

Forum: United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UNW)

Issue #1: Measures to prevent and respond to gender-based violence in conflict zones.

Student Officers: Nour Ahmed and Lily Thompson

Position: Chair of United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UNW)



Chung, Jean. "Amina, 13, centre, is surrounded by her classmates at the literacy centre." Canon, 30 October 2006, <https://shorturl.at/8nXZr>

Introduction

In conflict zones all around the globe, gender-based violence (GBV) is a severe and prevalent issue. Due to the escalation of armed conflicts and instability, both women and girls face risks such as exploitation, forced marriages, violence, and other forms of abuse. Between 2017 and 2022, there was a significant 50 percent increase in the

number of women and girls living in conflict-affected areas, reaching over 600 million females (Backstrom). GBV covers damaging actions rooted in unequal power relations, which increase in times of conflict and are repeatedly used as a weapon of war to torment civilians and worsen social instability (Fanm). Individuals are often more vulnerable to violence, there is an interference in their ability to seek help, and they have limited access to essential services such as healthcare, justice, and support systems during armed conflicts, as these frequently diminish legal protections and disrupt social structures (Capasso et al.). The risks women and girls face are furthered due to the collapse of social structures, an increase in weaponry, and the standardization of violence, as well as the pre-existing gender inequalities, which are enlarged under conflict conditions (OHCHR). In 2023, the number of women killed in conflicts doubled compared to the previous year. The United Nations documented 3,688 cases related to conflict-related sexual violence.

Additionally, there was a 35 percent increase in the number of girls affected by serious violations in circumstances of armed violence. (UN Women). GBV leaves severe and many-sided consequences, such as reproductive health complications, physical injuries, and deep psychological trauma (Shahali). In zones of conflict, this violence is used to terrorize, embed control over populations, and as a weapon of war. Multiple cases of gender-based violence in conflict go unaddressed and unreported, sustaining a cycle of impunity and impairment of the dignity and rights of women and girls ("Recommitment, Accountability and Resourcing Needed to End Gender-Based Violence in Conflict - World"). The factors that cause violence against women and girls in conflict zones call for increased awareness, collection of data, and a deeper understanding of the root causes of this issue.

Definition of Key Terms

Conflict zone: An area with an active war, significant violence, or political instability taking place that affects the daily lives of civilians, disrupting access to services and typically leading to human rights violations. (Prasad and Prasad)

Gender-based violence (GBV): Any act of violence directed at a person based on their

gender or that disproportionately affects a person of a certain gender. ("What Is Gender-Based Violence – and How Do We Prevent It?")

Conflict-related sexual violence: Refers to acts of sexual violence that are directly or indirectly linked to conflict, often using rape as a weapon of war or to displace and punish singular people or a community. ("Conflict-Related Sexual Violence")

Impunity: The exemption or freedom from punishments and consequences, failure to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions, such as sexual violence in conflict. (Cambridge Dictionary)

Systemic rape: Intentional and widespread use of rape as a part of a organized strategy or tactic, usually used in cases like war, ethnic cleansings, or political oppression. (UNIFEM)

Sexual exploitation and abuse: Refers to the abuse of power in terms of sexual acts, particularly committed by those in positions of power or trust. (UNHCR)

Safe spaces: Places where gender-based violence survivors can access protection, care, and essential services that are supportive and secure. ("Gender-Based Violence")

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs): People who are forced to leave their homes and communities due to conflict, violence, or disasters, but they have not left the official borders of the country and are forced to stay within their country of origin. ("Internally Displaced People | UNHCR")

General Overview

The Big Picture

Gender-based violence is a prominent issue and dramatically intensifies in areas of active conflict; women and girls bear most of the impact in this case. Even though gender-based violence exists as a globally widespread issue, the conditions of an armed conflict or instability intensify either the existing violence or introduce new forms.

These consequences are severe; Compared to 2022, the percentage of women killed in armed conflicts increased in 2023, accounting for four out of ten conflict-related deaths ("War on Women – Proportion of Women Killed in Armed Conflicts Doubles in 2023 | UN Women – Headquarters"). This issue is deeply rooted in gender inequality and exacerbated by the chaos of war, and in how they treat the affected survivors. It has many forms of violence that they face, most notably sexual violence, forced marriage, and abduction. These forms are mainly used on purpose to serve as a weapon of war or a systemic way to strategize, or used as a tactic. The breakdown of the law or the government during conflicts means survivors often do not have safe spaces where they can report these incidents to, and they also face intensive barriers to justice and to the support that they deserve.

