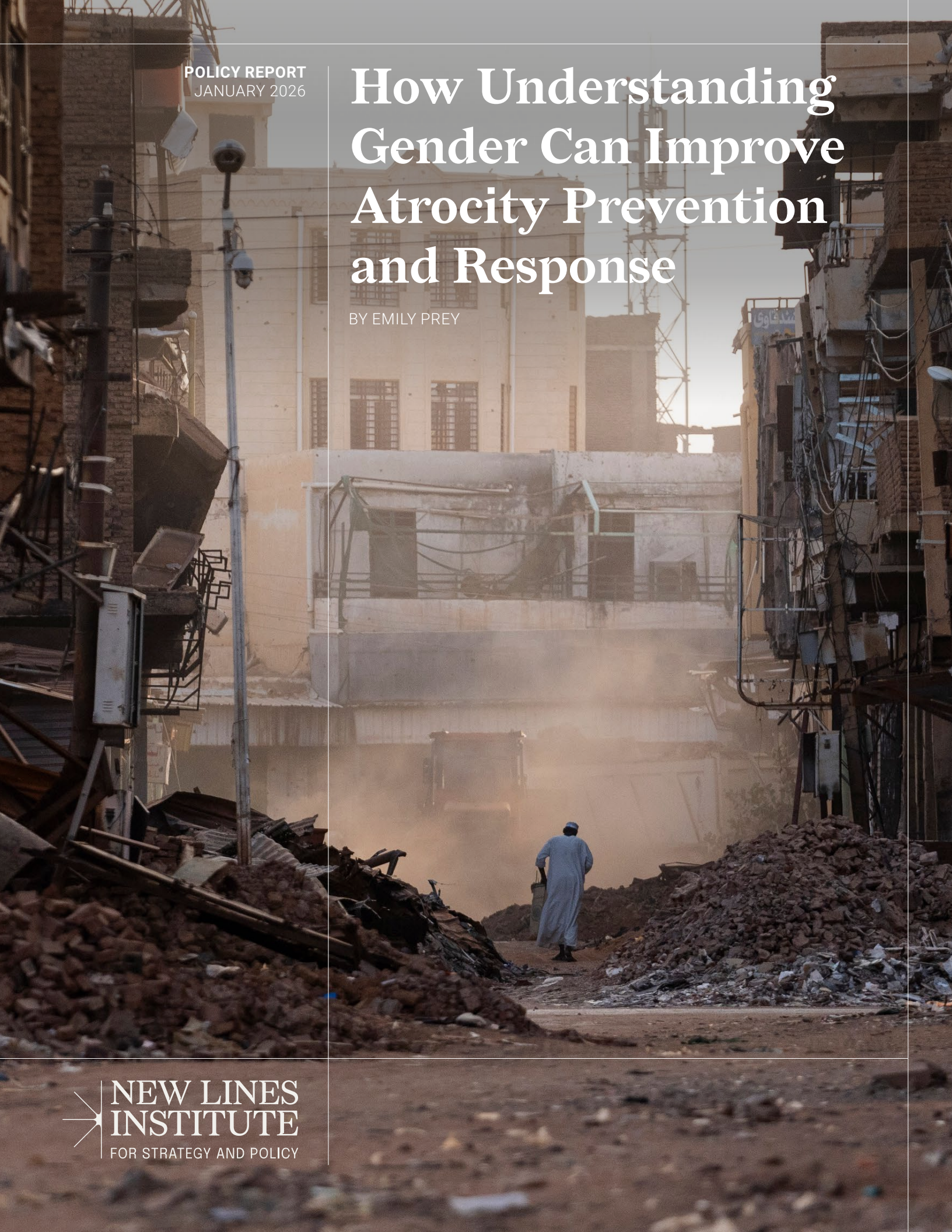


POLICY REPORT
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How Understanding Gender Can Improve Atrocity Prevention and Response

BY EMILY PREY

NEW LINES INSTITUTE
FOR STRATEGY AND POLICY

NEW LINES INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGY AND POLICY

Our mission is to provoke principled and transformative leadership based on peace and security, global communities, character, stewardship, and development.

