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FROM HATE TO HARM: HOW RUSSIAN
FORCES IN AFRICA TARGET WOMEN

From Harm to Hate: How Russian Forces in Africa Target Women

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This report contains descriptions of conflict-related sexual violence, including references to physical and sexual assault, sexual and gendered narratives, and other forms of abuse. Some readers may find this content distressing.

CIR has blurred personal images and redacted most links and the names of Telegram channels due to privacy concerns and to avoid amplifying harmful content. The list of examples on incidents of conflict-related sexual violence has also been removed. Upon request, CIR can share any relevant data.

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This investigation examines how incidents of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) committed by Russian-controlled forces¹ in Africa relate to online discourse. By collecting and categorising online posts containing gendered narratives targeting African women² and offline incidents of CRSV, the investigation explores how gender-based violence by Russian-controlled forces manifests online and offline and the relationship between the two.

The investigation analyses an indicative sample of CRSV incidents alongside posts and images collected from Telegram channels run by military bloggers affiliated with Russian military deployments in Africa (hereafter referred to as Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channels). The main findings of the investigation are:

- **Online**, Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channels use gendered, racist, and sexual narratives, as well as hate speech, in their online discourse to dehumanise, humiliate, and sexualise African women. This includes images that objectify African women, with captions that use derogatory language to describe them. The hate speech, derogatory language, and narratives can be viewed as forms of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV).
- These posts received significant engagement, generating hundreds of thousands of views and thousands of reactions and comments endorsing the content. The comment section often reflects the narratives in posts, with users leaving comments that reduce African women to mere objects of disgust and/or fetishisation. This all indicates that these views are not niche and were widely endorsed within the community.
- These posts were observed only in PMC Wagner Group (Wagner)/Africa Corps (AC)-affiliated milblogger channels. These channels serve as recruitment platforms or discussion forums for personnel. While they have direct links to Wagner and AC, they are not the groups' official communication channels. These narratives stand in sharp contrast to the language used in official channels run directly by Wagner, AC, or Russian influence vectors like African

¹ "Russian-controlled forces" refers to Private Military Company (PMC) Wagner, a Russian mercenary structure under the effective control of the Kremlin, active today in the Central African Republic (CAR). It also refers to Africa Corps (AC), an alleged Russian military intelligence (GRU) initiative to establish an expeditionary force under the Russian Ministry of Defence, intended to reinforce and expand Russia's military-diplomatic influence in Africa and carry out tasks previously implemented by Wagner. AC operates in Mali, Libya, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Equatorial Guinea.

² For the purpose of this investigation, the term "African women" is used to reflect the framing found in online discourse by Russian-controlled forces in Africa. These actors refer to women from Africa in generalised terms, without distinguishing between nationalities and/or ethnicities.

Initiative (AI). The latter focus solely on soft propaganda, such as Russia's positive actions toward women in Africa.

- **Offline**, CIR identified 26 publicly reported cases of CRSV by Russian personnel in Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR) between January 2021 and April 2025. These cases included rape, humiliation, psychological abuse, the burning of bodies, and severe injuries.
- Although information remains limited or entirely absent, it is highly likely that similar cases of CRSV are taking place in other African countries where Russian forces are directly engaged in conflict. CRSV against women is a common tactic used to humiliate, control, and destabilise communities. The lack of accessible open-source information on CRSV complicates efforts to understand the full extent of the issue, as many incidents remain **unreported** due to fear and stigma.
- While there is some evidence of online discourse mirroring offline action, it is not possible to establish a direct causal link between the statements and actions of the Russian mercenary structure, Wagner, or its successor AC. However, the findings are consistent with the broader evidence base on how online discourse normalises and enables offline violence by dehumanising and sexualising women and girls based on their identity.
- The continuity in personnel and use of online spaces between Wagner and AC could suggest that AC is likely to continue Wagner's previous online and offline behaviours. These findings, therefore, remain relevant, even after the transition from Wagner to AC.

2 INTRODUCTION

Since 2017, Russia has expanded its security footprint in several African countries (including Mali, the CAR, Sudan, Burkina Faso, and Libya) through [Wagner](#), offering the various governments combat support, training, and resource site protection in return for cash or concessions. Following the death of Wagner's leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, in 2023, Moscow began replacing Wagner with AC, a Ministry of Defence (MoD)-controlled military structure composed mainly of regular soldiers and contractors, which provides the same services under direct Russian state control. According to Russian military recruitment websites, approximately half of AC's personnel are former Wagner employees, including prominent ex-Wagner commanders.

While AC presents itself as a new entity, the continuity in personnel and shared online spaces suggests that AC personnel are likely to continue Wagner's previous online and offline behaviours. For example, ex-Wagner personnel are regularly prioritised for recruitment by AC Telegram channels. Before Wagner was replaced

by AC, Telegram channels operated by Wagner personnel were noted by CIR analysts to spread harmful, gendered, and sexual narratives targeting African women. These unofficial channels associated with Wagner continue to operate and spread gendered content from Russian personnel deployed in Africa and their supporters back home.

