

How Wars Disproportionately Affect Women and Children: A Gender Analysis of Armed Conflict

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Abstract - When conflicts occur between countries, women and children are the most vulnerable groups affected. This research examines how they suffer during armed conflicts, particularly through crimes such as sexual assault, exploitation, torture, and other forms of violence.

According to international databases on refugees and internally displaced populations, nearly 37 million children and 17 million women were displaced in 2018. This paper analyses the main causes behind these disproportionate impacts using the doctrinal research method. It further explores ways to protect these vulnerable groups and suggests measures to build a more peaceful society.

The study highlights the urgent need for better protection mechanisms and greater enclosure of women and children in peace processes to reduce their anguish and suffering in times of war.

Key Words: war, women, children, conflict, disproportionately, armed conflict.

INTRODUCTION

This series of papers focuses on the types and causes of crimes that vulnerable groups suffer during armed conflicts, with women and girl children being the most affected. The paper presents detailed doctrinal research that examines the scale of these crimes and suggests ways to protect these groups.

In 2024, the Peace Research Institute in Oslo recorded 61 armed conflicts across 35 countries. In 2025, the International Committee of the Red Cross recorded more than 383 armed groups of humanitarian concern globally, with 204 million people living in areas contested or controlled by such groups. These large numbers clearly show the widespread impact of armed conflicts.

This paper analyses the extent to which women and children are affected by armed conflict. It reflects on the current evidence of crimes such as exploitation, sexual violence, forced exploitation, and injuries faced by women and children. The study also examines the role of organisations like the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, UN Women, and Human Rights Watch in developing ways to protect vulnerable groups on a priority basis and in finding effective solutions and remedies.

According to the Report of the Secretary-General on Women and Peace and Security 2025, many of the 113 countries and territories that have adopted national action plans on women and peace and security as of July 2025, up from only 19 in 2010, have set targets for increased representation of women in the

justice and security sectors or advanced legislation that promotes the empowerment and the rights of women and girls. Around the world, thousands of women have received reparations for having been subjected to sexual violence in conflict. Perpetrators of conflict-related sexual violence have been convicted in courts or sanctioned by the Security Council in growing numbers and, increasingly, have been sanctioned by regional organizations and individual Member States. Women's participation in United Nations peacekeeping has more than doubled since 2017.

TYPES AND CAUSES OF CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRL CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICTS

During armed conflicts, women and children become easy targets for different kinds of crimes and violence. The most common crimes they face are sexual exploitation, rape, forced marriage, torture, and serious physical injuries. These things usually happen because normal law and order completely breaks down in war zones. Many armed groups deliberately use sexual violence as a weapon to humiliate the community and show their power.

There is no single clear definition of sexual violence during wartime. In most cases, the exploiters take away the dignity and sanctity of women. They use women as a tool of oppression and to satisfy their own sexual desires. After using them, they often leave the women in a very bad physical and mental condition, almost like a vegetative state.

1. Sexual exploitation

In sexual assaults, women are often beaten up, used only for pleasure, and made to suffer so that the attackers can release their frustration and anger on them and on children.

During the Tigray War in Ethiopia (2020–2022), there were many reports of rape and other forms of sexual abuse. Sexual violence in conflict happens all over the world. It is done by people of all genders and all ages. At its root, it comes from unequal power between men and women.

For children, age and gender make them more vulnerable. Adolescent girls face the highest risk of sexual violence in war. However, boys are also not safe. In recent years, sexual

violence against boys has been reported in conflicts in Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan, and Syria. Children who do not conform to traditional gender roles or have disabilities are also at higher risk.

2. Rape

Rape is one of the most serious forms of sexual exploitation in armed conflict. The International Criminal Court defines rape as follows:

“The perpetrator invaded the body of a person by conduct resulting in penetration, however slight, of any part of the body of the victim or of the perpetrator with a sexual organ, or of the anal or genital opening of the victim with any object or any other part of the body.”

This definition is not complete or exhaustive. Rape is not just about forced sexual intercourse with a woman. It is deeply connected to the aggressive nature of male anatomy and behaviour. In war, this aggression often turns into a way for men to control, and mark women and children as their territory. It becomes a tool to show power and ownership over the victims.

3. Forced Marriage

Child marriage and forced marriage takes away a girl's right to make decisions about her own life. It stops her education and makes her more vulnerable to violence, abuse, and discrimination, specially during war time when there is already so much chaos is going on;

Studies show that in conflict situations, child marriage increases due to several factors such as diffidence, fear of sexual violence, the wrong belief that marriage will provide protection, give education, help from poverty, and will gain social support. It also happens because of the shame attached to pregnancy outside specially when they are raped, they have no option but to surrender to marriage as the last resort to give their child a chance at life as amongst war it is next to impossible to have an abortion and depends on the respective countries law regarding abortion.