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Cover image: People pass through a destroyed section of Omdurman, Sudan on May 25, 2025. (Carolyn Van Houten/The Washington Post via Getty Images)

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Summary

- Using gendered and intersectional analyses allows for a more holistic understanding of how unequal power structures impact individuals and communities, which can help policymakers create more human-centered laws, be better informed about a situation, and be more effective and creative in their solutions in addressing the existing power structures.
- Research shows that states can anticipate international crimes by paying attention to women's rights and roles in a society. Rollbacks on gender equality and upticks in violence against women often serve as the canary in the coalmine for the future commission of international crimes.
- A reframing of what constitutes security is needed in states' foreign and domestic policy considerations and priorities. Promoting gender equality and creating societies where women and people of diverse gender identities can live freely, is one of the most cost-effective preventative measures for conflict, atrocities, and instability.
- The traditional canon of international law includes "universal" peremptory norms, such as the prohibitions on torture, genocide, and slavery. Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is notably absent, despite ironically being one of the most uniformly and consistently practiced crimes around the globe. But the foundations of international law are inherently gender-blind, which leads to weaker protections for all people.
- Even though conflicts are on the rise around the globe, it remains far more dangerous to be a woman living in the world than it is to be at war.
- States with lower levels of gender equality are nearly two times more likely to engage in aggressive acts and use force first during international disputes. Gender equality, social justice issues, and human rights are not "soft" security issues. They have very real geopolitical implications for the security of people and states. Gender equality levels are both a key predictor and a key preventative mechanism of international crimes.
- Repurposing frozen assets for the benefit of victims and survivors of internationally wrongful acts is a significant material and symbolic form of reparation and restorative justice.
- Applying a gender lens to reparations, and using a survivor-centered approach, can widen understandings of victimhood and provide a platform for victims and survivors who have historically been excluded from these processes.

In 2021, New Lines Institute released a conference summary report, "How Understanding Gender Can Improve Genocide Prevention and Response."[1] Five years on, we are seeing not only an increase in genocidal rhetoric and action around the world,[2] but also a surge in atrocities committed during both wartime and peacetime.[3] This short brief serves as a follow-up to New Lines' Gender and Genocide report, which clearly laid out how a gender analysis is critical to improving and strengthening state prevention tools, ensuring that policy responses are effective in mitigating and halting ongoing genocides, and delivering meaningful justice to survivors. This brief adds to the existing analysis by broadening the analytical lens to examine atrocity crimes as

1 Erin Farrell Rosenberg, Gender and Genocide in the 21st Century: How Understanding Gender Can Improve Genocide Prevention and Response, (New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, November 30, 2021), https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/Final-Edits_Gender-and-Genocide-Conference-Report_ep-Final.pdf.

2 "Red Flag Alert for the Genocidal Rhetoric of US President Trump's 4 March Address," Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention and Human Security, March 13, 2025, https://www.lemkininstitute.com/red-flag-alerts/red-flag-alert-for-the-genocidal-rhetoric-of-us-president-trump%E2%80%99s-4-march-address-.

3 "Summary of the UN Secretary-General's 2024 Report on R2P, Responsibility to Protect: The Commitment to Prevent and Protect Populations from Atrocity Crimes." Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. June 27, 2024. https://www.globalr2p.org/publications/summary-2024-report/.

a whole and demonstrate how a gender and intersectional analysis is a necessary tool to predict, prevent, and respond to atrocity crimes.

What is a Gender and Intersectional Analysis?

A gender analysis involves asking questions about the different lived experiences of men, women, boys, girls, and those with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) in a given environment to better understand the cultural and real-life contexts. A well-executed gender analysis is also a power analysis; it questions who has power in a situation and why. Too often, gender analyses are presumed to deal only with women or how a situation affects women. As a result, the lived experiences of men, boys, and individuals with diverse gender identities are overlooked. "Gender" is a socially constructed identity related to women, men, boys, girls, and those with diverse SOGIESC. By socially constructed, this means that there is nothing inherent about these labels, but instead they are interpreted, shaped, and defined by social dynamics and cultures and can change across time. Gender does not just refer to people. Language, institutions, objects, and more can also be gendered. Gender not only refers to relationships between men and women in a society, but also to the construction, order, and power dynamics associated with femininity and masculinity within that society. Gender is often confused or intentionally conflated with "sex," which deals with the different biological and physiological characteristics of males, females, and intersex individuals such as reproductive organs and hormones, but gender is not inherently linked to biological sex.

