

<b>Forum:</b>	Human Rights Commission
<b>Issue:</b>	The Question of Gender-Based Violence in Conflict Zones
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## Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) rises especially in conflict zones. It is a serious violation of human rights and a life-threatening health and protection issue. When people flee their homes, they are often at greater risk of physical, sexual and psychological violence, such as rape, sexual abuse, trafficking and forced prostitution. Victims of GBV are mostly women and girls. Armed conflicts, displacement and humanitarian emergencies leave women and girls at a greater risk of violence or exploitation.<sup>1</sup> There are many types of GBV, the most common being sexual violence, torture, forced marriage, and trafficking. GBV may be physical, psychological, sexual or socio-economic in nature. It can manifest as rape, sexual assault, physical assault, forced marriage, denial of resources, opportunities, or services as well as psychological or emotional abuse.

Common forms of GBV include intimate partner violence, so-called 'honour-related crimes,' child sexual abuse, child marriage, female genital mutilation, and trafficking in persons for the purpose of sexual exploitation, including sexual slavery, domestic servitude, and servile forms of marriage. Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by humanitarian workers is a form of GBV.

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<sup>1</sup>

[https://eige.europa.eu/gender-based-violence/gender-based-violence-migration-and-conflict?language\\_content\\_entity=en](https://eige.europa.eu/gender-based-violence/gender-based-violence-migration-and-conflict?language_content_entity=en)

According to the annual Report of the Secretary-General on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence,<sup>2</sup> sexual violence in conflict zones rose sharply. The report lists 63 State and non-State actors credibly suspected of or being responsible for patterns of sexual violence in armed conflicts on the Security Council's agenda. The highest numbers were recorded in the Central African Republic, The Democratic Republic of The Congo, Haiti, Somalia and South Sudan. Women and girls made up to 92% of all victims, but boys and men were also targeted, ranging in ages from 1 to 75.<sup>3</sup>

## Definition of Key Terms

### Gender-based Violence (GBV)

Violence that results in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering, based on gender discrimination, gender role expectations and/or gender stereotypes, or based on the differential power status linked to gender.

### Sexual Violence

Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, human trafficking, or acts otherwise directed against a person's sexuality, using coercion by anyone, regardless of their relationship to the victim in any setting.<sup>4</sup>

### International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

IHL is a special set of rules that apply during armed conflict. The rules governing Sexual GBV are spread across multiple legal instruments, depending on the status of the victim (civilian or combatant) and the type of armed conflict (international or non-international). However, customary IHL prohibits rape and other forms of sexual violence in all circumstances

### Human Trafficking

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/digital-library/reports/sg-reports/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/08/1165650>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/1/9/524088\\_0.pdf](https://www.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/1/9/524088_0.pdf)

Human Trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit.<sup>5</sup>

### **Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA)**

Abusing power or trust to force, pressure, or manipulate someone into sexual acts or situations, especially when the person is vulnerable or unable to give consent.

## **Explanation of the Question**

Sexual violence is often used as a weapon during conflicts, and has been used as a weapon for decades. Up to 400 000 Bengali women were systematically raped when the Pakistani Army wanted to crush the 1971 Bengali liberation movement.<sup>6</sup> Because it's so common, many have accepted it as a necessary and inevitable evil that simply comes as a consequence to war. There is a struggle to ensure safety from GBV and sexual violence, since women have long been excluded and discriminated against.

The Question of GBV in Conflict Zones is especially relevant now. Conflicts such as Israel-Palestine and Russia-Ukraine have seen a rise in GBV. In Ukraine, an estimated 2.5 million people have been internally displaced and are at a high risk to be exposed to GBV.<sup>7</sup> The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has worked with five national non-governmental organization (NGO) partners to help prevent GBV in 16 regions across Ukraine, yet GBV still occurs frequently. Especially front-line communities struggle greatly. Prolonged war takes a heavy psychological, physical and social toll on families. Stress naturally leads to aggression, which then leads to violence, usually directed at young girls and women. People from across Ukraine have been forced together and displaced. These individuals may find it hard to adapt to their new environment, which could lead to even more violence.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-Trafficking/Human-Trafficking.html>

