everyday life.

Feminist IR and the Limits of Universal Approaches

Feminist IR theory challenges the state-centred lens by shifting focus away from the state and onto individuals, revealing how gendered power structures and relations shape global politics and conflict. Since the late 1980s, feminist IR theories have challenged conventional IR assumptions but have often not been taken seriously; mainly because male-dominated theories tend to overlook "gender differences" in security issues.²⁷ The difference between IR and feminist IR lies in the referent object: for feminists, it is the global relations between gender, race,

²³ Chris J. Cuomo, "War Is Not Just an Event: Reflections on the Significance of Everyday Violence," *Hypatia* 11, no. 4 (1996): 30; Schott, 1995, cited in Cuomo, 31.

²⁴ Cuomo, "War Is Not Just an Event," 31.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁶ Waltz, 1979, cited in Koo, "Confronting a Disciplinary Blindness," 532.

²⁷ Inass Abdulsada Ali, "Feminist Theorizing in the International Relations Discipline," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 25, no. 2 (2023): 2, 5; Tickner, "Feminist Responses to International Security Studies," 45.

class, sexuality and the human; for traditionalists, it is the state.²⁸ Feminist IR scholarship has been instrumental in addressing identity oppression, domestic violence and rape as a weapon of war.²⁹

Despite significant feminist contributions to the scholarship, mainstream feminist IR theory often views women's struggles as a universal experience, neglecting the intersectionality of gendered sexual violence.³⁰ Universal feminist discourses (through a patriarchal lens)³¹ implicitly assert that men are the perpetrators and women are the victims in wartime rape, which overlooks male victims and ignores female perpetrators.³² When discussing terrorism (a factor in wartime rape), mainstream feminist IR approaches sometimes fail to accept that women can be just as terrorizing and violent as men.³³ Some feminist approaches to wartime rape still view it through a rigid male-female power structure, which fails to explain why particular men commit sexual violence, the significant variations of wartime rape or why some men rape other men in war.³⁴ These limitations are particularly apparent in the Haitian context.

²⁸ Ali, "Feminist Theorizing," 3; Cynthia Masters and Marysia Zalewski, "Feminist International Relations," in *Gender Matters in Global Politics*, 3rd ed., ed. Shepherd and Hamilton (London: Routledge, 2023), 10; Montoya, "Intersectionality," 47.

²⁹ Wendy Harcourt, "Body Politics," in *Gender Matters in Global Politics*, 3rd ed., ed. Shepherd and Hamilton (London: Routledge, 2023), 111; Tickner, "Feminist Responses to International Security Studies," 45.

³⁰ Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Boundary 2* (London) 30, no. 1 (1988): 61–88. <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1988.42>.

³¹ Kodamaya, Remi, and Fumika Sato. "Taking Male Victims Seriously: Toward A Deeper Understanding Of The Interrelations Between Wartime Sexual Violence And Patriarchy." *Hitotsubashi Journal of Social Studies* 53, no. 1 (2022): 1–18. <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/stable/27098768>.

³² Miranda Alison, "Wartime Sexual Violence: Women's Human Rights and Questions of Masculinity," *Review of International Studies* 33, no. 1 (2007): 84, 89.

³³ Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, "Terrorism and Political Violence," in *Gender Matters in Global Politics*, 3rd ed., ed. Shepherd and Hamilton (London: Routledge, 2023): 376–377.

³⁴ Alison, "Wartime Sexual Violence," 78.

Intersectionality as Corrective Framework

Intersectionality challenges and corrects mainstream feminist theory, arguing that different experiences of wartime rape are shaped not only by gender, but also by ethnicity, postcolonial factors, social and economic status, race and more.³⁵ A key concept of intersectionality is that gender is never the sole explanatory factor; rather, it is intersected with other identity factors to understand the complexities of feminist IR research.³⁶ Intersectional feminist research functions as a "political consciousness," combating oppression through both cross-racial and cross-national approaches.³⁷ Western-dominated mainstream feminist approaches acknowledge the need for gender analysis, but their single-axis approach often neglects or discriminates against women of colour and ignores the intricacies of oppression.³⁸ An intersectional feminist approach attempts to highlight these geopolitical dimensions, which can address the gendered complexities of wartime rape.

