LSE Media and Communications

Media@LSE MSc Dissertation Series

Editors: Simidele Dosekun, Zichen Hu

Narratives of Resistance

Tigrayan Women and Their Allies in Challenging Sexual Violence Denial

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Published by Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science ("LSE"), Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. The LSE is a School of the University of London. It is a Charity and is incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act (Reg number 70527).

ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the resources and discourses mobilised by Tigrayan women and their allies to challenge the denial of rape and sexual violence during the Tigray War (2020– 2022). Amid an unprecedented communications blackout and systematic silencing of survivors, testimony was structurally obstructed, rendering their suffering both unspoken and disbelieved. Early observations of advocacy during the blackout informed the provisional concept of proxy advocacy: advocacy under conditions of enforced absence, where systemic barriers prevent survivor testimony, compelling others to make claims from positions of proximity and solidarity. Using ten semi-structured interviews, analysed through thematic and Critical Discourse Analysis, the study identifies five interrelated advocacy practices: mobilising fragments into infrastructures of credibility, building community networks, creating digital counter-archives, enacting survivor protection practices, and sustaining the emotional costs of advocacy. CDA further revealed how participants strategically deployed language to navigate credibility deficits, construct authority through collective pronouns, and reframe sexual violence within genocidal discourse to contest denial. Taken together, these practices substantiate and refine the concept of proxy advocacy, showing how advocacy was reconfigured under enforced absence. This study contributes to scholarship on denial, testimony, and feminist advocacy by demonstrating how proxy advocacy illuminates the possibilities and ethical limits of political action under systemic silencing.

***Keywords**: proxy advocacy, conflict-related sexual violence, Tigray War, denial*

INTRODUCTION

'From a selfish point of view, I felt less crazy in the refugee camps. In London… with denial, gaslighting… it felt like… being made to feel like you're insane.' – Tigrayan diaspora woman, interviewee 3.

Her words capture how denial is an active force that corrodes reality. Speaking from the diaspora for those silenced in Tigray, she describes how denial doesn't simply reject testimony but systematically undermines the credibility of all who attempt to voice the unspeakable. During the Tigray War in Ethiopia (2020–2022), fought between the federal government and the regional Tigray People's Liberation Front, this corrosive force operated systematically (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Widespread reports of rape and sexual violence against civilians were denied by Ethiopian state officials, international actors, and online disinformation campaigns (Vigneswaran et al., 2025; OHCHR & EHRC, 2021). This denial unfolded amid an unprecedented physical and communications blockade: most of Tigray was cut off for nearly two years, with severely constrained telecommunications, internet, electricity, banking, aid, and free movement (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Journalists, investigators, and humanitarian organisations were barred from entry, making it, according to Access Now, 'the world's longest uninterrupted shutdown' (Associated Press, 2022). In this context, survivors' voices were structurally obstructed, leaving their suffering both unspoken and disbelieved.

This dissertation does not seek to prove the occurrence of rape and sexual violence during the war; survivors, investigators, and advocacy networks have already documented these crimes (Amnesty International, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2022; OHCHR & EHRC, 2021). Instead, it asks: **What resources and discourses do Tigrayan women, and their allies use to challenge the denial of rape and sexual violence during the Tigray War?**

To address this question, I introduce the concept of proxy advocacy, understood here as advocacy under conditions of enforced absence, where systemic barriers prevent survivor testimony and compel others to make claims from positions of proximity and solidarity. My earlier pilot study on digital advocacy in the Tigray War left me with lingering questions about why these practices did not sit neatly within conventional advocacy frameworks. This

dissertation develops proxy advocacy as a provisional analytical concept, extending feminist advocacy into contexts where survivor consultation and amplification are structurally obstructed, refines it through abductive engagement with interview data.

My review of advocacy literature, particularly feminist approaches, illuminates important dimensions but remains limited in this context. Feminist approaches (Alcoff, 1991; Oliver, 2001) stress the ethics of speaking with and for survivors but similarly presume access. Even Imig's early reference to advocacy by proxy (1996) situates it within institutional representation rather than conditions of enforced absence. These frameworks, while valuable, remain limited for analyzing advocacy under the extreme conditions of total communicative severing that characterized the Tigray blackout

These gaps in the literature make an empirical turn necessary. To address them, I conducted ten semi-structured interviews with Tigrayan diaspora advocates and their allies, analysed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995). These methods together illuminate what resources and discourses were mobilised.

The analytical framework brings together Cohen's (2001) account of denial as a political strategy, Spivak's (1988) notion of epistemic violence, Fricker's (2007) concept of testimonial injustice, and Butler's (2004) concept of grievability. These perspectives provide tools to interpret how denial obstructs testimony and reshapes the very terms of recognition. Against this backdrop, proxy advocacy becomes a lens to analyse how insisted on recognition when survivor voices were structurally blocked.

Positionality

I approach this research as a non-Tigrayan Ethiopian woman who lived in Addis Ababa during the war, close enough to witness the circulation of denials yet distant from the silenced experiences in Tigray. Reports of sexual violence and mass killings were frequently dismissed around me as propaganda, exposing a pattern of strategic discrediting. These moments sharpened the questions I carried forward: Why are some victims disbelieved by default? What makes certain suffering recognisable and other suffering disposable? What

becomes of those who speak in defiance of a world that prefers their silence? A feminist orientation guided my analysis, situating denial as not only political but also gendered: a system that selectively grants or withholds credibility, rendering some testimonies authoritative while others are erased.

Contributions

This dissertation makes three contributions. Empirically, it highlights the understated role of Tigrayan advocates resisting denial during the war, adding to limited scholarship on the conflict. Conceptually, it develops proxy advocacy as an analytical extension of feminist advocacy, theorising advocacy under enforced absence. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of combining thematic analysis with CDA to capture both the resources mobilised and the discursive strategies deployed in contested terrains of credibility.

Structure

Introduction situates the Tigray War within wider global patterns of conflict-related sexual violence denial and outlines the postcolonial and feminist theoretical foundations that inform the study, introducing proxy advocacy as its central lens. Literature review and theoretical framework detail the research methodology and analytical approach. Findings section presents the empirical findings, examining how participants mobilised resources and discourses to navigate credibility, visibility, and denial. Discussion section reflects on the broader conceptual implications of proxy advocacy, highlighting its ethical and political stakes under enforced absence. Discussion concludes by summarising the study's contributions, acknowledging its limitations, and identifying areas for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Setting the Context

This section outlines the political and infrastructural conditions that shaped both the perpetration of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) in the Tigray War and the subsequent denial of survivor testimony. Focusing on scale, targeting, and information control, it

identifies the contextual dynamics necessary for understanding how gendered violence and enforced absence became mutually reinforcing.

The Scale and Targeting of CRSV

The Tigray War, which began in November 2020 in northern Ethiopia's Tigray region, home to a predominantly Tigrayan population, was marked by widespread atrocities, including the systematic use of CRSV against Tigrayan women, committed in connection with armed conflict (Amnesty International, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2022; OHCHR & EHRC, 2021; United Nations, 2020). A joint investigation by the United Nations and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission found that multiple parties, including the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF), Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF), Amhara Special Forces, Fano militias, and Tigrayan Special Forces, were implicated in serious human rights violations (OHCHR & EHRC, 2021: 3). While no definitive numbers exist, estimates suggest that over 120,000 women were raped during the conflict (Le Monde, 2025), underscoring the potential scale of violence.

The targeting of Tigrayan women during the war cannot be separated from Ethiopia's political structure. As Hussen and Sete (2023: 98) argue, the country's ethnic federalist design has historically prioritized ethno-nationalist politics over structural human rights concerns, relegating women's rights to a secondary status. These dynamics intensified after Abiy Ahmed became Prime Minister in 2018. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), long-dominant in the ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), was sidelined when Abiy dissolved the coalition and merged it into the new Prosperity Party in 2019, a move the TPLF viewed as undermining Ethiopia's federal order (Blanchard, 2021). In parallel, Abiy's reconciliation with Eritrea reconfigured regional alliances, as Weldemichael & Dirar (2021) show, laying the groundwork for military collaboration against the TPLF once the conflict broke out. This political realignment was accompanied by an intensifying campaign of discursive vilification. The UK Home Office (2024: 78) documents how Abiy described TPLF leaders as 'daylight hyenas' and how state media's conflation of the party with the Tigrayan population 'result[ed] in collective punishment for the entire ethnic group.'