Disproportionate Impact on Women and Girls

Conflict makes an environment for discrimination and exposes women to heightened risks of violence. There is a larger discrepancy for the women and girls affected by gender-based violence than for men, meaning that the impact is far greater. One increased risk aspect for women is when they are uprooted from their homes in conflict-affected countries, and there is risk when they are traveling home or seeking refuge from conflict, which can make them very vulnerable to sexual violence and trafficking. According to UNHRC, "Across the world, more than 60 million women and girls who are forcibly displaced or stateless face high risks of gender-based violence." The number of deaths for women in conflict or war zones has increased for several reasons, one being the limited accessibility to healthcare services. "Every day, 500 women and girls in conflict-affected countries die from complications related to pregnancy and childbirth." ("War on Women – Proportion of Women Killed in Armed Conflicts Doubles in 2023 | UN Women – Headquarters") Gender based violence increases after conflicts occur as well because there is vulnerability and systems have broken down, meaning increased levels of violence and militarism.

Forms of Gender-Based Violence in Conflicts

There are several forms of violence that these victims can be put into different categories of violence. One example is sexual violence and systemic rape, where rape is used as a weapon of war to terrorize and destabilize affected communities. Recent

United Nations (UN) data show that in 2022, women and girls accounted for 94% of the 2,455 United Nations-verified cases of conflict-related sexual violence. ("Strongly Condemning Rise in Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, Speakers Urge Security Council to Better Prevent, Enforce Accountability for Such Crimes | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases") These numbers are considered to be serious understatements due to the underreporting of these cases. Another form of gender based violence is Intimate Partner and domestic violence. These rates usually increase when there is a raised conflict or during war zones because of the breakdown of the structures, and it is also fueled by stress and displacement. All combined reasons create an unstable environment, meaning it is more open to violent areas. More forms include forced and early marriage. "In 2023, 1 in 5 women aged 20-24 years were married before age 18." Marriage of children is more prominent in conflict zones because of the combination of heightened insecurities, economic hardships, and the breakdown of systems, meaning that families might see marrying off their child as a way to protect them or to save them from intense poverty, violence, or exploitation.

Barriers to Justice and Support

With the increased levels of violence comes the struggles that women face with either reporting their cases of gender based violence or receiving the justice that they deserve from the systems in place. Impunity for perpetrators is a problem that also comes with this because the people who are affecting the women in this way are not facing the consequences due to the law and government systems. Especially when the justice systems are inaccessible, corrupt, or biased, the perpetrators are not held accountable. The survivors of gender based violence usually do not report these cases due to fear of not being trusted or further actions being taken against them. For example, 85% of women surveyed in South Africa reported police incompetence in handling GBV cases ("Barriers to Justice: Gender-Based Violence in South Africa: Clooney Foundation for Justice"). Several barriers stem from the social and cultural aspects of gender based violence. The patriarchal ideologies that grant men the power over women and justify the male supremacy are prominent during conflicts and in conflict-affected countries because the roles are disrupted, and violence becomes more normalized within society. The survivors of gender-based violence often face stigma and are shamed and blamed for talking about their experiences, which may

discourage them from reporting abuse. In many conflict-affected countries, the laws currently in place are discriminatory towards females and cater more to patriarchal ideology, which hinders the access to justice that these victims need. Some legal systems make it so that if the woman affected is married to the perpetrator, then it won't be a case. Services provided to the survivors are often severely underfunded, meaning the victims may not get the help they need in a right amount of time or be provided with a safe shelter.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Ethiopia

Ethiopia has become one of the world's centers of gender-based violence in conflict conditions. In the country, over 835 incidents were reported in 2023, the highest number of verified gender-based violence incidents. The actual number of cases is predicted to be even higher due to underreporting and lack of support (Bekele and Eckles). The majority of the victims are women and girls who face sexual violence such as rape, gang rape, oral and anal rape, and intentional transmission of sexually transmitted diseases ("Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility; Ethiopia Secondary Data Review, February 2023 - Ethiopia | ReliefWeb"). The ongoing instability keeps placing millions of people in dangerous circumstances, as survivors lack medical care, justice, and a proper shelter and protection (Group).

