

Systematic Review

# Posttraumatic Growth and Resilience on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: A Set of Systematic Reviews of Literature

Carolina Botero-García <sup>1,\*</sup>, Daniela Rocha <sup>2</sup>, María Alejandra Rodríguez <sup>1</sup> and Ana María Rozo <sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup> Facultad de Psicología, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá 111231, Colombia; ma\_rodriguez@javeriana.edu.co (M.A.R.); rozo.ana@javeriana.edu.co (A.M.R.)<sup>2</sup> Departamento de Psicología Experimental, Instituto de Psicología, Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo 05508-090, Brazil; danielarochajurado@usp.br

\* Correspondence: cbotero@javeriana.edu.co

**Abstract:** Sexual violence is highly prevalent in sociopolitical conflict contexts. Even though its negative effects are well documented, further research is needed on how community experiences of social growth and rebuilding could positively impact victims of sexual violence in these contexts. As a starting point, we conducted a two-phase systematic review. The first phase focused on the relationships between sociopolitical conflict, sexual violence, and psychological effects or trauma (2010–2017), and, in addition to the deep negative psychological effects, it also found reports of posttraumatic growth in victims. This led to a second phase that related sexual violence in sociopolitical conflict contexts to posttraumatic growth and resilience (2017–2022). We found nine publications documenting experiences of resilience and posttraumatic growth in victims of sexual violence in sociopolitical conflicts. Interestingly, resilience and posttraumatic growth were shown not only in victims but also in communities and new generations, which is relevant to understanding the long-lasting effects of violence in contexts of sociopolitical conflict.



**Citation:** Botero-García, Carolina, Daniela Rocha, María Alejandra Rodríguez, and Ana María Rozo. 2023. Posttraumatic Growth and Resilience on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: A Set of Systematic Reviews of Literature. *Social Sciences* 12: 291. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12050291>

Academic Editors:  
Gwynyth Overland and  
Özgür Erdur-Baker

Received: 16 February 2023

Revised: 15 April 2023

Accepted: 19 April 2023

Published: 8 May 2023



**Copyright:** © 2023 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

Political conflict, as a type of collective violence with multiple forms, occurs daily in many parts of the world. The effects of these different types of events on health in terms of deaths, physical illnesses, disabilities, and mental anguish are vast, and history has shown that sexual violence in contexts of political conflict has been a recurrent practice. It has been spread across the world and throughout the ages: in Europe during the Second World War; in Asia during the Independence of India; in Africa with the Rwandan genocide; and in America during the conflict in Guatemala and the Chilean dictatorship, among others (Villellas 2010).

Unfortunately, sexual violence as a weapon of war is one of the ways collective violence happens and leaves physical, sexual, social, and psychological marks. In addition, sexual violence in some countries is an issue affecting both public health and social and economic development, characterized by both sexual and social events as well as political events, with a very high degree of dehumanization (Fiscó 2005; Oxfam International 2009). The psychological effects of doubly violent events have been overlooked in research due to the omission of historical and social analyses within mental health (Urrego 2007). This has produced a lack of psychological treatment based on the context that caused the trauma, which has in turn led to great failures in the protection and integral reparation of victims (Oxfam International 2009).

Sexual violence is defined as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality, using coercion, threats of harm or physical force, by any person regardless of

relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work." (Harvey et al. 2007, p. 3) When it happens in war and political conflicts, it is characterized by having a function related to the establishment of privileged status (Sanchez et al. 2014). Trauma is the most common psychological effect as a response to sexual violence as an extreme stressor. Trauma involves the direct personal experience of an event or the witnessing of it, be this event an actual or threatened death, serious injury, or other threat to physical integrity. It is composed of a disconnection from reality, vivid memories of the traumatic event, sleep problems, emotional changes, apathy, depression, fear, and avoidance of the stimuli that are associated with the event. Additionally, trauma directly affects the social functioning of the victim because it breaks trust and connection with close and unknown people; on top of that, culture and customs are attacked, as well as the integrity of each community (Madrigal-Bonilla 2012; Rincón González 2003; Valz Gen 2016; Gamondi 2004; Viñar 2008).

Even though extreme stress usually involves responses evaluated as negative or problematic, some researchers have found individual adaptive responses in environments of extreme adversity (Jacobs 2016). This has been defined as resilience. It is supposed to appear when an individual is exposed to a threat, adversity, or trauma and then achieves a positive adaptation despite the adversity. In addition, posttraumatic growth (PTG) appears to be closely related to resilience and has been more closely linked to trauma survivors' psychosocial processes. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2014) have found five factors for posttraumatic growth: personal strength, new possibilities, relating to others, appreciation of life, and spiritual change. Some of the characteristics of PTG have been described as the continued presence of family members, the support and strength in denouncing, evidencing no guilt or shame, and the desire for reconciliation (Álvarez 2015; Suarez 2013; Kuwert et al. 2014; Park et al. 2016; Eichhorn et al. 2015) and strong desires to live and hope for the future (Garnett et al. 2015). Hence, despite the deeply negative effects of sexual victimization, resilience appears as one of the psychological characteristics that may help victims protect themselves from worse effects or even drive them to posttraumatic growth.

