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Decolonising the field of violence against women and girls: A scoping review and recommendations for research and programming

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ABSTRACT

In response to continuing legacies of colonialism, there is increasing recognition of the need to decolonise various fields of research and practice, including within work on violence against women and girls (VAWG). An emerging body of literature critiques how VAWG is framed, how prevention and response interventions may be imposed on communities as part of White Saviourism, and the existence of hierarchical approaches to data collection, analysis and interpretation. This scoping review is the first known attempt to describe global published and grey literature on colonialism and decolonisation within VAWG research and programming. We conducted an extensive search across databases and search engines including research studies, reports, commentaries and blogs, and identified 55 sources that focused on VAWG and related to the legacy of colonialism and/or decolonial approaches within the field. Included literature discussed the role of colonialism in shaping VAWG, referenced decolonial approaches to respond to VAWG and identified five key recommendations for VAWG research and practice: 1. Consider the context and power hierarchies within which VAWG occurs; 2. Incorporate community resources and perspectives into efforts to end VAWG; 3. Use methods and approaches to researching VAWG that centre perspectives and lived experience of communities; 4. Shift VAWG funding to local actors and ensure VAWG funding streams are more responsive to local needs and realities; and 5. Ensure local, contextually-relevant framings of feminisms inform decolonising of VAWG. We conclude that shifting towards a bottom-up approach to decolonising VAWG research and programming is essential to prevent decolonisation from being reduced to a buzzword. While literature explored the use of specific methods to decolonise research on VAWG, researchers need broader strategies to embed a decolonial perspective throughout the research process, transcending mere methodological adaptations. There is a need for VAWG research and programming to scrutinise structural inequities, particularly acknowledging how colonial practices entrenched within wider societal power structures impact the field of VAWG.

1. Introduction

In this scoping review we explore global literature on colonialism and decolonising within the field of violence against women and girls (VAWG) prevention, response, and research. Historically, this field has been dominated by Western perspectives and methodologies, often marginalising or misrepresenting the experiences and voices of women and girls from the Global South and Indigenous communities. Through this review, we aim to deconstruct these entrenched biases by providing recommendations for making the VAWG field more inclusive, equitable, and accountable.

VAWG is a pervasive global public health and human rights violation, affecting, on average, one in three women in their lifetime, with variations across countries (World Health Organization, 2021). It has far-reaching consequences for health, well-being, social relations, and economic development. VAWG is both rooted in and a key driver of

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gender inequalities, described as "a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women" that has led to the subordination of women (Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, 1993). VAWG can manifest as physical, sexual, emotional/psychological, and/or economic abuse, and may also include coercive control.

Over the last 20 years there has been considerable progress in research on preventing and responding to VAWG. However, such research has often been affected by the power dynamics inherent within North-South research relationships. The topic of VAWG can also carry particular - yet often unexplored - assumptions linked to colonialism and the concept of "coloniality", which we discuss in the next section. Colonialism has often been linked to VAWG. For example, scholars have critiqued the narrow framing of VAWG which has resulted in a focus primarily on individual and some relational interventions to address VAWG, rather than tackling the structural impacts of colonialism (Mannell et al., 2021). There is a long history of scholarship, including Oyěwùmí's (1997) research among the Yoruba in Nigeria, showing how power hierarchies between women and men were created by colonial powers where none existed before, or where existing hierarchies between women and men were accentuated by colonial powers, resulting in VAWG (Kamphuis, 2015; Prianti, 2019). In the Latin American and Caribbean context, Hardin (2002) highlights the role of the colonial (re) interpretation and repression of Indigenous sexualities, genders, and social roles in the construction of rigid forms of gender expression. This included colonial powers limiting practice of same-sex sexual contact and fostering traits of hypermasculinity embodied in the so-called Latin American and Caribbean "machismo". As noted by Susan Rose (2012), existing scholarship documents the role of colonial powers in undermining traditional, "Indigenous" values and traditions (such as emphasis on the collective and the extended family) which were protective against VAWG, while simultaneously reinforcing narratives about "Indigenous" women being impure and dirty (p. 4).

Colonial ideologies are more present in narratives about particular forms of VAWG (Abu-Lughod et al., 2023). For example, Jane Werunga and colleagues (2016) argue that narratives about female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) focus on the barbarism and domination of women and girls, but neglect the social meaning attached to this practice, describing assumptions about the practice as "neocolonial hegemony" (p. 156). Pratiksha Baxi (2014) argues that sexual violence discourses often mobilise racist imagery about Black men being unable to control their sexual urges, describing how the repeated citing of sexual violence statistics reinforces notions of "disorder" and "crisis" around sexual violence (p. 146). Boonzaier and colleagues (2020) similarly highlight how global health scholars usually draw on remanent colonial stereotypes of Blackness and Black male sexuality as inherently violent, often underscoring their racial identity as a "risk factor" and failing to mention the history of colonisation and its political and economic impact in shaping masculinities, for example, among African or Black men in the United States.

In conflict settings, humanitarian actors often presume "social and moral decay" as "pathological" among refugee men, feeding into a narrative about increased risk of sexual violence – despite lack of data (Turner, 2017, p. 45). During war, "fetishisation" of sexual violence has occurred (Meger, 2016, p. 2), resulting in the "colonial lexicon" being used to reinforce racialised and sexualised images of armed men raping local women during conflict (Baaz and Stern, 2013, p. 24). Scholars critique the characterisation of rape as a weapon of war given that men also rape women during peacetime. They argue that fixating on rape during war underestimates the everyday violence women experience during war, as well as rape during peacetime (Baaz and Stern, 2013; Meger, 2016). Writing about forced marriage among Muslim populations, Sherene Razack (2004) criticises the depictions of "patriarchal Muslim culture" and the fascination with Muslim women's bodies. She also argues the concern about topics like forced marriage and FGM/C reflect the line between Islam and Western "modernity" (Razack, 2021, p. 32), emphasising the intersections between colonialism and racism and suggesting that discourses about honour crime operate as "lurid entertainment" (p. 37). Scholars suggest these narratives about VAWG often position communities in the Global South as "other" while presenting the West as reflecting enlightenment (Breton, 2022).

In narratives about VAWG, culture and tradition are often positioned as the problem despite colonial powers playing a role in introducing/influencing norms for masculinities and femininities, and reifying hierarchies between men and women (Abu-Lughod, 2015; Abu-Lughod et al., 2023; Razack, 2016, 2021). Communities in the Global South are at times presented by researchers and organisations working to implement interventions as "backwards", even "barbaric" and requiring reform – mimicking racist, colonial-era messaging (Al-Ali, 2018; Breton, 2022; Turner, 2017). Representations of VAWG may also reinforce White Saviourist notions of "saving brown women from brown men" (Abu-Lughod, 2015; Spivak, 1994, p. 92). This framing of VAWG as a problem of culture and tradition often results in education, knowledge and economic empowerment as a means of preventing VAWG, which scholars suggests shifts the focus from unequal power as a driver of VAWG and may be imposed by outsiders rather than being expressly requested by populations affected by VAWG (Abu-Lughod, 2015; Breton, 2022). Nancy Breton (2022) argues that colonial traces are also found in the "carceral feminism" approach taken in global health to VAWG, which at times results in infantilising and victim-based, top--down narratives that focus on laws, policing and imprisonment of men as approaches that keep women safe, instead of working in partnership with communities from the outset. Existing critiques of VAWG interventions also argue that social norm change occurring through workshops and trainings that are driven by the North, echo colonial attempts to "civilize" populations in the name of "liberating" women (Mertens and Myrttinen, 2019, p. 19). Even the way VAWG is defined may have different meanings in different settings – yet these different understandings of violence are often not recognised within research and intervention development (Zapata-Sepúlveda et al., 2014).

Globally, there is increasing recognition of the importance of working to understand topics like VAWG from the perspective of local actors and communities themselves (Mannell et al., 2021; Turner, 2017). Traditional approaches to research are increasingly being challenged as new efforts are being made to understand VAWG differently using more collaborative and participatory approaches (Lokot et al., 2023; Mannell et al., 2021, 2023). Scholars argue that there is a need to ensure efforts to prevent and respond to VAWG are contextualised; to carefully consider if external actors are imposing change agendas or if these changes are desired by local actors; to examine how women's lives are represented; to exercise reflexivity; and to ensure complex power hierarchies are not over-simplified (Abu-Lughod, 2015; Breton, 2022; Cornwall, 2016; Mertens and Myrttinen, 2019). These efforts, as outlined in the sections below, are often grounded in the idea that colonialism continues to have impacts on society.

