



The History of Insecurity: Exploring the Resilience and Agency of Women and Children in the World Conflict Zones

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an in-depth examination of the complex and multifaceted history of insecurity faced by women and children in conflict zones worldwide. This research employs both a qualitative and a quantitative methodology, combining a comprehensive review of existing literature with in-depth case studies of women and children in conflict zones in the world. Through a critical analysis of historical and contemporary conflicts, this research reveals the disproportionate impact of violence, displacement, and human rights abuses on women and children. Despite these overwhelming challenges, women and children have consistently demonstrated remarkable resilience and agency, advocating for peace, justice, and human rights. This article concludes that women and children are critical actors in promoting peace and security in conflict zones. Their resilience and agency are essential in advocating for peace, justice, and human rights. Therefore, it is crucial to recognise and support their efforts, ensuring that their voices are heard and their rights are protected.

Keywords: conflict zones, women's/children's rights, peace and security, resilience, agency.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict zones around the world have been plagued by violence, displacement, and human rights abuses, affecting women and children disproportionately. The impact of conflict on women and children is a longstanding concern. Throughout history, women and children have been affected by conflicts, from ancient wars to modern-day conflicts. Throughout history, women and children have been affected by conflicts, from ancient wars to colonial-era conquests. However, their experiences were often marginalised or ignored. In ancient Greece and Rome, women and children were frequently displaced, enslaved, or killed during wars. The 20th century saw numerous conflicts that disproportionately affected women and children. During World War I and II and the Rwandan Genocide, women and children were subjected to forced labour, displacement, and violence. The Vietnam War and subsequent conflicts in Cambodia and Laos also had devastating impacts on women and children. In recent decades, conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe have continued to affect women and children severely. The Syrian Civil War, for example, has led to widespread displacement, violence, and human rights abuses against women and children. Similarly, conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and Yemen have had devastating impacts on women and children.

The impact of conflict on women and children is a critical issue that requires urgent attention. Women and children are disproportionately affected by conflicts, facing increased risks of violence, displacement, and human rights abuses. The consequences of conflict on women and children can be long-lasting, affecting their physical and mental health, education, and economic opportunities. Furthermore, the resilience and agency of women and children in conflict zones are often overlooked or underestimated. Women and children are not just victims of conflict; they are also active agents of change, advocating for peace, justice, and human rights. Despite the overwhelming challenges they face, women and children in conflict zones have consistently demonstrated remarkable resilience and agency. Many have become leaders in their communities, advocating for peace, justice, and human rights (African Women's Development and Communication Network, 2020). Others have formed organisations to provide support and services to affected women and children (Women's Refugee Commission, 2020).

This article delves into the history of insecurity faced by women and children in conflict zones, exploring their resilience and agency in the face of adversity. By examining the impact of conflict on women and children, highlighting their stories and experiences, and analysing the factors that contribute to their resilience and agency, this article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of this critical issue. This article seeks to answer the following research questions: What is the history of insecurity faced by women and children in conflict zones? How have women and children been affected by armed conflicts throughout history? What are the factors that contribute to the resilience and agency of women and children in conflict zones? How can the international community support the resilience and agency of women and children in conflict zones?

CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATION ON KEYWORDS USED

In keeping with this section, we attempt to explain key concepts as used in the study in view of reducing ambiguities and inconsistencies they may generate. The concepts in question include security, insecurity, conflict zone and armed conflict.

Security

It is unusual to think that defining the term "security" already makes the implicit assumption that such a thing as "security" actually exists. Security is a fragile and significant issue that conveys different meanings to scholars, analysts, policymakers, and organisations across the globe. This section considers the diverse perspectives from which scholars understand the concept. It equally covers the notions of national security, international security, and the concept of human security, which is the basis of all other forms of security.

From the Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus, "security" may be considered as assured freedom from poverty or want, precautions taken to ensure against theft or espionage, or a person or thing that secures or guarantees.* According to D. Brooks, the term "security" may be expanded to include national security and the defence of a nation through armed force or the use of force to control a state's citizens. He further views it as public policing, with state

* *Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus*, Sydney, NSW: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992.

employed public servants.[†] Others may consider security as crime prevention, security technology, risk management, or loss prevention. Security may be considered all of these, but this diversity of definition results in a divergence of interests among many stakeholders.[‡] Nevertheless, security may have very different meanings to different people, given the time, place, and context.[§]

According to Von Boemcken et al., “security” would refer to an actual condition of existence that is independent of its enunciation in day-to-day discourse. To him, this ontological condition of security has been imagined in quite different ways. For example, between realism and idealism in international relations theory, it was either thought of as a relative condition in the present or as an absolute condition in the future. However, in both cases, the reference to security sought to imply objectivity. This has two implications for our understanding. First, security is conceived as something that can be objectively known and thus needs to be diligently measured, monitored, and improved upon by means of reason and scientific inquiry. Second, security attains a normative quality: it appears as a “good thing” we ought to actively aspire to.^{**} From such a perspective, the general definition of security is usually thought to be encountered in the absence, or at least unlikelihood, of threats to a certain object.

According to Bamidele Afolabi, security is about freedom from threat and the ability of states to maintain independent identities and functional integrity in the face of forces of change that they perceive as hostile, while their bottom line is survival.^{††} This entails being safe from harm, fear, anxiety, oppression, danger, poverty, defence, protection, and threats to one's core values. In the same line, William equally submits that security is most commonly associated with the alleviation of threats to cherished values, especially those that threaten the survival of a particular reference object. It could therefore be inferred that security, be it classical, state-centric, traditionalist, or non-traditionalist, is all about protecting assets, including living and non-living resources, against loss or damage. Bamidele further enlightens the concept of national and international security. In this regard, security embodies: human security; the seven dimensions of human security (economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security); national security; and international security.^{‡‡}

Baldwin defined security as “a low probability of damage to acquired values”.^{§§} Similarly, to L. Krause and J. Nye, it is “the absence of acute threats to the minimally acceptable levels of the

[†] David J. Brooks, “What is security: Definition through knowledge categorization”, in *Security Journal*, Palgrave Macmillan 0955–1622, 2010, pp. 1-15.