<sup>6</sup>

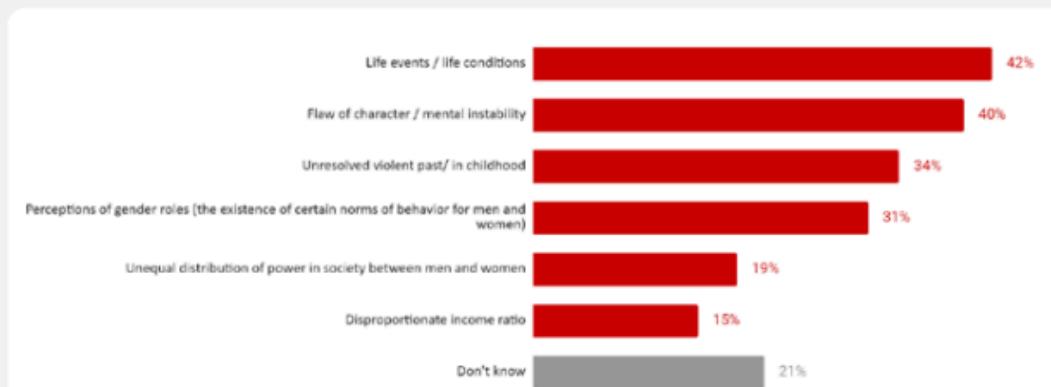
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<sup>7</sup>

<https://www.unhcr.org/ua/en/news/stories/addressing-gender-based-violence-ukraine-challenges-and-response-frontline-and>

## Main causes of gender-based violence

n=2800, multiple choice



## Main causes of gender-based violence

In Gaza, the risk of GBV is escalating greatly. 50% of the 2.1 million displaced are women and girls. The United Nations Human Rights Office estimates that 70% of deaths that took place from October 7 2023 to March 31 2025 were women and girls.<sup>8</sup> Access to GBV response services are very limited in Gaza. Lifesaving services such as medical care, psychological support and case management are almost non-existent. Adolescent girls and women with disabilities, especially those orphaned or separated from families, face acute risks in overcrowded shelters, where the lack of trusted adults and guardianship systems increases exposure to early and forced marriage, and abuse.

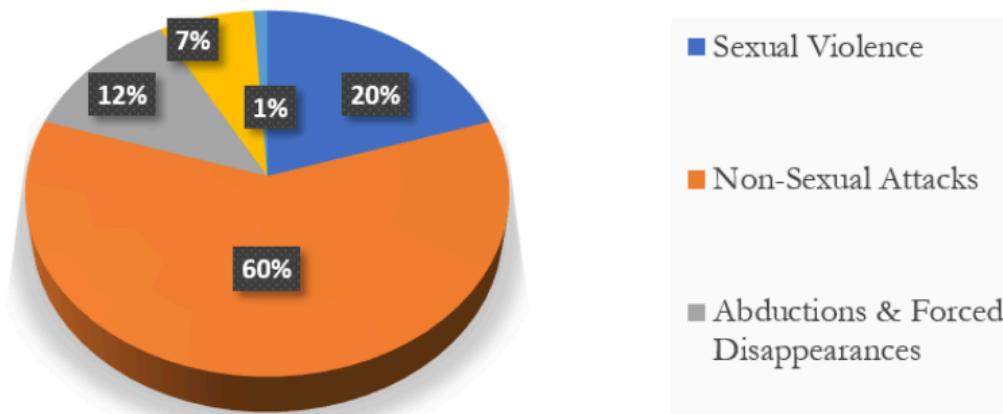
Primary coping mechanisms for women and girls in Gaza include remaining silent about experiences about GBV, and especially feeling that the violence they endure is insignificant compared to the larger scale war that kills thousands daily. Many are overwhelmed and trying to focus on surviving, so the experience of GBV gets scurried off to the side and many believe their experience isn't a priority. There is also quite a stigma attached to GBV in countries like Palestine. Palestine is primarily Muslim-populated, and women are often discouraged from seeking support from their families in regards to sexual abuse and are at the risk of being

<sup>8</sup> <https://palestine.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/2025-04/GBV-Snapshot-2025-Final.pdf>

blamed, shamed and retaliated against by their families. This causes many women to go silent, instead of reaching out for help.

During conflicts vital healthcare services are often interrupted, which poses a huge threat for the health of women. In some cases, pregnant women have to go through deliveries without painkillers and use period-delaying medications due to the unavailability of sanitation infrastructure due to the conflict.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 1: Various Types of Attacks in which Women/Girls are the Target of Violence**



Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)

### Types of attacks in which women/girls are the target of violence

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## Key Member States and NGOs Involved and Their Views

### Amnesty International

Amnesty International has long advocated for women's rights, and is a key Non-Government Organization when it comes to this question. Amnesty International highlights how women and girls in conflict are especially at risk from violence, and throughout history

<sup>9</sup>

<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/concealed-scars-beyond-the-frontlines-women-s-health-in-conflict-zones>

sexual violence has been used as a weapon of war.<sup>10</sup> In their research report, Amnesty International highlights that girls under 18 should not only be protected by general human rights law, but also the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child during armed conflict.<sup>11</sup>

## Palestine

The risk of Gender-based violence has increased greatly in Gaza since the Palestine-Israel conflict began. The ongoing conflict has deepened pre-existing vulnerabilities, including poverty, family separation, and the breakdown of social safety nets.<sup>12</sup> GBV response services are limited, and resources are sparse. Frontline service providers have been killed, injured and displaced, which has further eroded the availability of response leaving countless women and girls without protection. Women's groups, safe spaces, and local NGOs that once provided vital support are now destroyed, overwhelmed, or inaccessible, leading to an environment where fear, stigma, and impunity prevail.