As Calhoun and Tedeschi (2014) have mentioned, although there were some preliminary studies focused on this domain (e.g., Finkel 1975) and some findings showing the possibility for positive outcomes arising from the experience of negative events (e.g., Lam and Grossman 1997; Liem et al. 1997), systematic attention to trauma-related positive change has occurred only in the past 20 years. This tendency shows the need to explore protective factors and characteristics for different types of traumas, especially sexual abuse trauma, which might be focused on by clinicians and prevention professionals.

Until now, we could not find any systematic reviews on this matter. Hence, this study aims to identify trends, approaches, and professional demands related to sexual violence, psychological trauma, and posttraumatic growth in contexts of political conflict during the 2012–2017 period. Additionally, we explored studies (2017–2022) focused on the specific topic of resilience and posttraumatic growth as a particular process related to victims.

## 2. Method

This is a documentary study divided into two phases, each of which was a systematic review of the literature. The first one focused on the relationship between political conflict, sexual violence, and trauma. The second one was related to political conflict, sexual violence trauma, and resilience or posttraumatic growth. As the first phase had shown posttraumatic growth as one of the positive events after a sexual violence trauma, we decided to search for studies specifically about resilience and posttraumatic growth related to political conflict and sexual trauma.

### 2.1. Phase 1

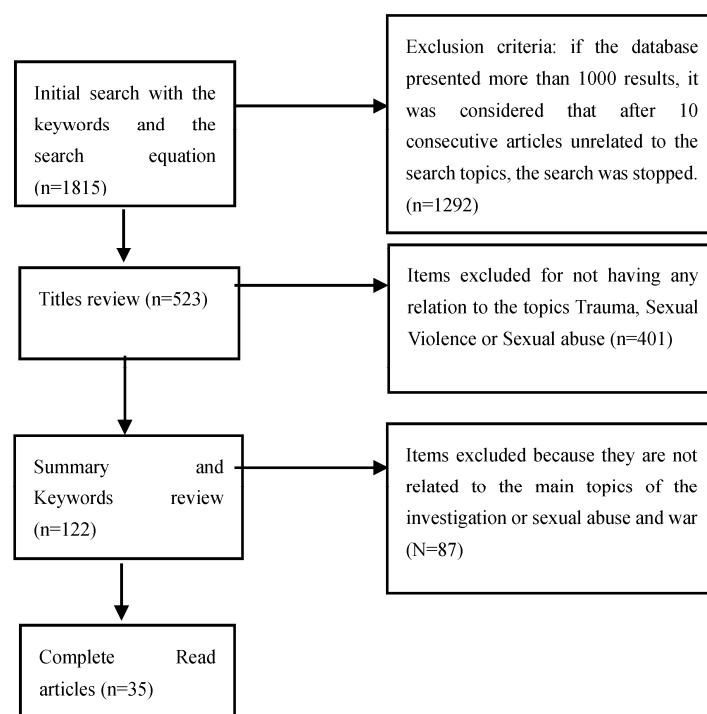
**Sample.** The first systematic review focused on the following subjects: social/political violence, sexual violence, and trauma. The search string was (Trauma) AND (Sexual Abuse OR Sexual Violence OR Gender Violence) AND (Political Violence OR Socio-political

Violence OR War OR Armed Conflict). The selected range was from January 2010 to January 2017 and was performed on twelve databases, including some specific to Latin America, namely: Ebscohost, Redalyc, JStor, Springer Link, Web of Science, Scielo, Wiley, Latindex, APA, Dialnet, ProQuest, and Sage Journals. The search variations depended on the structure of the databases; for example, translating the keywords from Spanish to English.

**Materials.** Two matrices were used to organize the information: a bibliographic matrix and an analytical matrix. The bibliographic matrix included metadata such as title, authors, year, language, database, country of the sample, country of publication, abstract, theoretical bases, type of research, research design, instruments, sample, population, and observations.

The analytical matrix was made by focusing on conceptualizations about social/political violence, sexual violence, victims, and trauma. For the first one, the following subcategories were analyzed: other traumatic experiences, the goal of socio-political violence, and the perpetrator. For sexual violence, the subcategories were: role of sexual violence, characteristics of sexual violence, and type of aggression. Based on the definition of a victim, the following subcategories were studied: number of people affected, legal management, and risk factors. Finally, for trauma, we included symptom effects, emotional and affective effects, and social effects. In addition, emerging categories were included.

**Procedure.** The search strategy yielded 1815 papers, which were filtered to include only articles whose title was clearly related to the topic of interest, resulting in 523 articles. A filter based on the summary and keywords was used, and related studies to the three major concepts—(socio)political violence, sexual violence, and trauma—or sexual abuse and war were selected. Based on this filter, 122 articles were included. Afterward, we selected those studies that dealt with the three topics, resulting in 35 articles (See Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Description of the methodological process for phase 1.