[‡] David J. Brooks, “Defining the Science of Security through Knowledge Categorisation”, Paper presented at the Criminology and Victimological Society of Southern Africa (CRIMSA) Conference 2007, October, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, 2007.

[§] M. A. Davidson, “A matter of degrees” in *Security Management* 49 (12): 2005, pp. 72-99.

^{**} Marc Von Boemcken and Conrad Schetter, “Security What Is It? What Does It Do?”, in *Think Piece 09 Reflection Group*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Global Policy and Development, Berlin, 2001, pp.1-2.

^{††} M. Bamidele Afolabi, “Concept of Security”, in *Reading in intelligence & Security Studies*, 2015, p.2.

^{‡‡} *Ibid.*, p.9.

^{§§} David Baldwin, “The Concept of Security”, in *Review of International Studies* 23: 1997, pp.5-26.

basic values that a people consider essential to its survival”.*** To progress from the essence to the concept of security in the context of a specific academic or political project, the most important question to address is, “Whose security”? In most cases, the answer would either refer to some or all individuals or to some or all states. It needs to be remembered, however, that security may be equally applied to such diverse objects as, for example, animal life, the biosphere, or physical infrastructure.

Two schools of thought can be derived from the approach to security: The traditional school of thought favours the maintenance of the Cold War conception of security. This school of thought defines security in this sense to mean safety from danger and from external attack or infiltration. The traditional security paradigm is a realist construct of security, in which the referent object is the state.††† It equates security with peace and the prevention of conflict through military means such as deterrence policies and non-offensive defence. This is why Walt defines security as a study of the threat, use, and control of military force.‡‡‡ This school of thought associated with Barry Buzan regards security as underdeveloped and in need of rehabilitation.

The second school of thought is non-traditional. It argues that other issues like the environment and political, economic, and social threats endanger the lives and properties of individuals rather than focusing on the survival of the state. It implies that a predominantly military definition does not appreciate the fact that the greatest threat to state survival may not be military but environmental, health, political, social, and economic.

With regard to the various definitions, the elastic nature of the concept of security attracts different meanings and interpretations. The concept of security is referred to freedom and protection of people from any form of physical, social, emotional, psychological and environmental harms, and to have the feeling safety, and freedom from danger, fear, anxiety and the threats of attack on individual and community. Where these security needs are missing, people and society is exposed to what is referred to insecurity thus discussed below.

Insecurity

The concept of insecurity comes semantically complex, with a plurality of meanings Sonia and Valeria. Achumba, Igbemereho and Akpo^{§§§} assert that insecurity is the antithesis of security. While security means freedom from all forms of threats, attacks, fears, and anxiety, insecurity means not feeling of or absence of security or exposure to danger; hazard; uncertainty; want of confidence; doubtful; inadequately guarded or protected; lacking stability; troubled; lack of protection; and unsafe. All of these have been used by different scholars to define the concept

*** Lawrence Krause and Joseph Nye, “Reflections on the Economics and Politics of International Economic Organisations”, in Bergsten and Krause (eds.) *World Politics and International Economics*. Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 1975.

††† A. Abolurin, *Security and its Management in Nigeria*, Ibadan: John Archers Publishers, 2010, cited by M. Bamidele Afolabi, “Concept of Security”.

‡‡‡ S. M. Walt, “The Renaissance of Security Studies”, in *Mershon International, Studies Review*, 41; 1991, pp.211-239.

§§§ I. C. Achumba, O. S. Ighomereho, and M. O. M. Akpor-Robaro, “Security Challenges in Nigeria and the Implications for Business Activities and Sustainable Development”, *Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development*. Vol.4, No.2. 2013, pp. 77-99.

of insecurity. Thus, insecurity is referred to a state of vulnerability to harm and loss of life, property or livelihood.

However, Zygmunt (1999) cited in Andrea (2018) opined that insecurity refers to three main dimensions: Cognitive uncertainty, linked to growing loss of intelligibility and predictability of contemporary societies; an existential insecurity, linked to the increasing social and geographical mobility and to the ongoing changes of the labour market, because of the obsolescence of the specific skills and professional roles, and because of the weakness of social relations which involves all of us; and an insecurity linked to personal safety and to property.**** This definition means that the perception of insecurity arises as a very heterogeneous concept, not limited to actual crime rates but encompassing a wide range of other aspects including personal well-being, trust in public institutions, justice, and social integration (Andrea, 2018).†††

However, Chris*** (2021) defines insecurity as the state of fear or anxiety, stemming from a concrete or alleged lack of protection. This definition reflects physical insecurity which is the most visible form of insecurity, and it feeds into many other forms of insecurity such as economic security and social security, political, environmental insecurity.

From the above definitions, insecurity is the feeling or conditions that threatens the social survival of people, and the consequence of which affect human capital development.

Conflict Zone

'Conflict/war zone' has been defined by Merriam-Webster's dictionary as "a zone in which belligerents are waging war; broadly, an area marked by extreme violence"§§§§ Based on the definition quoted from the National Language Service Corps (NLS Corps), interpreting in conflict zones involves serving people affected by conflicts and may include humanitarian and military interpreting "and sometimes medical interpreting as well".***** The French military field hospital in the Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan, for example, has hired several Jordanian interpreters to be able to communicate with patients and understand their conditions in order to carry out the required procedures and prescribe proper medications. Local government bodies and institutions also need interpreters to help communicate with these international and foreign organisations. Conflict zone interpreting requires not only language skills but also the ability to work under pressure and in hard conditions and the ability to tolerate heart-breaking and harsh circumstances, besides having decision-making skills and self-confidence.††††

On the other hand, the term 'conflict area' is a phrase commonly used to describe a geographical region

*** Andrea, T. B., "The Dimensions of Insecurity in Urban Areas. Research in the Roots of Unsafety and Fear of Crime in European Cities", National Institute of Criminology, Budapest, 2018.