A well-constructed gender analysis should use an intersectional lens. All individuals have multiple social identities shaping their lived experiences, including but not limited to sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, class, race, faith, age, disability, and nationality. These identities determine one's place in society, privileges and protections from human rights violations, and the impact of complex forms of discrimination. For example, in the Chinese Communist Party's ongoing genocide against the Uyghur minority group, Uyghur women are targeted for specific crimes based on their intersecting identities of being women (e.g. subjected to coercive birth prevention programs), of being Uyghur (e.g. incentivized to enter inter-ethnic marriages with Han Chinese men), and of practicing Islam (e.g. prohibited from wearing traditional Islamic dress).[4] Intersectionality acknowledges that singular oppressions exist while affirming that intersecting identities interact with overlapping systems of oppression and/or discrimination and can further marginalize and harm a group. Intersectionality serves as an analytical lens that considers and addresses how a person's overlapping identities contribute to unique experiences of oppression, privilege, and access. These forms of analysis are crucial to predicting, preventing, and responding to atrocity crimes.

State Anticipation of International Crimes

Research shows that states can anticipate international crimes by paying attention to women's rights and roles in a society.[5] Rollbacks on gender equality and upticks in violence against women are the canary in the coalmine for the future commission of international crimes. Violence occurs along a continuum.[6] Higher rates of violence against women in the every day of "peace" time more easily leads to outbreaks of violent conflict and higher rates

4 New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, The Uyghur Genocide: An Examination of China's Breaches of the 1948 Genocide Convention (March 9, 2021), https://newlinesinstitute.org/event/the-uyghur-genocide-an-examination-of-chinas-breaches-of-the-1948-genocide-convention/.

5 Valerie M. Hudson, Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill, Mary Caprioli, and Chad F. Emmett, Sex and World Peace (Columbia University Press, 2012).

6 Scottish Women's Aid and Equally Safe in Practice, ESiP Continuum of Violence – Making the Connections (2022), https://womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ESiP-Continuum-of-Violence.pdf

of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) perpetrated during conflict.[7] Definitions of violence against women must be reframed from atypical and episodic events to recognize the normalized, everyday violence and insecurity experienced by women and girls around the world. When a society becomes inured to violence, even to the point of expecting[8] it or legalizing[9] it, it becomes far easier for this everyday violence to spill over into civil or interstate conflict. Reframing understandings of violence against women (and SBGV writ large) at both state and international levels, and then prohibiting and preventing such violence, can help improve predicting capacity and, thus, prevent violent conflict.

Valerie Hudson et al.'s research has long shown that there exists a statistically significant relationship between the physical security of women and the relative peacefulness of states.[10] The first step in anticipating, and thus preventing, international crimes is in responding to the pervasive violence carried out in the every day. Thirty-five years ago, Hilary Charlesworth, Christine Chinkin, and Shelley Wright interrogated the total lack of gender in international law. They questioned the reasoning that "men's concerns" become general human concerns, while "women's concerns" are pushed to the side and siloed as special issues, part of the larger public vs. private dichotomy reflected in international law.[11] Because men are not traditionally perceived to be the victims of sexual and gender-based violence, which is often perpetrated in "private" settings (i.e. the home), these matters do not rise to the fore of pressing national or international policy concerns. Crimes such as intimate partner violence or domestic violence, though widespread enough to ironically constitute uniform and consistent state practice across all countries, are too often overlooked in international law prohibitions as private concerns of citizens. A reevaluation of what constitutes security is also needed in states' foreign and domestic policy considerations and priorities. Promoting gender equality and creating societies where women and people of diverse gender identities can live freely is one of the most cost-effective preventative measures for conflict, atrocities, and instability.

RECOMMENDATION: States must recognize the detrimental effects of SGBV both on victims as individuals but also on the societal fabric that makes up a nation. As such, states must prioritize gender equality not only as a human rights issue, but also as an issue of hard and national security.