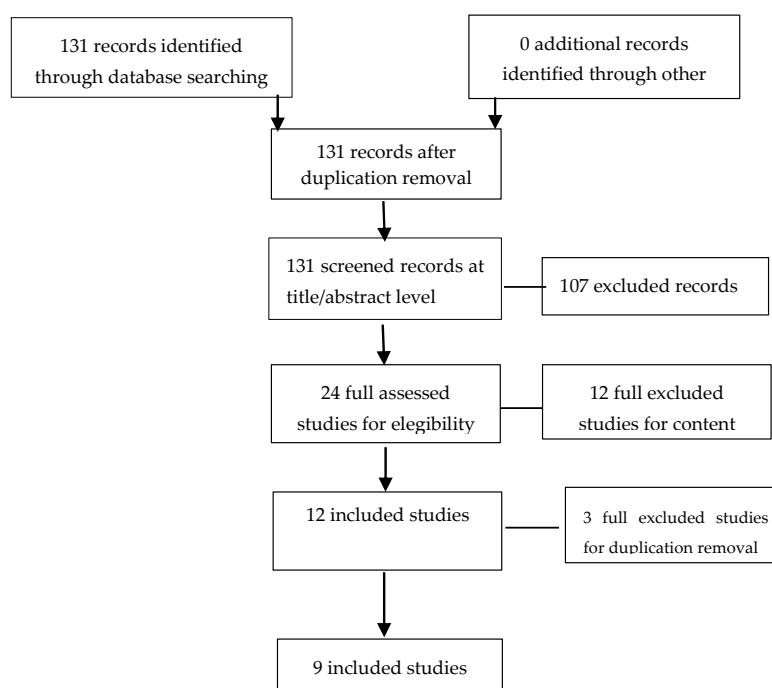
Finally, the analytical and bibliographic matrices were completed to categorize the results and analyze them according to the categories of the matrices. The traumatic effects category was contrasted with the factors related to them and analyzed through different theoretical perspectives.

## 2.2. Phase 2

**Search procedure and strategies.** A scoping review was performed based on the PRISMA methodology checklist. Three databases were consulted to obtain the articles; a search equation was adapted for each one using keywords in English. The basic search equation used was: (Posttraumatic Growth OR Resilience) AND (conflict-related sexual violence). Initially, a total of 131 articles were obtained from Web of Science (4), JSTOR (125), and Ebscohost (2).

The defined inclusion criteria for the search were: (a) studies that referred to mental health indicators or psychological effects; (b) studies that inquired about the effects of conflict-related sexual violence; and (c) studies that reported posttraumatic growth (PTG) and/or resilience.

**Selection of studies.** The CADIMA software ([www.cadima.info](http://www.cadima.info), accessed on 14 April 2023) was used to select the studies in stages: all the papers found in the database search were compiled; duplicate papers were eliminated ( $n = 24$ ); the titles and abstracts were read; papers that did not meet the inclusion criteria were discarded ( $n = 12$ ); then, the full texts were reviewed and once again the papers that did not meet the criteria were discarded ( $n = 3$ ). The review of compliance with the inclusion criteria was carried out by two reviewers. Finally, data extraction was carried out using the CADIMA software from the final selection of papers ( $n = 9$ ). Figure 2 plots the study selection process.



**Figure 2.** Description of the methodological process for phase 2.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Phase 1

The literature review on trauma, social and political violence, and sexual abuse covers different topics. The first one is related to the purpose of this type of violence—in political conflict contexts, it has been described as a systematic weapon to inflict trauma on the civilian population or as a way for one of the groups involved in the conflict to advance their social and economic position over the enemy and destroy families and communities to take power (Garnett et al. 2015).

The patriarchal system, defined as the subordination given by conditions of discrimination, inequality, and exclusion of women by men (Viveros 2004), has led to women being targeted by sexual violence in the context of conflicts. Women become the spoils of war

for enemy groups to achieve their aims (Cadavid 2014) because they are regarded as the property of men, and, their victimization entails humiliating the entire community (Betancourt Maldonado 2016; Valz Gen 2016). The idea of gender as an aggravating circumstance can also be generalized to race or ethnicity. These are the populations that, due to their economic, geographic, political, and racial conditions, become more vulnerable to sexual violence (Cadavid 2014).

The literature shows how sexual abuse victims in political and social conflicts are highly stigmatized within their communities. Victims are constantly intimidated and isolated due to the experiences they have gone through, which aggravates the victimization and further consequences (both social and psychological) for the victim. Women who have been victims of sexual violence in war contexts have been shown to have higher symptoms and signs of trauma; however, a large majority of the survivors do not report or disclose their experience out of fear of rejection, stigmatization, being ostracized from society, or even the possibility of revenge from the abusers when they are part of the same community. This further leads to other negative outcomes, such as loss of employment, limited political, civil, and property rights, and a lack of medical or psychological help (Garnett et al. 2015). Thus, women often feel that their feminine dignity and intimacy are destroyed, accompanied by a feeling of strangeness about their own selves and a rupture of identity and self-image (Gamondi 2004; Morales 2012; Park et al. 2016; Valz Gen 2016). Furthermore, they experience an inability to unite and place trust in their own social contexts, dishonor within the family, community, and culture, and exclusion from traditional activities or opinions by their communities (Park et al. 2016; Garnett et al. 2015; Jacobs 2016; Zihindula and Maharaj 2015). Social blame for the events also increases fear and shame (Betancourt Maldonado 2016; Cadavid 2014; Jacobs 2016; Zihindula and Maharaj 2015; Park et al. 2016)