††† *Ibid.*

*** Chris, A., "Bottom of Form Security challenges in Nigeria and the implications for business activities and sustainable development", 2021, Available on: <https://nsacc.org.ng/security-challenges-in-nigeria-and-the-implications-for-business-activities-and-sustainable-development/>, retrieved march 21, 2025.

§§§§ Merriam Webster's dictionary: available in [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/war%20 zone](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/war%20zone), retrieved March 21, 2025.

***** Anjad A. Mahasneh and Mohammed M. Obeidat, "Conflict zones: a training model for interpreters", *The Interpreters' Newsletter*, 2018 (23), 63-81.

†††† Moser-Mercer B. / Bali G., "Interpreting in Zones of Crisis and War: AIIC", aiic. net, available in <https://aiic.net/page/2979/interpreting-in-zones-of-crisis-and-war/lang/1>, 2008, retrieved March 21, 2025.

where armed conflict or war is taking place or where tensions are high and violence may occur. The etymology of the phrase stems from the use of the word 'conflict', which originates from the Latin 'conflictus', meaning 'a striking together, a fight', derived from 'con'- (together) and 'fligere' (to strike). The second part of the phrase, 'area', comes from the Latin 'area', meaning 'open space, floor, or exposed place'.####

To the Giles and Hyndman, a conflict zone refers to an area experiencing significant and ongoing violence, armed conflict, civil unrest, or severe political instability, disrupting essential services and daily life. In this regard, a conflict zone is characterised by:

- **Armed conflict:** This includes war, civil war, and other forms of armed struggle between states or groups.
- **Political instability:** This refers to a situation where the government is weak, unable to maintain order, or facing significant challenges to its legitimacy.
- **Widespread violence:** This encompasses a range of violent acts, including attacks on civilians, infrastructure, and security forces.
- Conflict zones often lead to:
- **Disruption of essential services:** This can include access to water, sanitation, healthcare, and education.
- **Economic hardship:** Conflict can damage infrastructure, disrupt trade, and lead to job losses.
- **Humanitarian crisis:** Large numbers of people may be displaced, and there may be shortages of food, shelter, and other basic necessities.
- **Increased risk to civilians:** Civilians are often caught in the crossfire of conflict and are at risk of being killed, injured, or displaced.#####

In this light, areas experiencing civil war or armed conflict between different groups, regions with high levels of political instability and violence, and areas where human rights abuses are widespread are typical examples of conflict zones.

In this context, 'conflict zone/area' refers to a specific space that is characterised by conflict or strife, without delving into the etymology of its individual components. The phrase is used in various fields, including military, political science, and humanitarian work, to identify and describe regions affected by violence or warfare. It contains all the active elements of the response as well as the local military leaders, local community leaders and the surviving elements of the host state government. The media representing every interest will also be present in the conflict zone.

Armed Conflict

It should be admitted that there seems to be no universal definition in existence for the term "armed conflict". On one hand, The Use of Force Committee, USA, cited by O'Connell, defines

O'Connell. M. E., "Defining Armed Conflict", *Journal of Conflict and Security Law*, Vol 13 Issues 3, 2009, pp. 393-400.

Giles, W. and Hyndman, I., forthcoming: *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

armed conflict as the presence of organised groups that are engaged in intense fighting.***** On the other hand, Stewart defines “armed conflict” as organised collective violent confrontation between at least two groups, either state or non-state actors. ICRC defines the term as protracted armed confrontations occurring between governmental armed forces and the forces of one or more armed groups or between such groups arising on the territory of a state.+++++ The armed confrontation must reach a minimum level of intensity, and the parties involved in the conflict must show a minimum of organisation and have the capacity to sustain military operations. Hazen defines the term “armed conflict” as the intentional use of illegitimate force, actual or threatened, with arms or explosives, against a person, group, community or state, which undermines people-centred security and/or sustainable development.+++++

Every conflict is multi-dimensional, and there is extensive academic attention to the categorisation of the type, the character and the values of conflict. In this study we look at the following types of armed conflict: Intra-state conflict is the most common type of conflict and occurs between the armed forces of the government and an opposing civil-organised group within the state borders. This conflict is often driven by ethnic, religious or ideological incompatibility. According to Mubika and Bukaliya, differences exist between classical intra-state conflict, that is, conflict without foreign intervention and intra-state conflict with a foreign involvement in which at least one party engaged in the conflict is supported by military troops of a foreign government.~~~~~ Inter-state conflict occurs between two governments deploying their respective two armed forces. The conflict occurs anywhere and often begins with a formal declaration of war. Non-state conflict involves the use of armed forces between two organised groups, neither of which is the government or state-sponsored. Extra-state conflict occurs between a state member of the international system and a political entity outside of its territorial boundaries. Extra-state is: state vs. independent non-state actor.*****

From the above citations, one deduces that conflict involves the use of arms and has to do with two or more warring factions. Armed conflict, therefore, can be viewed as a state of organised, armed and often prolonged conflict carried on between states, nations, or other parties typified by extreme aggression, social disruption, and high mortality, thereby hampering development.

MAPPING THE EVOLUTION OF ARMED CONFLICT IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Worldwide, the absolute number of war deaths has been declining since 1946. And yet, conflict and violence are currently on the rise, with many conflicts today waged between non-state actors such as political militias, criminals, and international terrorist groups. Homicides are becoming more frequent in some parts of the world, while gender-based attacks are increasing globally. The long-term impact on the development of interpersonal violence, including violence against children, is also more widely recognised. Unresolved regional tensions; a

***** M. E. O'Connell, “Defining Armed Conflict”, *Journal of Conflict and Security Law*, Vol 13, Issues 3, 2009, pp. 393-400.

+++++ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), “How is the Term 'Armed Conflict' Defined in International Humanitarian Law?”, Opinion Paper, March 2008.