RECOMMENDATION: States Parties to the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) are obligated under international law to eliminate discrimination against women, especially noting CEDAW Articles 2-4.[12]

State Prevention of International Crimes

The traditional canon of international law includes "universal" peremptory norms such as the prohibitions on torture, genocide, and slavery. Though the notion of peremptory norms is an important and serious discipline,

7 Hilary Charlesworth, "A Discipline of Crisis," The Modern Law Review Limited (2002): 63-3, 377-392. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/1468-2230.00385.

8 Kay Rollins, "Putin's Other War: Domestic Violence, Traditional Values, and Masculinity in Modern Russia," Harvard International Review, August 3, 2022, https://hir.harvard.edu/putins-other-war/.

9 Emma Batha, "Factbox: Female genital mutilation around the world: a fine, jail or no crime?" Reuters, September 13, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/factbox-female-genital-mutilation-around-the-world-a-fine-jail-or-no-crime-idUSKCN1LT2OS/.

10 Valerie M. Hudson, Mary Caprioli, Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill, Rose McDermott and Chad F. Emmett, "The Heart of the Matter: The Security of Women and the Security of States," International Security, Vol. 33, No. 3, (Winter 2008/09): 7-45. https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/heart-matter-security-women-and-security-states.

11 Hilary Charlesworth, Christine Chinkin, and Shelley Wright," Feminist Approaches to International Law," American Journal of International Law 85, no.4(1991): 613-45, https://doi.org/10.2307/2203269.

12 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, adopted 18 December 1979, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 34/180, entered into force 3 September 1981, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women.

Charlesworth and Chinkin have also critiqued these norms, arguing that the concept of jus cogens is not actually universal given that their development privileged the experiences of men over the experiences of women.[13] Due to the inherent gender blindness baked into the foundations of international law, the prohibition of gender-based violence – arguably the most pervasive and pernicious, yet widely accepted (and in many cases, legalized) crime around the world – has never been considered a jus cogens norm. Therefore, discussions of jus cogens provide an element of protection to men that is not accorded to women. This gender-blindness leads to weaker protections for people of all genders from international crimes. Charlesworth and Chinkin make the important point that the foundations of international human rights law and treaties have historically been drafted according to what men fear could happen to them. Jus cogens primarily protects men in their public lives. Gender equality – which cannot exist in the presence of SGBV – is the loudest silence in international law. And, as discussed above, gender equality goes hand in hand with conflict and atrocity prevention.

Even though conflicts are on the rise around the globe, it remains far more dangerous to be a woman living in the world than it is to be at war. In 2023, there were an estimated 82,500 combat deaths (including female soldiers and civilians).[14] That same year, 85,000 women and girls were intentionally murdered by intimate partners and family members in gender-related femicides,[15] while 260,000 women died due to complications from pregnancy and childbirth.[16] Globally, the most dangerous place for a woman is not on a battlefield, but inside her own home. States must take seriously the threats that women and girls face because these threats constitute warning signs for further violence, possible conflict, and the commission of atrocities. By addressing gender-based violence, policymakers can work to prevent further violence from spilling over to inter- and intra-state conflicts.

Research by Mary Caprioli shows that states with higher levels of gender equality are less likely to act aggressively or engage in the first use of force in interstate disputes. Even when these states participate in international conflict, they exhibit lower levels of violence.[17] Conversely, states with lower levels of gender equality are nearly two times more likely than their counterparts to engage in aggressive acts and use force first during international disputes. We can see this playing out in the recent U.S. use of force in Venezuela and Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine.[18]

Gender equality, social justice issues, and human rights are not "soft" security issues; they have very real geopolitical implications for the security of people and states. If states want to seriously engage with policies to prevent conflict, atrocities, and human rights abuses, and build democratic resilience in the face of rising authoritarianism, gender equality levels are both key predictors and preventative mechanisms.

RECOMMENDATION: United Nations member states have an obligation under UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS).[19]

13 Christine M. Chinkin and Hilary Charlesworth, "The Gender of Jus Cogens," Women's Rights: A Human Rights Quarterly Reader, ed. Bert B. Lockwood (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 87–100, https://repository.law.umich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1478&context=book_chapters.

