

The Role of International Organizations in Protecting Women from Violence

Youcef BERKOUK *

Public Services and Development Laboratory
Djillali LIABES University, Sidi Bel Abbas, Algeria

berkoukyoucef@gmail.com

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Abstract: Acts of discrimination-based violence against women violate several international human rights protected by international convention texts. Violence against women is a global and domestic issue affecting all races, nationalities, social, and economic orientations, requiring comprehensive solutions and perspectives. We believe that the United Nations should prioritize responding to widespread and systematic violence against women. It is crucial for the UN to address pervasive and systematic violence directed towards women, despite new laws, as attitudes sustaining violence against women persist.

Keywords: International Organizations; Violence; Women's Protection.

*Corresponding author: Youcef BERKOUK

Introduction:

Violence against women is closely linked to unequal power relations between men and women and social gender-based discrimination. It interacts with and forms the basis of human rights regarding the right to be free from violence and discrimination based on race, gender, expression, identity, age, lineage, or religion. It also encompasses inherent and equal dignity for every woman, man, and child. This type of violence is a widespread phenomenon worldwide, leading Peter Gali to express that violence against women is not merely personal or internal issues but global problems. Therefore, there is a need for global condemnation¹.

The United Nations, as a global entity, is concerned about violence against women as a significant form of discrimination and a violation of human rights. The international community, through treaties, has committed to protecting individual rights. The role extends beyond governmental organizations to non-governmental organizations due to the efforts of women's movements worldwide. These movements have taken various measures to monitor and address violations against women at both the national and international levels.

However, what is noteworthy is that despite the abundance of international human rights conventions and their diversity, which represent international legal protection for women against targeted violence to achieve equality and combat discrimination, they often remain ink on paper, whether during times of peace or war. In the latter case, women are more susceptible to practiced violence against them, and we have many examples in reality, with the recent Gaza war being the most significant evidence of that².

- **Study problem**

The problem of this study can be formulated in the following main question:

Has the international community assisted women in overcoming targeted violence, or is there a need to introduce alternative mechanisms?

To address this problem, the study is divided into:

- The reality and status of violence against women.
- The most important international mechanisms to address and monitor violence against women.

- **Study objectives**

This study aims to highlight the reality of violence against women in everyday life or during wars, the role of treaties dedicated to protecting women from these transgressions, and the

¹- United Nations. Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. New York: United Nations, 1993.

²- William Abresch, A Human Rights Law of Internal Armed Conflict: The European Court of Human Rights in Chechnya, *Working Paper, Extrajudicial Executions Series 4*, 2005, P. 02.

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effectiveness of governmental and non-governmental organizations in addressing these ongoing violations.

- **Study importance:**

The significance of the study lies in the application of treaties specific to the protection of women, providing guarantees of protection, and the effectiveness of the international community through its organizations. This is necessary for a secure society, achieving social stability, and promoting security and peace at both the local and global levels.

1 .Violence Against Women

Violence against women has garnered growing and significant attention from international institutions, led by the United Nations, as it is considered discrimination against women and a blatant violation of their rights. This attention is manifested through a series of treaties and declarations.

1 .1 Definition of Violence Against Women

Violence is defined as any behavior that causes harm to others or oneself. This action may cause physical harm to the human body, deprive them of their rights through unlawful actions, or involve expressions and speech (such as insults, threats, and defamation), which are behaviors contrary to the law or verbal attacks that undermine an individual's dignity³.

Violence against women includes any violent and demeaning behaviors directed towards women, resulting in various effects on their bodies, minds, relationships, coercion, intimidation, sexual assaults, or depriving them of many rights based on their gender and discrimination⁴.

Violence against women is also defined as practices based on social discrimination that cause physical, psychological, or sexual harm to women. Consequently, these acts and oppression harm women's status, identity, and fundamental freedoms in both ordinary circumstances and armed conflicts, whether domestic or international⁵.

One aspect of violence directed against women is rooted in power, arbitrariness, coercion, discrimination, insult, and aggression, based on the perception that women are unequal to men in all aspects of society and family. These practices and oppression lead to various forms of harm, as highlighted in the earlier definitions. The document issued by the Fourth World Conference on Women emphasized the need to address violence against women, recognizing it as discrimination and gender-based, violating human rights protected

³- Ben Ali, Abdelkader Daoudi, Violence Against Women: An Analytical Study of the Added Materials in Algerian Penal Code, Journal of Islamic Civilization, University of Oran, Volume 14, Number 1, 2018, p. 323.

⁴- World Health Organization (WHO), Violence against women, (consulted on 21/ 11/2023/11:35 AM), <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>.

⁵- World Health Organization (WHO), Violence against women, (consulted on 11/11/2023/07:56 AM), https://www.who.int/health-topics/violence-against-women#tab=tab_1.

by the international community in both ordinary times and conflicts, especially during times of conflict⁶.

Kofi Annan stated the necessity of addressing the practiced violence against women as a form of discrimination and gender-based violation, considering it an affront to human rights⁷. The international community is committed to protecting these rights, whether in ordinary times or conflicts, holding individuals accountable for crimes and legal responsibilities, especially during conflicts.

