



Twenty-two-year-old Minara Begum in her shelter in Balukhali camp, Myanmar March 2018. Image: UN Women / Flickr

Women and Girls in Wartime

OVERVIEW

Throughout history, women have played crucial leadership roles during wartime, even if their contributions were not always well-documented or recognized. In times of conflict, societal norms sometimes shift, allowing [women to step into positions of authority that might have been traditionally reserved for men](#). Despite indisputable evidence of women's leadership and bravery during conflict, however, women continue to be construed as “victims” and “passive actors”—rather than the political agents, leaders, soldiers, and visionaries that they are.

Indeed, women have proven to be both incredible leaders and promoters of peace and security, even as they are simultaneously targets during conflicts, a [war tactic intended to instill fear, exert control, destabilize communities, and hinder resistance](#). Viewing women as helpless robs them of power and dignity. Yet as risks increase during conflict, there must be protections in place to address women's and children's needs.

The world is currently bearing witness to a surge of ongoing conflicts, each with complex geopolitical, socioeconomic, and cultural factors, which contribute to their continuation and intractability. The impact on women is clear. In 2022, some [600,000,000 women lived within 50 kilometers of armed conflict](#).

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* For the purposes of this policy brief, we are looking at the roles of civilian women and girls and not women combatants or members of the military.

Evidence shows that armed conflict increases the risk of gender-based violence (GBV) and maternal deaths, decreases girls' attendance in school and women's participation in the paid economy, and has led to the [displacement of more than 40 million women and children](#). GBV is even more prevalent among women and girls who have been forcibly displaced.

This policy brief explores the diverse ways women and girls* are affected by conflict, both as targets of violence and as leaders for peace and security. It highlights existing US foreign policies to support, protect, and empower women and girls during conflict and the importance of creating and implementing [feminist foreign policy to advance gender equality and peace](#). Finally, the brief offers recommendations to improve the wellbeing and acknowledgment of women's and girls' roles during wartime.

WOMEN AND GIRLS AS TARGETS IN CONFLICT

Formal international recognition of the challenges posed to women resulting from conflict are relatively recent. The 1993 [Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women](#) was the first international instrument to define and recognize violence against women as a human rights violation. And the 2000 United Nations Security Council [Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security](#) (WPS) helped raise awareness of women's role in peacebuilding, and address the changing battlefields of war to include the direct targeting of civilians.

Women and girls often become targets during wartime, facing various forms of violence and abuse. Conflict zones can exacerbate existing gender inequalities, making [women and girls more vulnerable to exploitation, physical violence, sexual assault and rape, torture, forced marriage, kidnapping, trafficking, forced displacement, and](#)

[death](#)—all of which occur away from the front lines, which receive the majority of attention from the media and policymakers.

Trafficking for the purpose of forced marriage also occurs alongside conflict, often a result of poverty and desperation. [Families may arrange marriages for their girls believing that marriage will protect them](#) from the possible atrocities they might otherwise face from armed groups and ensure some financial stability for the family. Child marriage rates have risen in conflict-ravaged countries such as Yemen, Myanmar, and the Central African Republic.

Nowhere on earth is immune to gender-based violence.

In Afghanistan, for instance, it is estimated that as many [as 87% of women experience as least one form of GBV during their lifetime, and 62% are subjected to multiple forms of violence](#). During the ongoing conflict and Taliban rule, heightened restrictions on girls' education and women's autonomy and rights have aggravated an already precarious situation. There have been [alarming increases in gender-based violence in Ukraine, including transactional sex for food and survival, sexual exploitation and trafficking, child marriage with girls forced to discontinue their education, and diminished physical and mental wellbeing](#).

The UN [estimates that 4.2 million women and girls are at risk for GBV in Sudan](#), where sexual violence is significantly underreported due to shame, stigma, and fear of reprisal. In Ethiopia, a 2023 report by the International Commission of Human Rights on Ethiopia found systematic and widespread [sexual violence against 10,000 Tigrayan women and girls](#).