Surprisingly, in addition to the traumatic symptoms shown by some victims of sexual violence in social and political conflicts, research has found two alternative responses to the traumatic event: posttraumatic growth (PTG) and resilience. These responses are understood as functional and adaptive psychological responses by victims and their environments when faced with extreme adversity (Jacobs 2016; Kuwert et al. 2014; Park et al. 2016; Eichhorn et al. 2015). They are an experience of significant positive change stemming from a critical life event and include an appreciation of life, a new organization of priorities, a feeling of increased personal strength, the identification of new possibilities, or an improvement in intimate relationships.

PTG seems to appear when there are certain environmental, social, and political conditions the victim can access. Examples include reporting and having a successful legal process; having a constant support network; achieving recognition, both their own and their social context, that the abuse they lived was not their fault; the continued presence of family members; and the desire for reconciliation and forgiveness (Álvarez 2015; Suarez 2013; Kuwert et al. 2014; Park et al. 2016; Eichhorn et al. 2015). In addition, the victim maintains a strong desire to live, hope for the future, and a positive psychological attitude (Garnett et al. 2015).

Some research has shown that victims of sexual violence in different armed conflicts in history have been able to develop PTG and resilience after the traumatic experience. One of the cases was that of women in Germany who were raped during and after World War II and who, despite having symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder six decades after the traumatic event, showed more interest in reconciliation and better indicators of PTG compared to a group of women who had gone through traumatic experiences and events during the war but had not been raped (Kuwert et al. 2014; Eichhorn et al. 2015). These results suggest that victims are able to develop a positive mindset about the trauma and a desire to change the consequences they have experienced.

Another case is that of Afro-Colombian women from Chocó, in Colombia, who were victims of sexual violence during the Colombian armed conflict. They joined organizations

for victims' rights, created a support network, and were able to develop PTG and resilience towards their own traumatic experiences ([Orduz Gualdrón 2015](#)).

The literature mentions some factors that are related to PTG. For example, some Korean women who were "comfort women" during the Japanese-Korean war suggested that the failure of the Japanese government to formally acknowledge and apologize for their role in said system prevented them from fully developing a positive feeling and reconstructing themselves in a fully resilient way. Some victims indicated that an apology would have been vital to their ability to process their experiences of trauma, validate their lives, and allow them to die in peace. Some others fully admitted that having children and being surrounded by family kept them alive and allowed them to have a different and positive approach toward their experience ([Park et al. 2016](#)).

The study of PTG and resilience also has limitations. One of the biggest challenges is how these two constructs are understood and measured. [Suarez \(2013\)](#) states that "Resilience is often conceptualized as the absence of PTSD, depression, or other signs of emotional distress [ . . . ] Other scholars argue, however, that resilience appears to be a more complex construct than simply the absence of syndromes such as PTSD" (p. 201). This conceptual limitation can also be extended to PTG, as they are recently acknowledged concepts that are being studied and there are relatively few instruments to measure them. [Kuwert et al. \(2014\)](#), in their research using the "Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) ([Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996](#)), assessed the perceived positive outcomes that may occur following a traumatic event. It consists of the following subscales: personal strength, spiritual change, relating to others, appreciation of life, and new possibilities" (p. 3). In her investigation, [Suarez \(2013\)](#) used CD-RISC, which defines resilience as "a measure of stress-coping ability that varies with context, age, gender, time, and culture, as well as with different types of adversity" (p. 202). However, as trauma is a broad spectrum, we wonder if resilience and PTG instruments are sensitive enough to comprehensively assess sexual abuse trauma, in particular in political conflict contexts.

### 3.2. Phase 2 Results

The systematic review from 2017 to 2022 yielded nine publications that relate resilience and posttraumatic growth to political and social conflict and/or sexual violence (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Results from Phase 2 of the review.

Authors	Title	Aim	Participants
Daphna-Tekoah, Shir and Harel-Shalev, Ayelet ( <a href="#">Daphna-Tekoah and Harel-Shalev 2017</a> )	The Politics of Trauma Studies: What Can We Learn from Women Combatants' Experiences of Traumatic Events in Conflict Zones?	To learn from combatant experiences of traumatic events in conflict zones.	30 Israeli women combatants and women who served in combat-support roles with the Israeli Defense Force in the Gaza Strip and West Bank between 2012 and 2016.
Lupu, Noam and Peisakhin, Leonid ( <a href="#">Lupu and Peisakhin 2017</a> )	The Legacy of Political Violence Across Generations	To establish the lasting legacy political violence leaves on identities, attitudes, and behavior.	300 first-generation respondents, 600 second-generation respondents, and 1004 third-generation respondents living in 23 towns and 191 villages across Crimea.
Yosef, Raz ( <a href="#">Yosef 2017</a> )	Conditions of Visibility: Trauma and Contemporary Israeli Women's Cinema	To examine the representation of rape trauma in recent cinema by Israeli women, focusing on Michal Aviad's 2011 film Invisible.	Israeli women film-makers.