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

Across the globe, the DRC has long been considered one of the most dangerous places for women and girls, especially during conflict. In 2023, 773 verified cases of sexual-related violence were reported, but like many other countries, the number of verified cases related to gender-based violence in conflict zones is underreported. GBV such as rape and other forms of abuse are used as a weapon of war, often employed by both armed groups, and in some occasions even the government (Endalkachew Dellie et al.). Because of the lack of medical infrastructure and legal protection, survivors face heightened physical and psychological consequences, and often experience vulnerability and isolation ("Ethiopia: Gender Based Violence AoR - Reports | ReliefWeb Response").

Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, gender-based violence remains widespread and deeply established, specifically in the context of ongoing conflict and political disruption. Women aged from 15 to 49 have reported experiences of GBV at least once in their lives, with a great majority facing high rates of forced marriages, domestic violence, and sexual assault, as well as other types of sexual violence (Yinagn Shibie Kibret et al.). There are even greater limitations on women's rights, such as limited access to healthcare and education, and immunity and violence, after the return of the Taliban.

South Sudan

South Sudan has been one of the countries with the greatest number of reports of gender-based violence in the world. According to multiple researchers, 50 to 65 percent of both women and girls have experienced physical or sexual violence (Endalkachew Dellie et al., "Gender-Based Violence among Women and Girls in Conflict-Affected Areas of Northeast Amhara, Ethiopia"). This ongoing crisis is worsened by displacement, armed conflict, and weak legal protections. The collapse of social structures and the use of gender-based violence as a tactic of war typically leaves survivors with little to no support or a possible course of action ("In Ethiopia, a Rapidly Changing Humanitarian Crisis Demonstrates the Need for a Flexible Response").

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1985	The first working group of refugee women was summoned, leading to advocacy for conflict-affected women, and the Senior Coordinator for Refugee Women at UNHCR was designated ("Historical Timeline").
1990	The first policy on refugee women's protection was approved by UNHCR, which recognizes sexual violence as a key vulnerability and calls for targeted programming ("Historical Timeline").

1994	GBV (Gender-Based Violence) responses are recognized as a foundation of reproductive health in places of conflict by the ICPD (International Conference on Population and Development) after well-known cases in Rwanda and Bosnia. ("Historical Timeline").
1995	"Sexual Violence Against Refugees: Guidelines on Protection and Response" is published by UNHCR, which outlines legal, medical, and psychological support for victims ("Historical Timeline").
2002	Sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian staff in West Africa gained widespread media coverage, leading to global reforms and an increase in attention for GBV measures ("Historical Timeline").
2005	Guidelines for GBV interventions in humanitarian settings are created by UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee, presenting standards of the minimum response needed to address sexual violence. The GBVoAr is created for inter-sectoral coordination, after the cluster approach is adopted ("Historical Timeline").
2007	United Nations Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict (UN Action) is set in motion, merging UN efforts to end sexual violence in zones of conflict ("Historical Timeline").
2008	Resolution 1820 was adopted by the UN Security Council, which states that GBV in conflicts is a threat to security and international peace. UNiTE campaign is launched by the UN Secretary-General to call for laws, awareness, and action plans, as well as the end of violence against women ("Timeline of Policy Commitments and International Agreements").
2008-2013	International structures regarding sexual violence in conflict settings are reinforced by multiple Security Council agreements

(1888, 1960, 2106), additionally, a Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict was assigned ("Historical Timeline").

2014-Present	Reports of sexual violence by armed groups are persistent in ongoing conflicts (Ukraine, DRC, Sudan) ("Gender-Based Violence in Conflict • FREE NETWORK"). Psychological support, as well as legal aid, community-based interventions, and safe spaces, are provided by international organizations (UNHCR).
2023	GBV prevention and response are developed by UNHCR in cases of emergencies, which include training community advocates, assisting and supporting women-led organizations, and providing legal and health services in Sudan, Chad, DRC, Malaysia, and Moldova (UNHCR).