4. Sexual Torture, and serious physical injuries

Sexual torture is very common during wartime because at this time the most vulnerable groups are women and children, and women and children are beaten up while their bodies are exploited or they are raped or tortured. During World War II in Tokyo, the records which were not in the public eye for half a century showed the exploitation in the clinical documentation of their brothel system, in which the women were exploited and enslaved. In the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, there was large-scale abduction and sexual abuse which happened, but in the 1990s, after the feminist movement, these things came to light when the human rights violation movement came into existence.

In conclusion, sexual violence during armed conflict is not only a personal crime but also a serious violation of human dignity and human rights. Women and children suffer the most because they are most targeted in times when protection systems collapse. These crimes leave long lasting physical, psychological, and social damage, and therefore they must be addressed with strict legal action, accountability, and stronger protection for victims.

THE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS AMONG WOMEN IN ARMED CONFLICT ZONES

The UN Women report shows that war has a very serious impact on the mental health of women and girls in places like Afghanistan, Gaza, Georgia and Ukraine. More than 600 million women and girls are living in conflict areas, which is a 50% increase since 2017, and women made up 40% of civilian deaths in the last year. Around 1 in 5 people develop long-term mental health problems, but only 2% actually get treatment, and mental health only gets 1–2% of global health funding, which is very low.

In Afghanistan, about 68% of women say their mental health is bad. In Gaza, 75% of women face depression, 62% cannot sleep, and 65% suffer from anxiety and nightmares, and almost 85% of the population is displaced. In Georgia, around 23% people suffer from PTSD, and in Ukraine, 42% of women are at risk of depression, along with a 36% increase in gender-based violence. This clearly shows that mental health support is not easily available and is still ignored even though the problem is increasing.

Even nowadays, mental health is not taken very seriously in many low-tier countries like Democratic Republic of the Congo, parts of West Africa, and Afghanistan. There is very less awareness and very limited facilities, because of which people are not able to understand or treat mental health problems properly. This becomes even more serious in cases of assault on women during armed conflict, which often leads to conditions like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, where the trauma is remembered again and again, leading to depression, anxiety, and fear. Because of this, not only the survivors suffer, but their families and neighbours are also affected.

In post-war situations, most of the focus is on rebuilding the economy, infrastructure, and maintaining security. But in all this, the mental health of victims is ignored and sidelined. This makes the situation worse because the victims are left alone to deal with their trauma. Middle East countries are among the most affected, where continuous conflict has made the situation more like oppression, especially for women.

Studies show that when victims try to come forward, they are often not supported and are sometimes abandoned by their own families. They are not given the same respect as before, which leads to stigmatization by their families and friends. In many cases, victims are blamed, which makes their mental condition even worse. Women and children are the most marginalized groups who face this type of trauma after war.

Although there are organizations like International Committee of the Red Cross, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty

International which try to help these people by providing support and spreading awareness, their efforts are still not enough because the problem is very large and resources are limited.

THE TESTIMONIES OF SOME VICTIMS OF EXPLOITATION

- Wairimu V., 65, was raped by a group of men at an IDP camp. Her husband blames her for the rape, and beats and verbally abuses her including in the presence of their children. She would like to leave her abusive husband but is worried that she will not be able to support herself. She has such severe pain in her leg, lower abdomen and back that she has to take pain killers daily, she also has vaginal bleeding and hypertension. © 2015 Samer Muscati/Human Rights Watch.
- Mwende T., 16 at the time, was raped in January 2008 by a neighbor who said he would help her to escape from marauding youths. When she went to the police after a few days to report the rape, a police officer said she was lying about being raped. Mwende had to move when the man who raped her threatened to kill her when he learnt she had gone to the police. Survivors of sexual violence have experienced formidable challenges in getting help from authorities and accessing justice. © 2015 Samer Muscati/Human Rights Watch.
- Fatma W. with her 7-year old son born from rape. Atieno was 17 when she was gang-raped at their home in Nairobi by three men who accused her family of hiding men from the "enemy" tribe. She stopped going to school after the rape. Fatma said her neighbors stigmatize her son because he was born from rape. © 2015 Samer Muscati/Human Rights Watch.
- Atieno O. W. 36, has twice been a victim of rape. In 1992 she watched as her mother was gang-raped by a group of men during tribal clashes in Rift Valley. Since then she is easily frightened and experiences periodic blackouts. She was raped again in December 2007 during the post-election violence. She has never told her husband about the rape but says he is suspicious and still questions whether she was sexually assaulted during the violence. She is afraid that if he finds out the truth he will chase her away and she would not be able to support their three children on her own. Many sexual violence survivors suffer in silence and alone, without the support of family members who also stigmatize and reject them. © 2015 Samer Muscati/Human Rights Watch.
- Nafula K., 46, was gang raped together with three other women by four men in January 2008 while at an IDP camp. Her husband beats her, verbally abuses her, and refuses to sleep with her. Her family was also evicted from their home during the post-election violence. She says she wants to leave her abusive husband but wants the government to first build her a house so that she can have a place to go to. Many sexual violence survivors experience physical and verbal abuse in their homes. © 2015 Samer Muscati/Human Rights Watch.

