

# Women's Vulnerability in International Conflicts: Challenges to Life, Security, and Human Rights

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## Abstract

Despite growing international recognition of the importance of gender-inclusive peacebuilding, women continue to experience disproportionate harm and systemic exclusion in contemporary armed conflicts. This article investigates the paradox between extensive normative frameworks—such as United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women—and the persistent marginalization of women in peace and security processes. It explores how modern conflicts exacerbate women's vulnerability through militarization, environmental destruction, forced displacement, and the erosion of social and legal protections. At the same time, the study challenges dominant victim-centered narratives by highlighting women's agency as peacebuilders, mediators, and contributors to post-conflict recovery. The article argues that the failure to meaningfully integrate women into conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms undermines both the effectiveness and sustainability of peace outcomes. Strengthening gender-sensitive governance and international cooperation is therefore essential for advancing durable peace, human security, and sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Women, Peace and Security (WPS), International Armed Conflicts, Gender-Based Violence, Human Security, Peacebuilding and Mediation, UNSCR 1325, CEDAW

The multiplicity of threats facing the global system—including regional wars, cyber conflict, economic crises, and environmental degradation—requires multidimensional responses. Gender inclusion, international cooperation, and normative transformation must be seen as foundational to any comprehensive security architecture. Contemporary armed conflicts and geopolitical confrontations produce far-reaching consequences that extend beyond immediate human suffering and political destabilization. Their impact increasingly affects the planetary environment, global ecosystems, climate systems, and sustainable development trajectories. Modern warfare, fueled by advanced technologies, protracted engagements, and complex geopolitical interests, creates a multi-dimensional crisis for the Earth—one that poses long-term risks to both human and ecological security.

Peace-building is now a major aspect of the work of international institutions. (Chinkin, C., & Charlesworth, H. (2008.)). While once the international community aimed simply to maintain a ceasefire and restore some form of stability in conflict zones, since the early 1990s there has been increasing attention given to creating peaceful and democratic societies through international intervention. A common problem in international peace-building projects over the past decade has been the position of women, particularly their limited involvement in the institutional design of peace-building strategies and the possibility that peace-building may actually reduce local women's agency in society<sup>1</sup>.

Today, the world faces record levels of conflict and violence with a significant impact on people. In 2023 alone, over 170 armed conflicts were recorded. By the end of the 2024, nearly 120 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced due to persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations, and events seriously disturbing public order. While the human cost of war is undeniable and profound, the environment also suffers immense and often-overlooked consequences. Beyond the immediate destruction, conflicts disrupt ecosystems, deplete natural resources, pollute the environment, and jeopardize the health of our planet for generations to come. Armed conflict significantly disrupts the natural environment, leading to severe consequences for ecosystems, natural

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<sup>1</sup> Chinkin, C., & Charlesworth, H. (2008). Building Women into Peace: the international legal framework. In *International Law and the Third World* (pp. 243-264). Routledge-Cavendish.

resources, and human well-being. The destruction associated with war—including deforestation and environmental contamination—undermines agricultural productivity, pollutes water sources, and threatens both health and livelihoods. Military operations frequently involve the removal of vegetation or the alteration of ecosystems to deprive enemy forces of cover or to forcibly displace civilian populations. Such tactics have been documented in conflicts like the civil war in Sudan and during the draining of wetlands in Iraq, resulting in long-lasting environmental degradation.

In Ukraine, vast areas of land face contamination from landmines and unexploded ordnance, while intense shelling, fires, and flooding have polluted soil, rivers, and forests. The clearance of these hazardous remnants of war is a long-term and resource-intensive process. In Ukraine alone, the projected cost for demining efforts is estimated at approximately US\$34.6 billion<sup>2</sup>.