When intersectionality is applied to the study of wartime rape, it illustrates how sexual violence is used strategically against marginalized groups to enforce gendered and racial hierarchies, terrorism, domination and control. Intersectional approaches are not trying to disregard the gendered binary power imbalance between men and women.³⁹ Instead, feminist intersectional theories are interested in the intersection of gender with identity factors and situational variables

³⁵ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241; Montoya, "Intersectionality," 47.

³⁶ Masters and Zalewski, "Feminist International Relations," 15–16.

³⁷ Montoya, "Intersectionality," 49.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁹ Alison, "Wartime Sexual Violence," 78.

regarding violence.⁴⁰ Rape in wartime is often intentionally committed by specific men against specific women and men, namely those who belong to an "enemy" group.⁴¹ Intersectional analysis of wartime rape reveals that it is not necessarily based on sexual desire, but is rather a tactic used to target, terrorize and delegitimize another group, making it a weapon of war.

Furthermore, intersectional approaches make space to investigate men's experiences and address the reality that women can also be agents of sexual violence.⁴² Gender identities are social and political constructs⁴³ and militarization is often linked to masculinity and manhood.⁴⁴ Intersectional approaches allow for the gendered aspect of wartime rape to be addressed, where masculinity is inherently tied to aggression and femininity to devaluation.⁴⁵ Rape and sexual violence by men on other men serves as a weapon of feminizing those men, making them weak and highlighting the multifactorial theoretical explanation of targeting the enemy: marginalized communities, ethnic groups and even men, can be terrorized and delegitimized through wartime rape depending on cultural, individual and situational circumstances.

Postcolonial Context and the Haiti-Dominican Republic

⁴⁰ Alison, "Wartime Sexual Violence," 79; Henry, Ward, and Hirshberg, "A Multifactorial Model of Wartime Rape," 543; Koo, "Confronting a Disciplinary Blindness," 528–529.

⁴¹ Alison, "Wartime Sexual Violence," 79.

⁴² Alison, "Wartime Sexual Violence," 84; Swati Parashar, "Violence," in *Gender Matters in Global Politics*, 3rd ed., ed. Shepherd and Hamilton (London: Routledge, 2023), 387.

⁴³ Ali, "Feminist Theorizing", 4.

⁴⁴ Parashar, "Violence," 389; Megan Mackenzie and Nick Wegner, "Militarism and Security," in *Gender Matters in Global Politics*, 3rd ed., ed. Shepherd and Hamilton (London: Routledge, 2023), 292.

⁴⁵ Mackenzie and Wegner, "Militarism and Security," 293; Gentry and Sjoberg, "Terrorism and Political Violence," 370.

Haiti is a uniquely revealing case for this analysis precisely because it exposes the failures of both realist and universal feminist frameworks simultaneously. The country's current crisis of gang violence and sexual terror cannot be understood without situating it within its deep postcolonial history. As the world's first and only successful slave revolution, Haiti's 1804 independence was met with international isolation that shaped centuries of economic and political precarity.⁴⁶ France's demand for 150 million francs in reparations for "lost property" (meaning enslaved people) indebted Haiti for generations and established the structural conditions for the state fragility that enables contemporary gang violence.⁴⁷ Colonial history is not incidental to wartime rape in Haiti; it is foundational to understanding why the state has been unable or unwilling to protect women, why impunity for perpetrators is the norm and why grassroots women's organizations have become the primary source of survivor support.

Haiti's relationship with the Dominican Republic is an additional and often overlooked dimension of its gendered vulnerability. Both nations share the island of Hispaniola,⁴⁸ but their relationship has been shaped by structural racism, anti-Haitian discrimination and state-sanctioned violence. The 2013 Dominican Constitutional Court ruling TC 168-13 retroactively revoked the citizenship of anyone born to undocumented parents since 1929, making more than 133,000

⁴⁶ "Haitian Revolution," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, accessed April 9, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Haitian-Revolution>.

⁴⁷ Reparations Commission, "When France Extorted Haiti: The Greatest Heist in History," accessed April 18, 2026, <https://reparationscomm.org/reparations-news/when-france-extorted-haiti-the-greatest-heist-in-history/>.

⁴⁸ World Bank, "Haiti and the DR: More Than the Sum of Its Parts," June 11, 2012, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2012/06/11/haiti-and-the-dr-more-than-the-sum-of-its-parts>.

