



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,



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



[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](#)



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,



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](#)



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 US WPS 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





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