Weaponizing Women's Bodies as Ethnic Erasure

These overlapping political hostilities and ethnic conflations shaped how violence was enacted on the ground. In particular, they created the conditions under which gendered violence became central to the war's logic. In the Tigray War, rape was not only a weapon of war but also a means of ethnic persecution (Human Rights Watch, 2022; OHCHR & EHRC, 2021). Survivor testimonies documented by The Guardian (2025) reveal the extent of this intersection: one woman, gang-raped by six Eritrean soldiers, was found to have eight rusted screws, nail clippers, and a handwritten note inserted into her womb. The note read: 'Sons of Eritrea, we are brave… We will make Tigrayan females infertile.' Al Jazeera similarly reported survivors being told during rape that 'a Tigrayan womb should never give birth,' (Kassa, 2021). This account, alongside multiple documented patterns of sexual violence (Vigneswaran et al., 2025; Green et al., 2023), underscores how CRSV in Tigray was not merely opportunistic but purposefully weaponized to inflict long-term harm on Tigrayan women as Tigrayan women. Ethiopia's federal government collaborated with Eritrean forces, actors it initially denied inviting into the country to help fight the TPLF, creating the conditions for such atrocities to occur (The Sentry, 2025). As Musau (2024: para. 1) notes, the Eritrean government's willingness to align with Ethiopia drew directly from a logic of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend,' reinforcing how political alliances can intensify both the scale and brutality of gendered ethnic violence.

The Information Blackout

These violations occurred under conditions of extreme isolation, as the Ethiopian government imposed systematic obstruction of most communication channels, severely constraining phone and internet services (OHCHR & EHRC, 2021; Access Now, 2022). Far from being a byproduct of conflict, the blackout was a calculated tactic of war. As Gebreslassie et al. (2024: 105) argue, it constituted an 'information black hole', a deliberate severing of digital, financial, and health infrastructures designed to isolate Tigrayans. This enforced absence prevented survivors from speaking, witnesses from documenting, and advocates from verifying events in real-time, enabling a state-sponsored narrative of plausible deniability.

Alongside physical violence, the communications blackout operated as a weapon of silence. If rape targeted Tigrayan women's bodies, the blackout targeted survivors' voices and the intermediaries, family members, health workers, journalists, and advocates, who might have spoken for them. This dual assault, on the corporeal and the communicative, produced a layered form of erasure. As Weldemichel (2025: Abstract) argues, the Ethiopian government and its allies sustained a 'zone of invisibility' that framed the entire Tigrayan population as 'rebels' or a 'cancer in the body politic'. This narrative architecture obscured the crisis and preemptively delegitimized testimony, dampening calls for international action. As Gebreslassie et al. (2024: 123) note, atrocities were committed 'in daylight and openly, as the military had no fear of these being communicated', without fear of exposure because the only witnesses were silenced, discredited, or made to watch without recourse.

Denial and Its Shifting Forms

Although the communications blackout severely hindered real-time reporting, testimonies of sexual violence gradually emerged through alternative channels. As early as late 2020, community networks, healthcare workers, and humanitarian actors began documenting rape cases (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In January 2021, the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict publicly condemned a 'high number of alleged rapes' in Mekelle, including reports of individuals being forced to rape family members under threat of violence (United Nations, 2021: para.1).

In November 2020, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed categorically denied civilian harm, telling parliament that federal troops had 'not killed a single civilian' (Reuters, 2020: para. 1). He also dismissed the presence of Eritrean Defense Forces, who were later implicated in mass rape (Amnesty International, 2023). By February 2021, both UN officials and Ethiopian authorities had acknowledged the presence of conflict-related sexual violence (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

As documentation mounted, denial shifted. In March 2021, Prime Minister Abiy told Parliament, 'The women in Tigray… have only been penetrated by men,' implicitly minimizing rape by contrasting it with the sexualized torture of men, who he said, 'were

penetrated by knives' (Women of Tigray, 2021). At the same time, denial extended into humanitarian spaces. In a leaked recording published by Omna Tigray, a diaspora-led advocacy group, Letty Chiwara, the then UN Women's representative in Ethiopia, referred to rape reports as 'hype,' stating: 'Rape being used as a weapon of war … sometimes is true, sometimes it's not true. You take it with a pinch of salt' (Omna Tigray, 2021). Online, state aligned actors further amplified denial through disinformation campaigns, including click-to-tweet sites framing survivor narratives as TPLF propaganda (Brown & Knight, 2022).

Denial extended into some feminist spaces through evidentiary demands that shaped how testimonies were weighed. Requirements for 'clear evidence' and 'verified accounts' which conditions that made verification nearly impossible, and the nature of sexual violence as a crime that is rarely witnessed and often silenced (Omna Tigray, 2022).

State-aligned outlets employed more insidious tactics by reframing wartime rape as an extension of Tigray's supposed 'rape culture'. A 2021 Ethiopian Herald article marshaled selective statistics to depict Tigray as historically second in national sexual violence rates, attributing this to a 'rape culture' promoted by the TPLF rather than to the actions of federal or allied forces (Belachew, 2021). This narrative was reinforced the following year through a Herald interview with a Tigrayan academic, whose ethnic identity was explicitly highlighted in the introduction. She described wartime rape as exaggerated propaganda and reframed it as merely a persistent social issue in the region (Ethiopian Press Agency, 2022).

The strategic foregrounding of ethnic identity and cultural pathology, regardless of intent, served a dual purpose: lending credibility to state narratives while simultaneously discrediting other Tigrayan voices. As Wilmot et al. (2021) observe, this approach effectively recontextualized longstanding feminist critiques of patriarchy in Tigray, using them to downplay both the scale and intentionality of conflict-related sexual violence.

Denial as a Coordinated System

These evolving responses map onto Cohen's (2001: 7) three modes of denial: literal (denying facts), interpretive (reframing meaning), and implicatory (acknowledging facts but

minimizing significance). The Ethiopian state's early rejections exemplify literal denial. As evidence mounted, denial shifted into interpretive and implicatory forms. For instance, recasting rape as less severe than the sexual torture of men, or dismissing reports as politically motivated misinformation. These shifts were sustained through state-controlled narratives, the communications blackout that limited international scrutiny, and echoes from select humanitarian voices. These formed a coordinated denial system: deciding which suffering was grievable (Butler, 2009), whose testimony carried epistemic authority (Fricker, 2007), and which forms of pain could be rendered intelligible within dominant narratives (Spivak, 1988). These dynamics illustrate how denial operates as an active structuring of recognition and visibility, raising the central question of how advocates contest such regimes in contexts like the Tigray War.

Global Patterns of CRSV Denial

Denial of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) extends beyond rejecting survivor testimony; it also involves shaping the evidentiary environment in ways that obstruct recognition. Across conflicts from Bosnia to Syria and Sudan, denial has been deployed as a deliberate strategy to deflect, discredit, or erase claims of abuse. This section situates the Ethiopian case within broader patterns documented in existing literature.

In Bosnia, accused perpetrators argued that sexual encounters were consensual, or advanced medical and alibi excuses to undermine survivor testimony, prompting the ICTY to clarify that coercion nullifies consent in wartime contexts (ICTY, 2002). In Myanmar, government officials categorically denied reports of mass rape of Rohingya women despite consistent documentation by international monitors (Human Rights Watch, 2017). In Sudan, denial shifted over time: while earlier government rhetoric categorically rejected allegations, more recent statements selectively acknowledged sexual violence but attributed it to political rivals, strategically externalising blame (Human Rights Watch, 2008; Nihar, 2024).

Beyond discursive denial, states increasingly rely on infrastructural silencing. During the Sarajevo siege (1992–1996), systematic isolation limited documentation of sexual violence and shielded atrocities from scrutiny (Tabeau et al., 2003). In Myanmar, the government

imposed repeated internet shutdowns in Rakhine State during the Rohingya crisis, preventing real-time documentation of sexual violence and restricting survivors' ability to communicate with international monitors (Sharma et al., 2021). In Sudan's current conflict, both warring parties have obstructed journalists, creating 'dark spots' of unreported violence (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2024: 66). These examples illustrate how denial evolves from rejecting testimony to controlling infrastructures that enable it.

The Tigray War represents this strategy at its most extreme: a near-total communications blackout lasting almost two years created conditions of enforced absence unprecedented in recent conflicts.

Towards Proxy Advocacy

Theoretical Framework

Building on Cohen's (2001) account of denial as an active and coordinated political strategy, this section examines how three interlocking dynamics, epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988), testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007), and grievability (Butler, 2004), create the conditions of enforced absence. Denial here functions as a system of silencing, in which each dynamic reinforces the others.

At the foundational level, epistemic violence, as theorised by Spivak (1988), undermines the conditions under which certain subjects can be recognised as legitimate knowers. In the Tigray context, the communications blackout removed women in Tigray, particularly victims of CRSV, from the flow of information and rendered them structurally unknowable, ensuring their accounts would be treated as politically suspect before they were even voiced.

On this foundation, testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007) takes hold. Identity-based prejudices create credibility deficits that distort how testimony is received, meaning that even when fragments of Tigrayan women's experiences surfaced, they were routinely dismissed as propaganda. Credibility was undermined through intersecting hierarchies: gendered assumptions that cast women's testimony as unreliable (Gallagher et al., 2021), racialised and geopolitical discourses that devalue African women's speech (Eriksson Baaz & Parashar, 2021), and ethnic prejudice portraying Tigrayans as inherently biased (Weldemichel, 2025).