The specter of GBV as a war crime also have arisen in Myanmar, where thousands of [Rohingya women have been raped by Burmese military as part of a broader ethnic cleansing campaign, as it was](#)





Refugees escaping from internal warfare in Syria, September 2015. Image: quetions123 / shutterstock

during the war in Bosnia in the 1990s, when some 50,000 Bosnian women were raped as part of the Serbian ethnic cleansing efforts.

Recent conflicts in the Middle East have also highlighted the use of GBV as a war tactic. In Syria, armed conflict has exacerbated already rampant gender-based violence. Throughout the recent wars, Syrian women and girls have been subjected to different types of violations, such as extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, torture, executions, forced disappearances, sexual violence, forced displacement, siege warfare, and denial of healthcare and basic services.

Even more recently, the October 7 attacks by Hamas on Israeli civilians targeted women and children, and included rape, torture, kidnapping, and killing. In Gaza, women and girls also face heightened insecurity and devastation due to the conflict. According to the UN, some 4,600 displaced pregnant women and approximately

380 newborns living in Gaza health facilities are in need of medical attention, and are under constant fear of attack. Elderly women, particularly those with disabilities, will likely face the highest level of negligence and violence in this conflict.

In addition to violence at the hands of rival military and combatants, intimate partner violence also increases during wartime. Even peacekeeping troops have historically used the chaos of war to target women and children. For decades, reports have shown that incidents of rape and child prostitution have risen with the arrival of peacekeeping troops. UN peacekeepers have been at the center of these attacks—in stark contrast with their mandate to protect the rule of law—and complaints have been filed against them in Haiti, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Bosnia, Cambodia, East Timor, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), to name a few.

Indeed, more than 2,000 complaints of sexual abuse and exploitation were filed against UN





Refugees fled to Kule refugee camp in Ethiopia due to the clashes between South Sudanese government forces and South Sudan's former President Riek Machar's in Gambela, Ethiopia, July 2014. Image: Richard Juilliart / shutterstock

[peacekeepers and personnel](#) between the early 1990's and 2018. Of those incidents, 700 occurred in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The problem remains acute in the DRC, as [eight supposed peacekeepers were suspended after reports of sexual abuse](#) there in 2023.

The effects of such violence extend beyond the immediate physical harm, affecting women's and girls' mental health and wellbeing, as well as their futures. [Disintegrating judicial systems during conflict and displacement, discrimination against refugee populations in host countries, fear of reprisals against their families or themselves, fear of retaliation, and the stigma](#) associated with sexual violence are all factors that prevent women and girls from reporting sexual violence, and seeking justice and accountability. Conflict often [weakens legal systems meant to protect the human rights of civilians](#), so even when reported, perpetrators of GBV go largely unpunished.

MATERNAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IN CRISES

Maternal and reproductive health outcomes face significant challenges during conflict and crises. Conflict often leads to disrupted healthcare systems, limited access to essential services, and increased vulnerability for pregnant people and their children. [Warfare also destroys healthcare infrastructure, making it difficult for pregnant women to access prenatal care, safe deliveries, and postnatal care.](#) The resulting lack of skilled healthcare providers and functional facilities increases the risk of complications during pregnancy and childbirth.

Lack of access to health services such as [obstetric, prenatal, and postnatal care negatively impacts the health and wellbeing of women, and leads to a ripple effect](#) of adverse consequences for women. These include restrictions around voluntary family planning, including emergency contraception, safe



abortion, and post abortion care, especially for survivors of rape. Women who are subjected to rape and other forms of gender-based violence, also face increased risk of unintended pregnancies and exposure to sexually transmitted infections, which pose significant additional risks to their maternal and reproductive health.

When access to family planning services is compromised during conflicts, contraceptive methods may become scarce, and family planning education may take a backseat, leading to further unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions.

Displacement is also common in conflict situations, and pregnant women and new mothers may find themselves in crowded and unsanitary conditions in refugee camps or temporary shelters. These conditions increase the risk of maternal and neonatal mortality, as well as the spread of infectious diseases.