Dominicans of Haitian descent stateless.⁴⁹ Mass deportations of Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent have intensified since 2022, returning individuals to a country already in crisis; the Dominican Republic deported over 193,000 Haitians in 2024 alone.⁵⁰ From an intersectional perspective, the geopolitical context is directly relevant to wartime rape in Haiti. Deportees, many of them women and children, are returned to a country where state protection is absent and gang control is near-total. Stateless, economically precarious and without social networks, deported women face compounded vulnerability to sexual violence. The anti-Haitian racism embedded in Dominican deportation policy and the statelessness it produces, intersects with gender and class to further expose already-marginalized Haitian women to the "war system"⁵¹ operating in Port-au-Prince.

Haiti's Gangs, Non-State Armed Actors and the War System

Haiti's gangs and paramilitary groups share significant characteristics as armed non-state actors operating under conditions of weak statehood and political instability, especially in their use of rape as a weapon of war and violence. Although there are differences between gangs and paramilitary groups, both operate beyond state control, possessing autonomous leadership and the capacity to

⁴⁹ Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Center, "Stateless and Vulnerable: The Ongoing Crisis of Haitian Descent in the Dominican Republic," 2024, <https://kennedyhumanrights.org/our-voices/stateless-and-vulnerable-the-ongoing-crisis-of-haitian-descent-in-the-dominican-republic/>.

⁵⁰ Amnesty International, *Dominican Republic: End Racist Deportations of Haitians* (London: Amnesty International, 2024), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/americas/central-america-and-the-caribbean/dominican-republic/report-dominican-republic/>.

⁵¹ Reardon, 1996, cited in Catia Confortini and Annick Wibben, "Peace," in *Gender Matters in Global Politics*, 3rd ed., ed. Shepherd and Hamilton (London: Routledge, 2023), 318.

terrorize.⁵² Haitian gangs in Port-au-Prince, based on the nature of the political phenomenon behind their motives (poverty, economic and political instability) fit within a terrorist profile⁵³ which makes their wartime sexual violence an act of conflict.⁵⁴ Haiti's governments have historically used non-state militias and gangs to control the public through terrorism and violence.⁵⁵ The question of whether Haiti constitutes a 'war' in the realist sense is worth addressing directly because it is an implication of this analysis. In Sarkees and Wayman's *Resort to War*, they define 'war' as requiring at least 1,000 battle-related fatalities within a twelve-month period.⁵⁶ By this measure, Haiti may qualify as the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti (BINUH) estimated over 2,000⁵⁷ killings by criminal groups between January and June 2023 alone, a figure that surpasses the realist threshold.

However, relying on the realist threshold is a problem: the "war system"⁵⁸ refers to the broader militarization of society and its coercive structures. Anchoring the severity of sexual violence to whether a conflict technically qualifies as a 'war' reproduces the exact realist blind spot that this paper critiques. An intersectional feminist framework rejects this classification entirely, because whether Haiti is

⁵² Francesco Manfredi Firmian, "Introduction: State Capture by Militias, Paramilitaries, and Organized Crime," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 36, no. 4 (2025): 3.

⁵³ National Institute of Justice, *Psychology of Terrorism* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 2004), <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/208552.pdf>.

⁵⁴ James Cockayne, "The Futility of Force? Strategic Lessons for Dealing with Unconventional Armed Groups from the UN's War on Haiti's Gangs," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37 (2014): 739–740; Guerby Cyprien, Mohammad Iqbal, and Yimkumla Pongen, "The Ruralization of Haiti's Gang Violence after the Presidential Assassination," *Deviant Behavior* (2025): 2–3.

⁵⁵ Cockayne, "The Futility of Force?" 739.

⁵⁶ Meredith Reid Sarkees and Frank Wayman, *Resort to War: 1816–2007* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2010), 41.

⁵⁷ BINUH, cited in Human Rights Watch, *Living a Nightmare*, 2023.

⁵⁸ Reardon, 1996, cited in Catia Confortini and Annick Wibben, "Peace," in *Gender Matters in Global Politics*, 3rd ed., ed. Shepherd and Hamilton (London: Routledge, 2023), 318.

classified as a ‘war’ or an ‘armed conflict’ is not the main issue to be concerned about. The systematic use of rape as a tool of territorial domination, terror and control constitutes wartime sexual violence; the label matters less than the problem.