Testimonial injustice thus ensured that speech, when it occurred, could not travel as credible knowledge.

Finally, Butler's (2004: vii) concept of grievability highlights the unequal distribution of public recognition for suffering. She argues that 'some lives are grievable, and others are not', a judgment that prefigures whose losses will matter publicly and whose will be excluded. Grievability adds a dimension beyond epistemic erasure and credibility deficits: it shows how denial is not only epistemic but also affective and political. In the Tigray case, women's suffering was rendered ungrievable through ethnic dehumanisation and gendered dismissal, making their harm inadmissible to public consciousness. This foreclosure of grief both justified and sustained epistemic violence and testimonial injustice, completing the denial system.

This analysis shows how denial operates as a coordinated system. Epistemic violence removes the conditions for survivor speech, testimonial injustice discredits the fragments that surface, and grievability forecloses their recognition as losses worth mourning. Together, these dynamics align with Cohen's (2001) modes of denial: epistemic violence enables literal denial, testimonial injustice sustains interpretive denial, and grievability underpins implicatory denial. Infrastructure targeting, especially the two-year communications blackout, intensified these processes by dismantling the evidentiary environment on which recognition depends. The result was enforced absence, a condition in which survivor testimony was structurally obstructed across epistemic, credibility, and affective registers. This exposes an analytical gap in feminist advocacy frameworks, which typically assume survivors can be consulted or their testimonies amplified. It is to these limits under enforced absence that the next section turns.

Feminist Advocacy Literature: Strengths and Limitations

Feminist advocacy was chosen as the base framework because it directly addresses the politics of gendered violence, credibility, and silencing central to this study. Foundational contributions such as hooks' (2000) account of feminism as a transformative struggle and Crenshaw's (1989) articulation of intersectionality show how feminist advocacy grounds analysis in systemic and intersecting power relations. These perspectives situate feminist

advocacy as the most relevant foundation, even though its assumptions about survivor presence and consultation break down under the conditions of the Tigray War. It is precisely these limits that this study addresses through proxy advocacy, extending feminist advocacy.

Feminist advocacy has achieved significant successes in challenging sexual violence denial. The #MeToo movement demonstrated how coordinated testimony can break institutional silence and reframe personal trauma as collective politics (Manikonda et al., 2018; Mendes & Ringrose, 2019). Transnational feminist networks likewise pressured governments and international tribunals to acknowledge wartime rape, most notably in Bosnia, where survivor testimony, amplified by local women's NGOs and international advocates, helped establish rape as a crime against humanity before the ICTY (Nelaeva, 2010). These forms of advocacy show how survivors can bypass or counter traditional gatekeepers to create new forms of testimony and solidarity. These successes rely on amplifying survivor voices and mobilizing collective action around shared experiences.

Sexual violence advocacy, even outside conflict, faces obstacles such as survivors' fear of disbelief, stigma, or retraumatisation, alongside the fragmenting effects of trauma on testimony (Munro & Kelly, 2022; Lonsway & Archambault, 2012). Conflict-related sexual violence amplifies these barriers: it is frequently weaponized as a tactic of war and often carries ethnic or political motivations that heighten both its stigmatization and its strategic invisibility (United Nations, 2020). Survivors' accounts face heightened credibility challenges due to weakened institutions, mass displacement, and pervasive fears of retaliation, leaving many cases unrecorded. Even where CRSV is recognised as a consistent feature of modern warfare, available data reflects only 'the tip of the iceberg' (Germano, 2018: 12).

Feminist advocacy has responded to these barriers with strategies designed to redistribute power and credibility from institutions that perpetuate violence to survivors whose knowledge and leadership are essential for change. These include trauma-informed approaches that prioritise survivor safety and agency (Herman, 1992) and strategies to counteract secondary victimisation by legal, medical, and mental health systems that often retraumatise survivors (Campbell, 2008). While some of these practices have been mainstreamed by institutional actors such as the United Nations (United Nations, 2020),

feminist advocacy continues to encompass multiple forms of representation, from direct survivor testimony to strategic advocacy where survivors delegate others to speak for them (Alcoff, 1991; Spivak, 1988).

The practice of advocates speaking on behalf of survivors has been extensively interrogated within feminist and postcolonial theory. Spivak's (1988) *Can the Subaltern Speak?* warns that speaking for marginalised others risks reproducing the very relations of domination it seeks to resist, while Alcoff (1991) argues that 'speaking for' can entrench hierarchies where privileged voices replace, rather than amplify, those with direct experience. These critiques illuminate the ethical tensions that arise when survivors are represented indirectly, especially when there is at least some possibility of consultation or survivor participation.

The Tigray War, however, exposed a more fundamental challenge: what happens when the very infrastructures that enable survivor participation are dismantled? This moves beyond questions of credibility or consent to a more basic problem of access. Unlike established feminist advocacy practices that rely on survivor consultation and testimony amplification, advocacy in Tigray unfolded under enforced absence, conditions approaching communicative isolation, geographic separation, targeted elimination of witnesses, and systematic state denial (Amnesty International, 2021). As Chouliaraki (2006) observes, humanitarian communication depends on circulating suffering for recognition; in Tigray, the infrastructures of circulation themselves were dismantled. This is the analytical space requiring new conceptual tools to understand how advocacy persists under enforced absence. I conceptualise this as proxy advocacy: an extension of feminist advocacy into conditions where survivors are structurally silenced yet their suffering still demands recognition and political action.

Proxy Advocacy: Advocacy under Enforced Absence

Early observations from my pilot study of digital advocacy during the Tigray war informed the provisional concept of proxy advocacy: advocacy under conditions of enforced absence, where systemic barriers prevent survivor testimony and compel others to make claims from positions of proximity and solidarity. This section outlines this emerging framework, which will be empirically tested and refined through the analysis that follows.

I propose proxy advocacy as a provisional analytical lens for contexts where survivors are unable to speak or be heard due to structural obstruction rather than marginalization alone. In such contexts, others, often from positions of proximity and solidarity in the diaspora, take up the task of making claims on their behalf. For clarity, I use the broader term Tigrayan women and their allies throughout, noting where diasporic distance shaped these dynamics in particular ways.

The term proxy often implies substitution or detachment, but here it marks advocacy that emerges specifically from enforced absence: speaking for survivors when direct consultation is systematically obstructed and their voices are radically constrained. In this sense, proxy advocacy extends feminist advocacy, as discussed in Section 1.3.2, into contexts where its core assumptions about consultation and amplification can no longer be met.

In Tigray, the blackout encompassed telecommunications, internet, electricity, and banking, alongside bans on independent journalists and humanitarian observers (Access Now, 2022; Weldemichel, 2025). This systematic dismantling of mediation infrastructures created conditions where proxy advocacy became necessary.

This distinction requires analytical precision, since misidentifying absence risks reproducing epistemic violence. Fraser (1990) shows how exclusion operates through material constraints, while Mahmood (2001) demonstrates that silence can be strategic resistance. The challenge for proxy advocacy lies not simply in recognising structural silencing, but in determining when such silencing calls for speaking for rather than speaking about the conditions of silencing itself.

It requires deeper engagement with these specific warnings. Spivak's caution that 'the subaltern cannot speak' (Spivak, 1988: 104) outside the very structures that render her inaudible takes on particular urgency when advocacy emerges from enforced absence rather than marginalization. Similarly, Alcoff's (1991: 23) warning that 'certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous' and that speaking for others often ends up 'increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for' must be weighed against the alternative of allowing denial to stand uncontested.

Proxy advocacy therefore cannot claim legitimacy through proximity alone; its legitimacy remains contested and context dependent. It cannot be defended as inherently liberatory. What may distinguish it from the dangers identified by Alcoff (1991) and Spivak (1988) is its emergence under conditions where alternatives prove inadequate. In contexts of active denial, both silence and speaking about silencing may be insufficient to counter state narratives. The choice becomes between complicity with denial through silence, or complicity with epistemic violence through representation. Proxy advocacy names the latter choice while acknowledging its ethical costs.

This provisional framework suggests that proxy advocacy should be understood as an unavoidable compromise: necessary under extreme conditions of enforced absence yet always marked by epistemic limitations and potential harm. Its analytical value lies not in resolving the tensions of speaking for others, but in acknowledging them while examining how advocates navigate denial and silencing when conventional approaches prove insufficient. This provisional framework provides analytical tools for examining how advocacy operates under enforced absence, informing the investigation of resources and discourses mobilized during the Tigray War.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Rationale

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive case study design to investigate how Tigrayan women and their allies enact proxy advocacy in response to the denial of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) during the Tigray War. This approach is suited to examining voice, credibility, and political silencing as relational and contextually embedded phenomena. Case studies enable in-depth exploration where phenomenon and context are inseparable (Yin, 2018).