[Media outlets](#) have reported on Wagner's human rights abuses and atrocities committed across Africa, including targeting and torturing civilians and looting and burning homes. An article from [Law Fare](#), a US platform covering national security issues, describes how Wagner personnel have become "war influencers," posting "evidence of war crimes on their Telegram channels". It describes how, in addition to documenting atrocities, they also share "safari photographs and animal videos, descriptions of the local cuisine, cool new weapons and vehicles, and Wagner members hanging out with each other." The type of language and tone shared with these images reflects the "jocular attitude of the mainstream manosphere with 'boys being boys,' cracking jokes, and bragging of their conquests." However, little attention has been paid to how Wagner personnel portray African women and girls in their channels, and how such portrayals might influence their offline behaviour.

While there has been some reporting on CRSV involving Russian-controlled forces in Africa, such incidents remain significantly [underreported](#), creating a critical gap in the evidence base. This report contributes to addressing that gap by documenting incidents of CRSV involving Wagner personnel. It also examines online discourse in Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channels,³ with a particular focus on the gendered, sexual, and racist narratives used to target African women. These narratives, alongside the hate speech and derogatory language used in the channels, can all be considered forms of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV - refer to [Annexe I](#) for an explanation). The aim of the investigation is therefore to strengthen the evidence on gender-based violence online and offline and to explore if and how online narratives can enable, normalise, and potentially escalate offline violence.

³ Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger refers to digital assets with connections to Russian military deployments in Africa. These typically present as [amateur military correspondents](#), or 'milbloggers', but their channels are used as recruitment and discussion platforms for members of Wagner and AC. These assets are often referred to as "Wagner-affiliated channels" because many show clear ties to Wagner, like using Wagner symbols and supporting Wagner figures. However, they also seem to be used more broadly by members affiliated with both Wagner and AC, reflecting the personnel overlap between them. For instance, assets affiliated with Wagner have continued to receive user-generated content (UGC) and on-the-ground updates from members based in Mali after Wagner's withdrawal.

3 ONLINE DISCOURSE: AFRICAN WOMEN THROUGH THE GAZE OF THE WHITE RUSSIAN MALE

CIR manually collected posts and images shared in Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channels on Telegram that featured gendered narratives targeting African women between 1 January 2024 and 7 July 2025 (see [Annexe I](#) for a description of the Methodology). A qualitative approach was used to analyse the data, as it enabled a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the online discourse in these channels. This approach also allowed for the inclusion of image-based content that could not be assessed through automated analysis. CIR also conducted a manual comparison of this sample set with posts from Wagner, AC, and Africa Initiative official channels relating to women in Africa.

Analysis of the content and comments on these posts in milblogger channels demonstrated the use of sexualised and racist narratives to dehumanise, sexualise, and objectify African women. Much of the content posted featured images of African women, often accompanied by captions that include derogatory terms and phrases used to refer to African women, such as “local aunties”, “Black Valkyries”, “tanned girls”, “chocolate panthers” or “local chocolates”.

The key narratives identified were divided into: narratives that humiliate and/or degrade African women; that sexualise and objectify them; that portray them as commodities for male pleasure and service; posts that deny or deflect attention from Wagner’s human rights abuses; and posts that use African women to entice Russian personnel to return to Africa. These narratives are explored in more detail in the following section.

3.1 NARRATIVES THAT HUMILITATE AND/OR DEGRADE AFRICAN WOMEN

One of the Telegram channels circulated a series of “Tales of a Mercenary” posts (available on request) that describe alleged encounters in which Wagner personnel coerce local women to expose their breasts in exchange for basic goods like sardines or bottled water. CIR could not verify whether the stories were fabricated or based on real events. Regardless of their authenticity, they demean and diminish African women. Simultaneously, they celebrate Wagner’s influence, reinforcing a narrative of dominance, exploitation, and impunity, where the men can operate without repercussions.

The stories are often presented as a form of entertainment among Wagner members. For example, one user wrote:

“I drove along the same route quite often, and from a long stay in one place, and passing many times along the same villages, boredom, heat, the same thing. And

I, with my partner, came up with [a form of] entertainment. [...] One day, on another trip, we stopped near a village, which was a big event for the local population. Women and children always come up to us because they know that Russians are good people and will give them something. But this time, I decided that to give them water, they had to give something in return, so I asked the local women to show their breasts. They refused out of decency, to which I replied that there would be no water. They changed their minds and realised that showing their breasts was no big deal. [...] showing their breasts costs them nothing. The local population there has no morals [...].”

The post received 2K views and 154 comments, most of which were supportive of the use of forced nudity. One notable comment read: “A woman’s chest can brighten up the most boring day 😊 Author, did the prettiest chest get more water?))”. Users also engaged with the post by using emojis, including 21 thumbs-up, two monkey covering eyes, and 71 beaming faces with smiling eyes emojis.

3.2 NARRATIVES THAT SEXUALISE AND OBJECTIFY AFRICAN WOMEN

Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channels frequently share posts with narratives that sexualise and objectify African women. Numerous posts feature images of local women treated as “trophies”, often shared by users posing with them as if they were possessions to display. These posts are often shared with racist captions such as “white uncle with local chocolate”⁴ (figure 1, left) and “white uncles in the slums of Tatooine”⁵ (figure 1, right).

Figure 1 (left) was viewed 124.2K times, with over 800 positive reactions, predominantly Wagner-badge stickers, fire emojis and thumbs up. Figure 1 (right) was viewed 31.8K times and received 42 comments. The main user reactions included 423 Wagner-badge stickers, 151 fire emojis, and 59 ‘hang loose’ sign emojis.