The increase in maternal deaths during conflict offers strong evidence of the neglect of women's reproductive health during wartime. According to the 2023 Georgetown Women, Peace, and Security Index, [maternal deaths in fragile states stand at approximately 540 per 100,000 live births, more than double the global average of 212](#). Five of these fragile states—South Sudan, Chad, Nigeria, Central African Republic, and Guinea-Bissau—also have the highest maternal mortality ratios. [Between 2000 and 2019, a comprehensive study of armed conflict around the world found that associated violence increased the number of maternal deaths by a total of 37 per 100,000 live births](#).

The Minimum Initial Services Package for Sexual and Reproductive Health in Crisis Situations (MISP) is [a series of necessary, lifesaving activities required to address the immediate sexual and reproductive health \(SRH\) needs of women and girls at the onset of conflict or a humanitarian crisis](#). It was created to mitigate the consequences of conflict, and help to [prioritize SRH care at the](#)

[onset of every humanitarian emergency to prevent excess SRH-related mortalities and morbidities](#).

WOMEN AS PEACE LEADERS

Despite these challenges, women and girls in conflict zones display remarkable resilience and courage. At the onset of conflict, civilian [women are often left to defend their children and elderly family members, and—if they can escape—to find their own path to safety](#).

As conflict ensues, a myriad of opportunities customarily earmarked for men may also arise for women. War often demands a variety of skills—strategic thinking, resilience, diplomacy—that women possess. Efforts to promote women as leaders for peace can involve advocating for their inclusion in formal peace negotiations, supporting women-led grassroots initiatives, and ensuring that women's voices are heard at all levels of decision-making. [Recognizing and valuing the contributions of women in peacemaking is essential for creating more just and enduring solutions to conflicts](#).

In October 2020, the UN Human Rights Council recognized the [crucial role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, and in peacebuilding and confidence-building](#). Women as leaders for peace bring unique perspectives and contributions to conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction. [Numerous studies have shown that the inclusion of women in peace processes leads to more sustainable and comprehensive outcomes](#). Women often bring a broader perspective to peace negotiations, focusing on political considerations alongside social and humanitarian factors. Their involvement can lead to more inclusive and holistic peace agreements. Involving women in peace negotiations also increases the likelihood that [the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women and children in conflict zones, such as gender-based violence, access to healthcare, and education, are addressed](#).





Yemeni children study inside a school destroyed by the war in Taiz City, Yemen, December 2018. Image: akramalrasny / shutterstock

Women leaders often excel in negotiation and diplomacy. Their collaborative and inclusive approach can facilitate dialogue and consensus-building among conflicting parties. When women participate in decision-making, the resulting agreements are more likely to address the root causes of conflict and promote long-term stability. [Women's participation increases the probability of peace lasting two years by 20 percent, and the probability of peace agreements lasting 15 years by 35 percent.](#)

CURRENT US FOREIGN POLICY ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN CONFLICT

Safe from the Start ReVisioned Initiative

- Originally launched in 2013 during the Obama-Biden administration, *Safe from the Start* was established to complement and reinforce the goals of the US National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security, the US Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence

Globally, and the US Government Action Plan on Children in Adversity.

- *Safe from the Start* focuses efforts to bridge the gap between policy and practice by increasing dedicated GBV interventions, integrating GBV risk mitigation across humanitarian sectors, and increasing global accountability and leadership to better address the needs of all groups at risk of GBV at the onset of humanitarian emergencies.
- In 2022, the US Department of State and USAID launched *Safe from the Start ReVisioned*, a more ambitious framework to promote women's leadership, and prioritize GBV prevention and survivor-centered programming in every humanitarian response.
- In fiscal year 2022, the United States contributed more than \$25 million toward the *Safe from the Start* Initiative through USAID and the Department of State. The initiative has received a total of \$192 million in funding since 2013.