1.2 Forms of Violence Against Women

1.2.1 Violence Against Women During Peace Times

Violence against women during peacetime takes various forms:

- **Domestic Violence:** Domestic violence is a prevalent practice within households, whether in foreign or Arab countries, involving both simple and affluent families. Perpetrated mainly by fathers as heads of households or husbands as primary household responsible, it often leads to severe consequences, including divorce, escape attempts, and even suicide in extreme cases⁸. The violence manifests through physical abuse, cruelty, and frequently extends to psychological mistreatment, such as mockery, threats, and sexual violence, resulting in significant psychological and moral issues for women and girls. In some cases, it may lead to financial deprivation, withholding sustenance, and even suicide.⁹
- **Violence Against Women from Society:** Women outside the family face inhumane treatment in various settings, including workplaces, public transportation, neighborhoods, universities, schools, and stores. This mistreatment includes physical violence such as beating, abuse, injury, and even murder; psychological mistreatment such as threats, humiliation, extortion, and harassment; and sexual violence, especially harassment in the workplace and rape, particularly during conflicts¹⁰.

1.2.2 Violence Against Women During Armed Conflicts

Women experience more dangerous, violent, and cruel situations during internal conflicts or wars between countries compared to ordinary circumstances. This violence affects women directly and those around them, causing fear for their bodies and mental well-being.

⁶- United Nation Women (UNWOMEN), Types of violence against women and girls, (consulted on 19/11/2023/10:11 AM), <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/faqs/types-of-violence>.

⁷- United Nations (UN), Violence Against Women 'Most Shameful', Pervasive Human Rights Violation, Says Secretary-General in Remarks on International Women's Day, (consulted on 18/11/2023/12:24 AM), <https://press.un.org/en/1999/19990308.sgsm6919.html>.

⁸- Mohamed Amal Fouad, Violence Against Women, Journal of Studies and Research, Egypt, 2004, p. 49.

⁹- Rabia Redouane, Patterns of Violence Against Women and Legal Protection Mechanisms in National Legislation, Journal of Human Rights Generation, Issue 28, Algeria, p. 161.

¹⁰- Human Rights Watch, Abuses against Domestic Workers Around the World, (consulted on 29/11/2023/11:29 AM), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2006/07/28/swept-under-rug/abuses-against-domestic-workers-around-world>.

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The fear includes the threat of sexual assault or harm to their children. Civilians, especially women, constitute the majority facing armed conflict assaults¹¹.

It's worth noting that female combatants undergo all aspects of war similarly to male fighters despite their unequal capabilities and distinctive roles. Female combatants are often exploited by their colleagues or captors for sexual assaults or to perform tasks traditionally assigned to women, such as cleaning, cooking, and sexual services, without considering their opinions on the matter. This exploitation includes human trafficking, genital mutilation, conducting medical tests on reproductive organs, and infertility due to the use of dangerous weapons containing toxic substances¹².

Consequently, female combatants face severe psychological pressures resulting from sexual violations, lack of respect for their privacy during childbirth, pregnancy, or menstruation, and the absence of hygiene and cleanliness resources, as exemplified by the challenges faced by women and girls in Gaza¹³.

2. The Role of International Efforts and Organizations in Combating Gender-Based Violence Against Women

The acknowledgment of violence against women, discrimination, marginalization, and degradation by countries and international institutions did not occur overnight or in a specific place. Instead, it resulted from the evolution and stages of the fight to reclaim the rights of women and girls who suffered violence through a series of legal texts and international resolutions. This recognition is aimed at preserving the dignity of women, promoting their development, and protecting them, whether in ordinary circumstances or during times of conflict.

2.1 The Role of International Agreements

The United Nations Charter is one of the earliest international organizations concerned with gender equality and the dignity of women and men without any discrimination in rights, as stated in Article 1. The Charter focuses on promoting these rights for women and men without discrimination and works towards achieving equality, excluding gender, religion, and language as grounds for discrimination according to the third paragraph¹⁴.

Reflecting the principles of equality and non-discrimination found in the Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights also affirms and emphasizes these principles.

¹¹- United Nation population fund (UNFPA), The Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Girls A Consultative Meeting on Mainstreaming Gender in Areas of Conflict and Reconstruction, (consulted on 13/11/2023/07:46 AM), https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/impact_conflict_women.pdf.

¹²- Dara Kay Cohen, Female Combatants and the Perpetration of Violence: Wartime Rape in the Sierra Leone Civil War, *World Politics*, Volume 65, Issue 03, 2013, p 385.

¹³- United Nation population fund (UNFPA), Checkpoints Compound the Risks of Childbirth for Palestinian Women, (consulted on 15/11/2023/08:45 PM), <https://www.unfpa.org/news/checkpoints-compound-risks-childbirth-palestinian-women#:~:text=The%20Palestinian%20Ministry%20of%20Health,the%20death%20of%20five%20women>.