In late February of 2024, the two largest gang coalitions, G9 and G-Pèp, formed an alliance known as Viv Ansanm and launched an aggressive mission.⁵⁹ The aim was to destabilize civilian infrastructure across Port-au-Prince, leaving approximately ten percent of the capital under government control.⁶⁰ As BINUH documented, gangs have "continued to use sexual violence to punish, spread fear in, and subjugate the population".⁶¹ Between January and October 2024 alone, nearly 4,000 girls and women reported sexual violence, including gang rape, mostly committed by criminal group members.⁶² These figures represent only the reported cases. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) focal point for sexual violence prevention has noted that for every case reported, thousands more remain undocumented.⁶³ The BINUH and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)⁶⁴ joint report describes how gangs

⁵⁹ Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, "Haiti," 2025, <https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/haiti/>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti and Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Sexual Violence in Port-au-Prince: A Weapon Used by Gangs to Instill Fear* (New York: UN, 2022), <https://haiti.un.org/en/203684-sexual-violence-port-au-prince-weapon-used-gangs-instill-fear>; UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Haiti: Tackling Insecurity 'Utmost Priority,'" September 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/09/haiti-tackling-insecurity-utmost-priority-un-report-says-hundreds-killed>.

⁶² Human Rights Watch, *Haiti: Scarce Protection as Sexual Violence Escalates* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2024), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/11/25/haiti-scarce-protection-as-sexual-violence-escalates>.

⁶³ Jess DiPierro Obert, "'Women's Bodies Weaponized': Haiti Gangs Use Rape in Spiraling Violence," *The Guardian*, November 14, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/14/haiti-gangs-violence-women-rape>.

⁶⁴ BINUH/OHCHR, *Sexual Violence in Port-au-Prince*, 2022.

“use rape, including collective rape, to instill fear, punish, subjugate and inflict pain on local populations with the ultimate goal of expanding their areas of influence”. These methods are forms of strategic violence. Gang leaders in certain areas of Port-au-Prince have asserted territorial authority by specifically targeting the virginity of young girls, illustrating that wartime rape is a calculated tool of power and terror, not a spontaneous act of sexual aggression.⁶⁵

The Multifactorial Intersectional Analysis: Individual, Sociocultural and Situational Factors

Sexual violence in Haiti can be understood through the multifactorial framework (Henry et al., 2004), which distinguishes individual, sociocultural and situational variables, each of which intersects with gender in distinct ways in the Haitian context.

At the individual level, the framework centers on developmental context: the personal histories, economic circumstances and formative experiences that shape individual behaviour and vulnerability. In Haiti, nearly 77 percent of the population lives on less than two U.S. dollars per day, a condition of extreme poverty that drives young people toward gang membership and simultaneously increases the individual vulnerability of women and girls.⁶⁶ When rape complaints must be submitted to gang leaders rather than police in gang-controlled areas, individual women are structurally denied justice.⁶⁷ The intersection of gender and economic status is evident. Impoverished Haitian women are significantly more

⁶⁵ Koo, "Confronting a Disciplinary Blindness," 528.

⁶⁶ Jess DiPierro Obert, "'Women's Bodies Weaponized': Haiti Gangs Use Rape in Spiraling Violence," *The Guardian*, November 14, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/14/haiti-gangs-violence-women-rape>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

likely to be raped than privileged Haitian women, a disparity that a universal feminist or realist framework cannot explain.⁶⁸ Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Pran Men'm clinic in Port-au-Prince, which has treated nearly 17,000 patients over a decade, has documented that some of those patients are boys and men and that more than half of patients were attacked by multiple armed group members, with over 100 individuals attacked by ten or more perpetrators at once.⁶⁹ These individual-level realities demand a micro-political analysis that traditional IR cannot provide.

At the sociocultural level, the framework examines the attitudes, beliefs, norms and values that normalize sexual violence within a given social environment. In Haiti, the cultural norm of hyper-masculinity⁷⁰ (violence as a “manly” characteristic and a negative regard toward women and femininity) is identified as an underlying cause of rape and violence.⁷¹ As KOFAVIV's founding declaration notes, armed groups have “forced their way into our homes, stole everything we owned, raped us and our daughters, burned our houses, and threatened us”.⁷² This pattern illustrates how sociocultural norms that treat women's bodies as extensions of male territorial authority become institutionalized through gang culture. The Tonton Macoutes (the state-sponsored paramilitary force of the Duvalier dictatorships) normalized sexual violence as a political tool, and this

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Médecins Sans Frontières, *MSF Documents Alarming Rise in Sexual Violence in Port-au-Prince* (MSF, 2026), <https://www.msf.org/msf-documents-alarming-rise-sexual-violence-port-au-prince>.