⁴ Wagner personnel refer to themselves as “white uncles”.

⁵ Wagner personnel call African regions “Tatooine” a reference to the harsh and lawless desert world in the Star Wars films.



Figure 1: Screenshots of posts shared in Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channels: [Left] The image appears to show a Caucasian male with his face hidden by an emoji standing among three young African women. The post was shared on 19 June 2024 (source: CIR database, available on request); [Right] The image, which appears to show two armed Caucasian males posing with a young woman in traditional clothing, was shared on 7 July 2025 (source: CIR database, available on request).

Other posts invite users to rate African women's appearances with captions like "African beauty for the feed. Rate from 1 to 10" or present "examples" of local African women, showcasing their beauty and exoticness, reducing women to sexual objects for online entertainment. For example, figure 2 (left) shows two African women with their backs to the camera, standing in water. The post was shared on 21 May 2024 with the caption: "Chocolate panthers". In figure 2 (right), the post shows a collection of images of African women. Shared on 28 February 2024, its caption reads: "Local women. Bamako, Mali. Our days. Hands on the table".

Figure 2 (left) was viewed 18.9K times and received 178 comments. The main emojis used by users were the thumbs-up emoji (381), the palm emoji (65), the banana emoji (58), and the fire emoji (45). Figure 2 (right) was viewed 2.59K times and received five comments and dozens of emojis.



Figure 2: Screenshots of posts shared in Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channels: [Left] Images of two African women with their backs to the camera, standing in water, shared on 21 May 2024 (source: CIR database, available on request); [Right] A collection of images of African women, shared on 28 February 2024 (source: CIR database, available on request).

Narratives shared in posts can often be contradictory. In contrast to the images above, Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channels have also shared posts that demean women, mocking their appearance or calling them unattractive. Figure 3 provides an example of this, using an “expectation vs. reality” format, comparing a young African model to an older tribal woman. The post, which was shared on 12 September 2024, reads: “When I visited Dalniy. Expectation vs reality”. The post received 25.5K views and 14 comments. The main emojis users reacted with were: beaming face with smiling eyes (747), palm tree (40), and laughing-skeleton sticker (29).

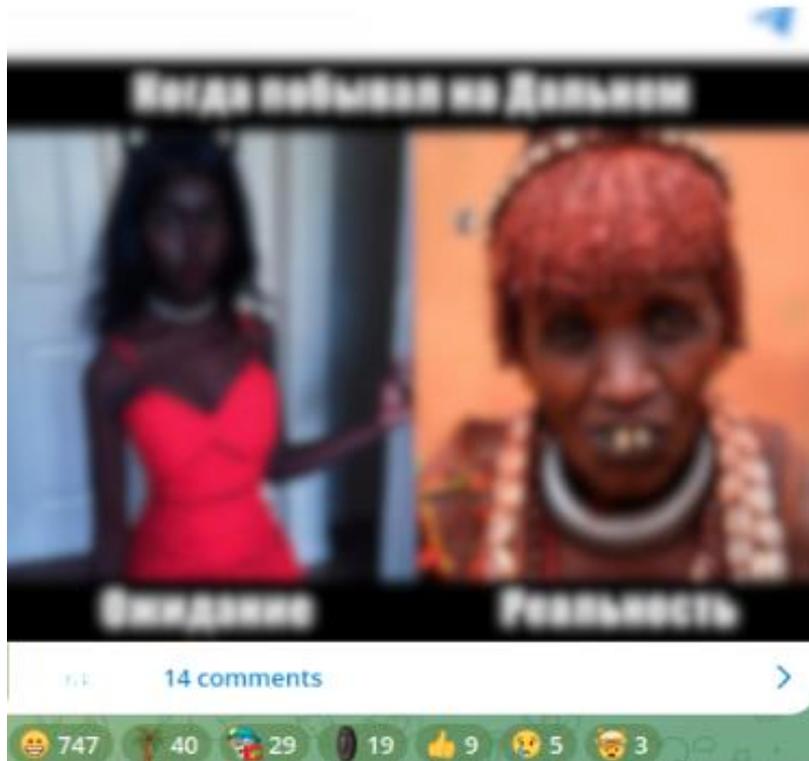


Figure 3: Screenshot of a post shared on 12 September 2024 from a Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channel. The post's caption reads: "When I visited Dalniy. Expectation vs reality" (source: CIR database, available on request).

In one Telegram channel, posts about the Miss CAR 2025 competition were shared. These included images of the contestants alongside captions that congratulated the winners or provided information about the location and time of the event. While the content is relatively benign, it could be considered as part of a broader pattern observed across Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channels – namely, the recurring presentation of African women as “exotic”. Alongside other posts that highlight “local African women,” this imagery can subtly reinforce objectifying or romanticised narratives, even in the absence of derogatory language.

3.3 NARRATIVES THAT PORTRAY AFRICAN WOMEN AS COMMODITIES FOR MALE PLEASURE AND SERVICE

Videos and images of African women twerking or in highly sexualised poses are often used to “invite outsiders” to come to Africa. These reinforce harmful stereotypes, framing African women as hypersexual, submissive, and accessible to foreign men. Captions frequently reference the idea that African women are “waiting for white uncles,” often accompanied by images of women cooking, dancing, or passively waiting for men to return from work.