The Tigray War exemplifies enforced absence: prolonged communication blackouts, displacement, and denial rendered survivor voices inaccessible, compelling proxies to act on their behalf. It thus serves both as an intrinsic case, reflecting my positionality, and as an

instrumental case, illuminating broader dynamics of proxy advocacy in conflict contexts (Stake, 1995).

Semi-structured interviews were selected for their balance of structure and flexibility, allowing participants to articulate politically sensitive experiences on their own terms while enabling comparison across accounts (Dunwoodie et al., 2023). This format also allowed participants to set disclosure boundaries while still capturing depth. Alternatives such as ethnography or focus groups were less feasible given the dispersed and sensitive nature of this advocacy.

Other sources, such as social media or NGO reports, were used contextually but not as primary data, both for ethical reasons of informed consent and to privilege reflective accounts over textual traces. Because proxy advocacy around the Tigray War was largely led by Tigrayan actors in the diaspora, the sample reflects this reality. The sample reflects the empirical reality that proxy advocacy around the Tigray War was largely led by Tigrayan diaspora actors, with one non-Tigrayan ally included for comparative perspective.

The study is framed by postcolonial feminist epistemology, which emphasizes lived experience, positionality, and power in shaping knowledge. From this perspective, proxy advocacy is understood as testimony offered in response to absence rather than substitution, aligning with feminist and postcolonial critiques of epistemic violence and silencing.

Research Question and Analytical Framework

This study is guided by the following research question: **What resources and discourses do Tigrayan women, and their allies use to challenge the denial of rape and sexual violence during the Tigray War?**

The analytical framework brings together four interlocking theoretical perspectives that collectively illuminate how proxy advocacy operates under conditions of enforced absence. These perspectives were chosen because they directly speak to the dynamics of enforced absence and credibility politics that structure advocacy in the Tigray case:

1. Epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988), to highlight how systemic silencing structures whose voices can be heard at all.
2. Testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007), to examine how identity-based credibility deficits shape responses to advocacy.
3. Grievability (Butler, 2009), to situate whose suffering is recognized as politically actionable.
4. Denial as social process (Cohen, 2001), to illuminate how state and institutional actors actively reframe or erase evidence of violence.

These frameworks work as an integrated system to reveal denial not simply as silence but as an active architecture of silencing that operates across epistemic, testimonial, and affective registers. This integrated framework informed the design of interview prompts, which asked how participants experienced silencing, negotiated credibility, and contested denial. It also guided the subsequent thematic-CDA analysis by directing attention to how participants navigated credibility challenges through language and constructed counter-narratives within denial regimes.

Participant Selection and Data Collection

Participant Selection and Data Collection

This study draws on ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individuals engaged in advocacy around CRSV during the Tigray War. A sample size of ten was chosen to enable sufficient thematic depth while remaining feasible within the ethical and time constraints of a master's dissertation. The aim was not to generalise across all advocacy actors but to examine diverse forms of proxy advocacy as they emerged from different positionalities, particularly those situated at the margins of institutional credibility.

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling within diaspora advocacy networks, guided by the research question. Inclusion criteria were active involvement in advocacy related to CRSV denial during the war, whether through public communication, organisational work, or community mobilisation. Exclusion criteria were individuals who engaged only incidentally or were unwilling to discuss their advocacy role.

Recruitment followed LSE ethics guidelines: participants received detailed information sheets, gave written informed consent, and retained full control over the extent of disclosure.

The final sample comprised seven Tigrayan women, two Tigrayan men, and one non-Tigrayan European woman ally. Seven of the Tigrayan participants were based in the diaspora (UK, US, or Ireland), while two remained in Ethiopia for most of the conflict, with one later relocating abroad. The European ally was based in Europe throughout. Participants came from varied professional backgrounds including academia, law, healthcare, and politics. While most became advocates specifically in response to the war, two had prior experience in women's rights advocacy. All participants were between 25 and 40 years old, an age range that was not predetermined but reflected who was most active in digital advocacy, particularly on Twitter (now X).

While the majority of participants were women, men and allies played distinct roles. Tigrayan men spoke from within a persecuted community but outside the direct embodied experience of sexual violence, while the non-Tigrayan ally spoke from outside the community altogether. For analytical clarity, I examine them together as advocates engaging from positions of solidarity rather than direct experiential knowledge, while recognising these positionalities are not interchangeable. This composition reflects the study's focus on proxy advocacy as it emerged outside formal institutions and across different forms of proximity and solidarity.

Data Collection

Recruitment was conducted via Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp, using a combination of direct outreach and snowball sampling (Bryman, 2016). Initial participants were identified based on their public visibility in digital advocacy, including Twitter threads and testimony-related posts. Of 15 individuals contacted, 10 responded positively (67% response rate). Subsequent participants were referred by interviewees or contacted based on mutual networks.

All interviews were conducted in English via Google Meet and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Participants were provided with full information sheets and gave informed consent

prior to interviews. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the LSE Research Ethics Committee, and care was taken to ensure emotional safety and the right to withdraw at any time.

To ensure data security, I created a dedicated email account for all research communications and file storage, separating research materials from personal accounts. Participants are referred to by numbers (e.g., Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2) throughout the dissertation to protect anonymity.

Interview Guide Development

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to translate the theoretical framework into researchable questions while remaining sensitive to the politically and emotionally charged nature of the topic. Questions focused on advocacy practices under conditions of enforced absence, credibility negotiations, responses to denial, and the ethical tensions of speaking for silenced others.

The guide incorporated trauma-informed safeguards: participants were reminded they could pause, skip, or stop at any time, and prompts emphasised advocacy work rather than detailed personal or secondary trauma. While a core set of topics provided consistency across interviews, wording and emphasis were adapted to reflect different positionalities. For example, Tigrayan men were invited to reflect on advocacy as insiders to an ethnically persecuted community but outside the embodied experience of gendered violence, while the non-Tigrayan ally was asked about the challenges of solidarity across ethnic boundaries.

This design balanced structure with flexibility, ensuring comparability while allowing participants to shape the depth and direction of their accounts, ultimately enabling analysis of how advocates navigated the ethical and practical challenges of speaking for structurally silenced others.

Ethical and Reflexive Considerations

My positioning as a non-Tigrayan Ethiopian woman who witnessed denial dynamics firsthand (as detailed in the Introduction) required particular reflexive attention. I was mindful that personal resonance with participants' experiences of structural discrediting

could bias interpretation and that my role as researcher carried risks of reproducing epistemic violence through misrepresentation.

This study received ethical approval from the LSE Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided informed consent, including explicit permission to record, quote anonymized material, and withdraw at any point. Particular care was taken to ensure participants did not feel pressured to disclose personal or secondary trauma, given the proximity of some to survivors of conflict-related sexual violence.

Given the emotionally charged nature of the topic, I adopted trauma-informed practices throughout: checking in before and after interviews, offering breaks, and reminding participants they could skip questions or stop entirely.

Anonymization and Protection

Given the small, networked nature of the Tigrayan advocacy community, full anonymity cannot be guaranteed, even with pseudonyms. To mitigate this, I removed or altered potentially identifying details such as specific organizational roles, locations, or distinctive phrasing, while preserving analytical meaning. Participants were informed of these limits at the consent stage and retained the right to review, restrict, or withdraw their contributions. This reflexive approach balances the political sensitivity of the research with the imperative to protect participants' safety.

Reflexive Practice

Guided by feminist methodological principles, which emphasize care, accountability, and the uneven distribution of credibility, reflexivity extended beyond formal protocols (Hesse-Biber, 2012). To manage the risk of over-identification or projection, I kept a reflexive journal during transcription and analysis and shared emerging interpretations with peers to ensure affective responses were not unduly shaping analysis. As an Ethiopian researcher working on politically charged issues, I also faced emotional and political risks; reflexive journaling and peer debriefs functioned as part of my own care practices.

Analytical Boundaries

I treated participants' accounts as testimony about their advocacy practices rather than as direct survivor testimony. While participants engaged in proxy advocacy, my analysis examined how they navigated this role rather than treating their words as equivalent to survivor voices. This distinction maintained analytical focus on advocacy processes while avoiding the ethical problems of treating proxy voices as substitute survivor testimony.

Because the subject matter is politically charged as well as ethically sensitive, I approached participants' words with care and accountability. This commitment shaped all analytical choices, with the pursuit of justice lying in maintaining fidelity to the ethical weight of participants' accounts rather than claiming analytical perfection.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a combination of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995). Thematic analysis captured advocacy patterns, while CDA revealed how language functioned strategically within denial regimes.

Thematic Analysis Framework

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis framework, I employed a three-phase coding process designed to move systematically from data familiarization to thematic interpretation while recognising that these phases were iterative and revisited reflexively in line with their emphasis on researcher subjectivity

Phase 1: Initial Coding - Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded inductively, generating codes around advocacy practices, credibility negotiations, emotional strategies, and responses to denial.

Phase 2: Theme Development - Initial codes were iteratively refined and grouped into broader patterns aligned with the research question.