1.1. Conceptualisations of colonialism

Historically, colonialism has been defined as a type of group domination over another group, incorporating acts such as occupying or settling land, economic exploitation, political domination, and coercive cultural change (Horvath, 1972). Horvath (1972) describes the relationship between colonisers and the colonised as encompassing three types: *extermination* (less common, where total extermination of populations occurred, e.g. in parts of Australia, America, Canada and Russia); *assimilation* (much more common, involving "cultural transfer" e.g. most parts of Latin America and the Caribbean); and *neither extermination not assimilation* (settlers and Indigenous populations living both separately as well as side by side, such as in Kenya, South Africa, Indonesia, Algeria, and Rhodesia) (p. 47). In recent years, scholars have also tended to define colonialism, including modern forms of colonialism, based on four types: *settler colonialism* (large-scale immigration,

and formulation of colonies), e*xploitation colonialism* (primarily focused on accessing natural and other resources and labour from populations), *surrogate colonialism* (a foreign power giving rights to a population who is not already present in the setting), and *internal colonialism* (occurring within state borders) (Atran, 1989; Gabbidon, 2010; Glenn, 2015; Murray, 1980).

Colonialism historically was underpinned by stereotypical representations of Indigenous populations as backwards and needing modernity – what Edward Said (1995) described as "Orientalism". Colonial powers were motivated by the imperative to "modernize" Indigenous populations, using a "Western" or Eurocentric standard as the standard for acceptable norms, and introducing expectations for behaviour related to religion, culture, health and social relations, among others (Quijano, 2000; Smith, 1999). Religion, specifically Christianity, was often used to justify colonial intervention, with colonial powers criticising Indigenous faith and belief systems as less enlightened and requiring correction (Hardin, 2002). Indigenous ways of knowing and producing knowledge were positioned as less valuable by colonial powers (Bhargava, 2013). Colonialism was reinforced by notions that Europeans were superior to Indigenous populations, especially because of their race – firmly linking colonialism and racism (Fanon, 1963).

1.2. Ongoing colonialism and the role of coloniality

Literature on colonialism and its legacies is varied and draws on different theoretical approaches, such as subaltern studies, post-colonial theory, and decolonial theory (Quintero, 2012). Scholars also highlight contemporary modes of colonialism, such as Israel's occupation of Palestine, often understood as settler colonialism (Natanel, 2023). They argue that discussions about the legacies of colonialism need to progress, while recognising varied experiences of colonisation/decolonisation that unfolded at a specific pace in each location (Craib, 2017; Shohat, 1992). The diversity of theories, combined with, and driven by the heterogeneity of experiences and timelines across geographies makes this discussion particularly complex (Craib, 2017; Dirlik, 1994; Shohat, 1992). In particular, colonialism, coloniality, and decolonisation and decoloniality are often used interchangeably, yet are understood in varied ways. In this review, we were informed by the concept of coloniality.

"Coloniality of power", developed by Aníbal Quijano (2000) in the Latin American and Caribbean context, is particularly useful in describing how colonial power hierarchies have been sustained in society today. Coloniality captures the attitudes, mindsets, beliefs, values and power structures that were embedded within colonialism and which Quijano emphasises is part of colonialism's legacy. Quijano argues that racialisation was used to stratify populations and legitimise domination, which helped to construct the dehistoricised idea of the difference between Europe and Non-Europe (and therefore of Europeans and non-Europeans), as a matter of racial superiority (Quijano, 2005). The strength of Quijano's idea of "coloniality of power" is the positioning of coloniality as foundational to shaping the world system, and the suggestion that colonial/modern and Eurocentric capitalism are extensions of colonial power that still operate globally.

Quijano's "coloniality of power" has been expanded by others to also include gender as a key structure that has shaped and continues to shape coloniality (Lugones, 2007, 2008). In her landmark works, María Lugones (2008, 2007) builds on and critiques Quijano's "Eurocentered" perspectives on gender, arguing that his framing of the role of patriarchy and heterosexuality within the "coloniality of power" does not sufficiently recognise the inequalities experienced by non-White women (2008, p. 2). She argues that colonialism "imposed a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers" (2007, p. 186), emphasising how "changes were introduced through slow, discontinuous, and heterogenous processes that violently inferiorized colonized women" (2008, p. 12). Lugones draws on Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí's (1997) landmark work to make her argument. In her 1997 book, *The Invention of Women,* Oyěwùmí argues that gender was imposed by European colonisers within Yoruba society in Nigeria. She explores how Yoruba society was not organised based on gender, instead roles were assigned according to age, however, European gender hierarchies created the male-female binary and subordinated women (pp. 20–34). Oyěwùmí's work has laid the foundation for critical analysis on the role of colonial actors in shaping gender norms in diverse settings (Kamphuis, 2015; Prianti, 2019; Rose, 2012).

Coloniality is also evident in research and intervention development in the Global South (Abimbola, 2019; Khan et al., 2021). Research has been criticised for mirroring colonial power hierarchies through top-down processes of decision-making, valuing positivist and quantitative forms of knowledge over others as "robust evidence", and perpetuating inequitable access to authorship and funding for actors based in the Global South (Abimbola, 2019; Eyben et al., 2015; Peace Direct, 2021; Singh et al., 2021; Smith, 1999). Representations of communities within research outputs may reinforce stereotypes of them as "other", while telling stories about people's trauma becomes "evidence of academic merit" (Abu-Lughod et al., 2023; Gagnon and Novotny, 2020, p. 497). Global health and humanitarian actors have also increasingly recognised how colonial ideologies influence development and implementation of interventions. For example, local actors are not always involved in designing interventions or research, instead funder priorities may inform programmes and research (Khan et al., 2021; Peace Direct, 2021).

1.3. Efforts to "decolonise"

There is increasing recognition of the need to decolonise structures and processes in society (Abimbola, 2019; Khan et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2021; Zakumumpa et al., 2023). While some position "decolonisation" as a solely political process describing independence from colonial powers (Naicker, 2023), we align with others, including critical scholars, who use the term more broadly to also describe processes of undoing/dismantling the legacies of colonialism (Betts, 2004; Smith, 1999). Building on decades of pioneering feminist literature analysing the intersection of ethnicity and gender (as well as other identities including sexuality and socio-economic status) (e.g. Mama, 2002; McClintock, 2013; Mohanty, 1984), and emerging from activists who resisted colonial powers, the concept of decolonisation has become an important approach for challenging and dismantling the legacy of colonialism within different spaces such as research, humanitarian aid and development, academia, and global health (Peace Direct, 2021; Singh et al., 2021; Smith, 1999). For example, decolonising research has involved a range of strategies such as embedding critical reflexivity into research (Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021) and involving communities and local actors in designing research and interventions (Mannell et al., 2021). Within academia, decolonising has involved challenging power hierarchies structuring research, curriculum and partnerships. In global health, the push to decolonise has involved challenging funding structures (Mogaka et al., 2021) shifting decision-making power to local actors (Khan et al., 2021), and rethinking the politics of knowledge production and collaborations by using more collaborative approaches to conduct analysis and determine authorship (Abimbola, 2019; Zakumumpa et al., 2023; Zreik et al., 2022).

However, leading critical race and decolonisation studies scholars Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012) warn that decolonisation has been weakened as a concept by "easy adoption of decolonisation discourse" without recognition of Indigenous struggles, frameworks and theories (pp. 1–3). Focusing on Indigenous populations in North America, they argue, echoing Franz Fanon (1963), that decolonisation is "unsettling" (p. 3) and requires dismantling colonial ways of thinking and behaving. A similar argument has been made by Krugman (2023) who argues that the concept of decolonisation has been captured by elite Global North institutions, leading to a liberal reformist understanding of term and to

the "buzzwordification" of decolonisation.

Drawing on the existing critiques and challenges in the VAWG field which we outline earlier, including external decision-making and assumptions about VAWG, we sought to review how colonialism and decolonisation are currently understood and approached within the VAWG field, guided by the idea that a decolonial approach could help the VAWG field address these challenges and make the field more responsive and accountable for VAWG. We also recognise that there is growing discourse about the importance of tackling legacies of colonialism in the VAWG field, however, the literature on this topic has not been mapped and analysed. There is also a need to situate the debates on colonialism and decolonisation for the specific field of VAWG, to help make concrete the implications for VAWG research and programming. As such, this scoping review assesses the global literature on colonialism and decolonisation of VAWG research and programming and provides recommendations to the VAWG field. To our knowledge, this is the first synthesis on the topic of colonialism, decolonisation and VAWG. The review is the first stage of a larger project which involves qualitative research with individuals working on VAWG research and programming. In the sections that follow, we outline the methods for this scoping review and describe the characteristics of the included sources in our findings. We then provide findings from our analysis on: decolonisation theories/frameworks used in the field of VAWG, links between VAWG and colonialism, decolonial and/or indigenous responses to VAWG in programming, and recommendations for research and programming emerging from this review. In the discussion section we detail the key implications of our review, and we conclude with final remarks on the contribution of this review.