**Table 1.** Cont.

Authors	Title	Aim	Participants
Mustillo, Sarah A. and Kysar-Moon, Ashleigh (Mustillo and Kysar-Moon 2017)	Race, Gender, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the U.S. Military: Differential Vulnerability?	To determine whether women overall and Black women in particular are at an increased risk of PTSD compared to Black and White men.	A large sample of U.S. Black and White servicemen and women returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.
Kijewski, Sara and Freitag, Markus (Kijewski and Freitag 2018)	Civil War and the Formation of Social Trust in Kosovo: Posttraumatic Growth or War-Related Distress?	To describe civil war experiences and shape social trust in Kosovo after the war from 1998 to 1999.	Between 827 and 930 eighteen-year-olds from twenty-six municipalities. 87 percent of the respondents identify themselves as Kosovo Albanians, whereas 13 percent identify as Serbs, and 0.1 percent identify as belonging to other groups.
Anderson, Kimberley; Delić, Amra; Komproe, Ivan; Avdibegović, Esmina; van Ee, Elisa and Glaesmer, Heide (Anderson et al. 2019)	Predictors of Posttraumatic Growth Among Conflict-Related Sexual Violence Survivors from Bosnia and Herzegovina.	To determine the capacity for posttraumatic growth (PTG) among a population of women who experienced CRSV and to what extent it is impacted by factors such as coping and optimism.	104 female adult survivors of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), with an average age of 48.8 years ( $SD = 8.7$ ), Bosnian ethnicity (90.6%, $n = 94.2$ ), and the rest a mixture of Bosnian Croats (4.4%, $n = 4.6$ ) and Bosnian Serbs (5%, $n = 5.2$ ).
Lordos, Alexandros; Ioannou, Myria; Rutembesa, Eugène; Christoforou, Stefani; Anastasiou, Eleni and Björgvinsson, Thröstur (Lordos et al. 2021)	Toward a Multisystemic Framework for Mental Health, Social Cohesion, and Sustainable Livelihoods among Survivors and Perpetrators of the Genocide against the Tutsi	(1) To review evidence on multisystemic healing initiatives already applied in Rwanda using fieldwork notes from interviews and focus groups, alongside relevant scholarly and gray literature, and (2) to propose a scalable multisystemic framework for societal healing in Rwanda that builds on existing innovations.	131 participating service providers from various organizations based in Kigali (Rwanda's capital) and Bugesera (a district south of the capital).
Clark, JN (Clark 2021)	Beyond “Bouncing”: Resilience as an Expansion-Contraction Dynamic within a Holonic Frame	To tell a different story about resilience that extends beyond “bouncing,” whether in a backward or forward direction. In so doing, it makes two important contributions—empirical and conceptual—to extant resilience scholarship. The article offers a novel analysis of resilience as a dialectical process of expansion and contraction across multiple levels.	The research uses three case studies—Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), Colombia, and Uganda—that are highly diverse across multiple criteria, from cultural context to conflict dynamics and duration.
Clark, JN; Jefferies, P and Ungar, M. (Clark et al. 2022)	Event Centrality and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: A New Application of the Centrality of Event Scale (CES)	To analyze event centrality in the context of conflict-related sexual violence.	449 sexual victim survivors from four countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Colombia, and Uganda.

#### 4. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Posttraumatic Growth

Some studies have focused on the relation between sexually related trauma or political conflict and posttraumatic growth (PTG). We identified two trends: one that does not find evidence for that relation, and the other that does. The first tendency is exemplified by one study, which did not confirm the theory that civil war conflicts positively affect social cohesion as an indicator of posttraumatic growth. Additionally, they found no indication of growth, which in this case was conceived specifically as social trust due to the war experience. When they studied social trust, they concluded it varies among individuals, depending more on the individual's experience of war than on the context in which the traumatic war experience took place (Kijewski and Freitag 2018).

By contrast, Anderson et al. (2019) and Mustillo and Kysar-Moon (2017) studied people with PTSD symptoms and did find some protective factors related to PTG. They found the following factors: (1) Having the possibility to relate to others and the possibility to experience personal growth in their own personal relationships. (2) The capacity to identify new possibilities in their future, such as by planning and finding new opportunities for their own future. This finding could be part of an attitude of optimism and positive reinterpretation of the traumatic experience and a protective factor against substance abuse and behavioral disengagement as predictors of no PTG in these victims (Anderson et al. 2019). (3) The importance of environment and opportunities as protective factors against PTSD and for PTG for women in war: being single rather than married and being in the Air Force or Marine Corps were associated with a lower risk of PTSD. In this study, PTG is seen as the result of cumulative protective factors, which include gender and race, as a possible factor for access to goods and services, in this case in the American society (Mustillo and Kysar-Moon 2017).