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

The United Nations has had a central and evolving role in addressing the issues surrounding gender-based violence in conflict zones, including developing policy frameworks and operational responses. The first resolution adopted by the UN security council in the year 2000 was resolution 1325 which called for recognition of the disproportionate affect on women and girls in conflict zones and emphasizing the increased participation and protection of women in peace proccesses ("Landmark Resolution on Women, Peace and Security (Security Council Resolution 1325)"). This was followed by a series of related resolutions, including UNSCR 1820 (2008), which acknowledged the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war, and UNSCR 1888 (2009), which created the role of Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict. The UN also launched UN Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict, a network of 26 entities working together to end sexual violence in conflict (osrsgsvc). Additionally, the UN has deployed Women Protection Advisors who support the survivors with legal and psychosocial services.

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Over the years, multiple attempts have been made to prevent and respond to gender-based violence (GBV) in conflict zones. It is beyond doubt that progress has been made regarding this issue, but many challenges persist in the protection of survivors and the prevention of violence. Governments, international bodies, local organizations, and humanitarian agencies have supplied help to address this issue. Examples of these attempts are:

1. Guidelines for GBV Interventions in Humanitarian Settings

In 2005, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) adopted the Guidelines for Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Interventions in Humanitarian Settings. In these guidelines, the minimum standards for responding to GBV in emergencies were established, as well as the emphasis that all humanitarian actors share the same responsibility for prevention and response to GBV in their sectors. In the same year, the Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility (GBVAoR) was established within the humanitarian cluster system, which provided a formal framework for multi-sectoral collaboration and accountability in prevention and response to GBV ("Home | Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility"). The 2005 IASC Guidelines established minimum standards for GBV prevention and response and highlighted shared responsibility among all humanitarian actors. Several factors have caused their lack of effectiveness. Most humanitarian actors know of these guidelines, but lack knowledge on the specific minimum standards, or just refuse to employ the guidelines in program design, implementation, or evaluation. Additionally, many actors believe that the general protection measures are sufficient, which causes an inconsistent application of GBV-specific standards. In organizational or sector-specific standards and strategies, the guidelines are not consistently reflected, which, as a consequence, leads to an inconsistent incorporation of GBV prevention measures. Lastly, there are no mechanisms to determine accountability. Donors often disregard accountability, and they rarely penalize non-compliance after funding is granted. Sectors are also not held responsible for failing to incorporate GBV standards (Evaluation of Implementation of 2005 IASC Guidelines for Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings in the Syria Crisis Response).

2. UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security Agenda

The UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security Agenda commenced with resolution 1325 in the year 2000. Resolution 1325 required conflict-affected countries to recognize the impact of armed conflict on both women and girls and to stop the violations of women's rights ("NATO Review - the Resilience of Resolution 1325"). Additionally, this resolution urged for greater participation and support of women in decision-making processes and peacebuilding, as well as for all actors to protect women and girls from GBV in situations of conflict (United Nations). This resolution demonstrated the importance of implementing gender perspectives into peace negotiations and humanitarian responses, as well as granting training for UN personnel on women's rights (United Nations). UNSCR 1325 had a groundbreaking nature, but it still faced several implementation challenges. The resolution was rendered ineffective as it lacked enforcement mechanisms, benchmarks, and targets, causing it to be seen as a set of guidelines rather than enforceable obligations and rules. Another challenge was the resolution's failure to tackle underlying institutional inequalities, power relations, or greater issues such as lack of education or poverty (O'Connor). Women's participation in decision-making processes is often nominal, as they have limited influence over these solutions and decisions. Women are typically included after the decisions have been made, decreasing their ability to shape outcomes meaningfully (Persistent Challenges in Implementing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 CSPPS Representatives Reflections on the Women, Peace and Security Agenda).

3. Community-Based Programs

Community-based programs aimed at transforming social norms and supporting survivors directly within affected populations have been a major effort executed to tackle this issue. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), UK's Department for International Development (DFID), have funded multiple programs to train faith leaders and local "Gender Champions" to raise awareness and defy attitudes and opinions that support and tolerate violence against women, as well as integrate GBV prevention messages and community speeches. This decreased the support of domestic violence and increased the willingness to aid survivors and victims of sexual violence and abuse. In Afghanistan, Family Protection Services were established at hospitals, which brought medical services to over 15,000 survivors in 3 years. The medical aid included

healthcare, screenings, and support. Community-based GBV interventions, while promising, have also faced limitations. Some programs have shown success in changing community opinion and attitudes, such as the training of faith leaders and “Gender Champions” in the DRC. Most of these changes are often localized and may not be sustained without greater systemic shifts. Another challenge is the structural barriers in some nations. In countries such as Afghanistan, crucial support for medical and psychological programs has been provided by Family Protection Services, but broader legal, cultural, and social barriers remain, causing access to justice and long-term support for victims to become limited (Kangas et al.).