2. Methods

This scoping review was reported according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) (Tricco et al., 2018). We determined that a scoping review was most appropriate given the subject matter of colonialism/decolonisation of VAWG is still emerging and there is a need to map the evidence (Chang, 2018; Munn et al., 2018). This scoping review enabled us to explore how colonialism/decolonisation and VAWG emerge in the literature, the methods used to study VAWG, and the evidence that exists on this topic.

2.1. Search strategy

An academic database search was conducted in 11 databases on July 19, 2022 by a senior information specialist (JF): OvidSP Medline ALL, OvidSP Embase Classic + Embase, OvidSP Global Health, OvidSP APA PsycINFO, EBSCOhost CINAHL Complete, EBSCOhost Africa-Wide Complete, Clarivate Analytics Web of Science Core Content, Carivate Analytics Web of Science SciELO, Scopus, Global Index Medicus and ProQuest ASSIA. Full details of database segments and date ranges used for each database can be found in Supplemental Material 1. We chose to search a wide range of information sources, including language and region-specific databases, to include as broad a selection of sources as possible. Care was taken to choose databases which include locally published titles and a variety of sources. Thus, literature from both the Global South and the Global North was retrieved. Sources covering health and social sciences were included to maximise the disciplinary heterogeneity of the retrieved resources.

The strategy used to search the databases included strings of terms, synonyms and controlled vocabulary terms (where available) to reflect two key concepts: 1) Decolonisation, and 2) VAWG. Terms for the two concepts were combined using the Boolean operator AND to find items discussing both concepts. Terms for the second concept were adapted from other reviews on VAWG (Sabri et al., 2023). After discussion with the project team, a draft strategy was compiled in the OvidSP Medline database by the experienced information specialist. The search strategy was refined with the project team until the results retrieved reflected the scope of the project. The agreed OvidSP Medline search was adapted for each database to incorporate database-specific syntax and controlled vocabularies. Searches were run with no limits in order to retrieve the widest range of material. No publishing date, language or geographical limits were chosen to make sure items from across the world were included in the review.

Alongside the academic database search, to reduce publication bias and avoid excluding non-academic knowledge we searched for grey literature (Adams et al., 2017). We conducted searches for grey literature using the Google search engine. We used six main search strings: "gender-based violence" AND "decolonising"; "gender-based violence" AND "decolonise"; "violence against women" AND "decolonising"; "violence against women" AND "decolonise"; "intimate partner violence" AND "decolonising"; "intimate partner violence" AND "decolonise". The search was conducted using the Chrome browser and in English only. We limited results to the first 200 hits per search and cleared browsing data before and after each search to prevent results being influenced by location and search history (Piasecki et al., 2018).

2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Using Covidence (a software used to manage reviews), screening occurred in two stages based on the inclusion/exclusion criteria outlined in Table 1. Firstly, we conducted a title/abstract screen, excluding

Table 1
Inclusion and exclusion criteria of review and rationale.

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria	Rationale
Any reference to VAWG including: - All sexual violence - All violence in intimate relationships - Violence against LGBTQIA + populations - Reproductive coercion - FGM/C - Forced/coerced male circumcision - Sex trafficking	Violence that does not specifically refer to a gender dimension, including: - Child abuse/child protection (e.g., cyberbullying) - Labour trafficking - Forced sterilization	Focus of review is on VAWG rather than violence more generally, allowing us to make more specific recommendations to the field.
Academic or grey literature, including: - Research studies - Reports - Commentaries - Blogs	Books, book chapters, reviews, newspaper articles, case law, editorials, theses, conference proceedings, and descriptions of methodology	Broad inclusion to ensure we capture varied forms of knowledge, in particular from actors not usually represented in academia.
References to legacy of colonialism, decolonising, slavery, Indigenous knowledge, historical forces of colonialism, or imperialism	Only colonial-era violence is described, or the focus is on racism rather than colonialism	Colonialism content should also reflect on the current legacy related to VAWG to ensure that recommendations are timely and relevant to the current context.
English, French, Spanish and Portuguese language literature	All other language literature	Languages included based on authors' proficiencies.
Literature rated as having "high" relevance	Literature rated as having "low" or "medium" relevance	Studies included only if they contained a lot of content on colonialism and were therefore highly relevant to the review, to limit breadth and allow for a more in-depth synthesis of included literature.

books, book chapters, reviews, newspaper articles, case law, editorials, theses, conference proceedings, and descriptions of methodology. We also excluded any violence which did not specifically reference a gender dimension (e.g., police violence). During full-text review we narrowed our search further to identify literature where VAWG was the main focus, and references in which colonialism/decolonising and related terms concerned the ongoing legacy of colonialism rather than just describing violence during the colonial era. We excluded literature which was about child abuse/violence against children (rather than girls specifically), and literature which was about racism more generally rather than colonialism. Literature in languages understood by the research team were included: English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. The seven sources which passed the title and abstract screening but were published in a language other than these are listed in Supplemental Material 2. All literature were double-screened during the title/abstract screening and full-text review process (except for those in Spanish, Portuguese and French which were screened by one person), with regular meetings held between the research team to reach consensus.

2.3. Data extraction and analysis

For each source included in the study we extracted information on the a) characteristics of the included literature (type of output, study design, methods, and funding source), b) key themes related to colonialism/decolonising, c) type of VAWG, and d) recommendations for research and programming. All data relevant to the review was also extracted verbatim by the research team using Covidence. Each source was extracted by one person. We analysed extracted data to identify the level of engagement with colonialism/decolonising the field of VAWG within each source using a 3-point rating system of 'low', 'medium' and 'high'. To identify the rating, we reviewed content extracted on colonialism, decolonising, slavery, Indigenous knowledge, historical role of colonialism, or imperialism to identify literature where 1) content included cursory or passing references to these terms only, 2) content that referenced these terms more substantively at multiple points in the literature, or 3) content significantly referenced these terms throughout the source. All literature rated as "low" or "medium" were subsequently excluded from the review, along with literature that lacked a focus on practical efforts to decolonise research or use bottom-up approaches. We reviewed extracted content and conducted a thematic analysis.

In our analysis of included literature we use terminology that authors used, e.g., for country names, concepts like North-South, minority, local, and Indigenous, among others. We recognise specific terms are problematic as they have often been developed in the North to describe those deemed as "other"; our use of such terms in this paper does not indicate our agreement with these terms, but for lack of a universally appropriate option we defer to terms used by authors. We also use terms such as "local", "community" and "grassroots" with awareness that these concepts do not take into account local power struggles, and have become buzzwords in and of themselves (Cornwall, 2007). However, we recognise the importance of challenging terminology where possible, and we have taken steps to do this, such as referring to communities who have experienced colonialism, rather than "colonised communities". Language is important and we suggest that part of decolonising requires decolonising terminology, which remains an ongoing challenge.

2.4. Author positionality

As part of our commitment to decolonising research and conducting reflexive, equitable research, we briefly describe the positionality of our team below. We sought to mitigate against bias and ensure a robust study through taking a collaborative and reflexive approach to the research design and analysing data together, being mindful to centre Indigenous frameworks in our analysis despite the fact that as an authorship team we had not been trained in disciplines that centred these ways of knowing. To this end we met once a week over several months to engage in critical dialogue, evaluate our assumptions, sense-check findings and discuss the implications of the data.

Our team consisted of a mix of backgrounds and experience inside and outside academia. While having a shared awareness of the importance of reflecting on our own power and positionality during this review, we recognised that we each have different experiences of colonial legacies based on personal experience, as well as direct family experiences of colonialism (ML, NK, AMB) that informed our perspectives during the review. Some of our team identify as White women (MP, BK, SN, JF), one identified as a mixed heritage woman (AMB) and three identified as women from racialised minorities when viewed from the Global North (ML, NK, AMB); these perspectives informed our engagement with each other, and the decisions made throughout the review. We have all benefited from being educated in middle- or high-income settings, which also affected how we engaged with literature. Many in our team have experience researching VAWG (ML, MP, BK, NK, AMB), including reflecting on our individual roles in perpetuating North-South and academic-non academic power dynamics within research collaborations, and the ways in which we frame 'feminism' in our VAWG research and programming.