#### 5. Social Sciences and the Study of Resilience and PTG

Trauma, political conflict, and PTG have also been studied through the social sciences using diverse methods and approaches. Thus, for example, violence-related trauma against women has been reflected in films that sensitize society to the suffering of women but also to their resilience and post-traumatic growth. Raz Yosef (2017) shows how films can generate visibility of conflict-related sexual violence, displacement, and migration. Raz, in his review, found at least nine films have been made based on conflict-related sexual violence, leading the viewers to question the way they understand women's violent experiences. As Raz indicated, the films and their impact on the viewers might be understood as a kind of posttraumatic growth, as the filmmakers and crew are often directly or indirectly victims of conflict-related sexual violence, and the films modify their own and others' realities. Additionally, it allows for the exposure of violence that has previously been understood as personal and private by showing it on the big screen and recognizing it as an aspect of the community.

From an interdisciplinary perspective, Clark (2021) looks at the concept of "bouncing" in the study of resilience in the context of political violence. It offers a novel conceptualization of resilience as a dialectical process of expansion and contraction across multiple domains and levels. Drawing on fieldwork with victims and survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, and Uganda, it uses qualitative data both to empirically critique the notions of "bouncing back" and "bouncing forward" and to explore what expansion and contraction look like in practice.

The centrality of traumatic memories has been another important concept when resilience and PTG are studied in the context of violence-related trauma. A recent study by Clark et al. (2022) uses the centrality of event scale (CES) to examine the centrality of a stressful event in a person's life. Thus, this concept of centrality appears to be a key concept for understanding the relationship between PTSD and resilience/PTG. A greater centrality of traumatic memories has been found to positively correlate with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In Colombia, for example, they found a significant relationship between CES scores and support from friends. Although one might have

reasonably expected a negative relationship between these two variables—meaning that more support from friends would result in lower CES scores—the relationship was positive, which makes sense given that many of the Colombian participants were involved in women's (and women-led) organizations and had formed close relationships with fellow members. The authors concluded that what they articulated was a strong sense of solidarity based on common and shared experiences. Therefore, event centrality would contribute to fostering new friendships.

In Uganda, they found significant correlations between participants' CES scores and cultural and social bonds, as well as relationships with friends and the community. Despite the strong stigma that accompanies being a violence victim, the positive relationship between CES scores and protective factors that enable resilience indicates, according to [Clark et al. \(2022\)](#), that those who exhibit high event centrality are more likely to actively seek out sources of support within their social ecologies. Furthermore, it also indicates that having such support enables a more open and direct confrontation with the past.

Through the social sciences, PTG has also been studied across different generations. Thus, [Lupu and Peisakhin \(2017\)](#), as a result of their research about the legacy of political violence across generations, concluded that third-generation respondents with more intensely victimized ancestors are consistently more politically engaged than their peers. They report a greater willingness to participate in political activities in the future. Although these results are consistent with studies that find an effect of violence on political engagement among the victims themselves, they highlight both the intergenerational effect of violence and the fact that this participation seems motivated by opposition to potential renewed persecution, not by posttraumatic growth.

Another interesting study from the social sciences was conducted by [Lordos et al. \(2021\)](#), who reviewed evidence on multisystemic healing initiatives already applied in Rwanda using fieldwork notes. They found that one possibility for addressing Rwanda's mental health treatment gap might be to emphasize group-based, resilience-oriented psychological interventions. For example, "sociotherapy," a community-based livelihoods initiative, could be an effective pathway to strengthen social cohesion after the genocide, as could "reconciliation villages," the establishment of youth clubs, individual and group psychotherapy, vocational counseling, and extensive collaboration between formal government and nongovernmental service providers, as well as a creative synthesis between local innovations and emerging international practices.

When reviewing studies in the social and behavioral sciences, we find two general trends: one of them focuses on the relationship between PTG, PTSD, and trauma. This trend has been trying to establish a relationship between these variables and encompasses studies that find a link between them while others do not. The other trend includes studies from interdisciplinary areas and the social sciences that try to understand posttraumatic growth as a broader concept, as a collective phenomenon, be it intergenerational or related to the contextual and social characteristics of a community.

## 6. Discussion

This was a documentary review that was carried out in order to find some trends in the study of trauma, political conflict, sexual violence, and posttraumatic growth. One of the results of the first phase was that even though sexual violence in political conflicts has negative effects, a surprising result was that survivors can grow as individuals and in collective ways as communities. Even when this surprising result was shown in some papers, it must be said that traumatic events led to responses that carried with them physical and psychological suffering. So, even when PTG can be an interesting outcome for a traumatic event, it is important to say a traumatic event is not the way to create psychological growth. Also, that international regulatory agents and nations must work together to decrease political and sexual violence around the world.