One post (figure 4, top) shows two seemingly AI-generated images depicting a Caucasian man in a military cap adorned with the Russian flag – potentially

representing Wagner personnel – embracing two African women. The post was shared on 14 March 2025 with the caption: “In between tough tasks, our Vikings like to have a good rest.” The post was viewed 31.8K times and received 140 comments and over 900 positive reactions.

Figure 4 (bottom-left) shows two African women standing near a truck. The post, shared on 13 January 2025, was captioned: “tanned girls wish you sweet dreams and are waiting for white uncles far away [in Africa]”. The post was viewed 28K times and received 54 comments and 608 endorsing reactions.

The final screenshot in figure 4 (bottom-right) shows a 23 December 2024 post featuring a woman in a sexually suggestive position. The caption reads: “A local woman in one of the villages far away, seeing hungry white uncles in multicam, warms up food for distinguished guests there.” The post was viewed 61.2K times and received 86 comments and 1,200 positive reactions.





Figure 4: Screenshots of posts shared in Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channels: [Top] Post of two seemingly AI-generated images depicting a Caucasian man in a military cap adorned with the Russian flag, embracing two African women. The post was shared on 14 March 2025 (source: CIR database, available on request); [Bottom left] Post showing two African women standing near a truck, was shared on 13 January 2025 (source: CIR database, available on request); [Bottom right] Post shared on 23 December 2024 featuring a woman in a sexually suggestive position (source: CIR database, available on request).

Comments on the posts included both sexual and racist comments, with derogatory language and racial stereotypes being used against African women. Examples include: "they are not tanned, they are burnt," "bathe, clean, soak in bleach," "if you soak in bleach there'll be nothing left to f**k," "the goal is to undress them!," "this is how a woman should meet her man from work," "do not f**k with the local flora and fauna," "better not f**k the monkey," "I won't f**k this miracle there, at most I'll jerk off at a distance" and "in hot countries, there are charmers, hot tanned women who are ready to brighten the evenings of white uncles for sardines and francs".

Users also allude to going to Africa and finding a second wife. In the comment sections of such posts, users often suggest that Russian personnel who marry African women must "discipline" them and ensure they display "acceptable" behaviour toward their husbands. Figure 5 shows a mercenary standing next to an African woman, and the caption reads: "Every white man [who is] far away misses women. And some find a second wife here." The post was viewed 30.1K times, received 268 comments, and users reacted with similar emojis to the other posts: the beaming face with smiling eyes emoji (659), the laughing emoji (176), and the Wagner-badge sticker (101).

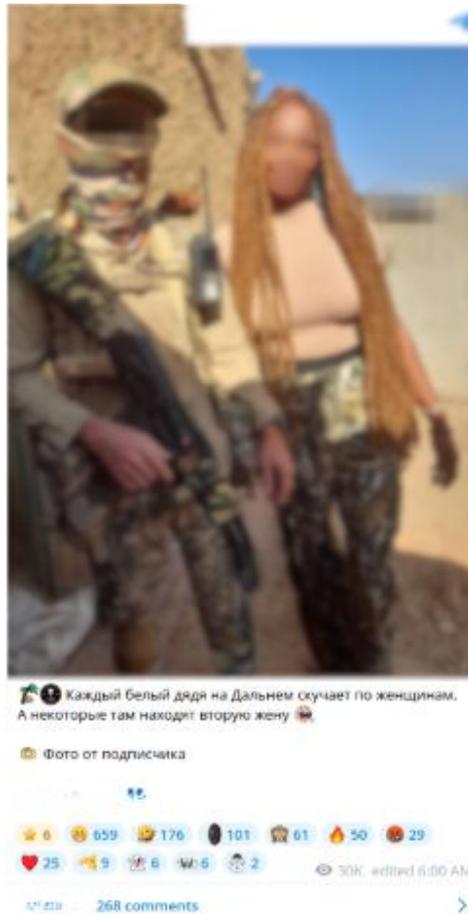


Figure 5: Screenshot of a post shared in a Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channel. The post, which shows an armed Caucasian man and an African woman, was shared on 15 March 2025 (source: CIR database, available on request).

3.4 AFRICAN WOMEN USED TO ENCOURAGE RUSSIAN PERSONNEL TO RETURN

One of the Telegram channels shared several videos between August and September 2024, featuring African women calling out the names of Russian men and urging them to return to Africa. These videos included captions such as: “Maksim, you are awaited [in the land] far away! Contact the recruiters, they will tell you what to do next! Previously, they were looking for Pavel, Alexander, Mikhail, Nikolai, Roman, Yuri, Denis, Dmitry, and Andrey.” In most of these videos, one or more African women, dressed in traditional clothing, call the (alleged) Wagner personnel by name and say, in Russian, “Where are you? Why don’t you write back? I miss you”.⁶ These videos were highly likely used for recruitment purposes

⁶ To create these videos, the Telegram channel seems to be using a service run by a page called “Salam Afrika” who writes messages on boards for money. Given the messages written in Russian on their boards, the target audience seems to be Russian. CIR researchers were not able to verify whether the Wagner-affiliated Telegram channel paid for the videos.

or to entice personnel to return to Africa. Figure 6 shows an example of one of these videos, featuring an African woman dressed in traditional clothing and speaking in Russian to the viewer. The video received 27.1K views, 47 comments, and hundreds of endorsing emojis such as thumbs up and kissing emojis.