According to a study by Scientists for Global Responsibility and the Conflict and Environment Observatory, militaries account for an estimated 5.5 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. Nearly two years of conflict have left over two million Palestinians, half of whom are children, without access to sufficient water, food or medical care. Famine has become a deadly reality, with catastrophic hunger tightening its grip across the population. Over 90% of homes in Gaza have been damaged or destroyed, leaving nearly 1.9 million Palestinians without a permanent and safe place to live. People are seeking refuge in tents or makeshift shelters that fail to provide safety or dignity. While states react to perceived threats with militarization and force, the effects of these actions are not experienced equally. Women and marginalized gender groups often bear disproportionate burdens of the resulting insecurity:

- ✓ Increased military spending<sup>3</sup> often comes at the expense of social services (health, education, reproductive care).
- ✓ Militarization of societies heightens risks of gender-based violence, including sexual violence in conflict zones<sup>4</sup>.
- ✓ Displacement, breakdown of law and order, and restrictions on civil liberties disproportionately affect women and children.

Within these tensions, women — especially those from marginalized or vulnerable backgrounds — are disproportionately affected, yet underrepresented in shaping outcomes. A gender perspective highlights the power asymmetries in these conflicts and reveals how women can be agents of transformation, advocating for more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable futures.

. Women, who make up half of the global population, play indispensable roles in households, communities, economies, and governance systems. Yet their contributions are often under-recognized and underutilized in formal development processes. In 2024, an estimate of 119 million school-age girls and adolescent girls are

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/peace-and-security/how-conflict-impacts-our-environment>

<sup>3</sup> Global military expenditure increased to \$2718 billion in 2024, the 10th year of consecutive rises. The world's 15 largest spenders in 2024 all increased their military expenditure. The global military burden—the share of global gross domestic product (GDP) devoted to military expenditure—increased to 2.5 per cent in 2024. Military spending in Europe (including Russia) rose by 17 per cent to \$693 billion and was the main contributor to the global increase in 2024. All European countries increased their military spending in 2024 except Malta. Total military spending by NATO members amounted to \$1506 billion, or 55 per cent of global military expenditure. Of the 32 NATO members, 18 spent at least 2.0 per cent of GDP on their militaries, according to SIPRI methodology, up from 11 in 2023 and the highest number since NATO adopted the spending guideline in 2014. Military spending by the USA rose by 5.7 per cent to reach \$997 billion, which was 66 per cent of total NATO spending and 37 per cent of world military spending in 2024. Military expenditure in the Middle East reached an estimated \$243 billion in 2024, an increase of 15 per cent from 2023 and 19 per cent more than in 2015. Israel's military expenditure surged by 65 per cent to \$46.5 billion in 2024, the steepest annual increase since the Six-Day War in 1967/<https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2025/unprecedented-rise-global-military-expenditure-european-and-middle-east-spending-surges>

<sup>4</sup> In conflict zones, political violence is often accompanied by gender-based violence, including sexual assault, rape, sexual slavery, human trafficking, and intimate-partner violence. Higher rates of violence against women can be found in militarized societies, especially during and in the aftermath of wars. Multiple UN resolutions and special reports, culminating in UNSCR 1325, suggest that the increased participation of women at all levels of the political system may contribute to peacebuilding and reduce the rate of gender-based violence. The proportion of women killed in armed conflicts doubled in 2023 compared to the previous year. Sexual violence in conflict rose dramatically with UN-verified cases of conflict-related sexual violence soaring by 50 per cent to 3688 cases and the number of girls affected by grave violations in situations of armed conflict increased by 35 per cent. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-women-peace-and-security#90012>