[Kijewski and Freitag \(2018\)](#) and [Anderson et al. \(2019\)](#) had findings in different directions when they studied PTG in PTSD victims and survivors. On the one hand, they

showed protective factors for PTG sexual victim-related trauma; on the other hand, we found studies that did not find any relation. In the middle of the two trends, there are studies with mixed findings. Research is needed for confirmation between these links and the factors related to any links. This was also exemplified by [Kuwert et al. \(2014\)](#), who reported mixed findings and explained their results through the two-dimensional stress response perspective, which suggests that posttraumatic stress and growth may be two separate, independent dimensions of the posttraumatic experience ([Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004](#)).

The relationship between resilience and sexual-related trauma has also been studied in the past 20 years. Resilience has been observed in individuals but also communities, showing pre-trauma protective factors (demographics, life events, contextual support), but also posttraumatic collective processes of healing, social support, and leadership, among others. The literature review indicates that psychological resilience in victims could be a strong factor in the development of posttraumatic growth.

This study is an effort to systematize empirical studies that have focused on the positive outcomes of traumatic sexual experiences in both individuals and communities. As far as we know, there are few systematic reviews on this topic. We hope this information can be useful for developing interventions for strengthening protective factors and resilience, all towards the promotion of posttraumatic growth. In terms of limitations, we did not use the exact same methodology in both systematic reviews, which could affect the number and comparison of results between periods. Additionally, we could not include some studies because of keyword restrictions in our search process.

Finally, we conclude that the social sciences are increasingly interested in posttraumatic growth as a collective process and are making interdisciplinary efforts to find out what can help communities' resilience for healing in a collective way. More efforts must be made by social sciences academics to find evidence that can shed light on such initiatives.

**Author Contributions:** This is a set of systematic reviews, in which all authors have contributed. All authors have read and agreed to the published manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Phase 1. Table of results.pdf. Critical\_appraisal\_outcome\_Phase 2.xlsx. Data\_extraction\_sheet\_2021\_Phase 2.xlsx.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

- Álvarez, Victoria. 2015. Género y violencia: Memorias de la represión sobre los cuerpos de las mujeres durante la última dictadura militar argentina. *Nomadías* 19: 63–83.
- Anderson, Kimberley, Amra Delić, Ivan Komproe, Esmina Avdibegović, Elisa Van Ee, and Heide Glaesmer. 2019. Predictors of posttraumatic growth among conflict-related sexual violence survivors from Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Conflict and Health* 13: 23. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
- Betancourt Maldonado, Lady. 2016. Narrativas sobre la violencia sexual en el marco del conflicto armado colombiano. *Derecho Y Ciencias Sociales* 14: 76–103.
- Cadavid, Margarita. 2014. Mujer: Blanco del conflict armado en Colombia. *Analecta Política* 4: 301–18.
- Calhoun, Lawrence, and Richard Tedeschi. 2014. The foundations of posttraumatic growth: An expanded framework. In *Handbook of Posttraumatic Growth*. London: Routledge, pp. 3–23.
- Clark, Janine. 2021. Beyond “bouncing”: Resilience as an expansion–contraction dynamic within a holonic frame. *International Studies Review* 23: 556–79. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Clark, Janine, Philip Jefferies, and Michel Ungar. 2022. Event centrality and conflict-related sexual violence: A new application of the Centrality of Event Scale (CES). *International Review of Victimology* 2022: 02697580221116125.
- Daphna-Tekoah, Shir, and Ayelet Harel-Shalev. 2017. The politics of trauma studies: What can we learn from women combatants' experiences of traumatic events in conflict zones? *Political Psychology* 38: 943–57. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