+++++ J. M. Hazen, *Armed Violence in Asia and the Pacific: An Overview of the Causes, Costs and Consequences*, UNDP. 2008.

~~~~~ A. Mubika Kudakwashe and R Bukaliya, “Causes of Armed Conflicts and Their Effects on Women”, *International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Studies*, Volume 2, Issue 4, April 2015, pp. 77-85.

\*\*\*\*\* *Ibid.*

breakdown in the rule of law; absent or co-opted state institutions; illicit economic gain; and the scarcity of resources exacerbated by climate change have become dominant drivers of conflict, with women and children largely affected. In recent times, conflicts are becoming more fragmented; for example, the number of armed groups involved in the Syrian civil war has mushroomed from eight to several thousand since the outbreak of the conflict. Furthermore, the regionalisation of conflict, which interlinks political, socio-economic and military issues across borders, has seen many conflicts become longer, more protracted, and less responsive to traditional forms of resolution.

### **Major Armed Conflict in Recent Days**

The majority of armed conflicts since the end of the Cold War have been non-international. Intra-state armed conflicts started multiplying in the 1960s; their number peaked in the early 1990s, with some fifty armed conflicts worldwide, and then declined again, levelling off at thirty-two armed conflicts during the last three years. This process was largely given momentum by the demise of colonialism and the end of the Cold War. The terms 'intra-state conflicts', 'internationalised intra-state conflict', 'non-state-based armed conflict' and 'one-sided violence' sum up various categories of organised political violence. Most of these conflicts are related to disagreements over wealth- and power-sharing, declining economies, high dependence on natural resources, bad governance, human rights violations and poor human security conditions. Group cleavages often take place around ethnicity, religion or some other characteristic that can create identity and unite a group.<sup>+++++</sup>

In Sudan (1983–2002), 2 million people were killed in the war between the north and south of the country, while only about 55,500 of these died directly in battle, although this estimate is subject to debate. In Angola (1975–2002), there were an estimated 1.5 million war deaths, of which about 160,500 were battle deaths.<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> In Rwanda, an estimated 800,000 were killed in 'one-sided violence' in the 1994 genocide within a period of 100 days. These cases illustrate that battle deaths directly resulting from hostilities (i.e., deaths of both combatants and civilians) account for only about 10 per cent of estimated total war deaths in many contemporary conflicts. Most war deaths are caused indirectly by starvation and the spread of diseases typical for combat zones. Civilian women, children and the elderly and not uniformed personnel make up the overwhelming number of victims in such conflicts.<sup>§§§§§§</sup>

### **Organised Crime, Urban and Domestic Violence**

Today, crime kills far more people than armed conflicts. In 2017, almost half a million people across the world were killed in homicides, far surpassing the 89,000 killed in active armed conflicts and the 19,000 killed in terrorist attacks. If homicide rates keep climbing at the current rate of 4 per cent, then Sustainable Development Goals 16, which includes a target to significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere, will not be met by 2030.<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> Organised crime and gang violence vary widely across regions. Countries in the

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<sup>+++++</sup> Stathis N. Kalyvas, "The ontology of "political violence": action and identity in civil wars", *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 1 (3), 2003, pp. 475-94.

<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> Bethany Ann Lacina and Nils Petter Gleditsch, "Monitoring trends in global combat: a new dataset of battle deaths", *European Journal of Population*, Vol. 21 (2/3), 2005, pp. 145-66.

<sup>§§§§§§</sup> Gerard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997.

<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> United Nations, "A New Era of Conflict and Violence", in <https://www.un.org › new-era-conflict-and-violence>, retrieved March 24, 2025.



Americas have the worst homicide rates by a wide margin, accounting for 37 per cent of the global total in a region that accounts for only 13 per cent of the world's population. Political instability engenders organised crime, including targeted attacks against police, women, journalists, and migrants. Meanwhile, political violence no longer affects only low-income states. In the past 15 years, more than half of the world's population have lived in direct contact or proximity to significant political violence. For women and girls, the home remains the most dangerous place. Some 58 per cent of female homicides were carried out by intimate partners or family members in 2017, up from 47 per cent in 2012. Women bear the heaviest burden of lethal victimisation, often as a result of misogynistic beliefs, inequality, and dependency, which persist globally, especially in low-income countries.+++++

### **Violent Extremism and Nuclear Threat**

While terrorism remains widespread, its impact has been waning in recent years. Globally, the number of deaths attributed to terrorism dropped for a third consecutive year in 2018, to under 19,000. Attacks have become less lethal as governments step up counter-terrorism efforts, regional and international coordination, and programmes to prevent and counter violent extremism. In 2017, a fifth of terrorist attacks were unsuccessful, compared with just over 12 per cent in 2014. Conflict remains the primary driver of terrorism, with more than 99 per cent of all terrorist-related deaths occurring in countries involved in a violent conflict or with high levels of political terror. The majority of deadly attacks take place in the Middle East, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa, with Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Somalia, and Syria bearing the heaviest burden.+++++

In countries with high levels of economic development, social alienation, lack of economic opportunity, and state involvement in an external conflict are the major drivers of terrorist activity. In Western Europe, terrorism-related deaths have fallen dramatically in the past few years, but the number of incidents has increased. There has been a sizeable increase in the number of attacks carried out by actors with far-right, white nationalist, or anti-Muslim beliefs in both Western Europe and North America in the past two decades. The number of incidents across the two regions increased from three in 2002 to 59 in 2017, with social media playing a crucial role in the dissemination of xenophobic speech and incitement to violence.+++++

Extremist groups today have unprecedented access to the general public through the internet, which allows for more efficient and effective recruitment, incitement, and propaganda, as well as the purchase of weapons and unregulated money transfers. Both state and non-state actors can also use AI-enabled deep learning to create 'deep-fakes', which create seemingly real footage of people speaking words they never uttered and have the potential to fuel misinformation, divisions, and political instability.+++++

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+++++ *Ibid.*

+++++ Doron Zimmermann and Andreas Wenger (eds.), *How States Fight Terrorism: Policy Dynamics in the West*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, 2007.