not in school, and more than a quarter of these girls are in conflict- or crisis-affected countries. In 2023, there were 1,521 reported attacks on health care in 19 countries with complex humanitarian emergencies, causing over 2,000 injuries or death. Attacks on health centres in Haiti, Mali, Myanmar, Sudan, Ukraine, and in the State of Palestine, deprived millions of women of life-saving services, including sexual and reproductive health care. The United Nations verified 3,688 reported cases of conflict-related sexual violence in 2023, a shocking 50 per cent increase from the previous year. In 2023, 1 in 5 women aged 20-24 years was married before age 18. Child marriage is more prevalent in conflict-affected countries and 14 percentage points higher than in non-conflict settings (UN-Women, 2023). Women in conflict zones are often depicted primarily as victims — of violence, displacement, and economic hardship. While these vulnerabilities are real and well-documented, this narrative ignores the critical roles women play as peacebuilders, negotiators, and decision-makers during and after conflict. The participation of women across all sectors of society and their inclusion in decision-making processes—particularly when informed by a gender perspective—are critical components of inclusive, equitable, and democratic governance. Although full gender parity remains an ongoing objective, recent decades have seen increasing recognition of the vital role that women play in promoting sustainable peace and security.

A significant milestone in this regard was the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in October 2000. This resolution marked a paradigm shift in the UN's approach to international security by formally acknowledging women's roles and responsibilities in peace and conflict dynamics. For the first time, women were placed at the center of the global security agenda. UNSCR 1325 underscores the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on women and affirms that gender equality and the empowerment of women are essential for achieving long-term stability, sustainable development, and resilient state-society relations. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) articulates a foundational recognition that women experience conflict in fundamentally different ways than men, necessitating differentiated responses, specialized protection, and the incorporation of gender expertise in peace and security initiatives. This acknowledgment is particularly salient in the context of contemporary armed conflicts, the majority of which are intra-state rather than inter-state in nature. These conflicts are characterized by the deliberate targeting of civilians, with women and children disproportionately affected through displacement, sexual violence, and loss of livelihood (UNSC, 2000; UN Women, 2020).

Crucially, UNSCR 1325 does not depict women solely as victims of war; rather, it recognizes them as agents of change who bring essential resources, perspectives, and capacities to the prevention, mediation, and resolution of conflicts. The resolution thus positions the inclusion of women in peace processes not only as a normative imperative but as a practical strategy for achieving durable peace. It calls upon all relevant actors—including Member States, the United Nations system, and civil society—to take concrete measures to increase the participation of women, integrate gender perspectives across all peace and security efforts, and ensure that the voices of women are not only heard but actively shape policy and practice at all levels. Women's contributions to peacebuilding are shown to enhance the legitimacy, sustainability, and inclusiveness of post-conflict recovery processes (O'Reilly et al., 2015; Paffenholz et al., 2016).

Despite more than two decades of international advocacy for gender-inclusive peacebuilding—most notably through the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325)—the representation of women in formal peace processes remains strikingly low. Empirical data show that from 1990 to 2018, mediation was utilized in only 34% of the 876 documented conflict-years, and women served as co-mediators in just 10% of those instances (UN Women, 2020). This pattern reflects not only a limited institutional uptake of mediation strategies but also a systemic marginalization of women from key decision-making roles in conflict resolution. Recent figures underscore the persistence of this exclusion. In 2023, women comprised only 9.6% of negotiators, 13.7% of mediators, and 26.6% of signatories in formal peace processes (UN Women, 2023). While these numbers represent incremental improvements in some areas—particularly in signatory roles—they remain far from parity, and progress has been uneven across regions and contexts.

The relationship between CEDAW and peace is most explicitly articulated in General Recommendation No. 30 (2013), which emphasizes the Convention's applicability in conflict prevention,

conflict resolution, and post-conflict reconstruction<sup>5</sup>. This recommendation highlights both the disproportionate vulnerabilities faced by women in armed conflict—such as gender-based violence and forced displacement—and their underrecognized contributions to peace processes. Feminist security studies have demonstrated that higher levels of gender equality correlate with lower risks of conflict and more durable peace settlements<sup>6</sup>. By mandating women’s equal participation in political and public life (Article 7), CEDAW provides a binding legal basis for inclusive peacebuilding that goes beyond representation to address structural inequalities. CEDAW interacts with complementary global frameworks such as the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2000) and the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015). This convergence demonstrates that peace and sustainability are mutually reinforcing and contingent upon gender equality. Whereas the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and WPS agenda provide political commitments, CEDAW imposes legally binding obligations on states, strengthening accountability mechanisms and advancing an integrated vision of peace, rights, and sustainability<sup>7</sup>.