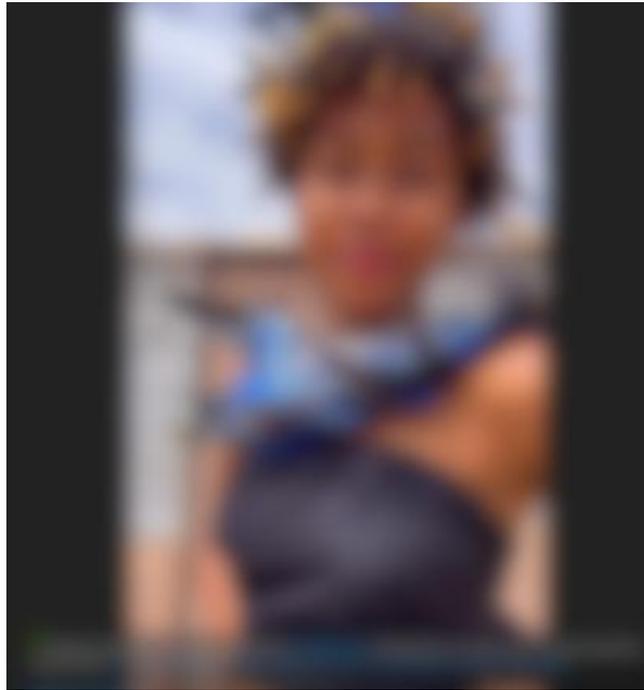


Figure 6: Screenshot of a video shared on a Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channel. The video was shared on 20 September 2024 (source: CIR database, available on request).

3.5 WHATABOUTISM OR DENIAL AND DISTRACTION

One tactic employed in Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channels is to deny and deflect attention away from claims that Wagner personnel are raping African women. They do so by sharing posts that mention Wagner personnel celebrating and handing out flowers to African women on International Women’s Day and calling out Western men or organisations for raping African women. For example, figure 7 was shared with a caption reporting on an international investigation into reports of sexual violence by MINUSCA staff in 2022 and 2023. The post received 7,986 views and users reacted with the following emojis: the fire emoji (47), the clown emoji (9), and the red heart emoji (1).



Figure 7: Screenshot of a post shared in a Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channel on 18 October 2024 (source: CIR database, available on request).

3.6 CONTRAST WITH OFFICIAL NARRATIVES

In contrast to the gendered, sexual, and racist narratives identified in Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channels, official Wagner mouthpieces and AC and/or African Initiative⁷ channels do not appear to be spreading similar narratives. As these channels represent official communications, they appear to follow an editorial line that focuses on soft propaganda, sharing posts that highlight cultural events and activities with positive messaging either featuring or targeted at women and girls in Africa. These include emphasising African influencers celebrating Russia and

⁷ African Initiative is a Russian strategic communications project carrying out information and influence operations in Africa.

President Putin online, promoting events on African Fashion Week in Moscow, and celebrating International Women's Day.

4 OFFLINE INCIDENTS: REPORTS OF CRSV

The hate speech, derogatory language, and narratives shared in Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channels also represent forms of gender-based violence or TFGBV. Analysing this online discourse can contribute towards understanding offline incidents.

International organisations and media outlets have reported on Russian forces committing CRSV incidents in Africa. This includes a 2023 report published by the [United Nations Security Council](#) that documented how Malian troops and their foreign security partners, believed to be part of Wagner, used human rights abuses and violence against women to spread terror as part of the decade-long conflict between the government and insurgency groups. The report found that sexual violence was being used as a war tactic and in a “systematic” manner. However, this issue remains significantly understudied. Although various datasets and reports capture incidents of CRSV across African conflicts, many do not assign responsibility to specific actors, particularly in cases involving foreign military forces. This lack of attribution, combined with the considerable challenges in identifying and reporting CRSV, contributes to a gap in the evidence base.

To address this gap, CIR collected reports of CRSV by Russian personnel, either directly through open-source monitoring of social media or from secondary sources, such as media reports, spanning from January 2021 to April 2025. CIR documented 26 reported instances of CRSV by Russian personnel across two African countries: Mali and the CAR – the only countries where sufficient qualitative data was available.

Given the significant challenges in identifying and reporting CRSV, these cases are highly likely to be an underrepresentation of the true extent of the issue. As noted by the UNSC, these challenges include: “survivors’ inability or unwillingness to report the incident due to social, cultural, or religious factors, and fear of retaliation; their lack of access to medical care or health providers; limited domestic investigations, and absence of a judicial response.”⁸

⁸ This is not just the case for African countries. Global figures indicate that most women do not report rape or sexual violence. In the United States of America, the [National Crime Victimization Survey](#) found that from 2006 to 2010, 65% of rapes or sexual assaults were not reported to police. In the United Kingdom, [the Cambridge Rape Crisis Centre](#) cited that five in six women do not report rape, which means only around 17% of rapes are reported.

Reporting rape or discussing experiences of sexual violence can carry significant stigma and shame, leading to underreporting in both formal reports and informal testimonies. Given the actions of Russian-controlled forces in Mali and CAR, it is highly likely that personnel from Russian groups in Africa are carrying out other similar instances of CRSV, but data might be lacking due to underreporting.