+++++ *Report of the 2018 session of the Group of Governmental Experts on Emerging Technologies in the Area of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems*, Geneva, 9–13 April 2018 and 27–31 August 2018 (CCW/GGE.1/2018/3).

+++++ James Andrew Lewis, "Dismissing Cyber Catastrophe", *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 17 August 2020.

Today, we are witnessing the unravelling of the international arms control architecture and a gradual backtracking on established arms control agreements, which have supported global stability, restraint, and transparency. The continued existence of nuclear weapons poses an ever-greater threat to the survival of humanity. While the number of nuclear weapons has dropped from more than 60,000 during the Cold War to around 14,000 today, nuclear weapons are more powerful today. At the same time relations between nuclear-armed states are fraying, and divisions over the pace and scale of disarmament are growing.

When the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty ended in August 2019, the UN Secretary-General deplored the loss of “an invaluable brake on nuclear war”. The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) faces a similar demise. The total elimination of nuclear weapons can still be achieved, but it will require a renewed commitment to trust and cooperation between the world’s most powerful countries. The Secretary-General has called on states to renew fervour on outstanding and current arms control agreements.+++++++

### **New Technologies**

Technological advances are contributing to the changing nature of conflict. There are concerns about the potential for artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning to enhance cyber, physical, and biological attacks. For example, by making them more finely targeted, harder to attribute, and easier for small groups, perhaps even ‘lone wolves’, to carry out. Emerging technologies are lowering the barriers to the acquisition of biological weapons, toxic substances or diseases used to harm or kill humans, livestock, and crops. There are concerns that advances in AI and 3D printing could facilitate biological attacks by automating the development and production of the weapons and the systems that develop them.

There is also mounting international concern over the development of so-called lethal autonomous weapons (LAWs), which could identify and engage a specific target without human guidance, thereby transferring responsibility over life and death from human moral systems to complex data systems, devoid of an ethical compass. The UN Secretary-General has called for fully autonomous weapons to be prohibited by international law, as have over 30 nations. Perhaps the most prevalent modern-day threat is that of cyber-attacks. According to IBM’s X-Force Incident Response and Intelligence Services, the number of cyber-attacks doubled in the first half of 2019 in comparison with the second half of 2018, most of them targeting manufacturers, oil and gas companies, and educational institutes. Owners of critical infrastructure are especially at risk, as malicious actors seek to target airport control towers, nuclear power plants, hospitals, and dams. Over the past year, more than a hundred cyber incidents with the potential to undermine international peace and security were identified. Such attacks would cause substantial damage and casualties.+++++++ On the flip side, advances in AI and other technologies also provide new tools and preventive strategies for police and counterintelligence agencies to better prevent attacks and identify perpetrators. But here too there are risks. For example, predictive policing comes with its own downsides, including

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+++++++ United Nations, “A New Era of Conflict and Violence”, in <https://www.un.org › new-era-conflict-and-violence>, retrieved March 24, 2025.

+++++++ UN General Assembly, “Promoting technical assistance and capacity-building to strengthen national measures and international cooperation to combat cybercrime, including information-sharing, resolution 74/173”, New York: United Nations, 2019.

inbuilt racial and religious biases, which can engender radicalisation to violent extremism. \$\$\$\$\$\$

In 1945, the UN was primarily designed as a tool to manage interstate relations as the world reeled from the horrors of two world wars. While today's world is in many ways safer, the nature of the threat has evolved considerably. New, more complex and more sophisticated threats require imaginative and bold responses and strengthened collaboration between states, as well as the private sector and civil society. Institutional boundaries must also be bridged so that political, human rights, and development partners can work in concert.

### THE IMPACT OF ARMED CONFLICT ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN

In today's world, with some form of armed conflict in almost every region, more than 70 per cent of the casualties are civilians most of them women and children. During conflict and reconstruction, the impact of horrific gender-based violence at societal, community and individual levels is a critical issue. In this section, we shall discuss some of its impact, mostly in conflict zone.

Civilian women and children face different risks and dangers in armed conflict compared to those faced by civilian men. There is a growing literature and attention to sexual violence and rape as a strategy of warfare. After incidences of sexual violence, women are often rejected by family or community. Despite pity for the trauma the women have suffered, society marks the victims as 'damaged goods'. \*\*\*\*\* The forms of violence used - rape, mass rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced sterilisation and the forced termination of pregnancies. The raping of women is a means for the aggressor to symbolically and physically humiliate the defeated men. In some contexts, the actors of the conflict use sexual violence as a punishment and a general warning to the female population within the community under control. Rape or the threat of rape is also used to drive communities off lands or to heighten terror during attacks. In recent years rape has also been used to wilfully transmit HIV.+++++++ Such cases of abuse have been well noticed in Rwanda, Uganda and Sierra Leone.

Women and girls have been held against their will and repeatedly raped until they conceive, as in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Rwanda. Sexual slavery is another form of gender-based violence experienced by women and girls during armed conflict. Examples of women and adolescent girls being forced into sexual slavery include East Timorese women abducted during the occupation of the island region and Rwandan "ceiling women" who were kept in the space between the rafters and roof while their captors were away and then brought down for sexual and domestic slave labour upon the captors' return.+++++++ An investigation of refugee camps

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\$\$\$\$\$\$\$ Gartner, "The Urgency to Treat Cybersecurity as a Business Decision", February 2020.

\*\*\*\*\* O. Bennett, J. Bexley, and K. Warnock, "Introduction", in O. Bennett, J. Bexley and K. Warnock (eds), *Arms to Fight, Arms to Protect: Women Speak Out About Conflict*, London: Panos Publications, 1995. Cited by A. Mubika Kudakwashe and R. Bukaliya.

+++++++ A. Smith, *HIV/AIDS and Emergencies: Analysis and Recommendations for Practice*, London: Overseas Development Institute, 2002.

+++++++ A. Mubika Kudakwashe and R. Bukaliya, "Causes of Armed Conflicts and Their Effects on Women", pp. 77-85.