3. Findings

3.1. Final sample

All citations identified by our searches were imported into EndNote 20 software. Duplicates were identified and removed using the method described on the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine blog (Falconer, 2018). Out of 19,092 records identified from the academic database search, 6231 were deemed to be duplicates, resulting in 12,861 records being screened. From our Google search, 125 records were identified and 21 were deemed irrelevant leading to 104 being screened. At the title/abstract screening stage, 12,219 academic papers and 68 grey literature records were excluded. We conducted a full-text review of 678 sources. Of these, 83% (n = 534) of academic papers and 67% (n = 24) of grey literature were excluded. The main three exclusion reasons were not having any reference to colonialism or associated terms, not having enough detail on colonialism or associated terms, and VAWG not being the main focus. In total, 55 sources were included in our review, specifically 48 academic papers and 7 grey literature sources. Fig. 1 uses an adapted PRISMA diagram to outline our review process.

3.2. Characteristics of included literature

The characteristics of the 55 included sources are detailed in Supplemental Material 3. Approximately half of the included literature (n = 25) reports findings from research studies, the vast majority of which use qualitative methods (n = 22) and a few use quantitative methods (n = 3), while the remainder (n = 30) are either commentaries and opinion pieces (n = 21), blogs (n = 5), theoretical frameworks (n = 2) or reports (n = 2). This literature is generally quite recent, with 49 published in the past ten years, and 28 published since 2020, highlighting the increased recognition of, and interest in decolonising the field of VAWG. Only 40% of this literature (n = 22) reported receiving funding for their work, suggesting that this literature has generally been driven by individuals, rather than work commissioned by funders or institutions.

Of those who did receive funding, the most common funders in our sample were the Department of Health and Human Services/National Institutes of Health in the USA, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council in Canada, the New Zealand Government Marsden Fund Council, and various bodies under the Australian government. This is in line with the geographical regions in which most of this work was conducted, with 18 studies in North America and 13 in East Asia and the Pacific. Literature from Latin American and the Caribbean was also well represented in our sample (n = 11), likely because we included four Spanish-language, three Portuguese-language and one French-language

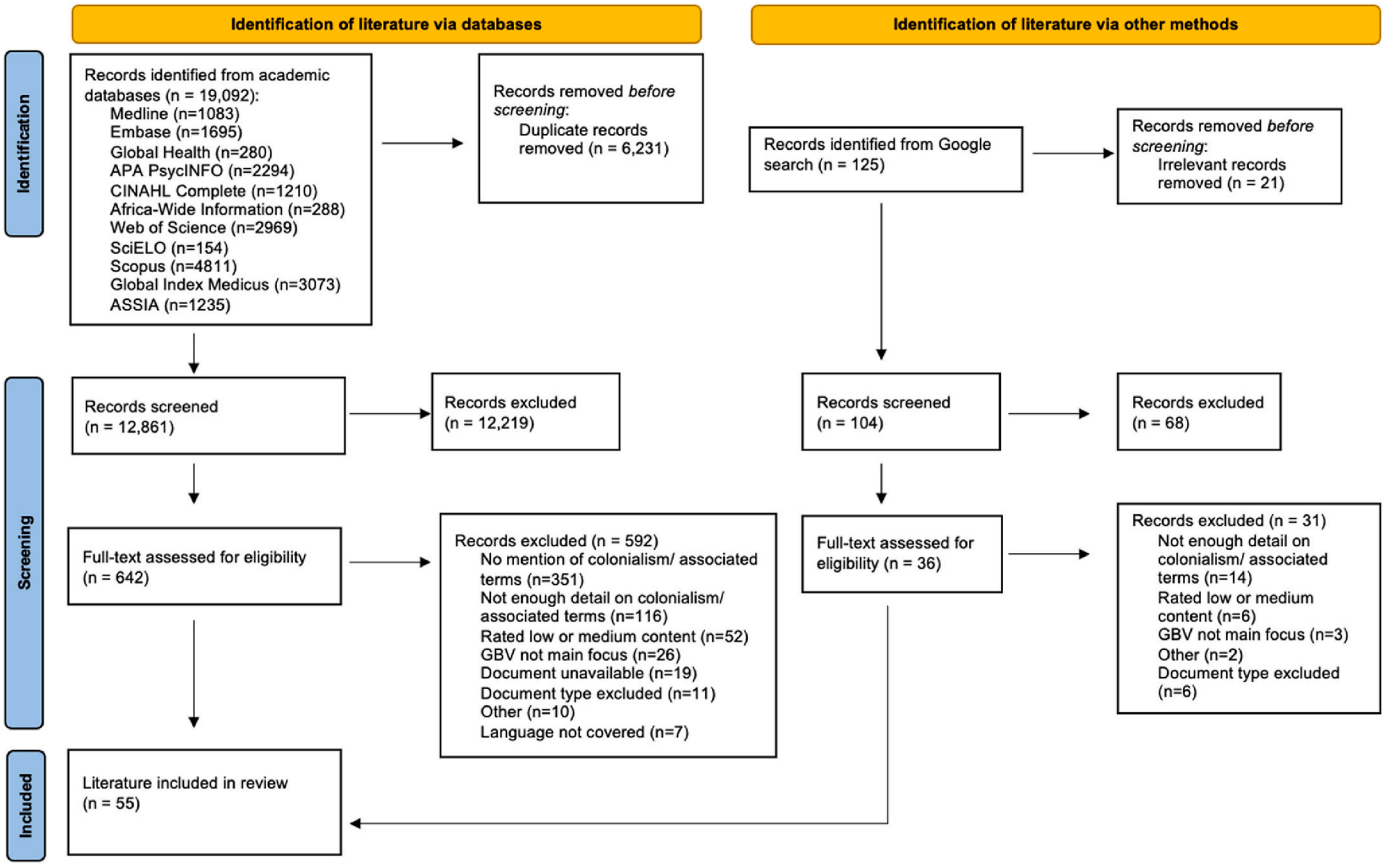

Fig. 1. Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) diagram.
Adapted from Page et al. (2021). For more information, visit: http://www.prisma-statement.org/.

source from this region. Additionally, we included six sources which focused on sub-Saharan Africa, two which focused on the Middle East and North Africa, and one which focused on South Asia (some literature covered multiple regions). While this literature was conducted on these regions, it was not always clear whether the authors were from these regions themselves. One piece of literature was on the Global South generally, and five did not specify a region or location. Interestingly, none of the included literature discussed European countries where ethnic and minoritised groups such as Roma populations and immigrants experience 'internal' colonialism; or experiences of Central Asian countries in the context of imperial Russia/Soviet Union, suggesting important areas for future investment in research.

The included works originated from a diverse set of disciplines and were published in a range of academic journals focusing on gender studies (n = 12), social sciences and qualitative methods (n = 11), violence (n = 9), health (including mental health and nursing) (n = 7), law (n = 6), and social work (n = 4). The most well represented journal in our sample was the Journal of Interpersonal Violence. The majority of the included literature, however, was published in less well-known journals, suggesting limited discussion of the issue of decolonising the field of VAWG in mainstream academia. We did not disaggregate findings based on types of violence as most of the included literature mentioned multiple, overlapping forms of violence, and disentangling them would have been a superficial exercise.

During our analysis of the included literature five key themes arose related to decolonisation and VAWG. These themes, and the number of included references that we found discussing each theme are listed in Table 2 and are further described in the sections below.

Table 2
How included violence against women and girls (VAWG) literature related to decolonisation.

Decolonisation themes	Number of references
Uses a decolonisation framework to understand VAWG	20
Describes how colonisation has led to VAWG	39
Describes how responses to VAWG have been framed from a colonial perspective	38
Suggests bottom up, Indigenous approaches to responding to VAWG	44
Describes how to decolonise own research on VAWG	21

3.3. Decolonisation theories/frameworks

Only 23 of the 55 included literature explicitly mentioned using a decolonisation theory or framework in their research. Studies that mentioned using a particular framework or theory to decolonise research most often referenced use of feminist theories (Coetzee and du Toit, 2018; García-Del Moral, 2018; Mack and Na'puti, 2019; McKenzie et al., 2022; Mendez, 2020; Potts et al., 2022; Rajiva, 2021; Reverter, 2022; van Rijswijk, 2020), with some specifying the use of an intersectional approach (García-Del Moral, 2018; Mercado-Catrinir, 2021; Rajiva, 2021; Reverter, 2022; Romero, 2019). Feminist theories were seen as facilitating relational approaches (García-Del Moral, 2018) and analysis of the root causes of VAWG (Mendez, 2020), while challenging traditional approaches to knowledge production (van Rijswijk, 2020). However, multiple studies also critiqued feminist approaches as a product of Western worldviews (Blagg et al., 2022; Ikeotuonye, 2016; Mack and Na'puti, 2019; Mendez, 2020; van Rijswijk, 2020; Werunga

et al., 2016). Postcolonial (Femenías, 2009) and anti-colonial (Kaye, 2016) approaches were also mentioned as theories to challenge oppression and enable reflexivity, with a few studies also merging postcolonialism and feminism and using terms like 'African feminism', 'Indigenous feminism' or post-colonial feminism (Luebke et al., 2021; Rajiva, 2021; Werunga et al., 2016). Others merged postcolonial and intersectional theories in combination with a human rights framework (Minnick and O'Brien, 2018) or proposed the idea of decolonial feminist theory (Coetzee and du Toit, 2018; Mendez, 2020), which differs from postcolonialism as this theory posits that women have the ability to subvert colonising discourses.