Today, global politics demands more than ever before a commitment to inter-state dialogue, negotiation, and diplomacy (Berridge, 2010). Diplomatic instruments have proven to be among the most effective tools in preventing international conflicts and fostering cooperative relations (Risse, 2011). Regular engagement and direct communication between states enhance mutual trust and serve as crucial mechanisms for peaceful conflict resolution. The emergence of new actors in the international system, the necessity to resolve territorial disputes, recognize sovereignty, and implement political agreements, all underscore the need for structured and inclusive negotiation processes (Diez, Stetter, & Albert, 2006). In many cases, resolving complex disputes requires the involvement of neutral third parties, further highlighting the growing importance of arbitration and mediation institutions (Zartman, 2008).

The UN has implemented various policies and initiatives to enhance women’s role in peace and security which include the following: UNSCR 1325 and subsequent resolutions: These resolutions mandate increased participation of women in peace processes and the integration of gender perspectives in peacekeeping. UN Women: Established in 2010, UN Women promotes gender equality and empowerment of women, including their roles in peace and security. Gender Parity Strategy: Launched in 2017, this strategy aims to achieve gender parity at all levels of the UN by 2028, including in peacekeeping and diplomatic roles<sup>8</sup>.

In this regard, the United Nations plays an indispensable role as a mediator in ensuring international peace and stability. Its most important instruments include the body of international legal norms, conventions, agreements, treaties, and other binding documents (Chesterman, Franck, & Malone, 2019). The UN’s role in coordinating global action, establishing platforms for open dialogue, defining legal standards, creating enforcement mechanisms, and overseeing implementation reflects its global mission (UN, 2015). However, modern international politics continues to navigate the tension between realist and liberal approaches, while reaffirming the relevance of liberal norms (Dunne, Kurki, & Smith, 2016). International law remains a vital mechanism for preventing and managing inter-state conflicts and ensuring that states uphold their legal obligations (Slaughter, 2000).

In conclusion, the growing complexity of global challenges—ranging from security threats and climate change to economic instability and social inequality—underscores the indispensable role of regional cooperation within the broader framework of international relations. As individual states increasingly face limitations in addressing such issues alone, collaborative efforts among nations, regional organizations, and global institutions have become essential. Mechanisms such as diplomacy, mediation, legal frameworks, and

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<sup>5</sup> Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, General Recommendation No. 30 on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations, UN Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/30 (2013).

<sup>6</sup> Mary Caprioli, “Primed for Violence: The Role of Gender Inequality in Predicting Internal Conflict,” *International Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (2005): 161–178; Valerie M. Hudson, Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill, Mary Caprioli, and Chad F. Emmett, *Sex and World Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Dianne Otto, “Power and Danger: Feminist Engagement with International Law through the UN Security Council,” *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 32, no. 1 (2010): 97–121; Jacqui True, “Explaining the Global Diffusion of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda,” *International Political Science Review* 37, no. 3 (2016): 307–323.

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuela Idongesit, NTA-WILSON. 2024. “The Role of Women in the Maintenance of International Peace and Security in the United Nations”. *African Journal of Social Issues* 7 (1):730-44. <https://doi.org/10.4314/ajosi.v7i1.55>.

development agendas like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are critical in promoting peace, justice, and sustainable progress. Despite persistent obstacles such as political rivalries and cultural fragmentation, regional cooperation offers a strategic path to shared solutions by enhancing mutual trust, resource-sharing, and coordinated action. Ultimately, the convergence of security, sustainable development, international law, and inclusive governance reflects an integrated approach necessary for building resilient and equitable global systems.

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