Phase 3: Theme Review and Definition - Provisional themes were tested against the dataset to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness, with particular attention to how themes related to the theoretical framework of proxy advocacy. Final themes were mapped against

concepts of epistemic violence, testimonial injustice, grievability, and denial to ensure coherence between empirical data and theoretical framing.

Critical Discourse Analysis Integration

CDA was applied as a lens to interrogate thematic patterns for their discursive work, adapting Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework and extending it with feminist and postcolonial insights.

Each emergent theme was examined systematically using Fairclough's three dimensions. At the textual level, I attended to linguistic features such as word choice, modality, stance markers, and pronoun use. At the discourse practice level, I analyzed how participants constructed credibility, positioned themselves in relation to denial narratives, and adapted their speech to different audiences. At the social practice level, I situated these discursive strategies within wider power relations of gender, ethnicity, and geopolitics.

This integration addressed CDA's blind spots on epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988), testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007), and ungrievability (Butler, 2009), while staying grounded in participants' accounts.

Data Saturation and Quality Assurance

Data saturation was assessed using the principle of informational redundancy, the point at which later interviews no longer produced novel insights (Guest et al., 2006). This point was documented through memos noting when new data confirmed, rather than extended, emerging themes.

Quality assurance included:

- Reflexive documentation – coding journals and memos.
- Peer debriefing – occasional feedback on interpretations.
- Analytical transparency – audit trail linking data to codes/themes.

Analytical Tools and Process

Microsoft Excel was selected for data management due to its flexibility in handling the iterative, comparative process required for this study's combined analytical approach. Manual coding preserved closeness to language and linguistic nuance. The ten interviews

generated approximately 12 hours of audio data, with transcripts coded across multiple rounds to ensure analytical depth.

Methodological Considerations

Member checking was not pursued due to political and emotional risks. It was also avoided to prevent placing additional epistemic burdens on participants already navigating silencing and denial. Instead, validity was supported through thick description, theoretical triangulation, and fidelity to participants' framings.

Divergences between thematic and discursive readings were treated as analytically generative, exposing the negotiations shaping proxy advocacy under silencing.

This approach positions analysis as both empirically grounded and theoretically informed, enabling examination of how participants navigate the complex terrain of speaking for silenced others while themselves operating under conditions of epistemic marginalization.

Limitations

This study offers grounded insight into how denial around conflict-related sexual violence is contested, but it is shaped by several limitations that also illuminate analytical dimensions of proxy advocacy.

First, the study relies exclusively on semi-structured interviews. This limits breadth but allows the depth needed to examine meaning-making and credibility negotiations. Given the politically sensitive nature of the research and ongoing risks to participants, interviews were the most ethically viable method for capturing advocates' own framings of their work, aligning with the study's focus on situated testimony rather than textual traces.

Second, recruitment via Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp may over-represent digitally visible advocates while under-representing those working through offline networks, local organizing, or less visible channels. With the exception of one participant who remained in Tigray and whose advocacy was shaped by highly constrained communication conditions, the sample primarily reflects diaspora-based, digitally active advocacy. This sampling skew highlights how technological access and platform visibility structure proxy advocacy.

Third, while two participants were based in Ethiopia, most were in US/UK diaspora contexts. This limits representativeness but reveals how privilege, citizenship, and digital access shape proxy advocacy, analytically significant for understanding credibility negotiations from positions of diaspora privilege yet marginal institutional power.

Fourth, the sample is predominantly women (eight of ten). This mirrors gendered leadership within Tigrayan advocacy networks but offers a more limited view of men's roles.

Fifth, the study captures advocacy only during and immediately after the war, offering a snapshot rather than longitudinal account. This limits insight into evolving strategies but provides unique perspective under acute denial, when communicative silencing was most intense.

Sixth, direct survivor testimony was excluded for ethical reasons and to focus conceptually on proxy advocacy. This limits insight into survivors' experiences but enables sharper analysis of enforced absence, a dynamic underexplored in existing literature.

Seventh, exclusive use of English-language interviews may flatten cultural nuance. Tigrinya or Amharic expressions often carry affective and political meanings difficult to translate. English, however, was the most practical shared language in transnational contexts, many participants already advocating in English online. This reliance reflects broader concerns about epistemic violence: whose voices are amplified, and how English dominance both enables visibility and reproduces asymmetries in credibility.

Eighth, the scarcity of academic literature on Tigrayan advocates outside formal frameworks creates epistemological challenges but also justifies the study's contribution. Much advocacy knowledge remains informal, reflecting how Global South resistance practices are excluded from academic production.

Finally, as a single-researcher study by a non-Tigrayan Ethiopian woman, the analysis may carry positionality-based blind spots despite reflexivity efforts. The findings should therefore be read as situated knowledge: one interpretation shaped by particular positionalities, not an exhaustive account.

These limitations mark the analytical boundaries of the study and reflect the constrained conditions under which both proxy advocacy and research on marginalized resistance operate. Future work could extend this by incorporating survivor testimony, multilingual interviews, and offline/local advocacy to trace proxy advocacy beyond moments of acute denial.

FINDING AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the findings of the study and addresses the central research question: What resources and discourses do Tigrayan women, and their allies use to challenge the denial of rape and sexual violence during the Tigray War? The analysis draws on participants' testimonies, interpreted through thematic and critical discourse analysis, to surface five interrelated themes. These themes capture how advocates mobilised fragments of evidence, community and diaspora networks, digital platforms, survivor protection practices, and affective labour as resources of proxy advocacy.

- **Fragments as Evidence** explores how scattered testimonies, smuggled voice notes, and partial reports were pieced together and curated into credibility.
- **Community and Diaspora Networks as Proxy Advocates** examines the collective infrastructures of advocacy, especially women-led organizing, that transformed absence into presence.
- **Digital Platforms as Proxy** Archives analyses how social media became both a site of preservation and a space for discursive reframing through hashtags and circulation.
- **Survivor Protection and Dignity** highlights the ways advocates regulated testimony to balance visibility with care, refusing exploitative forms of exposure.
- **Advocacy as Affective Labour** reflects on the emotional, bodily, and professional costs of advocacy, and how sacrifice and composure themselves became markers of credibility.

These themes illustrate how proxy advocacy emerged not as a single resource but as a layered practice of resistance. Through fragments, networks, platforms, refusals, and

affective labour, participants contested denial and sought to render Tigrayan suffering visible, grievable, and politically actionable.

Theme 1: Fragments as Evidence

Advocates repeatedly described their work as piecing together scattered accounts, testimonies relayed by family, voice notes smuggled out of Tigray, and sporadic NGO or media reports. These fragments, though partial and fragile, became the foundation of advocacy. These fragments were never 'whole' but, as one participant explained, 'He [her brother in Tigray] had a small access of internet, so I told him to send me some evidence that we put in the database' (Interviewee 6). The non-standard plural 'evidences' signaled both epistemic burden and the need to make fragments multiply: credibility was not drawn from a single testimony, but from stitching together 'some, two, three' traces until they became usable as proof.

At the level of discursive practice, kinship networks themselves became infrastructures of evidence. Advocates triangulated refugee testimonies with NGO reports and diaspora relays, often circulating them through hashtags such as #TigrayGenocide. This practice blurred testimony and advocacy: fragments were not simply collected but curated into coherence. As one male diaspora participant who works in academia reflected:

> *Whenever I write…I am more forced to write bulletproof today than I would have for Tanzania or Kenya… because of the kind of scrutiny that I would face, my publications would face (Interviewee 3).*

This demand for 'bulletproof' testimony exemplified the testimonial injustice Tigrayan advocates faced (Fricker, 2007): they were structurally discredited, compelled to meet evidentiary standards so exacting that even atrocity itself became contestable.

At the level of social practice, fragments under blackout were mobilized as resistance. In Spivak's (1988) sense, subaltern voices could not speak directly, their access foreclosed by siege and silence. Yet proxy advocates insisted that even fragments could speak politically. In one participant's words, 'We had activists and survivors that were brave enough to travel miles to find some kind of connection and send us guarded voice messages and videos'

(Interviewee 1). The fragmentary thus became the evidentiary: absence itself was re-signified as proof of erasure.

Theme 2: Community & Diaspora Networks as Proxy Advocates

If digital platforms served as proxy archives, community and diaspora networks functioned as the infrastructures through which advocacy itself became possible. Participants repeatedly described how they worked as a community despite beginning with nothing: 'We didn't have any resources whatsoever. We built organizations from scratch... We all came together' (Interviewee 1).

The collective 'we' recurred across accounts, often contrasted with the individualized 'I.' As one participant put it: 'In some parts of the world, the 'I' is more centered, while in our culture, we focus on the collective' (Interviewee 1). In Fairclough's (1995) model, this discursive emphasis enacts social relations by positioning unity itself as a resource against denial.