⁷⁰ “Hypermascularity,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, accessed April 14, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/hypermascularity>.

⁷¹ Malamuth et al., 1991, cited in Henry, Ward, and Hirshberg, “A Multifactorial Model of Wartime Rape,” 544; Parashar, “Violence,” 389.

⁷² KOFAVIV, cited in Haiti Support Group, “Ending Violence and Discrimination against Women Is Everyone's Responsibility,” 2021, <https://haitisupportgroup.org/qending-violence-and-discrimination-against-women-is-everyones-responsibilityq/>.

legacy is visible in the methods of contemporary gangs, which continue to use rape to silence opposition and enforce social control.⁷³ Furthermore, the sociocultural stigma surrounding sexual violence means that over 70 percent of women and girls who are victims of gender-based violence (GBV) in Haiti will not speak about it, knowing perpetrators will not be held accountable.⁷⁴ Sociocultural context is constitutive of wartime rape in Haiti.

At the situational level, the framework examines the external environmental triggers that create conditions conducive to sexual violence. The existence of the "war system" in Haiti and the in-group/out-group dichotomization of enemy communities are among the situational factors causing wartime rape.⁷⁵ The lack of safe displacement shelters for more than one million displaced individuals increases the number of rapes that occur, where shelter, sanitation and security are all absent.⁷⁶ A United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) interview with a woman from a camp near Port-au-Prince airport captures this situational reality, where a girl with no parents and no place to stay was forced into survival sex (the exchange of sex for basic human needs or safety) because no other option existed in conditions of absolute deprivation.⁷⁷ In Haiti, displacement and economic insecurity directly intersect with gender to increase vulnerability to sexual

⁷³ Center for Strategic and International Studies, "The Gender-Based Violence Crisis in Haiti," 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/gender-based-violence-crisis-haiti>.

⁷⁴ Civil society worker, cited in CSIS, "The Gender-Based Violence Crisis in Haiti," 2024.

⁷⁵ Henry, Ward, and Hirshberg, "A Multifactorial Model of Wartime Rape," 548.

⁷⁶ UN Women, "Media Factsheet Haiti: Impact of Ongoing Violence on Women and Girls," May 2025, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2025/05/media-factsheet-haiti-impact-of-ongoing-violence-on-women-and-girls>.

⁷⁷ UNHCR, "Haitian Group Offers Safe House for Rape Survivors," October 6, 2011, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/haitian-group-offers-safe-house-rape-survivors>.

violence.⁷⁸ The gang control of over 80 percent of the capital constitutes a situational context of total impunity, where perpetrators operate without fear of legal consequence and survivors have little access to protection or care.⁷⁹

Women in Gangs and the Complication of the Victim/Perpetrator Binary

The question of whether women are also gang members in Haiti is directly relevant to the intersectional argument of this paper, and it is a dimension that a universal feminist framework struggles to accommodate. Women do participate in Haiti's armed groups, though their roles are complex and often coerced. The 2022 BINUH and OHCHR report documents that gangs "coerce young women, girls and sometimes men into becoming their sexual 'partners,'" and that in poverty-stricken communities, families might push their women to have "non-consensual intercourse with gang members in exchange for food, water, and protection."⁸⁰ This coercive association with gang violence complicates any simple reading of women as exclusively victims. Some women become complicit in the system of violence, either through coercion or, in some cases, through genuine affiliation. Intersectional analysis accommodates this complexity in ways that mainstream feminist IR theory does not. Because intersectionality acknowledges that gender identities are social and political constructs,⁸¹ and that militarization is linked to masculinity in ways that women can also perform,⁸² it allows for an analysis that neither victimizes nor exonerates women within gang structures. Instead, intersectional theories examine the structural conditions of poverty, impunity and state collapse that produce these ambiguous roles. This clarity is precisely what is missing from universal feminist

⁷⁸ Laura Hall, "Migration and Displacement," in *Gender Matters in Global Politics*, 3rd ed., ed. Shepherd and Hamilton (London: Routledge, 2023), 275, 277–280.

⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch, *Haiti: Scarce Protection*, 2024.

⁸⁰ BINUH/OHCHR, *Sexual Violence in Port-au-Prince*, 2022.

⁸¹ Ali, "Feminist Theorizing," 4.

⁸² Parashar, "Violence," 389.

analyses, which tend to reproduce the victim/perpetrator binary that intersectionality challenges.