US Strategy and National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS)

- In 2023, the Biden-Harris administration released a National Action Plan reflecting updates to the USWPS Strategy, which was last updated in 2019.
- This strategy reflects the US government's commitment to advancing women's participation in peace and security processes, and integrating gender perspectives in US foreign policy, as detailed in the Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017.
- The updated strategy comprises five focus areas: participation; protection; relief, response, and recovery; integration and institutionalization; and partnerships.
- The Strategy outlines existing actions in these areas, and details additional priorities for the Biden-Harris administration.
- These efforts include ensuring women's participation in ongoing conflict settings, combatting GBV (including gender-based violence through technology), investing in the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, supporting regional WPS capacity building, and ensuring that WPS is meaningfully included in defense engagements.
- In fiscal year 2023, the Biden-Harris administration contributed more than \$2.6 billion in foreign assistance to advance gender equality globally. Implementation of the updated WPS Strategy will also involve reporting from implementing agencies that detail each agency's efforts to incorporate the strategy's focus areas into their specific work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Supporting women and girls during and after conflict is crucial for their wellbeing, and the stability of affected communities. We present the following policy and programmatic recommendations to address these impacts:

1. **Adopt a feminist foreign policy.** Feminist foreign policy prioritizes gender equality and centers on the human rights of women and girls (and other traditionally marginalized groups) to disrupt male-dominated power structures that tend to perpetuate gender inequalities. In 2014, [Sweden adopted the world's first feminist foreign policy—followed by Canada, France, Mexico, Spain, Luxembourg, Germany, and Chile](#). Feminist foreign policies differ from state to state, but commonly address issues of equal rights, equal representation in government, and equal resources allocated to the needs of women and girls. Governments must find effective strategies and entry points to ensure women's meaningful political participation as decision makers, implementers, and beneficiaries of post-conflict reconstruction.
2. **Prevent and respond to gender-based violence.** In agreement with the Resolution on Women, Peace, and Security, it is imperative to incorporate a gender perspective into peacekeeping operations, include adequate contract and accountability mechanisms to prevent sexual violence, and promote gender diversification of peacekeeping troops, military observers, and civilian police. Governments and humanitarian organizations must implement measures to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, including the creation of safe spaces, the availability and access to psychosocial support, and ensuring access to medical care and legal support for survivors of violence.
3. **Enforce and strengthen legal protections for women and girls.** Country leaders must create, implement, and enforce laws against gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence, child marriage, and other harmful practices. Justice systems need to be accessible and responsive to the



needs of women, peacekeepers should be closely screened and monitored, and perpetrators of violence must be brought to justice. Increased investment in programming to improve the reporting of GBV and the treatment and services for survivors of violence, is paramount to improving justice for survivors. The revamping of legal justice systems and increased efforts to improve civilian awareness of legal rights and protections are key tools for women and girls during conflict and humanitarian emergencies.

4. **Promote gender equality through education and job opportunities.** Ensure that girls have access to education, even in conflict zones. Policymakers must establish safe and secure learning environments, and provide resources to overcome barriers such as displacement and economic hardship. Support for initiatives that empower women economically is critical. This can include vocational training, microfinance programs, and creating opportunities for women to participate in the local economy.
5. **Ensure access to healthcare.** Prioritize and facilitate access to healthcare for all, especially maternal and reproductive healthcare services. This includes prenatal and postnatal care, family planning, primary healthcare for women, men, and children, as well as prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of diseases. It is vital that women's health and reproductive health are integrated in the women, peace, and security agenda.
6. **Increase evidence-based research and documentation of lived experiences.** Highlighting the stories and experiences of women and girls in conflict zones is imperative to creating lasting change. Researchers should deepen their focus in humanitarian and conflict settings to include women and girls and use disaggregated data to more clearly demonstrate the unique impact of war and conflict on these populations. Women and girls with lived experience who are able to speak on their experiences should be protected and supported to inform policy and decisionmakers about the needs of women and girls during conflict. Evidence and storytelling help to raise awareness, garner financial and other supports, and ensure that the voices of women and girls are heard by decisionmakers.





Members of women's forums are enjoying their newfound voice and role in cross border peace building. Image: Tine Frank / USAID East Africa Regional





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