- Maua E., 53, at her relocated home in Rift Valley. Maua went to Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital for treatment two days after being gang raped but the health workers ridiculed her and delayed treatment. Some women who sought medical treatment for sexual violence were mocked by health care workers, turned away without treatment, or denied important medical records by doctors who appeared to refuse treatment on the basis of ethnicity or trivialized the experience of rape. © 2015 Samer Muscati/Human Rights Watch.

THE URGENT NEED FOR BETTER PROTECTION MECHANISMS AND GREATER ENCLOSURE OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN

The Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict;

This declaration by the United Nations General Assembly talks about protecting women and children during war and emergency situations. It clearly shows that they are the most vulnerable group and suffer the most because of violence, exploitation, and inhuman treatment upon themselves.

It also says that all countries must follow international laws like the Geneva Conventions and make sure that basic necessities like food, shelter, and medical help are provided to women and children.

Altogether, it means that such acts are measured serious crimes and countries should take appropriate steps to guard and protect women and children during armed conflicts.

Women's Human Rights and Gender Issues During Conflict and Instability

During conflicts, gender-based violence against women and girls increases a lot, including acts like torture, sexual violence, and rape. This happens because law and order breaks down, and predators take advantage of the situation to commit crimes like trafficking, sexual exploitation, and abuse.

Access to basic services like healthcare, especially reproductive health, also gets disrupted. Because of this, women face risks like unplanned pregnancies, injuries, infections, and even maternal deaths. During displacement, many women lose their homes and security. Internally displaced women often do not get proper healthcare and are at higher risk of violence, forced labour, trafficking, and abduction.

Gaps in Legal Frameworks and Failures in Protecting Women's Rights During Armed Conflicts

Even though there are many well-written declarations and treaties made for the protection of women, there are still many loopholes which cannot be ignored. For example, in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights uses the word "men" instead of gender-neutral terms. This shows that even important documents are not fully inclusive, and similar issues can still be seen in some modern treaties. Because of this, the legal framework is not as strong as it should be.

Another major issue is weak implementation. There are not many strictly binding international laws that specifically focus on protecting women in armed conflicts. In reality, women are often the main targets of sexual violence during war. From Afghanistan to Somalia and even during World War II, women and girls have faced serious sexual violence again and again.

There is also a problem of jurisdiction, where domestic laws do not always match with international laws, which leads to poor implementation. Many times, the people who are supposed to protect society are the ones violating these rights. Also, some countries do not follow certain international laws properly. For example, during conflicts related to Gaza Strip and West Bank, Israel did not accept the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention. Because of all these reasons, proper enforcement of women's rights during armed conflict becomes very difficult.

After looking at different laws made for protecting women's rights, one major problem that comes out is the lack of proper implementation. Just having laws or agencies is not enough; what is actually needed is a strong and properly structured system that can effectively implement these laws. Even though international and regional instruments place a duty on States to prevent and punish violence against women and girls, in reality, these violations are still increasing at both national and international levels.

Overall, there are still many gaps in the protection of women's rights which cannot be ignored. Treaties and laws are important, but they should be practical and properly enforced, not just written documents for display.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, after analysing all these aspects, it becomes very clear that even though there are many laws, treaties, and international efforts made for the protection of women and children during armed conflicts, the ground reality is still very disappointing. The existence of legal frameworks like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Geneva Conventions gives a sense of protection on paper, but in actual situations, these protections often fail due to weak implementation, lack of accountability, and ignorance by States.

The suffering of women and children, whether in the form of sexual violence, exploitation, displacement, or mental trauma, clearly shows that they are still not given the priority they deserve. It is disheartening to see that even after so many years, victims are still struggling not only with the violence they faced but also with social stigma, lack of support, and poor access to justice and healthcare. This gap between the substantial equality is missing, what is written in law and what actually happens in reality is very different.

At the same time, this situation also creates a strong requirement and accountability to bring change. There is a need for stricter implementation of laws, better support systems, and more awareness so that victims are not left alone. Efforts should not just remain at the international level but must reach the ground level where real change is needed. Only then can we move towards a system where women and children are actually protected, and not just promised protection on paper.

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