

Policy brief

From silence to evidence: interoperable reporting on sexual violence in conflict zones

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In vulnerable communities, such as people living in conflict-affected areas or refugees and displaced persons traveling along migratory routesⁱ, sexual violence is often deployed on a widespread and strategic level. Especially in conflict zones, numerous reports have highlighted the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war not only in the Horn of Africa region, but extending far beyond.ⁱⁱ As part of a well-considered and deliberate tactic, the battleground is shifted from cities and infrastructure to the bodies of women and girls.

Because of the conflict-related context and large scale of the sexual violence, the reporting of incidents of sexual violence is accompanied with big information gaps. Where sexual violence incidents in conflict areas disappears into such information black holes, the Humanitarian Data Space's federated, FAIR-compliant architecture offers a way to surface, connect and protect these reports while keeping ownership with affected communities.

SafeLine

It is to this end that the SafeLine application was created. SafeLine supports organisations and trusted field workers in documenting incidents of sexual violence in a secure and structured way, ensuring that data is published in the same format and that information is machine-actionable from the moment of creation. The system is built around strict access control, so data owners remain in full control over who can view, query, and reuse their information. SafeLine offers a secure and user-friendly reporting interface, validates entries, converts them automatically into a single format and stores them in a protected environment for analysis. The system is to be presented as one where contributors retain control over their data, including granular control over access, visibility, and revocation of permissions.

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Executive Summary

Sexual violence in conflict zones is often systematically used as a weapon of war, while reporting on it remains fragmented and incomplete due to stigma, insecurity, and inadequate infrastructure. The lack of reliable and linked data hinders visibility and accountability. The Humanitarian Data Space and the SafeLine application offer a solution to this by enabling secure, standardized, and interoperable reporting, while ensuring that data ownership remains with local actors.

The need for interoperable reporting

Interoperable reporting is not just a technical improvement, but a prerequisite for both visibility and accountability. By enabling data to be connected across regions and over time, it becomes possible to identify patterns in the use of sexual violence as a deliberate tactic, rather than isolated incidents. Interoperable reporting is especially important in areas struck by conflict, where underreporting remains a problem due to absent infrastructure and the severe social repercussions survivors may face, including stigma, abandonment, or further marginalisation; factors that continue to create information gaps. Linking these data storages helps to transform fragmented accounts into actionable evidence, strengthening efforts to address impunity not only at the level of individual perpetrators, but also among those higher up in the chain of command who design and enable such strategies. In this way, interoperable systems like SafeLine contribute to a more comprehensive, survivor-centred understanding of conflict-related sexual violence.

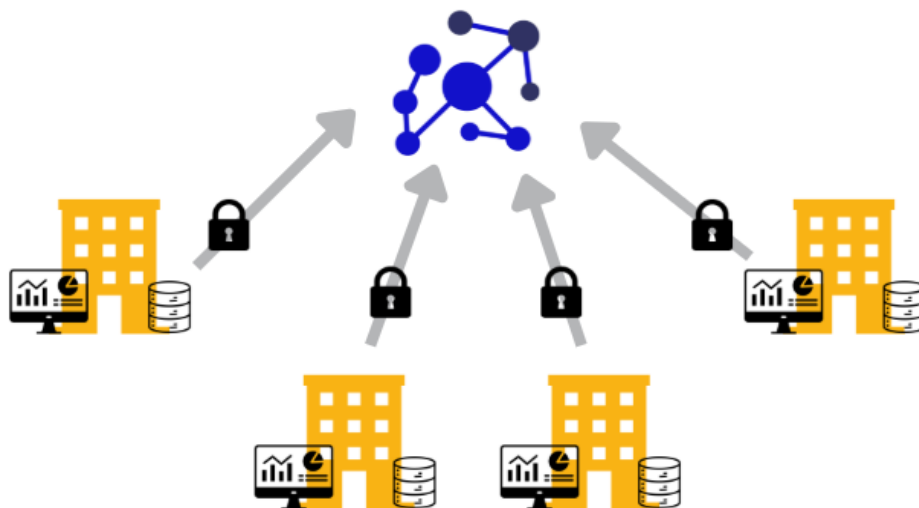


Figure 1. Diagram of the SafeLine architecture, a space where organisations can report, structure, and analyse sensitive data on conflict-related sexual violence in a systematic and standardised way.

Recommendations

For the wider humanitarian and international community, supported by governmental institutions and (inter)national policymakers:

- Adopt interoperable data standards and governance frameworks based on FAIR-aligned formats.
- Enshrine strong legal protections and access controls of the SafeLine application.

- Support community engagement, culturally appropriate informed consent processes, and identify safe or unsafe areas and service gaps to reduce underreporting.

For EU policymakers:

- Adopt an EU-level FAIR-compliant minimum dataset and semantic metadata schema for conflict-related sexual violence.
- Make eligibility for EU external action funding and EU procurement dependent on third-country compliance with survivor-centred privacy safeguards, federated storage, and interoperability certification.

Links:

The application Safeline is documented here: <https://github.com/VODAN-Development>

The application forms a production tool for the local repositories that form the Humanitarian Data Space (HDS). The HDS is available here: <https://www.humanitariandataspace.com/>

The HDS is supported by the Africa Health Data Space: <https://aun.mu.edu.et/ahds/>

ⁱ EEPA (2025). *Policy Brief: Sexual violence along migratory routes, and in Libya*. https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Policy-Brief_Sexual-Violence-on-Migratory-Paths-in-and-towards-Libya_2026.pdf [accessed 13 May 2026].

ⁱⁱ Amnesty International Publications. *Casualties of war: women's bodies, women's lives : stop crimes against women in armed conflict*. (2004).; Team of Experts, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, DPKO, Patten, P., & WHO. (2017). *Rule of Law/Sexual Violence in Conflict*. <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/Team-of-Experts-on-Rule-of-Law-Sexual-Violence-in-Conflict-Annual-Report-2017.pdf> [accessed 13 May 2026]; UNMISS & United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. (2020). *Access to health for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in South Sudan*. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/SS/access_to_health_for_survivors_of_conflict-related_sexual_violence_in_south_sudan.pdf [accessed 13 May 2026]; Amnesty International. (2021, 25 augustus). *Ethiopia: "I don't know if they realized I was a person": Rape and sexual violence in the conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia* - Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr25/4569/2021/en/> [accessed 13 May 2026]; Amnesty International. (2021a, juni 3). *Sudan: Darfur: Rape as a weapon of war: sexual violence and its consequences* - Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr54/076/2004/en/> [accessed 13 May 2026]; United Nations Secretary General. (2024). *Conflict-related sexual violence (S/2024/292)*. United Nations Security Council. <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/report/report-of-the-secretary-general-on-conflict-related-sexual-violence/202404-SG-annual-report-on-CRSV-EN.pdf> [accessed 13 May 2026]; *Gender-based violence in armed conflicts*. (z.d.). European Institute For Gender Equality. https://eige.europa.eu/gender-based-violence-armed-conflicts?language_content_entity=en [accessed 13 May 2026].