in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone revealed the sexual exploitation of women, girls and boys by humanitarian workers and peacekeepers in exchange for basic provisions. \$\$\$\$\$\$

As members of the civilian population, women experience distinctive economic problems in armed conflict. In many cases women are separated from the men who traditionally may be their source of income. Lack of education and training, their role in caring for others, and general community attitudes make it extremely difficult for women to support themselves financially. \*\*\*\*\* In many cultures, moreover, it is women who have the most to gain from economic development and are thus particularly disadvantaged when these resources are diverted during armed conflict. With men making up the majority of landmine casualties, women may be required to provide sole support for their families. Even if women are not directly wounded during armed conflicts, the devastation suffered by their families and the threat of violence can contribute to women's isolation. Widowhood, flight to cities and remaining inside the home to avoid violence all serve to break down social institutions and isolate women. Furthermore, the widowed women have no rights to claim land ownership after the death of the husband. ++++++

Women and children, especially the girls, also face health threats that stem from biological differences. For example, the physical vulnerability of women and adolescent girls is higher than that of men and adolescent boys due to their sexual and reproductive roles. Particular risks women face includes SIIs, including HIV/AIDS and vesico-vaginal fistula, trauma, mutilation, complications from botched abortions, uterine problems, scarring of the vagina and problems having a normal sexual life or giving birth in the future. In Afghanistan, women's health during the Taliban regime, attributed their depression to Taliban policies that restricted their movement and access to employment and education opportunities and caused isolation, financial hardship and fear. \*\*\*\*\* Functioning nurseries and schools are rare and qualified teachers are few, especially for the internally displaced and refugees. Women who remain in conflict zones may find themselves with few options apart from working for warlords and criminal militias or entering into exploitative informal economies. Indentured servitude and other forms of forced labour may evolve along gender and generational lines. Apart from being used as sexual slaves for militia commanders and soldiers in Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, women and adolescent girls are forced to do domestic work for soldiers, to work as daily labourers and to carry supplies and messages between work gangs or among fighting forces. \$\$\$\$\$\$ As part of the assault on civilian livelihoods, wells are poisoned, lands are mined and marketplaces destroyed, making the daily tasks of fetching water, tilling the land and buying and selling in markets increasingly dangerous. Functioning nurseries and schools are rare, and qualified teachers are few, especially for the internally displaced and refugees.

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\$\$\$\$\$\$\$ Benjamin, Judy A., "Conflict, Post-conflict, and HIV/AIDS - The Gender Connections: Women, War and HIV/ AIDS: West Africa and the Great Lakes, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children", Presented at the World Bank, International Women's Day, March, 2001.

\*\*\*\*\* A. Mubika Kudakwashe and R. Bukaliya, "Causes of Armed Conflicts and their Effects on Women", pp. 77-85.

+++++++ *Ibid.*

\*\*\*\*\* A. Smith, *HIV/AIDS and Emergencies: Analysis and Recommendations for Practice*, 2002.

\$\$\$\$\$\$\$ UNICEF, *The Impact of Conflict on Women and Girls in West and Central Africa and the UNICEF Response*, New York. UNICEF, 2005.

Trafficking in women and children remains the order of the day during conflict moments. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) estimates that, in 2001, between 700,000 and 2 million women and children were trafficked across international borders. There is increasing evidence that a significant amount of this activity is associated with armed conflict. In Sierra Leone, women were used as sexual slaves for the camp managers and forced to grow food, cook and provide other services. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Liberia, women and children were abducted to work for the many militias that patrol the diamond fields, as well as to service the commanders. The conditions in Afghanistan resulted in women and young girls being trafficked into India, Pakistan and, to a lesser degree, other countries in Central Asia.\*\*\*\*\* International intervention itself can result in an increase in trafficking operations and may intensify during post-conflict periods.

Wars have separated millions of children from their families. In 1994, the war in Rwanda left 100,000 children without families. In 1995, 20 per cent of children in Angola were separated from families and relatives, according to a UNICEF study. In Cambodia, a country where half the population is under 15 years old, the war deprived children of adult carers. As a result, problems of delinquency, child prostitution, drug abuse and other crimes are rampant. Displaced children are also most likely to be abused, raped, tortured, exploited and draughter as child soldiers.+++++

Women and children displaced by armed conflict remained alarming. Refugee statistics have to be interpreted cautiously because definitions and data collection methods often vary between countries and agencies. According to data compiled by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of refugees, defined as forcibly displaced people who cross an international border and who cannot return home safely, has almost doubled during the past decade, from 10.5 million in 2008 to 20.4 million by the end of 2018. Two-thirds of the refugees originated from five countries: Syria (6.7 million), Afghanistan (2.7 million), South Sudan (2.3 million), Myanmar (1.1 million) and Somalia (0.9 million). Additionally, there were 3.1 million asylum seekers in 2017. Another 5.5 million Palestinian refugees are under the mandate of the UN Relief and Works Agency, rather than the UNHCR, bringing the total number of refugees globally to more than 25.9 million in 2018. Venezuela has a rapidly growing number of international migrants and refugees, exceeding 4 million in the course of 2019, according to the UNHCR, as a result of the country's economic and political instability. Notably, displacement is a complex process, and these estimates are approximations that cannot accurately capture mixed displacement patterns and distinguish forced displacement due to conflict from other causes, such as droughts.

However, conflict has led to many women being widowed or separated and therefore becoming the single head of household. The American Association of University Women (2007), in the effects of war on women, argues that women are gravely affected by conflicts. They are displayed, become heads of households, and lose their resources since they often cannot own land or anything. They try to hold it together but often are punished after the conflict is settled because of what they had to do to do this. Women are exposed to violence and abuse. They lose protection and freedom of movement; they are forced into marriages and forced to become

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\*\*\*\*\* E. J. Amani, "Gender and Armed Conflict Overview Report", BRIDGE, 2003.

+++++ UNICEF, Report on the State of the World's Children, 1996.