Possible Solutions

Criminalization of Perpetrators

One major aspect of GBV is how the perpetrators usually face little to no consequences, enforcing strict legal implications for the individuals and the groups who are responsible for gender-based violence would provide justice for the victims and prevent it from occurring further. This includes military personnel, rebels, and peacekeepers. Ending impunity is important for the discouragement of this and for the justice of the victims and survivors. Implementation can be done through the support of international and national prosecutions, the adoption of legislation that aligns with international law, and the training of law enforcement and judges, which can be some of the most effective ways.

Strengthening Support Centers

A way to aid the survivors of GBV and improve their livelihood can be by expanding and funding local support centers that offer healthcare, counseling, legal aid, and safe shelter to survivors of gender-based violence. The purpose would be because survivors need safe, trauma-informed, and confidential spaces that they can come to and recover to rebuild their lives. Execution of this can be fulfilled by partnering with local NGOs and UN agencies to establish or upgrade these centers.

Inclusion of Women in Peace Processes

Women are typically not involved in resolutions or negotiations that affect them or their

issues. A way to combat this would be to ensure that women can participate in peace negotiations and reconstruction after a conflict has occurred. Including women in these processes can lead to more inclusive peace and a chance to hear from their points of view. This can be implemented by making sure that a certain percentage of people in peace negotiations have to be women, offering training to women so that they can successfully contribute to these discussions, listening to women's organizations and civil society groups when making decisions, because they understand the issue better than outsiders.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)

SDG 11, Sustainable Cities and Communities

Sustainable Development Goal #11 aims to make cities and human settlements safe, inclusive, sustainable, and resilient. Ensuring safety and security for every individual, especially those in the context of a vulnerable situation, is a key priority of this goal. Target 11.7 focuses on providing universal access to inclusive, safe, and accessible public spaces, with a specific focus on women, elder civilians, children, and individuals with disabilities. This target emphasizes the importance of safety in community environments, which directly aligns with the issue of preventing and responding to gender-based violence (GBV) in areas affected by conflict or humanitarian settings, where refugees often live in urban areas. Additionally, SDG 11 highlights the improvement of slums and informal settlements (Target 11.1), which frequently have an absence of proper protection measures and services, consequently increasing GBV. This SDG supports efforts to address and reduce vulnerabilities that contribute to violence against women and girls in conflict-affected areas, as it promotes secure, inclusive, and resilient settlements. In summary, addressing GBV in conflict zones connects with SDG 11's mission to construct inclusive and safe human settlements, guaranteeing that every person, specifically women and girls, are able to live free from violence and unsafe conditions in their communities (United Nations, "Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities").

Appendix

This section of the issue bulletin is dedicated to providing delegates with valuable sources to utilize during their research.

<https://reporting.unhcr.org/global-report-2023/outcome-areas/gender-based-violence>

Source A: This source shows statistics about gender-based violence in the last couple of years and explains what they mean and the response.

<https://www.unicef.org/protection/gender-based-violence-in-emergencies>

Source B: This resource scopes the impact and how to respond and prevent GBV with a focus on the children and vulnerable groups.

<https://www.rescue.org/article/what-gender-based-violence-and-how-do-we-prevent-it>

Source C: This article explains GBV and outlines certain prevention and response strategies, highlighting the importance of empowering women and safe spaces.

<https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15676.doc.htm>

Source D: This UN document provides current statistics and country-specific information about sexual violence in conflict zones.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/women/womens-human-rights-and-gender-related-concerns-situations-conflict-and-instability>

Source E: This source summarizes the past major UN resolutions relating to GBV. It explains how international law has shaped the current global response to GBV, which helps understand the history of the issue.

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-women-peace-and-security>

Source F: This article includes relevant statistics and facts about the impact of violence on women in conflict.

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