Other frameworks referenced included a 'Black experience-based social work' framework, which emphasised how a Black perspective that was culturally-responsive could address critiques of colonialism and improve responses to gender-based violence (GBV) (Bent-Goodley, 2009) and 'FHORT' (The Framework for Historical Oppression, Resilience, and Transcendence) - a liberatory, critical feminist Indigenous-based ecological framework of historical oppression, resilience and transcendence used by McKinley and Liddell (2022) to understand the contextual features and barriers for Indigenous women in the US leaving relationships characterised by intimate partner violence (IPV). McKinley and Liddell (2022) highlight its value for understanding women's IPV experiences through integrating how structural oppression coupled with the internalised oppression of patriarchal and devaluing beliefs, may interact to exacerbate IPV and limit women's choices. The FHORT framework focuses on the continued effect of settler colonisation in Indigenous women's daily lives, including its gendered impact though the rearrangement of matrilineal and patriarchal social structures. Additionally, two sources referenced transformative justice (Kaye, 2016; Mendez, 2020). Moreover, critical theory (McKinley and Liddell, 2022; Yepes Delgado and Hernández Enríquez, 2010) and the concept of relationality (Blakemore et al., 2021) were also discussed, along with a 'decolonisation discourse' framework (Tefera, 2022).

3.4. Links between VAWG and colonialism

The authors of the included literature reported that colonialism was linked to increased VAWG in a myriad of diverse ways, on different socio-ecological levels. The basis of their argument was well summarised by Stote (2017), who wrote that "*the process of colonialism in whatever its form is necessarily violent*" (p. 114). Many authors argued that this violence continued to perpetuate throughout societies that had experienced colonisation, with the greatest negative impacts on the most vulnerable members of the community – women and girls. Accounts of how colonialism is linked to VAWG were remarkably similar across the literature from different world regions. Some authors argued that colonialism wasn't an antecedent of VAWG, but that they were one in the same. They stated that VAWG is an enactment of colonialism in the modern world, especially when perpetrated by White men against Indigenous women (Farley et al., 2016; Luebke et al., 2021; Mack and Na'puti, 2019; Rajiva, 2021; Stote, 2017). For example, a source comparing the experiences of White and Indigenous Canadian adolescent girls reported that "*sexual violence is not simply a consequence of either patriarchy or white supremacist systems but […] it is actually how you do racism and settler colonialism*" (Rajiva, 2021, p. 3; Razack et al., 2010).

Nonetheless, most authors did conceptualise colonialism as an antecedent of VAWG. These authors often reported that the atrocities of colonisation – loss of land, family, and way of life, to name a few – lead to intergenerational trauma, as colonised populations faced racism, lack of education and employment, and poverty as a result (Dhunna et al., 2021; Edwards et al., 2022; Family Violence Death Review Committee, 2020; Farley et al., 2016; Jain, 2021; Jenkins, 2020; Keddie et al., 2021; Luebke et al., 2021; Minnick and O'Brien, 2018; Rajiva, 2021; Wilson et al., 2021). Dehumanisation was also a major theme in much of the included literature, and authors reported that members of communities that had been colonised were made to feel racially inferior and subordinate, and this insidiously entered into their psyches (Coetzee and du Toit, 2018; Edwards et al., 2022; Family Violence Death Review Committee, 2020; Fuentes, 2020; García-Del Moral, 2018; Jain, 2021; Jenkins, 2020; Kaye, 2016; Lehavot et al., 2009; Minnick and O'Brien, 2018; Pires Marques, 2020; Romero, 2019). This reportedly generated extreme anger, that was then released in households in the form of VAWG (Blakemore et al., 2021; Family Violence Death Review Committee, 2020; Fiolet et al., 2020; Keddie et al., 2021). Pires Marques (2020) described this violence as men trying to re-establish their "virility" through establishing power over women. Included literature also highlights intergenerational and multigenerational impacts of such trauma which may give rise to feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, fear, anger, guilt, stress, and physical and mental ill-health for colonised communities. Keddie et al. (2021) for example, highlight the particular experience of Australian Indigenous men who may feel disenfranchised and powerless in relation to the majority non-Indigenous culture, and when coupled with racism, may experience a loss of identity and status, and may be further disempowered through unemployment and low wages.

Interestingly, while externalised anger due to colonisation reportedly led to men perpetrating VAWG, internalised anger was described as leading women to be more tolerant of this violence in their lives. This was most clearly articulated in a study conducted in African American communities: "*Participants noted that the experience of slavery left deep feelings of rage and anger leading one to engage in violence and/or to accept being a victim of violence*" (Jenkins, 2020, p. 7). Similarly, in case studies from Cuba and Guatemala the authors reported that feeling devalued and dehumanised by colonisation played a role in women choosing not to leave violent relationships (McKinley and Liddell, 2022). A possible mechanism for this was described in a study on violence against lesbian, bi-sexual and two-spirit American Indians and Alaska Natives. The authors explained how colonisation robbed participants of their internal locus of control, or "*mastery*" over life circumstances, playing a role in their tolerance of violence in intimate relationships (Lehavot et al., 2009), regardless of sex or gender.

Gender, however, did play a big role in the link between colonisation and VAWG. Colonisers brought their conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinities and femininities – which were based on Eurocentric Christian values – and this construction of gender normalised VAWG (Blagg et al., 2022; Borges and Santana, 2022; Braganza, 2019; Coetzee and du Toit, 2018; Fuentes, 2020; Ikeotuonye, 2016; Jain, 2021; Le Grice, 2017; Luebke et al., 2021; Matamonasa-Bennett, 2015; McKinley and Liddell, 2022; Mendez, 2020; Mercado-Catrinir, 2021; Mfecane, 2019; Minnick and O'Brien, 2018; Pires Marques, 2020; Raby, 2018; Rajiva, 2021; Wilson et al., 2021; Yepes Delgado and Hernández Enríquez, 2010). In many of the Indigenous communities represented in the included literature, such as the Yoruba of present day Nigeria and the Māori of present day Australia, women held "*power, status and respect*" prior to colonisation (Coetzee and du Toit, 2018; Dhunna et al., 2021; Edwards et al., 2022; Family Violence Death Review Committee, 2020; Matamonasa-Bennett, 2015; McKinley and Liddell, 2022, p. 3355; Wilson et al., 2021) and VAWG was not considered socially acceptable (Bennett, 1997; Dhunna et al., 2021; Edwards et al., 2022); although some authors noted that it did occasional occur (e.g. Mack and Na'puti, 2019; Raby, 2018). With colonisation, however, women came to be seen as less than human or "*property*", and thus VAWG became normalised and often unpunished and not prosecutable (Kaye, 2016; McKinley and Liddell, 2022; Minnick and O'Brien, 2018; Pires Marques, 2020; Raby, 2018; Rajiva, 2021; Wilson et al., 2021). Indigenous men also began to adopt the gender inequitable attitudes and violent behaviours of the colonisers:

> *The production of this indifference of colonized men towards colonized women, resulted in a behaviour analogous to that of the colonizer, an exploitative, violent behaviour that reduces women to the category of non-*

humans, objects, subject to abuse and disposal. (Pires Marques, 2020, p. 209)

Several authors compared the colonial conquest of land to the conquest of women's bodies in the context of rape and femicide (Borges and Santana, 2022; Fuentes, 2020; Marceau et al., 2020). As a source on violence against Indigenous women in the Americas stated:

Sexual assault mimics the worst traits of colonization in its attack on the body, invasion of physical boundaries, and disregard for humanity. This link is made clearer when considering that, a survivor of sexual assault may experience many of the same symptoms, self-blame, loss of identity, and long-term depression and despair, as people surviving colonisation. (Mack and Na'puti, 2019, p. 359)

Moreover, Indigenous women were often hypersexualised and fetishised, and seen as "*rapeable*" by colonisers (Farley et al., 2016; Fuentes, 2020, p. 167; Luebke et al., 2021; Marceau et al., 2020; Mendez, 2020; Mercado-Catrinir, 2021; Rajiva, 2021), and this attitude was also passed down to Indigenous men and internalised by Indigenous women (Le Grice, 2017; Rajiva, 2021). Conversely, Indigenous women were also perceived by colonisers to be "*unfit mothers*" because of the domestic violence experienced and witnessed by their children, leading to reproductive coercion through forced sterilization policies (Le Grice, 2017; McKenzie et al., 2022).