combatants in the army and militia. They are forced to have abortions and forced to be pregnant; they are detained and raped. The rape is not for pleasure but for control. When violence against women increases, it is a sign of impending military conflict. It escalates during the war but continues after the conflict has died down.\*\*\*\*\*

The creation of conflict-free zones has proved effective in some cases in protecting children from harm and providing some essential services. So have periodic ceasefires agreed to by governments and rebels to allow health workers to immunise children against common diseases, such as polio, measles, diphtheria and tetanus, and to deliver medical services and supplies. Such practices have been used in El Salvador, Uganda, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Sudan. In Eritrea, alternative sites for schools destroyed by war include caves, camouflaged huts or under trees. In Sierra Leone, mothers and adolescents were trained to teach. Sri Lanka used public media to reach out-of-school children and other sectors of the community. Vocational training that leads to employment has, in some cases, eased the reintegration of former child soldiers into the community.

### **RESILIENCE AND AGENCY: A POST-CONFLICT SITUATION**

In 2000, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) approved resolution 1325, which marked the start of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. The resolution urged the participation of women in peace initiatives, protection from violations of their human rights, and the prevention of conflicts. Eight further resolutions have since been approved, widening the range of issues covered by the agenda and thus making it more ambitious.\*\*\*\*\* One of the commitments included in the agenda is the development of national action plans. These are strategic documents defining a country's objectives and initiatives for implementing the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. To date, 79 countries have drawn up such a plan, including Spain, Iraq and Palestine, amongst others.\*\*\*\*\* Although an increasing number of countries now have a national action plan, most of these merely consist of proposals on paper, with no accountability mechanisms or associated budgets.

### **Women, Peace and Security Agenda (WPS)**

This is clear on the need to protect women's rights and support the work of women's organisations in peace-building efforts. Despite these commitments, the gendered ways that women and men, but particularly women, actively engage with and are victimised by armed conflict and reconstruction remain unrecognised by gender-blind interpretations of war and its aftermath. Women's organisations continue to protest these injustices at the local, national and international levels. These ongoing efforts have laid the groundwork to have gender mainstreamed more effectively into institutions that govern during periods of armed conflict and reconstruction. Recognising the relative inequality faced by women during and after armed conflict is an important step to mainstreaming gender. Only then will the impacts on women and gender relations be put into context. The importance of supporting women's organising efforts has been recognised by Point 15 of UNSC Resolution 1325, which officially endorses the

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\*\*\*\*\* Waki, "The Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Girls", A consultative meeting on Mainstreaming Gender in Areas of Conflict and Reconstruction, 2001.

\*\*\*\*\* UN, "Global Study on the implementation of UNSC Resolution 1325", 2015.

\*\*\*\*\* Anderlini, S. N., *Women, Peace and Security: A Policy Audit. From the Beijing Platform for Action to UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and Beyond*, London: International Alert, 2001.

need to promote gender equality through consultation with local and international women's NGOs in the processes of post-conflict reconstruction (UN 2000).+++++

There is a distinction between women's actual engagement in peace-building and the integration of women's rights in the peace process. It is, after all, possible to enforce the international laws and conventions that protect women from GBV and recognise the disadvantages experienced by women during and after armed conflict without actively involving them in the political process. Although recognition on its own is important, it would still deny women the opportunity to work alongside men in shaping conflict resolution processes in more equitable ways. Long-term peace that is gender equal must go beyond protecting but still excluding women to actively engaging women in the decision-making structures that govern peace itself.+++++

Women's work in peace-building mostly capitalises on stereotypical interpretations of gender roles because, typically, it is only in their capacity as wives and mothers that women gain the attention of soldiers and politicians. Women's presence in the official peace process remains marginal, and the process of negotiating gendered relations of power in the context of armed conflict is an ongoing challenge.

The fact that women support conflict along religious, ethnic and nationalist divides raises the question of whether it is possible for women to unite around gender-specific concerns to fight patriarchy and oppression. There are many examples, however, of groups of women that have managed to prioritise gender-specific concerns over political allegiances in order to address women's human rights issues in a unified fashion.

### **National Action Plans for WPS**

Iraq was the first country in the region to develop a National Action Plan (NAP) in 2014. And this is not something that happened by chance. Decades of work by women's organisations to raise the profile of women's roles have achieved significant milestones. This work, and the fragile and insecure situation of the country at the time, led to the preparation of the first civil society report monitoring implementation of UN Resolution 1325. This was a significant step towards promoting the participation of women and their protection. With the aim of monitoring implementation of such a plan, the NAP1325 Initiative involving over 30 organisations was set up. A Women for Peace group comprising 20 women from different political parties in Kurdistan was also formed. This plan, as happens with many others, lacks a monitoring system, an associated budget and a specific timeline for achieving its objectives.+++++

The Occupied Palestinian Territory was the second Arab state territory (after Iraq) to develop its own action plan in 2016. It includes three objectives: the protection of women and girls, particularly in light of the Israeli occupation; holding the Israeli occupation accountable to fight against impunity; and the participation of women in international and local institutions. The

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+++++ Paula San Pedro, "Women in Conflict Zones", Oxfam Intermón report number 51, March 2019.

+++++ *Ibid.*

+++++ MIFTAH, "A Vision for Palestinian Women's Rights Organizations based on the Global Study of the UNSCR 1325", 2017.

Higher National Committee, which was responsible for preparing the plan, has also become a platform for facilitating dialogue between governmental institutions and civil society organisations. Thanks to the influence exerted by women's organisations, which started a participatory process to enable women to engage from their own communities, a representative NAP has been achieved.\*\*\*\*\*

## Palestinian and Israeli Women Work Together

Jerusalem Link, a partnership between the Israeli Organisation Bat Shalom and the Palestinian Jerusalem Centre for Women, is one example of women successfully bridging the divides between politics, armed conflict and gender equality. Whilst the two organisations work principally to address the concerns of women in their own societies, Jerusalem Link is able to prioritise women's human rights more generally as an important element of any lasting peace settlement.