This cohesion was not only rhetorical but embodied in everyday practices. As Interviewee 6 recalled:

> *We had like some Tegaru [Tigrayan] here… we chat, vent. We drink coffee, and church… we drove to another city for some events, especially protests. You'll be prepared, the pain, how you feel, how they feel is similar, so that is helpful (Interviewee 6).*

Such gatherings sustained affective solidarity, anchoring formal advocacy within lived community.

The discursive emphasis on cohesion positioned unity itself as a resource against denial, a framing that materialized in practice as networks that built infrastructures without material resources. They established multilingual campaigns to bridge linguistic divides, organised protests, and mobilised volunteers across continents. Importantly, participants highlighted that the leadership of these efforts was overwhelmingly female: 'Most of our advocacy,

without exaggeration, I would say over 90 percent - is led by women. It showed me the power and organizational skill of the women in our community' (Interviewee 1).

This emphasis does more than celebrate participation; it reorients credibility away from elite institutions and toward women's collective agency, demonstrating how diasporic organisation itself became an evidentiary claim against state narratives of denial. Here, Butler's (2004) notion of grievability is instructive: where state denial rendered the suffering of Tigrayan women 'ungrievable,' diasporic women's leadership re-inscribed that suffering as collective, public, and legitimate. In Butler's (2005: 10) terms, their discursive practices performed an avowal, a compelled acknowledgment of violence and responsibility, against the backdrop of state disavowal and dismissal.

As a social practice, the creation of these networks illustrates proxy advocacy at its most relational. With survivors in Tigray largely silenced by blackout and repression, diaspora communities stepped in as proxy advocates, transforming absence into structured presence. In doing so, they not only amplified fragmented testimonies but also reframed solidarity as a form of credibility infrastructure: the fact of women-led collective organisation became itself a counter to interpretive denial.

Thus, while digital platforms archived traces of violence, it was community networks that sustained the credibility of those archives.

Theme 3: Digital Platforms as Proxy Archives

Digital platforms emerged as crucial proxy archives, functioning as stand-ins for silenced survivors by preserving testimonies and circulating them into international visibility. One participant explained, 'The first thing I did was to use Facebook to educate people on how to use Twitter… we exponentially increased the presence of Tigrayans on Twitter' (Interviewee 1) The language of 'exponentially,' alongside terms like 'database' and 'archive' invoked by other participants, signals how platforms were framed not simply as spaces of communication but as repositories of evidence. This framing illustrates what Fairclough (1992) identifies as the ideological function of discourse: here, the discursive emphasis on

permanence and scale countered the Ethiopian government's strategy of literal denial by leaving a digital trace of otherwise silenced violence. This aligns with Cohen's (2001) argument that denial often depends on erasing traces; here, digital platforms inverted that logic by creating archives that made erasure more difficult.

At the level of discursive practice, advocates described a deliberate shift from Facebook, where circulation was largely peer-to-peer, to Twitter, which afforded greater global visibility and access to international journalists, policy actors, and human rights institutions. This migration reflects the move from closed community solidarity to transnational advocacy, where digital testimonies were curated and amplified into broader public arenas. Within this shift, hashtags became key discursive devices. Rather than functioning as mere metadata, they were used strategically to contest denial and frame atrocity, aligning with Bonilla and Rosa's (2015) notion of hashtags as sites of political contestation and community formation.

As one participant recalled, 'We started using #IAmTigray… then after we learned about the genocidal intent of the Ethiopian government, we started using #TigrayGenocide' (Interviewee 1). Another explained, 'We had, like, this hashtag, how they use rape as a weapon of war, and this thing #TigrayGenocide… so we are working through that, with evidences' (Interviewee 6). Such uses of digital discourse linked CRSV directly to genocide, foregrounding how denial was countered not only through visibility but also through reframing atrocity itself. As Interviewee 3 stressed:

> *It's not conflict-related sexual violence. It is sexual violence at a scale that is organized by the state. It's not rape because a soldier wants to have sex. It's rape to deliberately destroy the womb. You wouldn't put screws in a woman's genitalia and say that's about sexual gratification (Interviewee 3).*

In Butler's (2009) terms, this discursive reframing demanded that Tigrayan suffering be recognized as grievable, directly contesting its systematic invisibilization.

The digital archive-building described by participants demonstrates proxy advocacy in practice. By producing and curating traces of violence survivors themselves could not communicate, diaspora advocates intervened against both silence and denial. What began as

fragmented testimony thus became, through discursive strategies of scale, circulation, and reframing, a collective counter-archive that contested dominant narratives of the war.

Theme 4: Survivor Protection & Dignity (Ethical Refusal)

If fragments became evidence and digital platforms became archives, another striking feature of proxy advocacy lay in what was not circulated. Advocates frequently described their work not only as amplification but as a form of protection. In one participant's words, recounting her time in the Sudanese refugee camps:

> *It feels like a very extractive process. Like you're taking someone's soul. Or like you're going up to them and saying, 'Tell me the worst thing that's ever happened to you' (Interviewee 2)*

The metaphor of 'soul-taking' elevates testimony into a sacred register, dramatizing the violence of extraction, while the repetition and hedging ('like… like…') enact her discomfort within language itself. Here, testimony is not simply a narrative exchange but a deeply ethical encounter, where the danger of taking 'too much' from survivors haunted even acts of documentation.

Other advocates recounted how this concern translated into concrete practices of refusal. A lawyer-advocate based in Mekelle during the war recalled:

> *We never used images. We never used names… I always asked journalists to make sure to look for body cues… to make sure that there was no distress while the interviews were being conducted. But there was also a desire amongst survivors to tell their stories because there was this feeling that if they didn't, all that they had gone through would not have meaning (Interviewee 8).*

The emphatic repetition 'we never used… we never used' functions as discursive negation of exploitation, reframing refusal as an active stance of care. At the same time, her account surfaces a contradiction: survivors themselves often insisted on speaking, driven by the need for remembrance and recognition.

This negotiation was discursive as much as ethical: survivors articulated speech as a way to produce meaning from suffering, while advocates framed refusal as protection, invoking what Butler (2009) calls grievability and what Oliver (2001) theorizes as response-ability.

Socially, these refusals underscored the uneasy compromise of proxy advocacy. Advocates anonymised, curated, and filtered testimonies so that survivors' words could circulate without exploitation. Amplification risked retraumatisation, while refusal risked invisibility. Yet in withholding names and images, protective refusal inverted the logic of denial: what perpetrators used to erase suffering was reworked into a fragile form of dignity-preserving resistance. In this way, refusal itself became a resource of proxy advocacy, enabling advocates to contest denial while safeguarding survivors.

Theme 5: Advocacy as Affective Labour

Participants described advocacy not only in terms of exhaustion, burnout, and loneliness but also in terms of deliberately disciplining their emotions in order to be effective. For some, advocacy was survival at immense personal cost. One participant reflected:

It comes with immense personal price. It undermines your professional growth. You'll be looked at as, you know, controversial, again, not because whatever I did was wrong, but because there are political powers in play here. … But I think the most painful part is knowing I'll probably never be able to go back home and connect with my people, with the soil. And that will delay my healing journey

(Interviewee 1)

Here advocacy appears as a burden carried in the body, a stalled career, reputational risk, and the exile of being cut off from home and soil.

For others, affective labour took a different form: rather than collapse under emotion, they chose distance. One participant described the need to 'zoom out', to resist being pulled entirely into the immediacy of 'firefighting' and instead connect sexual violence to the broader structures of siege and blockade:

As an academic, my role is to sort of like zoom out, … to collect material that could be used for advocacy, but also just to have a discussion on what's going on. … It's very difficult to see rape and sexual violence separately from the broader context … of blockade, siege, and all, and the rape and sexual violence. … When everything is about firefighting, someone has to stay and connect the dots and show to governments … to ordinary Tigrayans and others, to see that there is some connection (Interviewee 3)

At the level of discursive practice, both narratives circulated as credibility markers. Burnout and sacrifice were narrated as proof of authenticity; composure and analysis were narrated as proof of authority. This resonates with Hochschild's (2012) notion of emotional labour, originally coined to describe the management of feeling in service work, but here reconfigured as the labour of rendering atrocity legible to audiences predisposed to disbelief. Ahmed's (2014) argument that emotions themselves do political work helps illuminate how sacrifice and restraint circulated as counter-discrediting evidence. Cohen's (2001) analysis of denial as an active and ongoing process makes visible why such emotional labour became necessary: because denial continually shifts the burden of proof onto advocates, forcing them to repeatedly discipline their affect in order to reassert credibility against official erasure.

At the level of social practice, proxy advocacy demanded a double labour: to feel deeply without collapsing, or to suppress feeling without detaching. In this sense, affective labour itself became a resource: credibility was not only won through fragments or testimonies but through the embodied costs of advocacy, whether carried in ruptured careers, or carefully disciplined restraint.