Another commonly described pathway from colonisation to VAWG was the shift from more communal ways of life to nuclear families. In traditional communal societies interpersonal violence was stigmatised and acted upon collectively (Luebke et al., 2021), for instance in many traditional Native American communities, men who perpetrated VAWG lost status as warriors and could even be ostracised or exiled (Matamonasa-Bennett, 2015; McKinley and Liddell, 2022). With colonisation these societies adopted the structure of the nuclear family, and as a consequence domestic violence became private, and often shameful for women rather than perpetrators as there was a lack of communal accountability (Dhunna et al., 2021; Jain, 2021; McKinley and Liddell, 2022; Wilson et al., 2021). This was exacerbated by women's societal role being shifted from public to more private spheres, so that those who experienced violence were more isolated (Pires Marques, 2020; Wilson et al., 2021).

3.5. Decolonial/indigenous responses to VAWG in programming

The vast majority of literature that we reviewed on decolonial or Indigenous responses to VAWG mainly derived from the perspective of Indigenous populations from the US, Canada, and Australia, and to a lesser extent, Latin America and the Caribbean. The included studies highlighted three main decolonial approaches to respond to VAWG.

1. Holistic and healing-focused programmes and services

Within included literature we found decolonial approaches to respond to VAWG included holistic and healing focused programmes and services created and led by and for Indigenous communities (Keddie et al., 2021; Lindeman and Togni, 2022). Proponents of such approaches emphasise the importance of situating VAWG within the context of racist violence, including inherited and ongoing grief and trauma experienced by Indigenous communities from State sanctioned policies of forced separation and assimilation, dispossession of land, cultural violence and imperialism, on-going racism and discrimination, and the intergenerational and multigenerational impacts of such trauma, particularly on men and their identities, as earlier discussed (Jain, 2021; Keddie et al., 2021). Proponents of healing focused programmes and services advocate that programmes that work with Indigenous men should also work with families and communities to create culturally sensitive recovery, and actively tackle the intergenerational impacts of trauma (Keddie et al., 2021).

2. Engagement with Indigenous masculinities and femininities

We also identified literature emphasising the need to engage with Indigenous masculinities and femininities in responding to VAWG. Within this decolonial approach, we found reference particularly to the need to avoid tokenistic inclusion of people from such communities without space for them to contribute (Jain, 2021; Rajiva, 2021). This would help to address situations where methodologies, approaches and tools are developed in the Global North and claim to be adapted to local contexts, but insufficiently engage with Indigenous masculinities or femininities (Jain, 2021). Engaging with Indigenous masculinities and femininities was mentioned as important for overcoming the narrow definitions of Eurocentric models of masculinities and femininities that were imposed during colonialism (Blagg et al., 2022), enabling reflection on the relative value placed on certain types of masculinities, male identities and what is considered to reflect gender equality in relationships and societies (Blagg et al., 2022).

Feminist, intersectional thinking is also important for highlighting the experiences of Indigenous girls and women and overcoming the instances where White, Western, middle class, heteronormative, able-bodied characterisations of girlhood dominate, and come to represent universal characterisations of girlhood and girls' experiences of violence (Rajiva, 2021). Tajima (2021) argues that strategies to respond to VAWG need to be developed by people from the same class and race background. Tefera (2022) also stresses the importance of ensuring local and Indigenous ideas meaningfully inform intervention development. This was contrasted with examples of where Indigenous actors and people of colour had been tokenistically included in violence prevention campaigns instead of being meaningfully engaged (Jain, 2021).

3. Strengthening Global South leadership and knowledge base

Proponents of decolonised ways of responding to VAWG also argue for the importance of strengthening Global South leadership and the Global South knowledge base, such that research and responses to VAWG are grounded in and led by local communities who are experts in their own lived experiences and contexts (Jain, 2021; Tefera, 2022). This, they argue, can be achieved through working with local and Indigenous communities, feminists, and advocates in pursuit of bottom-up approaches, rather than those that are externally or internationally determined. This would help to ensure that change agendas and solutions are driven by communities themselves. Similarly, democratising and honouring community-level knowledge processes, particularly in Indigenous communities, is important for changing the way in which knowledge is generated and valued (Jain, 2021; Werunga et al., 2016). In this way the decolonisation of knowledge requires an explicit examination of who has power over knowledge production, dissemination, and management, and ensuring that those who were marginalised by colonialisation are not prevented from engaging in real and meaningful ways (Potts et al., 2022; Tefera, 2022).

3.6. Decolonising VAWG methods for research

Several studies mentioned using specific methods to decolonise their research. Feminist research methods were particularly discussed as being useful in decolonising VAWG research, including helping voices of Indigenous women to be heard (Matamonasa-Bennett, 2015), providing different forms of knowledge (Potts et al., 2022), enabling intersectional analysis (Werunga et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2021), facilitating transformative justice (Mendez, 2020), and enabling reflexivity (Matamonasa-Bennett, 2015).

Storytelling was most frequently mentioned in the included literature as a research method for decolonising VAWG research and programming (Blakemore et al., 2021; Le Grice, 2017; Lindeman and Togni, 2022; McKenzie et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2021). Other studies that focused on VAWG among Indigenous communities emphasised that

research should use Indigenous methods to generate knowledge (Edwards et al., 2022; Tajima, 2021; Wilson et al., 2021). Two studies from Aotearoa/New Zealand, for example, advocated for the use of a "Kaupapa Maōri" research methodology - which seeks to position Maōri interests at the centre of the research, privileging Maōri worldviews and avoiding stereotypical representations of Maōri people and communities (Dhunna et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2021). Two studies mentioned using a participatory action research design (Lindeman and Togni, 2022; Potts et al., 2022), and one mentioned community-based participatory action research (Edwards et al., 2022). Indigenous methods of generating and sharing knowledge were emphasised as legitimate ways of knowing, which would help to address the shortcomings of colonised research methodologies that are often argued to include positivist and reductionist approaches to research (Edwards et al., 2022). Indigenous frameworks could also inform use of Indigenous methods (McKinley and Liddell, 2022).

Other approaches to decolonising research outside of using specific methods included designing research with communities (Buxton-Namisnyk, 2017), establishing an Advisory Committee with members of the group who were involved in design and analysis of data (Fiolet et al., 2020), using a specific approach for analysis like critical discourse analysis (Pires Marques, 2020), considering historical and social context (Lindeman and Togni, 2022), using culturally-safe approaches (Fiolet et al., 2020), sharing feedback with research participants (Buxton-Namisnyk, 2017), and co-authoring academic and community outputs (McKenzie et al., 2022), all as a means of centring communities and their experiences and perspectives in the design, delivery, analysis, interpretation and reporting of the study.

A few studies also reflected on decolonising programming in relation to specific types of VAWG. For example, Mannell et al. (2021) discuss the importance of a theory of change process for VAWG interventions that is grounded in an understanding of colonialism as a driver of VAWG. Scholars stress that efforts to prevent and respond to FGM/C require a local perspective that is grounded in historical analysis (Werunga et al., 2016). Romero (2019) similarly argues that even feminist accounts of femicide of Indigenous women have been "mono-causal and mono-dimensional" and lacked historical grounding, affecting efforts to ensure justice.

3.7. Summary of recommendations for research and programming

Although we initially set out to describe recommendations for research and programming separately, we found that recommendations often overlapped, so we describe recommendations for research and programming together, identifying instances where recommendations were made exclusively for rone or the other.

3.8. Consider the context and power hierarchies influencing VAWG

Firstly, we found that many sources offered recommendations about the importance of considering the context or the community in which VAWG occurs, referring to specific communities within a country, such as the Black community or Indigenous communities, or groups that are being intervened upon or studied in the Global South. Authors recommend framing VAWG responses considering structural oppressions faced by those communities (such as racism, chronic unemployment, or intergenerational trauma), to avoid a reductionist view that would hinder the effectiveness of policies, interventions, and studies by ignoring the reality that those factors can act to generate or increase violence, and are oftentimes colonial legacies themselves. This approach led several of the authors to recommend understanding perpetrators in the communities as also experiencing structural violence, with emphasis being put in community wide and community-led social change.