CIR's analysis identified multiple types of CRSV by Russian personnel, including: reports of rape; claims of public humiliation and psychological abuse; claims of bodies being burned; and claims of women being severely injured (a separate file with a more complete list of incidents is available upon request). These cases were selected according to two criteria: *type of violence* – acts of violence specifically targeting women – and *perpetrators* – incidents committed by Russian forces, alone and/or alongside a local actor (for a more detailed description of the methodology see [Annexe I](#)).

4.1 REPORTS OF RAPE

Since 2021, a number of international media outlets have shared reports of Russian forces, particularly those affiliated with Wagner, raping African women or coercing them into sexual acts.⁹

In May 2021, [VICE](#) documented testimonies from survivors in Bangui, CAR, who described being arrested, forced to perform oral sex, and raped by Russian forces. That same year, [CBS News](#) interviewed a man who said Russian troops raped his sisters. This reportedly occurred after the Russians had taken over Bambari, an African gold mining town. [The Guardian](#) reported that Russian forces in other villages in CAR had raped women and girls on their farms. One result of this was reportedly food shortages, with women avoiding going to the fields and markets.

In 2022, [Business Insider](#) reported that mercenaries belonging to Wagner were accused of raping women who had just given birth at a maternity ward in CAR. It reported that “three Russian Wagner mercenaries stormed the maternity ward and began to sexually assault women on admission”. An [Associated Press](#) report in April 2024 quoted a local fighter who described witnessing six Russian men rape a woman in a tent in Bambari. He recounted that after the assault, the men gave the victims canned food, such as sardines, and bottled water.

In Mali, the pattern of abuse differs slightly, with Wagner personnel frequently acting in coordination with the Malian Armed Forces (Forces Armées Maliennes, FAMA). In addition to looting and the destruction of properties in several regions around Mali (including Tombouctou, Kidal, Kayes, Mopti, and Gao), they also committed acts of sexual violence against women. In one reported incident from March 2024, the Fulani, an ethnic minority in the Sahel, were targeted with

⁹ This data is consistent with wider patterns of CRSV reported by the UN in these countries.

violence. The incident, corroborated by CIR, said that “FAMa and Wagner, guided by Dogon hunters, killed 20 men and young people, all Fulanis.¹⁰ They raped 11 Fulani women and took away 50 Fulani people and children.”¹¹ Across the Sahel, national militaries and their foreign partners have been [accused](#) of committing mass atrocities against Fulani civilians under the pretext of counterterrorism operations. This incident underscores how ethnic targeting can intersect with sexual violence.

4.2 CLAIMS OF PUBLIC HUMILIATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE

In August 2024, CIR corroborated an incident which featured a video, reportedly found on the phone of a member of Wagner killed in Tin Zaouatine. The video, with no specific date or location, was circulated widely on X and allegedly shows Wagner and FAMa personnel interrogating a woman. During the interrogation, conducted by a Caucasian male speaking French, likely a member of Wagner, the woman is questioned about the whereabouts of armed fighters and weaponry hidden in the village. Despite her repeated denials of any knowledge of their whereabouts, the interrogators threaten to hand her over to the gendarmerie if she does not cooperate. To further intimidate her, they demand she undress, threatening to expose her naked to the entire village. The video features at least three Caucasian men in military clothes, in all probability Wagner personnel, in an environment that resembles that of Northern Mali. This incident, corroborated by CIR, highlights how Wagner and FAMa forces are targeting women in Mali with public humiliation and psychological intimidation, demonstrating that acts of sexual violence are not the only tactic used by Russian forces.

A similar incident occurred in December 2024, with a WhatsApp group claiming that Wagner stopped women, children, and men and searched their underwear in two villages in the region of Koulikoro, Mali.

4.3 CLAIMS OF THE BURNING OF BODIES

CIR documented three incidents in October 2024 involving the killing and burning of elderly women in their homes. These events reportedly took place in the Kidal region of Mali and appear to have been carried out jointly by Wagner personnel and FAMa troops. The deliberate targeting of individuals who were both women and elderly may indicate a broader pattern of gendered and age-based violence.

¹⁰ Data analysed by CIR is divided into 'claimed', 'corroborated' and 'verified'. If investigators are unable to find UGC but can identify multiple reliable sources that claim an incident has occurred, the data is classified as 'corroborated' (see Annexe I for more information on the methodology).

¹¹ According to [RFI](#), a French radio, Dogon hunters are “hunters regularly used by the army as guides”.

According to research from the US investigative group [Sentry](#), the burning of bodies could be part of a broader set of tactics employed by Wagner. The report said that Wagner has trained soldiers and militias in the CAR to “torture and strangle prisoners and burn people alive.” This could suggest that the burning of civilians, including elderly women, could be part of Wagner’s strategy to subdue the population with terror.

4.4 CLAIMS OF WOMEN BEING SEVERELY INJURED

Throughout 2024, CIR documented multiple incidents alleging that women were violently beaten, tortured, and seriously injured by both FAMA and Wagner personnel. In these cases, it was not possible to establish whether they were gender motivated or reflective of the violence inflicted on local communities. These reports originated from various regions across Mali, including Tombouctou, Gao, Kidal, and Mopti. In one specific incident on 28 February 2025, two women were reportedly wounded by FAMA and Wagner in the “Adas ag Islamabe camp” in Eghacharsadidan, in Kidal, Mali. According to the documentation, they were shot at by FAMA and Wagner personnel, with one of the women succumbing to her injuries.