14 Julia Haines, "The Deadliest Conflicts Across the Globe in 2023," US News & World Report, January 18, 2024, https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/countries-with-the-deadliest-conflicts-of-2023.

15 UNODC and UN Women, Femicides in 2023: Global Estimates of Intimate Partner/Family Member Femicides, (United Nations, 2024), https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/femicides-in-2023-global-estimates-of-intimate-partner-family-member-femicides-en.pdf.

16 World Health Organization, Maternal Mortality, last updated April 7, 2025, https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/maternal-mortality.

17 Mary Caprioli, "Gender Equality and State Aggression: The Impact of Domestic Gender Equality on States First Use of Force," International Interactions 29, no. 3 (2003): 195-214, doi:10.1080/03050620304595.

18 Janina Dill, "Expert Comment: The illegality of the US attack against Venezuela is beyond debate – how the world reacts is critical," University of Oxford, January 7, 2026, https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2026-01-07-expert-comment-illegality-us-attack-against-venezuela-beyond-debate-how-world-reacts.

19 United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women and Peace and Security, October 31, 2000, S/RES/1325 (2000), https://undocs.org/S/RES/1325.

One of the four pillars of WPS focuses on gender-responsive approaches to conflict prevention. States should utilize the global power of this agenda – 113 countries have WPS National Action Plans – to address the root causes of conflict, prevent violence against women, and assist with early warning and response to conflict.

RECOMMENDATION: Governments must work alongside civil society and build official partnerships with civil society working groups, which hold a wealth of research and practitioner expertise that can support state implementation of atrocity prevention. Governments should especially partner with women-led organizations, Global South organizations, and organizations that apply a gender lens in their work.

RECOMMENDATION: The United Kingdom must re-prioritize WPS as a part of British national security. The exclusion of WPS and gender considerations from its 2025 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence Review threaten Britain's security, posture, and alleged values on the world stage. Increasing military funding while cutting foreign aid – all while ignoring gender – is a worrying trend that signals that women's rights are secondary considerations in national security and conflict and atrocity prevention.[20] Women's inclusion and participation in these spaces is not "soft" diplomacy, nor should it be considered a secondary or tertiary strategic objective for states. Women's position in society is a bellwether of democratic stability, economic prosperity, and the overall peacefulness of a state.

State Responses to International Crimes

While there are many legal and non-legal avenues to ensure accountability for international crimes, repurposing frozen assets for the benefit of victims and survivors of internationally wrongful acts is a significant material and symbolic form of reparation and restorative justice. Ukraine has provided a useful case study, with global efforts to freeze and seize Russian state assets in Europe, the United States, Canada, and elsewhere well underway. In 2023, Yuliya Ziskina and New Lines Institute built a proposal for multilateral asset transfer using the international law of state countermeasures.[21] This model provided a potential framework for third states to adopt when creating their own individual domestic legal mechanisms for the transfer of Russian state assets for the purpose of rebuilding Ukraine. The model proposes an international fund to house Russian state assets identified by third states within their jurisdiction, to be used as reparations for Ukraine as a consequence of Russia's unlawful aggression.

This model is only the beginning of the conversation. Once assets have been frozen and seized, states must set aside a portion for the needs of survivors of international crimes. The Global Survivors Fund (GSF) undertook a global study on reparations for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence.[22] The study highlighted the importance of interim reparative measures, including free legal aid, compensation for lost housing, psychosocial support, and childcare paired with comprehensive reparations, such as guarantees of non-repetition, special victim status, and public recognition. GSF's work also underscores the importance of looking at the concept of reparation through a gender lens, which can widen understandings of victimhood and provide a platform for victims and survivors who have historically been excluded from these processes, including male survivors of conflict-related sexual

20 Osmond Chia, "Trump calls for US military spending to rise more than 50% to $1.5tn," BBC, January 7, 2026, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy59kxl2xwzo.

21 Yuliya M. Ziskina, Multilateral Asset Transfer: A Proposal for Ensuring Reparations for Ukraine (New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, June 14, 2023), https://newlinesinstitute.org/rules-based-international-order/multilateral-asset-transfer-a-proposal-for-ensuring-reparations-for-ukraine/.