There were also recommendations regarding the importance of tailoring policies to contexts and communities, emphasising the need to consult beneficiaries, and of having policies not only planned for those groups, but also by them. Specific to practice, service response was also mentioned as having to be adapted to the needs of users, with recommendations on provider education and cultural sensitivity to make services more effective and less likely to perpetuate harmful colonial practices (Bent-Goodley, 2009; Farley et al., 2016; Matamonasa-Bennett, 2015; Wilson et al., 2021):

> *(…) behind each individual lies a narrative beyond one's control, shaping and molding each one. When it comes to violence, we are quick to individualize the issue and fault the person and transpose this understanding irrespective of the sociocultural context in which violence occurs. This is unfair, and paints an incomplete picture.* (Braganza, 2019, no pagination)

3.9. Centre community resources and perspectives in efforts to end VAWG

Secondly, there were also recommendations to incorporate community resources and perspectives into efforts to end violence, such as their ability to mobilise their traditional values to counteract the ideas that perpetuated VAWG, which was often seen as a colonial legacy in itself (Blagg et al., 2022; Coker, 1999; Le Grice, 2017; Marceau et al., 2020; Matamonasa-Bennett, 2015). Literature often presented the state as a colonial force trying to impose ways of dealing with VAWG that were not suitable to the community. They also highlighted the role of particular, power actors in setting GBV research agendas: *"Similarly, research agendas are generally set by too few, usually the most recognised, senior or loudest in the room"* (Mago and Dartnall, 2022, p. 2). Recommendations emphasised the importance of strengthening community structures and internal regulations as a way to decolonise responses to VAWG and make them more effective, since communities were able to regulate the behaviour of their members and solve conflicts more effectively than institutions that were considered foreign and violent in some ways.

3.10. Engage communities in knowledge production

Thirdly, several authors also argued for the importance of decolonising research on VAWG, with recommendations such as adapting methodologies to allow for the inclusion of marginalised groups in the research processes, making the methodologies more responsive to the realities they were exploring, and ensuring the research as a whole is more committed to those realities and groups. This included the LGBTQIA + community within those groups, who were understood to have specific additional needs and vulnerabilities that intersected with LGBTQIA + identity (Ghanbarpour et al., 2018; Marceau et al., 2020). While some authors expressed the importance of including those new voices and perspectives, others were part of the under-represented communities and argued for themselves. Authors stressed the importance of avoiding exploitative and extractivist behaviour, such as using communities for data collection without offering something meaningful in return, and advised that, to be able to produce something meaningful for communities, researchers would need to incorporate them into the research process and be open to collaboration at different levels.

The recommendations regarding inclusion of communities in research meant different things, ranging from more superficial involvement as data collectors, to more central roles that recognised the possibility of contribution in the production of knowledge, and in the process of explaining and transforming realities. There were also recommendations to include diverse voices in educational and research institutions, having them in the curriculum and in positions of authority in projects to positively influence the research that is being made (Blagg et al., 2022; Farley et al., 2016; Fiolet et al., 2020; Ghanbarpour et al., 2018; Tefera, 2022):

> *This speaks of the urgent need to decolonise our research by centring it on African ontologies and epistemologies, to make sure that it reflects the*

realities and lived experiences of the majority of African populations. Gender analysts must refrain from simply imposing ready-made concepts from the Global North when analysing our complex social problems and instead seek to develop grounded explanatory frameworks. (Mfecane, 2019, no pagination)

3.11. Challenge research agenda-setting processes and redistributing funding

Fourthly, there were also recommendations to make funding schemes more responsive to local realities and needs. Several authors referred to the importance of ensuring funding schemes do not perpetuate the same power imbalances that shape them, with calls to redistribute power to amplify the voices of marginalised communities and people in the Global South. This discussion was closely linked with recommendations for a decolonised research agenda necessarily requiring that communities that are affected by VAWG, and those working to end it, own meaningful space to shape and deliver the research agenda, rather than it being controlled by funders and Eurocentric academic institutions in the Global North (Edwards et al., 2022; Ghanbarpour et al., 2018; Mago and Dartnall, 2022; Pino et al., 2021).

We found references to the need to increase funding for policies and programmes, but also for resources to be distributed in a way that would better serve users. Many authors, however, believed this would only be achieved with the participation of the communities in the decision-making process, to avoid both lack of funding and its misdirection to uses that were culturally insensitive and ineffective (Blagg et al., 2022; Farley et al., 2016; Jain, 2021; Jenkins, 2020; Mago and Dartnall, 2022; Pino et al., 2021).

Communities have been disempowered through de-funding of community-controlled services and programs. There was a consistent belief across all of the sites that Aboriginal organizations have been steadily asset stripped of resources, which have been reinvested in a mix of religious or affiliated organizations. (Blagg et al., 2022, p. 545)

3.12. Decolonise feminism itself

Lastly, most authors highlighted the need to decolonise feminism to ensure that it can adequately inform VAWG response for different groups, as they considered that mainstream (White) feminist theory might not be serving the needs of women in varied settings, who experience radically different realities to those where the movement emerged. Feminism and feminist approaches were discussed in many different ways and, although a feminist response to VAWG was sometimes presented as empowering, feminism and the feminist movement were associated with White people, 'modernity' and the West, depending on the source of the critique. These authors often propose the use of intersectional and decolonial feminism to address these concerns, making sure that gender is not looked at separately from other issues that shape the experience of VAWG, and stressing the importance of drawing from the theorising and experiences of women in those groups (Bennett, 1997; Blagg et al., 2022; Boryczka, 2017; Braganza, 2019; García-Del Moral, 2018; Jain, 2021; Marceau et al., 2020; McKinley and Liddell, 2022; Pino et al., 2021; Romero, 2019; Stote, 2017; Tajima, 2021; van Rijswijk, 2020).

4. Discussion

This scoping review represents the first known effort to describe and qualitatively synthesise global literature on colonialism and decolonisation of VAWG research and programming. We contribute to the growing debate and discussion on decolonisation, providing recommendations specific to the VAWG field, and suggesting further avenues for the application of a decolonising lens for research and programming in the field.

The broad geographical representation within the included sources reflects the growing interest in decolonisation and greater visibility of decolonisation in VAWG research and policymaking, especially over the last ten years. However, despite growing engagement with the concept of decolonisation, we suggest more could be done to describe what counts as decolonisation, especially to ensure better theoretical grounding of the concept of decolonisation. While the notion of decolonisation has gained traction in recent years, its use as a buzzword risks it being diluted or misconstrued (Tuck and Yang, 2012). The concept of decolonisation may even risk going through a process of "NGO-isation" (Jad, 2004; Lang, 1997), which refers to the depoliticisation and bureaucratisation of activistic concepts within NGOs. As decolonisation gains momentum not just within research spaces but also VAWG programming, it is vital that it maintains its political, "unsettling" and sometimes uncomfortable meaning (Fanon, 1963).

Importantly, our review outlines critical resistance to Western, liberal versions of feminism that can often underpin VAWG research and programming. While feminist frameworks were most commonly referenced among studies that explicitly referenced using a decolonisation framework, scholars also argued that Western feminism may not always reflect the complexities of VAWG experienced by those in the Global South, and might perpetuate coloniality. These critiques of feminism are not new (Mohanty, 1984), but reflect the need for the VAWG field to re-consider the role of feminisms, and more explicitly recognise the ways in which Western interpretations of feminism influence VAWG research and programming.

Our review finds that the accounts of linkages between colonialism and VAWG are startlingly similar across geographical regions. Colonialism's long-term impacts included devaluing and dehumanising Indigenous populations (Jenkins, 2020), with lasting effects for women's agency and tolerance of VAWG in relationships (Lehavot et al., 2009). We find that the impacts of colonisation on VAWG cannot be linked to just one factor but is the amalgamation of many. Notably, some authors also stated that colonisation persists in the patriarchal, capitalist systems that currently operate our world (Jain, 2021; Kaye, 2016; Mack and Na'puti, 2019; van Rijswijk, 2020), which raises the poignant question for anyone impacted by colonialism: "*How do we heal from the violence when it is ongoing?*" (Kaye, 2016; Lee, 2015).