5 UNDERSTANDING THE ONLINE-OFFLINE RELATIONSHIP

While there is no direct causation between online content and offline actions, posts or narratives that are gendered, sexual, and racist in nature can contribute toward normalising and enabling violent actions against women and girls. The repeated humiliation, dehumanisation, and sexualisation of African women in these posts may desensitise Russian personnel, creating an enabling environment for similar abuses to occur on the ground. This finding is consistent with the wider evidence base on the relationship between online and offline gender-based violence, and dehumanisation, sexualisation, and CRSV.

Research by the [Wilson Center](#) and the [EU DisinfoLab](#) underscores the complex relationship between online and offline spaces, finding that online spaces do not merely mirror offline gender-based violence but often amplify and accelerate it. Their research in particular highlights how sustained online attacks on public-facing women (journalists, female politicians, etc.) can legitimise and embolden coordinated offline violence.

Similarly, in their guide to “Technology-facilitated gender-based violence”, the [United Nations Population Fund](#) (UNFPA) explores the online-offline continuum of violence, claiming that violence and abuse that starts in the digital space may lead to offline violence and vice versa. The guide emphasises that gender-based online abuse and hate speech can “exacerbate, trigger, and drive offline violence,” which may take many forms, including “honour-based killings” and “attacks on female

public figures”. In [conflicts](#), it can “incite CRSV and atrocity crimes (such as genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes).”

In the context of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, both state and non-state Russian actors have spread [identity-based disinformation](#) targeting Ukrainians, with the aim of undermining Ukraine’s efforts in the conflict. A report by [UNFPA](#) explains how Russia has used gendered disinformation campaigns to “emasculate Ukrainian men and sexualise Ukrainian women, increasing their risk of conflict-related sexual violence”. [Russian state and non-state actors](#) frequently use disinformation campaigns and manipulated images to discredit, silence, and undermine women, leading to threats to their safety.

In the dataset, there were examples of online narratives and violence mirroring and reinforcing offline violence. For example, in the Tales of a Mercenary series, a post describes coercing a local woman into exposing herself in exchange for food. The description of what happens in the post mirrors real-world reports of CRSV, such as the documented case in Bambari involving Russian men raping a woman and then giving her canned goods. A video depicting the interrogation of a local woman and the threat of forced nudity by Wagner and FAMA personnel showed how psychological abuse and humiliation centred around the female form, a theme notable in online narratives, was used as a tactic of intimidation and coercion. The sexualisation, objectification, and humiliation of women noted as a key theme in the online discourse can also be seen in reports of abuse by the UN, which included incidents of Wagner personnel forcibly undressing and photographing women and girls naked.

6 CONCLUSION

While this investigation did not aim to show a direct causation between online content and offline violence, it demonstrates how online narratives can contribute towards normalising and enabling offline violence against African women.

The gendered, sexual, and racist narratives shared in Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channels are used to humiliate, sexualise, and degrade African women, turning them into objects of fetish, disgust, and desire. These narratives also glorify Wagner’s power, reinforcing a narrative of dominance, exploitation, and impunity, where personnel can act without consequences. This is precisely what happens offline, with Wagner personnel sexually and psychologically abusing African women.

The investigation also reveals the underlying attitudes and behaviours that Russian personnel deployed in Africa have towards African women and girls – attitudes that stand in sharp contrast to the more positive actions promoted by the official Russian communication channels.

7 ANNEXE I: METHODOLOGY

To understand both the online discourse and the offline incidents involving Wagner's actions against African women, CIR used a qualitative approach to analysing the data. This approach enabled a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the online discourse shared in Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channels. This included:

- Collection and analysis of posts from relevant Telegram channels and the selection and analysis of documented offline incidents of CRSV.
- An analysis of the comment section under posts identified as containing gendered, racist, and sexual narratives targeting African women.
- Discourse and narrative analysis used to categorise and understand the content shared on Telegram. This includes narrative grouping or categorisation, with data being categorised into gendered, racist, or sexual narratives. It is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive, as narratives can overlap in posts.

7.1 ONLINE SECTION

For the online section of the investigation, CIR collected posts and images shared in official and Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger Telegram channels from 1 January 2024 to 7 July 2025. From an existing list of Telegram channels compiled for previous CIR research, only those that featured posts containing gendered, sexual, or racist narratives were included in the data collection. The channels can be divided into:

1. Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channels. This refers to digital assets with connections to Russian military deployments in Africa. These typically present as amateur military correspondents, or 'milblogger', but their channels are used as recruitment and discussion platforms for members of Wagner and AC. These assets are often referred to as "Wagner-affiliated channels" because many display overt affiliations with Wagner, such as the use of Wagner symbols and support for Wagner figures like Yevgeni Prigozhin. However, they appear to be used more broadly by members affiliated with both Wagner and AC, reflecting the overlap in personnel between them. For example, assets affiliated with Wagner have continued to receive user-generated content (UGC) and on-the-ground updates directly from members based in Mali after Wagner's withdrawal. These channels are open and do not require users to subscribe.
2. AC, Wagner, AI official channels. Used for the groups' official messaging. These channels are open and do not require users to subscribe.