## United Nations Security Council (UNSC)

Since the year 2000, the UNSC has adopted 10 resolutions that form the foundation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. The UNSC has raised attention to gender issues in their decisions. In 2024, over 60% of decisions made by the UNSC included gender-related language. Since 2004, when the first woman was invited to represent the Civil Society, more than 350 have briefed the UNSC. The representation of women in expert panels of sanctions committees is now approaching parity, as well.<sup>13</sup>

## The United States Of America

The United States believes that preventing and responding to gender-based violence around the world is a matter of human rights, justice, equity, and equality. In 2012, the U.S. Congress first requested a "multi-year strategy to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls," which led to the development of the first *U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally*. This strategy, and the subsequent update in 2016, elevated the human rights of women and girls globally as a U.S. national security, diplomatic, and foreign assistance priority.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/discrimination/womens-rights/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/act770502005en.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://palestine.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/2025-04/GBV-Snapshot-2025-Final.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-women-peace-and-security>

## Timeline of Events <sup>14</sup>

Date	Description of Events
February 1863	During the American Civil war, there was an attempt to codify the law of armed conflict. Sexual assault was explicitly mentioned as a punishable act and rape prohibited on pain of death with the publication of the Lieber Code
1985	The first working group on refugee women is convened to advocate for the needs of women affected by conflict.
1990	UNHCR adopts the first-ever policy on refugee women's protection, from which evolved UNHCR's 1991 <i>Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women</i> .
1994	The International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo identifies GBV response as one of four basic pillars of reproductive health programming.
2000	UN SCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security is adopted. It is the first SCR to link women to the peace and security agenda.
2007	United Nations Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict (UN Action) is launched.
2008-2013	The UN Security Council adopts four resolutions framing conflict-related sexual

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/1472-historical-timeline.html>

	<p>violence as a threat to international peace and security.</p> <p>Appointment of a Special Representative to the Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict.</p>
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## UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

The UN has developed several key frameworks addressing the prevention of gender-based violence, emphasising protection, early prevention, and survivor-centred responses. Through these frameworks, the UN has consistently highlighted the responsibility of states and the international community to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, and has repeatedly called for stronger action to protect women and girls, particularly in situations of conflict.

- UNHCR policy on the prevention of, risk mitigation and response to gender-based violence, 2020
- UNHCR Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity, 2018
- UN SCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, 31 October 2000 (**S/RES/1325**)<sup>15</sup>

## Possible Solutions

### Prevention

Prevention means actions that prevent GBV from occurring by addressing the root causes of it. Root causes can include: Gender inequality, systemic discrimination, and unequal power relations between women and men. When the root causes of GBV are addressed,

<sup>15</sup>

<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/WPS%20SRES1325%20.pdf>

programming to change behavior and social norms can begin. This can be achieved through long-term approaches that will require the involvement of men and young boys, but programming that includes women and young girls. This programme should dismantle abusive and abusive and unequal power relations. The UNHRC must advocate for and support the inclusion of young girls and women in prevention measures, and make sure they are heard and accounted for all throughout.

## Response

In addition to preventative measures, immediate intervention is also required at this time. Survivors are in desperate need of intervention that addresses their physical safety, health concerns and psychological needs, and the resources to seek justice. Multi-sectoral services to survivors of gender-based violence contribute to their safety, and improves their physical, mental and sexual health. All survivors of gender-based violence, including survivors of SEA perpetrated by humanitarian workers have the right to immediate life-saving resources. Survivors of SEA should be treated equally as survivors of other forms of GBV.

## Case & Information Management

A survivor-based approach is crucial for success. Non-stigmatizing and confidential access to GBV care will make it much easier for survivors to reach out for help. Hiring female workers with training specialized in handling GBV. Offices and areas in which GBV issues are handled should be familiar and safe. It is very important to ensure a coordinated process of referral, service delivery and follow-up is in place.<sup>16</sup> A key element of Case and information management is collecting data. Analysis of data related to GBV incidents allows humanitarian actors to plan, implement, and adjust effective and timely prevention, risk mitigation and response measures.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/us/sites/en-us/files/legacy-pdf/5fa018914.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/us/sites/en-us/files/legacy-pdf/5fa018914.pdf>

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16. <https://www.unhcr.org/us/sites/en-us/files/legacy-pdf/5fa018914.pdf>
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