Established in 1994, the partnership project marks the first time that a Palestinian and an Israeli organisation have worked so closely together for the advancement of women's and human rights in the region, as well as for the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The two organisations jointly run programmes promoting peace, democracy, human rights and women's leadership. Their work includes campaigning on International Women's Day, raising awareness through Palestinian/Israeli Women's Public Media Dialogue, facilitating an International Women's Peace Commission, and lobbying international organisations and national governments to promote the inclusion of women in decision-making processes.<sup>+++++</sup>

The importance of recognising, encouraging, supporting and strengthening the capacity of women in conflict and post-conflict situations cannot be overstated. Women mobilise and take the initiative in periods of armed conflict in order to survive and/or to fight for their rights. As they move into non-stereotypical roles with support from family and community, the basis for the protection of women's human rights and the groundwork for a longer-term shift towards more equal gender relations are made possible.\*\*\*\*\*

## Addressing the Multi-faceted Needs of Women: The Liberian Experience

The National Women's Commission in Liberia (NAWOCOL), an NGO made up of 78 women's groups, developed in the post-war period to address the myriad needs of women. It encouraged grassroots working groups to come together around income-generating activities, from garden projects to peer counselling. Progress has been made in educating women about their rights, providing training for income-generating activities and enabling women to take control and move away from stereotypical roles. Although there is cause for optimism, women require government support, and some men remain sceptical. Generally, it is clear that this work has paved the way to rebuild Liberian society in a more gender-equitable fashion. Below we reprint an extract from the testimony of Rose, a former Secretary-General of the Commission in

\*\*\*\*\* *Ibid.*

+++++ Krause J., Krause W., and Bränfors P., “Women’s Participation in Peace Negotiations and the Durability of Peace”, 2018.

##### MIFTAH, “Fact Sheet on Violations Against the Palestinian Women and Girls in East Jerusalem by the Israeli Occupation”, 2018.



Monrovia, discussing the multiple programmes in place to assist women in the post-conflict period:

*The idea for the Abused Women and Girls (AWAG) programme came right after the ceasefire in 1990. A group of women, including myself, attended a workshop run by Save the Children, UK [...]. We talked about the Ugandan experience where women were raped and molested [...]. We were moved because we knew that these things had happened in Liberia [...]. We decided to form an association called the Association for Women in Crisis. Its aim is the rehabilitation of victimised women and abused women and girls through trauma counselling and group therapy [...].*

*We have health education talks about family planning, nutrition, hygiene, sanitation and general things. Besides that, we have preventive education and counselling about HIV/AIDS [...]. We have increased awareness about HIV/AIDS, but we are short of films and other educational materials.*

*The HIV counsellors have meetings with women's groups in the schools and in the churches. In one month they see about 2,000 or 3,000 people and distribute information materials as well as condoms. We also talk about taking care of a victim and about the psychological effects on a victim's family. All the myths about AIDS are cleared away.*

*Women took up arms, and they've disappeared [...]. We are trying to develop a programme to identify these girls, help them find their productive capacity and rehabilitate them through counselling and training.*

*Women are becoming independent of men. We love the men; we need them. They are our husbands, brothers, fathers, uncles but we are not waiting for them like before to be the only providers. Men have come to appreciate this role, and they talk about it with admiration. They also fear it, but they are willing to go an extra mile with the women. It is now common to hear a man say, 'We wish to have a woman president'.*

*That's how far the women have gone. In Liberia, women have proved themselves. But somehow, the suppression is there. It's camouflaged. You don't see it but it's there. In the refugee camps outside of Liberia, the women are learning masonry and carpentry and about building their own homes [...]. You could not find that before.*

*All is not rosy, because our government has to back us, and we have to have a unified country. The government has been sensitised now to plan for gender issues.* \$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$

Women are active not only at the local or community level, but at the national and international levels as well. In Africa, for instance, women's groups have formed the African Women's Committee on Peace and Development (AWCPD), now a part of the African Union. Its mandate is to broaden the peace agenda to include issues such as land reforms, economic and social justice and equal participation for women in political processes generally. The inclusion of rape

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\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$ O. Bennett, J. Bexley, and K. Warnock, "Introduction", in O. Bennett, J. Bexley and K. Warnock (eds), *Arms to Fight, Arms to Protect: Women Speak Out About Conflict*, London: Panos Publications, 1995.

and GBV as war crimes and crimes against humanity in rules and statutes governing the ICC is due to the contribution of international women's groups led by the New York-based Women's Caucus for Gender Justice.\*\*\*\*\*

From the local to the international sphere, women's activism is laying the groundwork for mainstreaming gender in all aspects of armed conflict and post-conflict reconstruction. However, significant efforts have been put in place by gender activists to wipe this gap between the male and female folk at both local and international levels; nevertheless, much still needs to be done for it to gain full maturity.

## CONCLUSION

The history of insecurity faced by women and children in conflict zones is a complex and multifaceted issue. From ancient wars to modern-day armed conflicts, women and children have been disproportionately affected by violence, displacement, and human rights abuses. Despite these overwhelming challenges, women and children have consistently demonstrated remarkable resilience and agency, advocating for peace, justice, and human rights. This article has examined the history of insecurity faced by women and children in conflict zones, highlighting their experiences. It has analysed the evolution of armed conflict in the contemporary world, including their impact to women and children. The article has also discussed the importance of recognising and supporting the resilience and agency of women and children in conflict zones. In a nutshell, the history of insecurity faced by women and children in conflict zones is a complex and multifaceted issue. Despite the overwhelming challenges they face, women and children have consistently demonstrated remarkable resilience and agency. It is essential to recognise and support their efforts, promoting a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of conflict and promotes sustainable peace and development.

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