For this investigation, only posts and images that referred to African women were included in the data collection. The use of dehumanising language, hate speech, and the objectification and sexualisation of women characterised this content. Posts that targeted Russian or Ukrainian women were excluded from the dataset.

The [UNFPA](#) defines TFGBV as “an act of violence perpetrated by one or more individuals that is committed, assisted, aggravated and amplified in part or fully by the use of information and communication technologies or digital media against a person on the basis of gender”. It can take many forms, including sextortion, image-based abuse, doxxing, and hate speech. The narratives, derogatory language, and hate speech used in Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channels and analysed in this investigation can be considered forms of TFGBV.

A set of keywords was used to collect the data; however, manual research was also required, as many sexual, gendered, and racist narratives were shared through images, often without accompanying captions containing relevant keywords. Consequently, manual research of the photo sections in selected Telegram channels was conducted to ensure comprehensive data collection. The list of keywords combined terms from CIR’s previous gender-related projects with new terms identified in Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels. These included:

- Derogatory terms used against women, such as: “b***h”, “s**t”, “w***e”;
- Sexualised references to women’s bodies: “boobs”, “backyard”, “p***y”;
- Terms with racial or dehumanising connotations: “chocolate”, “monkey”, “black fruit”;
- And terms used explicitly in Wagner channels: “tanned girls”, “local aunties”, “black valkyries”, and “chocolate panthers”.

The data collected for the online section was catalogued in a database, noting the following classifiers: Link to post, Date published, Country, Name of channel, translation of post, analysis, narrative (includes racist, gendered, sexual), number of views, additional information, and notes from the comment section. Where possible, engagement (measured in the emojis used to react to posts, views, and the number of comments) has been added to the analysis. While this does not give an adequate representation of the impact or reach of the posts, it shows that users engage with this type of content.

7.2 OFFLINE SECTION

The offline section of the investigation consisted of incidents collected from CIR’s open-source monitoring and secondary sources (including a literature review of relevant media articles). A total of 26 incidents were identified and collected between January 2021 and April 2025.

CIR investigated 19 incidents targeting African women. CIR's [verification methodology](#) uses three labels to categorise data once it has been analysed: 'claimed', 'corroborated', and 'verified'. Content is marked as 'claimed' if only one piece of content is found. If investigators are unable to find UGC but can identify multiple reliable sources that claim an incident has occurred, the data is classified as 'corroborated'. Content is considered 'verified' if the UGC has been geolocated and chronolocated. Of the 19 incidents collected, two are 'corroborated' and 17 are 'claimed'.

For the purpose of this investigation, offline incidents were selected following the [United Nation's](#) definition of CRSV: "refers to rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage, and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls or boys that is directly or indirectly linked to a conflict." CRSV is a form of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), which has been defined by the [UN](#) as: "violence committed against a person because of his or her sex or gender. It is forcing another person to do something against his or her will through violence, coercion, threats, deception, cultural expectations, or economic means." Given the ongoing conflict in the countries in which data was collected (Mali and the CAR), CIR has used the term CRSV rather than SGBV to categorise offline incidents.

Cases for the offline section of the report were selected based on the following criteria:

- **Type of violence.** Only incidents involving acts of violence specifically targeting women were included. This includes rape, torture, physical assault (e.g. beatings), burning of bodies, and infliction of severe injuries. Incidents involving casualties resulting from drone strikes, shootings or arrests have not been included.
- **Perpetrators.** Only incidents allegedly committed by Russian forces (Wagner group) have been included in the database. Incidents that were allegedly committed by Russian forces *and* a local actor (for example, FAMA) have also been included.

In a similar fashion to the online section, offline incidents were collected and catalogued in a database, noting the following classifiers: link to sources, date of incident, incident information and analysis, perpetrators, location, and additional information.

7.3 RESEARCH LIMITATION

The findings of this report constitute a representative sample of both the online and offline cases, with the data collection encountering the following limitations:

- **Data availability.** Certain content may have been taken down and removed. The same can be said of certain Wagner-affiliated channels, which have either been blocked by Telegram or are no longer active.
- **Assessment of CRSV claims.** Claims of gender-based violence are often difficult to assess and verify using forensic or open-source techniques. Much of the available data relies on survivors being willing and able to share their experiences. Because direct verification is frequently not possible, the data collected is best understood as providing an indicative overview, offering insight into the number and nature of reported cases, rather than a comprehensive or fully verified account.
- **Sensitivity surrounding sexual violence.** Reporting rape or discussing experiences of sexual violence can carry significant stigma and shame. As reported in several media articles, this may contribute to the underreporting of rape and other forms of CRSV, both in formal reports and informal testimonies.
- **Data collection.** Incidents of CRSV were collected from two countries due to limited or non-existent information on other countries where Russian forces are present.
- **Qualitative approach.** A qualitative analysis, rather than a quantitative study, was used to explore the online discourse and better capture the narratives shared in Wagner/AC-affiliated milblogger channels. Since much of the content consisted of images, a qualitative approach was necessary to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the narratives used to target African women.
- **External databases.** This investigation did not incorporate data from external databases (for example, from the Humanitarian Data Exchange). The research adopted a qualitative approach to analyse and describe CRSV incidents. Including external datasets could have resulted in data gathered under potentially different definitions or verification standards, which might not match the specific inclusion criteria of this study. Ensuring consistency across such sources would require additional validation procedures outside the scope of this investigation's methodological framework.