

Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Girls (conclusions from S/2002/1154)

- Many of the experiences of women and girls in armed conflict are similar to those of men and boys. They suffer the same trauma, are forcibly displaced, injured and killed, and have difficulties in making a living during and after conflict. But there are important differences. Women and girls have become prime targets of armed conflict and suffered its impact disproportionately—particularly as gender-based and sexual violence have become weapons of warfare and among the defining characteristics of contemporary armed conflict. Women and children also constitute the majority of the world's refugees and internally displaced persons.
- Women and girls are vulnerable to all forms of violence, but particularly sexual violence and exploitation, including torture, rape, mass rape, forced pregnancy, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, and trafficking. Easy access to weapons increases interpersonal violence, including domestic violence, which often continues and may even increase in the aftermath of conflict.
- Armed conflict exacerbates inequalities between women and men, and discrimination against women and girls. If women do not participate in decision making, they are unlikely to become involved in decisions about the conflict or the peace process.
- The health consequences for women and girls during conflict are enormous. Women and girls are highly vulnerable due to their sexual and reproductive roles. Gender discrimination can lead to inequitable distribution of food to women and girls, causing malnutrition and other health problems. Experiencing or witnessing death, separation, rape, torture, destruction, loss of livelihood and material deprivation can cause severe mental and social stress.
- Women's daily tasks as providers and caregivers become increasingly difficult and dangerous, especially as public services and household goods become less and less available. Armed conflict forces women to take on more responsibilities for family security and livelihoods. But lack of land and property rights constrains their efforts. Women and girls take on new or non-traditional occupations. Forced out of the formal sector, and with increasing competition in the informal sector, they may be pushed into dangerous illegal activities.
- Armed conflict also changes social structures and relations. Women as well as men are victims of detention and 'disappearance'. The 'disappearance' of male relatives particularly affects women in societies where their status is directly linked to their relationships with men. Women are traumatised and cannot find closure as long as they still hope for the return of their relatives.
- Girls face particular difficulties. They may be forced into early marriages as a coping strategy in economically desperate households. Girls' enrolment in schools often drops in times of war. When forced to become heads of households, girls are particularly marginalised, suffer social stigma, and are at an increased risk of abuse and sexual violence.
- Refugee, returnee and internally displaced women and girls suffer human rights abuses throughout their displacement flight, in camp settings and in resettlement. Weakened or lost social support structures result in less security, higher risk of harassment or abuse, and problems in accessing assistance necessary for survival. Difficulties faced by women and girls are not always identified and addressed in the planning and management of camps. Increased participation of women in decisions regarding the organisation of camps, the layout of shelters and facilities and the distribution of supplies is critical for reducing the risks for women and girls.
- Women and girls are not only victims in armed conflict: they are also active agents. They may choose to participate in the conflict or to provide non-military support; or they may be manipulated or forced into various roles. Women and girls may be forced into sexual slavery or coerced to work as domestic servants for fighting groups. Many women organise for conflict resolution, peacemaking and disarmament. They are involved in rebuilding the social, cultural, economic and political fabric of their societies. But even where women have been involved in informal peace processes, they are normally pushed into the background when formal peace negotiations begin.
- The specific impact of conflict on women and girls calls for specific responses from the international community. Gender-based differences and inequalities need to be addressed in policies, planning and implementation in all peace operations, humanitarian activities and reconstruction efforts.