- Eichhorn, S., N. Stammel, H. Glaesmer, T. Klauer, H. J. Freyberger, C. Knaevelsrud, and P. Kuwert. 2015. Readiness to reconcile and post-traumatic distress in German survivors of wartime rapes in 1945. *International Psychogeriatric Association* 27: 857–64. [CrossRef]
- Finkel, Norman. 1975. Strens, traumas, and trauma resolution. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 3: 173. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Fiscó, Sonia. 2005. Atroces realidades: La violencia sexual contra la mujer en el conflicto armado. *Papel Político* 17: 119–59.
- Gamondi, Alicia. 2004. Exorcizar el destino. Reflexiones en torno al concepto de resiliencia. *Universidad de Ciencias Empresariales y Sociales*, 108–18.
- Garnett, Susan, Sanaya Lim, Paul Kim, and Sophie Morse. 2015. The legacy of gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS in the postgenocide era: Stories from women in Rwanda. *Health Care for Women International* 37: 721–43.
- Harvey, Alison, Claudia Garcia-Moreno, and Alexander Butchart. 2007. *Primary Prevention of Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Violence: Background Paper for WHO Expert Meeting May 2–3, 2007*. Geneva: World Health Organization, Department of Violence and Injury Prevention and Disability, vol. 2.
- Jacobs, Janet. 2016. The Memorial at Srebrenica: Gender and the social meanings of collective memory in Bosnia-Herzegovina. *Memory Studies* 10: 423–39. [CrossRef]
- Kijewski, Sara, and Markus Freitag. 2018. Civil war and social trust formation in Kosovo: Posttraumatic growth or war-related distress? *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62: 717–42. [CrossRef]
- Kuwert, Philipp, Heide Glaesmer, Svenja Eichhorn, Elena Grundke, Robert H. Pietrzak, Harald J. Freyberger, and Thomas Klauer. 2014. Long-Term Effects of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence Compared with Non-Sexual War Trauma in Female World War II Survivors: A Matched Pairs Study. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 43: 1059–64. [CrossRef]
- Lam, Judy N., and Frances K. Grossman. 1997. Resiliency and adult adaptation in women with and without self-reported histories of childhood sexual abuse. *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 10: 175–96. [CrossRef]
- Liem, Joan H., Jacquelyn B. James, Joan G. O'Toole, and Ame C. Boudewyn. 1997. Assessing resilience in adults with histories of childhood sexual abuse. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 67: 594–606. [CrossRef]
- Lordos, Alexandros, Myria Ioannou, Eugene Rutembesa, Stefani Christoforou, Eleni Anastasiou, and Thröstur Björgvinsson. 2021. Societal Healing in Rwanda: Toward a Multisystemic Framework for Mental Health, Social Cohesion, and Sustainable Livelihoods among Survivors and Perpetrators of the Genocide against the Tutsi. *Health and Human Rights* 23: 105.
- Lupu, Noam, and Leonid Peisakhin. 2017. The legacy of political violence across generations. *American Journal of Political Science* 61: 836–51. [CrossRef]
- Madrigal-Bonilla, Angie. 2012. Disociación como defensa al trauma: Caso clínico de Fuga disociativa. *Revista Cípula* 26: 9–18.
- Morales, Carolina. 2012. *Violencia sexual contra las mujeres: Comprensiones y pistas para un abordaje psicosocial*. Edited by En N. Clave. Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana.
- Mustillo, Sarah A., and Ashleigh Kysar-Moon. 2017. Race, Gender, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the US Military: Differential Vulnerability? *Armed Forces & Society* 43: 322–45.
- Orduz Gualdrón, Frank Steward. 2015. Victimización y violencia Sexual en el Conflicto armado en Colombia. *Subjetividad y Procesos Cognitivos* 19: 173–86.
- Oxfam International. 2009. *La Violencia Sexual en Colombia Un arma de guerra*. Bogotá: Paula San Pedro.
- Park, Jee Hoon, KyongWeon Lee, Michelle D. Hand, Keith A. Anderson, and Tess E. Schleitwiler. 2016. Korean Survivors of the Japanese "Comfort Women" System: Understanding the Lifelong Consequences of Early Life Trauma. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* 59: 322–48. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Rincón González, Paulina Paz. 2003. *Trastorno del estrés postrumático en mujeres víctimas de violencia doméstica: Evaluación de programas de intervención*. Madrid: Universidad Complutense de Madrid.
- Sanchez, C., M. Carmona, C. Morales, and C. Mejía. 2014. *La reparación integral transformadora para las mujeres sobrevivientes del conflicto armado colombiano: Comprensión del daño diferencial y propuesta de medidas de reparación*. Bogotá: Sisma Mujer.
- Suarez, Eliana. 2013. Two decades later: The resilience and post-traumatic responses of Indigenous Quechua girls and adolescents in the aftermath of the Peruvian armed conflict. *Child Abuse & Neglect* 37: 200–10.
- Tedeschi, Richard, and Lawrence Calhoun. 1996. The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory: Measuring the positive legacy of trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 9: 455–71. [CrossRef]
- Tedeschi, Richard G., and Lawrence G. Calhoun. 2004. Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence. *Psychological Inquirí* 15: 1–18. [CrossRef]
- Urrego, Zulma. 2007. Reflexiones en torno al análisis de la situación de salud mental en Colombia, 1974–2004. *Revista Colombiana de Psiquiatría* 35: 307–19.
- Valz Gen, V. 2016. Cuerpo, violencia y trauma. *Revista de la Sociedad Colombiana de Psicoanálisis* 41: 35–51.
- Villellas, María. 2010. La violencia sexual como arma de guerra. *Quaderns de Construcció de Pau* 15: 1–15.
- Viñar, Marcelo. 2008. Derechos Humanos y Psicoanálisis. *Revista Latinoamericana de Psicoanálisis* 8: 51–67.
- Viveros, Mara. 2004. El concepto del "género" y sus avatares: Interrogantes sobre algunas viejas nuevas controversias. In *Pensar (en) género Teoría y práctica para nuevas cartografías del género*. Edited by C. Millán and Á. M. Estrada. Bogotá: Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, pp. 170–93.

Yosef, Raz. 2017. Conditions of Visibility: Trauma and Contemporary Israeli Women's Cinema. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42: 919–43. [[CrossRef](#)]

Zihindula, Ganzamungu, and Pranitha Maharaj. 2015. Risk of Sexual Violence: Perspectives and Experiences of Women in a Hospital in the Democratic Republic of Congo. *Journal of Community Health* 40: 736–43. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.