DISCUSSION

This chapter reflects on the research question: What resources and discourses do Tigrayan women and their allies use to challenge the denial of rape and sexual violence during the Tigray War? Rather than a catalogue of themes, the discussion synthesises how proxy advocacy operated as overlapping infrastructures of credibility, solidarity, and recognition under enforced absence. Across fragments, networks, platforms, protective practices, and

affective labour, advocates constructed alternatives to state denial, while also exposing the tensions and limits of speaking for silenced others.

Critical Discourse Analysis further showed how participants strategically deployed language to navigate credibility deficits, construct authority through collective pronouns, and reframe sexual violence within genocidal discourse These reveal proxy advocacy as a distinct form of advocacy defined by enforced absence and marked by unresolved tensions around ethics, credibility, and visibility.

At the international institutions level, participants described proxy advocacy as oscillating between abandonment and recognition. Several underscored deep disappointments with international organisations, where lobbying was met with disbelief or conditional acceptance that seemed to require a performance of suffering to be granted credibility. This dynamic reflects what Mohanty (1988: 65) warns against: collapsing diverse experiences into the figure of an 'average Third World woman,' a homogenised victim whose suffering becomes the universal currency of recognition. For advocates, this pressure not only flattened Tigrayan women's experiences but also demanded that pain be performed in particular ways. As one participant put it, she sometimes felt like she was 'selling trauma' to be taken seriously (Interviewee 3). This highlights how affective labour itself became a resource, but one mobilised under unequal terms, narrated through discourses of obligation and recognition. Ahmed's (2017) observation that marginalised subjects are often required to recount injury in order to be legible resonates here: testimony becomes a condition of recognition, but one that extracts affective labour while reproducing unequal terms of visibility.

Fricker's (2007) theorisation of testimonial injustice sharpens this tension. In her account, injustice occurs when survivors speak but are disbelieved; in the Tigray case, proxy advocacy revealed how this injustice is intensified when survivors cannot speak at all, and recognition depends on others performing their suffering by proxy. Proxy advocacy does not resolve this dilemma; it makes it visible, exposing how credibility economies remain structured by power even in the absence of testimony.

Yet credibility was also shaped internally. Although only one participant articulated it explicitly, his critique reveals how credibility negotiations were fractured within advocacy

itself. He reflected that while 'everyone was united, everyone was strongly advocating against sexual violence' during the war, this unity fractured after. When reports emerged of rape committed by internal forces in Tigray, 'there was no diaspora advocating for this' (Interviewee 7). He speculated that acknowledging these crimes was avoided because it risked being read as denial of the wartime rapes committed by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces. Yet for him, such selectivity was untenable: 'rape is rape, whether committed by an external force or by internal forces.' His account underscores how proxy advocacy, even as it resisted state denial, could reproduce its own silences by classifying the same crime differently depending on the perpetrator's identity. This moment illustrates what Spivak (1988) warns against: the representational violence that occurs when advocacy, even in resisting state denial, decides which violences are narratable and which are left unspoken.

However, participants also recalled moments where proxy advocacy ruptured denial. The imposition of AGOA sanctions on Ethiopia or the first convening of the UK House of Commons to debate Tigray following the #24HoursForTigray campaign were narrated as tangible victories. In these instances, hashtags and lobbying campaigns translated fragments into recognition, signalling that proxy advocacy could force acknowledgment from structures otherwise complicit in silence. Here, digital counter-archives and community networks served as resources, converting fragments into infrastructures of political consequence. As one participant reflected, these moments 'felt like we had made a difference,' pointing to how proxy advocacy translated denial into a material cost for the Ethiopian state (Interviewee 1).

Denial is rarely dismantled by more evidence alone but disrupted when its maintenance becomes too costly (Cohen, 2001). Yet Butler's (2009) notion of grievability highlights their limits. Such victories mitigated abandonment but did not alter the larger structures that rendered Tigrayan lives ungrievable. Proxy advocacy, then, is marked by an inherent paradox: it can generate cracks in denial, but recognition itself remains conditional, fleeting, and unstable.

This instability raises a sharper question: what does it mean for advocacy if recognition can only ever be partial and precarious? Proxy advocacy shows that advocacy under enforced

absence is not about securing permanent recognition, but about unsettling denial long enough to make its costs visible, without ever fully escaping the fragility of grievability.

Participants underscored that the very digital platforms which enabled proxy advocacy were also infrastructures of harm. Social media was a space where evidence could be circulated and denial contested, but also a breeding ground for disinformation, misogyny, and incitement to violence. One advocate recalled how false claims about a Tigrayan professor, circulated on Facebook despite repeated pleas for removal, were followed by his murder 'in broad daylight' (Interviewee 9). Another described the toll of online harassment: 'someone would call me a witch… simply because I talked about conflict-related sexual violence, and Twitter wouldn't do anything' (Interviewee 1).

These accounts exemplify what Chouliaraki (2012: 52) calls 'the complexities involved in the mediation of solidarity'. Her analysis of humanitarianism as a 'theatre of suffering' captures how mediated appeals to vulnerability are structured by spectacle, drawing publics into action while simultaneously constraining the terms of solidarity. The Tigray case extends this logic: proxy advocacy online circulated fragments and hashtags as substitutes for survivor testimony, creating counter-archives that functioned as infrastructures of recognition. Yet these same platforms also amplified discrediting attacks, misogynistic abuse, coordinated disinformation, and algorithmic silencing, producing what might be described as a digitally intensified testimonial injustice.

Proxy advocacy online thus reveals a double ambivalence. On the one hand, it enabled recognition by mobilising fragments into visibility; on the other, it reproduced denial by exposing advocates to violence and undermining credibility. The result is an unstable economy of recognition in which digital infrastructures both sustain solidarity and reinforce the very erasures they seek to contest.

While the methodological chapter addressed methodological decisions around participant categorisation, I return to them here because the tension between 'ally' and 'Tigrayan women' is not merely technical but epistemic: it unsettles who can claim credibility in proxy advocacy and how solidarity itself is narrated. Interviews later confirmed both the value and the limits of this distinction, as the categories proved more porous than I had anticipated.

This assumption was partly borne out: women advocates faced gendered abuse that men did not. One participant recalled Twitter users telling her, 'I wish you were raped,' (Interviewee 1) while a male participant noted, '…unlike the men, it's not only denial, it's also an attack' (Interviewee 7). These testimonies confirm that gender shaped how denial was lived and that my initial distinction captured real asymmetries. Yet the interviews also destabilised this framework. One male participant explicitly resisted the label 'ally,' remarking, 'It's very hard to call myself an ally. When it's about, it is about my own mother and sisters and whatnot. But yeah… yeah' (Interviewee 3). His words conveyed hesitation: the trailing 'but yeah… yeah' sounded less like agreement and more like reluctant concession, as if he was accepting the label without embracing it. For him, advocacy was grounded in kinship rather than solidarity, exposing a gap between my analytical categories and his lived positioning. This moment reminded me that proxy advocacy unsettles neat typologies, its practices blur the lines between allyship, kinship, and obligation, revealing advocacy as relational, ambiguous, and resistant to fixed definitions.

In sum, Tigrayan women and their allies mobilised five resources, fragments, networks, digital platforms, protective withholding, and affective labour, each animated by discourses of justice, solidarity, dignity, and recognition. These practices constituted proxy advocacy: a fraught but necessary response to enforced absence, through which denial was both contested and rendered visible as a political strategy. The findings demonstrate that the dilemmas advocates faced, credibility deficits, testimonial burdens, protective refusals, and embodied costs, are precisely those theorised within feminist advocacy, underscoring why proxy advocacy had to be developed as an extension of feminist advocacy frameworks.

Hence, this study proposes proxy advocacy as an analytical lens for understanding advocacy under enforced absence. Its contribution lies in three moves: (1) identifying enforced absence as a distinct terrain of denial, pushing beyond Cohen's (2001) focus on evidence to theorise credibility production when testimony is structurally obstructed; (2) extending Fricker's (2007) concept of testimonial injustice to contexts where survivors cannot speak at all, showing how credibility economies shift when others must speak in their stead; and (3) reorienting debates on 'speaking for others' by showing that under enforced absence,

speaking-for becomes a contingent necessity rather than only an act of usurpation (Alcoff, 1991; Spivak, 1988). This also extends Butler's (2009) insight on grievability to argue that proxy advocacy is a practice of holding open recognition where silence would otherwise foreclose it.

CONCLUSION

'I think my very existence is an act of resistance, let alone what I was doing actively, just existing…as a Tigrayan, is an act of resistance' (Interviewee 1). These capture the heart of this dissertation: under conditions of enforced absence, advocacy transforms into something more precarious and ethically fraught than conventional frameworks acknowledge.

This study examined how Tigrayan women and their allies challenged denial of rape and sexual violence during the Tigray War. Through ten interviews analysed via thematic and critical discourse analysis, it traced how advocates mobilised fragments into evidence, built community networks as credibility infrastructures, created digital counter-archives, enacted protective practices, and sustained advocacy's affective costs. These practices constitute proxy advocacy: advocacy under conditions of enforced absence.