Haitian Women's Voices

A bottom-up feminist methodology demands that the lived experiences of Haitian women be treated as primary analytical evidence. The testimony of KOFATIV's co-founder Eramithe Delva, speaking to the United Nations in 2012, articulates this lived reality: women in displacement camps lived in conditions of structural vulnerability where rape was both “rampant” and unpunished and where the Haitian justice system was absent.⁸³ Between 2004 and 2010, KOFATIV was barely able to get ten rape cases into the justice system.⁸⁴ However, after the 2010 earthquake, the number rose to approximately 200 cases over two years because KOFATIV's presence in the camps allowed more survivors to come forward.⁸⁵ KOFATIV director Jocie Philistin's documentation that sixty-five percent of sexual violence victims are minors, with cases involving babies as young as one to seventeen months, reveals the degree to which age intersects with gender to shape vulnerability in Haiti.⁸⁶

More recently, a 29-year-old survivor documented by Human Rights Watch in 2023 described being gang-raped by members of the G9 coalition after watching her brother and others killed with machetes at a location called “Carrefour la Mort,” or Crossroads of Death.⁸⁷ Another woman, a 27-year-old who was nine months

⁸³ Eramithe Delva, cited in “Group Founded by Rape Survivors Lifts Up Haitian Women,” ReliefWeb, 2012, <https://reliefweb.int/report/haiti/group-founded-rape-survivors-lifts-haitian-women>.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Jocie Philistin, cited in UNHCR, “Haitian Group Offers Safe House for Rape Survivors,” 2011, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/haitian-group-offers-safe-house-rape-survivors>.

⁸⁷ Human Rights Watch, “*Living a Nightmare*,” 2023.

pregnant and living on the street with three children, described going “three to four days without eating” after being raped by G9 members and developing a vaginal infection she could not afford to treat.⁸⁸ A 53-year-old woman treated at MSF's Pran Men'm clinic described being beaten, raped by three men and then watched the men rape her daughter.⁸⁹ These cases are representative of a systematic pattern that the UN, MSF, Human Rights Watch and Haitian civil society organizations have all documented. A mother of four in Brooklyn, Port-au-Prince, told Human Rights Watch after being abducted and gang-raped: "I'm infected with HIV... They shot me in the foot. When I went to the hospital, they discovered I was infected. It was too late".⁹⁰ These accounts make visible what realist scholars cannot see and what universal feminism cannot fully explain: the precise intersection of gender, class, geography and postcolonial abandonment that makes these particular women's bodies sites of political violence.

Conclusion

An intersectional feminist perspective demands that when addressing wartime rape, academia move beyond a traditional realist state-centred lens and recognize the multiple layers of sexual violence in wartime. This paper has argued that traditional realist and mainstream IR feminist theories fail to adequately address the weapon of wartime rape and its gendered implications for lived experiences. Statism overlooks sexual violence in internal state conflicts like Haiti because it cannot see the human beneath the state, while universalism obscures the specific ways in which poverty, race, displacement and postcolonial abandonment compound women's vulnerability.

⁸⁸ Human Rights Watch, *Haiti: Scarce Protection*, 2024.

⁸⁹ MSF, *MSF Documents Alarming Rise in Sexual Violence*, 2026.

⁹⁰ Human Rights Watch, *Haiti: Scarce Protection*, 2024.

Haiti's context of colonial debt, anti-Haitian racism at its borders, near-total gang control and the almost complete absence of state protection creates conditions under which the limitations of both realist and universal feminist frameworks are most exposed. An intersectional feminist perspective, applied through the multifactorial framework, reveals the multi-layered features of sexual violence in Haiti and moves beyond simple binaries of gendered victim/perpetrator dynamics. It acknowledges that women can be coerced into gang-adjacent roles, that men are also victims of wartime rape, that class and displacement status shape vulnerability as powerfully as gender and that postcolonial history is an analytical foundation.

Grassroots organizations like KOFAVIV, founded by survivors for survivors, embody the bottom-up methodology this paper advocates. Their testimony, their documentation and their advocacy represent the kind of political consciousness that intersectional feminist research calls for.⁹¹ When Eramithe Delva describes women living in harsh and degrading conditions with no recourse, she is articulating the failure of every framework, state, international and academic that has refused to take these experiences seriously. Rape is not an inevitable, unfortunate by-product of war; rape is a weapon of war in itself.

⁹¹ Montoya, "Intersectionality," 49.

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