Current research on early warning of ‘widespread and systematic’ sexual violence in conflict discounts the relevance of structural gender inequality in predicting the likelihood and occurrence of such atrocities. We challenge these studies in two steps. First, we evaluate how structural gender inequality is tested in these studies of conflict-related sexual violence. We argue that researchers have not consistently tested their findings regarding the relationship between gender inequality and the presence of sexual violence in armed conflict. Instead, studies have selectively used conflict data, sexual and gender based violence definitions, thresholds for sexual violence, and single data sources to inform their research designs. As a result, the research findings are not sufficiently rigorous or generalizable to eliminate structural gender inequality as an explanation for the conditions that give rise to widespread and systematic sexual violence. Second, we examine how the situation of widespread and systematic sexual violence in Sri Lanka presents the case for a more concerted focus on structural gender inequality as a critical early warning factor for widespread and systematic sexual violence, which may assist with efforts to prevent egregious crimes of sexual violence.

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Sara Davies and Jacqui True are members of the Women, Peace and Security Academic Collective, www.wpsac.wordpress.com

Venue: Seminar Room 537, Level 5, GPN3 Building no.39A St Lucia Campus University of Queensland