22 Global Survivors Fund, Global Reparations Study, Global Survivors Fund, accessed January 14, 2026, https://www.globalsurvivorsfund.org/how-we-work/global-reparations-study/.

violence or children born as a result of wartime rape. A gender lens includes taking a survivor-centered approach in state responses to international crimes. Policymakers should listen to survivors and center their needs when responding to international crimes. This will make state responses more effective, sustainable, and inclusive.

RECOMMENDATION: In the case of Ukraine, nearly $300 billion in Russian state assets are currently frozen in Western financial institutions. Ziskina further examined the jurisdictional accountability over Russian state assets and found that approximately 98% of this is being held in cash of at least eight different currencies around the world.[23] These cash assets now fall within the jurisdiction of the countries that issue those currencies (e.g. USD, GBP, CAD). The governments of these countries should locate and disclose the amount of Russian state assets being held not only in their countries but also in their currencies (i.e. within their jurisdiction). These governments should direct banks to separate Russian state assets from the banks' other funds and publicly and transparently communicate guidelines to manage these assets. Lastly, these governments should consider placing these assets into an independent international fund, for the benefit of victims and survivors of Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

RECOMMENDATION: States must ensure that any funds seized from aggressive actors must be put toward transformative reparations which address structural social, gender, political, and economic inequalities and are accessible to all victims and survivors.[24]

Conclusion

While gender is increasingly becoming more recognized as a tool for analysis, its dominant use is often limited to the "add women and stir" method.[25] Gender is a system of power. Using gendered and intersectional analyses can help policymakers create more human-centered laws, be better informed about a situation, and be more effective and creative when addressing the existing power structures. In implementing a gender analysis of the crime of aggression in international law, Christine Chinkin and Louise Arimatsu noted:

As a system of power, gender is both constituted by and integral to the manufacture of other vectors of power such as race, class, colonialism, militarism, nationalism, the political economy, and international law. Gender structures our world, our knowledge, and our views on violence, both inter-personal and interstate. It shapes our ideas on what constitutes violence; how lawful violence is distinguished from unlawful violence; who is entitled to resort to violence; and the conditions thereof. Gender is thus core to our understanding of inter-state aggression under international law.[26]

If policymakers continue to ignore the gendered foundations and implications not only of international crimes but also of the violence of the every day, incidents of international crimes during both wartime and peacetime will continue to rise. Governments must commit to including gender and intersectional analyses across their foreign and domestic policies. Embracing

23 Yuliya M. Ziskina, Anton Moiseienko, and Jamison Firestone, Resolving Accountability Over Russian State Assets: New Understandings of Jurisdiction and Policy Opportunities (New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, January 21, 2025), https://newlinesinstitute.org/rules-based-international-order/resolving-accountability-over-russian-state-assets-new-understandings-of-jurisdiction-and-policy-opportunities/.

24 Emily Prey, Tanya Domi, and Kinsey Spears, Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Ukraine: Lessons from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Policy Options for Ukraine, the United States, and the International Community (New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, September 20, 2023), https://newlinesinstitute.org/gender/conflict-related-sexual-violence-in-ukraine-lessons-from-bosnia-and-herzegovina-and-policy-options-for-ukraine-the-united-states-and-the-international-community/.

25 Maddie McCall, "'Add Women and Stir?' For the Love of Feminism, Please Put the Spoon Down!" Museum of Peace at the University of St Andrews, December 2022, https://peacemuseum.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2023/02/19/add-women-and-stir-for-the-love-of-feminism-please-put-the-spoon-down/.

26 Christine Chinkin and Louise Arimatsu, A Gendered Analysis of Aggression and International Law, (New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, February 17, 2025), https://newlinesinstitute.org/gender/a-gendered-analysis-of-aggression-and-international-law/.

a gender perspective within government can help deconstruct systematic and normalized patterns of violence and power that lead to conflict and atrocity crimes. The current trajectory is strategically unsound, and it is imperative that states embrace and utilize these lenses in their work to prevent atrocities.



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