Proxy advocacy extends feminist advocacy theory beyond current limits. Where existing frameworks assume survivors can speak, be consulted, or have testimony amplified, proxy advocacy theorises recognition when these assumptions collapse. It reveals how credibility operates when survivors cannot participate in their own representation.

The findings reveal that effective advocacy under extreme silencing requires understanding advocacy as infrastructure-building rather than message amplification. Advocates constructed entire credibility systems through fragmentary evidence, transnational networks, digital archives, protective practices, and embodied sacrifice. This infrastructure work constituted political action in its own right.

The study exposes how recognition frameworks demand advocates perform trauma to gain credibility. As one participant reflected, advocacy felt like 'selling trauma' to be taken

seriously (Interviewee, 3). This reproduces colonial patterns requiring marginalised subjects to recount injury as a recognition condition.

This study's limitations, ten interviews, primarily diaspora-based, conducted in English, mirror the structural constraints necessitating proxy advocacy itself. The concept emerges from conditions of constraint, not ideal democratic participation circumstances.

This mode of advocacy cannot resolve the ethical dilemmas of speaking for others; it makes visible conditions rendering such dilemmas inevitable. Its value lies not in providing ethical clearance for representation but in acknowledging representation's costs while examining how advocates navigate them when alternatives prove insufficient.

These claims, however, are bounded by the scope of a single case study. While proxy advocacy is theorised here through the Tigray War, further research is needed to examine how the concept travels beyond contexts of near-total communication shutdowns. The analysis therefore offers a provisional contribution: a framework that highlights both the necessity and the ethical ambiguity of advocacy under enforced absence.

While grounded in Tigray, the framework is not confined to it. Internet shutdowns during the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, restrictions on journalists in Sudan, and the silencing of survivors in Bosnia all reveal conditions of enforced absence where others spoke in proxy. This suggests proxy advocacy is analytically transferable, offering tools for understanding how advocacy persists under silencing across contexts.

Three directions extend this work: comparative research testing this lens across different silencing contexts; methodological approaches incorporating survivor perspectives on proxy representation; and longitudinal studies tracing how this mode of advocacy evolves when communication conditions change.

This study has shown that proxy advocacy does not resolve the ethical dilemmas of speaking for others; it renders them visible. Its value lies in naming the conditions that make ethical compromise unavoidable and examining how advocates navigate them when alternatives are foreclosed. In an era of intensifying authoritarianism and systemic silencing, proxy

advocacy shows how political action endures under extreme constraint, precarious, imperfect, and ethically fraught, yet indispensable.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I begin with my mother, Misrak Solomon, who has given me everything I needed to keep moving forward. The life I live today is the life she deserved, and I carry it with the knowledge that it is her sacrifices that made it possible. To her, I owe gratitude and a commitment to live fully.

I am deeply grateful to my supervisor Professor Shakuntala Banaji, whose generosity, guidance, and intellectual rigour shaped this dissertation and the way I see myself within the academy. She taught me to think more critically, to write more courageously, and, perhaps most importantly, she made me feel seen.

This dissertation rests on the voices of my interviewees and on the courage of countless advocates who refused silence during the Tigray War and beyond. I thank those who gave their time and testimony to this research, and I honour the wider community of advocates who continue to insist that asking for justice and empathy should not require closeness to violence to be felt as true. I extend this acknowledgement to all who resist denial, erasure, and violence, their labour is never invisible, even when it is unrecognised.

Finally, I wish my father Hailu Legesse could be here to witness this. His absence remains part of my story, and I carry the hope that he would have been proud to see this work and the path it represents.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the women of Tigray, and to all women who have borne sexual violence not once but twice, first in their bodies, and again in the denials that sought to erase them.

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APPENDIX

Thematic and Critical Discourse Analysis Coding Framework

Theme	Text (linguistic features)	Discursive Practice (production/circulation/consumption)	Social Practice (ideological function / proxy advocacy tie-in)	Illustrative Quote
Fragments as Evidence (Patchwork Testimony)	Non-standard plural ("evidences"); hedging ("some," "like, two, three"); epistemic burden ("bulletproof").	Kinship networks used as evidence-gathering (brother, family relays); diaspora advocates triangulating fragments with NGO/medical reports; fragments circulated via hashtags (#TigrayGenocide) and media outlets; heightened demand for "airtight" evidence.	Proxy advocacy labor under blackout: fragments mobilised as resistant testimony yet subjected to heightened credibility scrutiny.	"He had a small access of internet, so I told him to send me some evidences that we put them in the database." (Interviewee 6) "I'm saying this because whenever I write… I am more forced to write bulletproof today than I would have done for Tanzania or Kenya… because of the kind of scrutiny that I would face."(Interviewee 3) "…we had activists and survivors that were brave enough to travel miles to find

				some kind of connection and send us guarded voice messages and videos." (Interviewee 1)
Community & Diaspora Networks as Proxy Advocacy	Relational/collectiv e language: "Unity," "clarity of purpose," "Collective vs I," "strategic/longterm"; affective solidarity ("chat, vent, drink coffee").	Diaspora mobilization: building organizations, multilingual advocacy, protest organizing, women-led leadership, everyday solidarity practices.	Proxy advocacy: networks substituted for silenced survivors by amplifying their absence. Counters interpretive denial by reframing solidarity as credibility, and shared presence as infrastructure of advocacy.	"We didn't have any resources whatsoever. We built organizations from scratch. We all came together." (Interviewee 1) "We had like some Tegaru [Tigrayan] here… we chat, vent. We drink coffee, and church… we drove to another city for protests. You'll be prepared, the pain, how you feel, how they feel

				is similar, so that is helpful." (Interviewee 6)
Digital Platforms as Proxy Archives	Words of scale: "exponentially increased," "database," "archive" → framing platforms as evidencebuilding spaces.	Shift from Facebook (peer-to-peer) → Twitter (global visibility); digital testimonies circulated into international media. Hashtags reframed the conflict discursively — from identity claims (#IAmTigray) to atrocity framing (#TigrayGenocide) — situating CRSV not as incidental but as evidence of genocidal intent.	Proxy advocacy: platforms became stand-ins for survivors, hosting testimonies they could not share directly. Counters literal denial by leaving a digital trace of otherwise silenced violence	"The first thing I did was to use Facebook to educate people on how to use Twitter… we exponentially increased the presence of Tigrayans on Twitter." (Interviewee 1) "We had this hashtag… how they use rape as a weapon of war, and this thing #TigrayGenocide. So, we are working through that, with evidence." (Interviewee 6)

Survivor Protection & Dignity	Metaphor ("taking someone's soul"); repetition ("we never used…"); hesitation ("like… like…"); intertextuality (echo of humanitarian trauma scripts).	Advocates anonymise, refuse images, push back against journalists; tension between survivors' wish to speak vs. intermediaries' protective filtering; circulation shaped by consent.	Proxy advocacy managed ethically by resisting spectacle; foregrounds dignity over visibility; refusal vs. amplification double bind; ethical curation as resistance to extractive humanitarian logics.	"It feels like a very extractive process. Like you're taking someone's soul. Or like you're going up to them and saying, 'Tell me the worst thing that's ever happened to you.'" (Interviewee 2) "We never used images. We never used names… But there was also a desire amongst survivors to tell their stories because there was this feeling that if they didn't, all that they had gone through would not have meaning." (Interviewee 8)
Advocacy as Affective Labour	Emotionally loaded terms ('burnout,' 'Lonely,' 'crazy,' 'delayed my career,' 'financially affected,' 'never be able to go back home') highlight cost. Repetition ('full-time advocacy, full-time community leadership, fulltime school') emphasizes relentlessness. Metaphors ('price,'	Participants narrated advocacy both through sacrifice and through restraint. Burnout, exile, and personal cost were told as proof of authenticity; composure and analysis were told as proof of authority. In both cases, advocacy was framed not only as political intervention but as something credibility itself depended on, carried in bodies marked by sacrifice or disciplined by restraint.	Proxy advocacy demanded a double labour: to feel deeply without collapsing, or to suppress feeling without detaching. Credibility carried not only in "facts" but embodied in sacrifice, stalled careers, exile or in emotional regulation and analytical composure. Advocacy thus functioned	"It comes with immense personal price. It undermines your professional growth. You'll be looked at as, you know, controversial, again, not because whatever I did was wrong, but because there are political powers in play here. … But I think the most painful part is knowing I'll probably never be able to go back home and connect with my people, with the soil. And that will delay my healing journey." (Interviewee 1) "…show to governments

	'toll') frame advocacy as burden. Analytical phrasing ('zoom out,' 'connect the dots') marks deliberate emotional restraint.		simultaneously as survival strategy and sacrifice, resisting denial while leaving lasting scars.	… to ordinary Tigrayans and others, to see that there is some connection between what's happening in terms of blockade, siege, and the rape and sexual violence." (Interviewiee 3)