We also identify a need to invest in decolonisation research in under-researched areas. This includes research among ethnic and underprivileged minorities like Roma populations and refugees within Europe (Collyer and Shahani, 2023; Hrešanová, 2023), who might experience underdevelopment and forms of policing and ghettoisation focused on maintaining a "white elite" (Tuck and Yang, 2012, pp. 4–5).

Our review also highlights a gap in studies that explore intersections between colonialism and other identities, identifying a need to invest more broadly in understanding especially how colonialism intersects with LGBTQIA + identities. While the literature points to the colonial imposition of binary genders in contexts in which this was not prevalent or did not exist at all, more research is needed linking the imposition of this gender binary with contemporary violence against queer and transgender women, building on the work of pioneering scholars who analysed how coloniality and gender intersect (e.g. Amadiume, 2015; Lugones, 2007; Oyěwùmí, 1997).

While our study encouragingly finds that a majority of literature refers to bottom-up, Indigenous approaches to respond to VAWG, we suggest more work could be done to help researchers understand how to decolonise their own VAWG research, and how to use decolonisation frameworks to understand VAWG. Further, the recognition of the importance of local, bottom-up or community perspectives needs to be grounded in an understanding that these are romanticised "buzzwords" that do not take into account power differentials between actors who are often presumed to represent communities even while being labelled as "local" (Cornwall, 2007). Indeed, there is growing critique of the North-South "binary" and greater recognition of the need to analyse

power dynamics beyond this simplistic division (Haug et al., 2021).

Our review identifies a range of decolonial strategies, however, the reviewed literature is relatively silent on decolonial or 'Indigenous' ways of responding to VAWG from the perspective of populations that were previously colonised in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and the Pacific. More work might be needed to understand the reasons for studies being conducted on colonialism and VAWG in particular geographical reasons over others. It may be that the term 'Indigenous' is narrowly understood or is not used to capture other realities of colonialism, e.g. for groups who belong to the dominant population and thus have influence in terms of state and political power, resource allocation, and who are not minoritised by the population that colonised them. It is also worth exploring differences in funding flows for VAWG research by region, as well as differences in the type and impacts of colonialism by region.

In this review, storytelling was the most frequently mentioned approach to decolonising research methods, perhaps because of how forms of storytelling (rather than text-based communication) have often been part of many Indigenous traditions (Blakemore et al., 2021; Le Grice, 2017; Lindeman and Togni, 2022; McKenzie et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2021). We suggest that more work could be done to expand the use of methods that can accommodate decolonial lenses beyond only storytelling, building on Indigenous traditions such as weaving (McKinley and Theall, 2021), but also through testing alternative means of generating data such as arts-based methods and creative and dramatic approaches which have been used to understand varied topics outside of VAWG. Alongside methods, we find a growing body of work on strategies used to decolonise research itself, such as co-designing research with communities, analysing positionality, using culturally safe approaches, and co-authorship of outputs with members of the affected community. However, we find these strategies to be less commonly discussed than the use of specific methods such as storytelling. More work could be done to provide guidance on how researchers can embed a decolonial lens across each stage of the research process, beyond thinking about research methods alone as the avenue to decolonise (Singh et al., 2021). More training and support are needed for researchers on how to use these methods and strategies effectively.

The included literature frequently mentions recommendations for research and programming - with overlaps for both categories in how these recommendations were described – and these are listed in Table 3.

We suggest that it is also vital to create opportunities for meaningful investment in the capacity of Indigenous actors to enable them to lead VAWG research and programming, as part of decolonising who holds power within the VAWG space. There is a material aspect to inequities in access to resources for VAWG, so efforts to decolonise need to consider the distribution of resources and challenge the structures that keep communities, researchers, and practitioners from the South and from marginalised groups reliant on outside funding. More thinking is also needed on how to better recognise perpetrators of VAWG as also a product of processes of colonisation (especially given gendered expectations for behaviour introduced by colonising powers), and to respond with programmes to tackle coloniality as a contributing driver for perpetrator behaviour. This may include mental health programmes for perpetrators (Tol et al., 2019), gender transformative programming, and "gender synchronised" initiatives implemented across groups of women, men and people of all sexual orientations and gender identities under the same programme (Greene and Levack, 2010), that acknowledge the value of relationality, and seek to increase gender-equitable attitudes and behaviours, and challenge restrictive gender norms (Ruane-McAteer et al., 2019; Stewart et al., 2021). Such initiatives recognise men's multiple and intersectional identities alongside their own experience of marginalisation (Casey et al., 2018), including those originating from colonisation processes. The poverty and violence that permeate the countries and communities affected by colonisation also have to be taken into account to contextualise the behaviour of perpetrators. This means it is important to advocate for broader social and economic change to support longer-term tackling of root causes of VAWG. In this sense, addressing VAWG through a decolonial lens might mean making an effort to consider structural changes that would ameliorate living conditions in those contexts, by understanding them both as a driver of violent behaviour and a barrier for help seeking for those experiencing violence.

Our review had some limitations and strengths. Firstly, the broad range of literature identified in our initial search meant that significant narrowing of the scope of the review had to occur. Our searching and sampling strategies were not necessarily replicable, especially at the last stage of including only "highly relevant" literature. Secondly, we focused our review on VAWG literature with higher levels of content on decolonisation, which meant that literature with less content on decolonisation was excluded - potentially resulting in important lessons being excluded. This specific focus, however, allowed us to extract more detail from the highly relevant literature included on a very specific topic. We were thus able to provide detailed and nuanced recommendations on decolonising the field of VAWG. Additionally, we used not just decolonisation/colonisation as the lens to identify literature, but also associated terms which meant that some literature that referred to broader topics related to decolonisation/colonisation were included even if they did not specifically use the term decolonisation/colonisation. This helped to identify literature that captured the essence and spirit of what it means to think about power, North-South dynamics and Indigenous knowledge. The positionality of all authors also played a role in these determinations, as we each had varied experience working to decolonise our own research and encountered particular barriers trying to do so in our current and previous organisations. It is possible that some literature is less directly related to the topic of decolonisation and colonisation. Given our comprehensive search strategy - including across disciplines and world regions, as well as a grey literature search - we chose not to conduct citation tracing, which could have strengthened our methodology. We are confident, however, that the essential literature on decolonisation/colonisation and VAWG was captured in our review. Moreover, given that we chose to conduct a scoping review our goal was not to capture all the available literature, but to synthesise the key literature, providing recommendations for future research and programming.

5. Conclusions

Colonialism has left significant legacies in society today, including within research and programming on VAWG. This scoping review of academic and grey literature engages with the concept of colonialism and decolonisation related to VAWG, and points to key recommendations for how VAWG research and programming could be decolonised. To our knowledge, this review is the first to explore colonialism and decolonisation within VAWG research and programming. While our focus is on contributing to the VAWG field, we recognise the findings

Table 3
5 recommendations for research and practice to decolonise the field of violence against women and girls (VAWG).

1. Consider the context and power hierarchies within which VAWG occurs
2. Incorporate community resources and perspectives into efforts to end VAWG
3. Use methods and approaches to researching VAWG that centre perspectives and lived experience of communities
4. Shift VAWG funding to local actors and ensure VAWG funding streams are more responsive to local needs and realities
5. Ensure local, contextually-relevant framings of feminisms inform decolonising of VAWG

could have wider applicability for work on gender equality more broadly. The 55 included sources draw attention to the importance of decolonisation, but much of the literature also highlights critical tensions that those involved in VAWG research and programming should consider, including the extent to which mainstream (White) feminism is fit for purpose, and the role of the Global South VAWG actors in setting the terms for what decolonisation of VAWG means. This scoping review suggests that more bottom-up guidance and methods are needed for researchers to decolonise VAWG research to avoid decolonisation being further reduced to a buzzword – but also that greater interrogation of categories like "local" actors is needed. Research and programming could also pay greater attention to structural inequities, including improving access to funding for actors in the Global South, recognising the role of hierarchical organisational structures in perpetuating colonial behaviours, and investing in Indigenous knowledge and expertise when researching VAWG. Finally, it is important to note that although those actions are urgent and important, the colonial practices that affect the field of VAWG are part of a wider structure. True decolonisation requires a structural change that would allow all communities and countries to have self-determination and autonomy over their knowledge production and VAWG interventions, an ambitious goal that is worth pursuing.

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Ethical statement

Ethics approval was not required for this scoping review because we did not collect data from human subjects.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Michelle Lokot: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Marjorie Pichon:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Beatriz Kalichman:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis. **Samantha Nardella:** Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Jane Falconer:** Methodology, Conceptualization. **Nambusi Kyegombe:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Ana Maria Buller:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Data availability

Data has been shared in the manuscript and supplementary materials

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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