¹⁴- Abdelaziz Mohamed Serhan, *The Legal Framework of Human Rights in International Law*, First Edition, Dar El Hana for Printing, Cairo, 1987, p. 111.

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Additionally, treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights have contributed to combating discrimination against women. These treaties emphasize equality in economic, social, political, cultural, and civil rights for both men and women.

As a result of previous agreements and the advocacy efforts of women's rights organizations over the years, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was established. CEDAW aims to achieve gender equality, develop families and societies, enact laws to assist women and girls, combat prostitution and all forms of discrimination, and considers gender-based violence as a complete crime with specific elements and conditions. This classification places it within the legal framework¹⁵.

Women are particularly vulnerable to risks and persecution during armed conflicts, whether from enemies or colleagues, such as trafficking, prostitution, and forced pregnancies. Therefore, international efforts to protect women have been manifested through various international conventions addressing issues like rape, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, and human trafficking to prevent and alleviate their suffering¹⁶.

Humanitarian law, a set of international legal rules, aims to resolve humanitarian problems arising from armed conflicts. This law originates from agreements or international customary law¹⁷. Armed conflict represents declared war or any other armed confrontation between two or more parties, or other military groups¹⁸. It grants importance to the protection of civilians, providing general and specific protection for women, respecting their dignity, and protecting them from all acts of violence and threats¹⁹.

The contribution to protection did not stop there, and the International Criminal Court (ICC) furthered the cause by incorporating various violations of women's rights into war crimes, such as rape. Feminist and international organizations and individuals work towards empowering the court to hold Israel accountable for its actions in Palestinian territories²⁰.

¹⁵- United Nations General Assembly, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, (consulted on 20/11/2023/09:22 PM), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>.

¹⁶- United Nation population fund (UNFPA), The Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Girls A Consultative Meeting on Mainstreaming Gender in Areas of Conflict and Reconstruction, (consulted on 20/11/2023/10:44 PM), https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/impact_conflict_women.pdf.

¹⁷- Stanislaw A. Nahlik, A Brief Overview of International Humanitarian Law, International Review of the Red Cross, Geneva, 1984, p. 79.

¹⁸- United Nation Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), International Armed Conflict (IAC), (consulted on 27/11/2023/08:30 AM), <https://www.undrr.org/understanding-disaster-risk/terminology/hips/so0001>.

¹⁹- Al-Fatlawi, Suhail Hussein, and Emad Mohamed Rabea, International Humanitarian Law, 1st edition, Dar Al-Thaqafa, Alexandria, 2007, p. 170.

²⁰- Directorate General for Internal Policies, Gender Equality and Women's Rights In Palestinian territories, (consulted on 22/11/2023/11:55 AM), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/document/activities/cont/201110/20111027ATT30536/20111027ATT30536EN.pdf>.

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2.2 Efforts of Non-Governmental International Organizations in Developing Women's Protection from Violence

Several non-governmental women's organizations have emerged, contributing significantly to monitoring and observing human rights situations for women. These organizations have fought for a long time to improve women's conditions worldwide and monitor violations through various initiatives to highlight the oppression and violence women face. Through protests, opposition, articles, myths, and legends, all aimed at increasing awareness of women's issues globally and advocating for their justice²¹.

These organizations have become influential in shaping both domestic and international policy-makers, gaining a status in human rights protection and situation monitoring that sometimes surpasses that of countries. Therefore, many agreements recognize the role of non-governmental organizations, such as the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women²².

Despite improvements in various aspects of women's lives, discrimination against them persists. The focus on women's protection globally has witnessed progressive stages and numerous actions. Women's organizations have called for the adoption of various mechanisms and measures to combat these violations at both the national and international levels. Consequently, the issue of violence against women has been placed on the agenda within the context of working towards asserting women's rights in the United Nations.

The interaction between women's advocacy worldwide and United Nations initiatives over the past few decades has been a driving force in drawing attention to this issue. Non-governmental organizations have played a crucial role in raising awareness, advocating for women's rights, and influencing policies and international discussions. The issue of violence against women has become a focal point in the broader struggle for gender equality and the protection of women's rights on a global scale.

In its early stages, international women's organizations and associations focused their initiatives on addressing violence within families. This was done through plans developed by organizations, such as those adopted by the World Conference for the International Women's Year in Mexico City in 1975. The conference called for the implementation of programs that help resolve conflicts arising within the family environment.

The role of women's organizations in confronting and addressing various forms of violence at the international level increased starting from the 1980s, particularly after the Nairobi Conference, part of the Third World Conference on Women. The outcomes of the Nairobi Conference highlighted the recognition of violence, oppression, and mistreatment

²¹- Mahnaz Afkhami, Yakin Ertürk and Ann Elizabeth Mayer, *Feminist Advocacy Family Law and Violence Against Women International Perspectives*, (consulted on 19/11/2023/11:38 AM), <https://idrc-crddi.ca/sites/default/files/sp/Images/IDRC%20Books/idl-57272.pdf>.

²²- Sakshi John, *Role of Human Rights NGOs In International Human Rights Protection*, (consulted on 19/11/2023/09:22 AM), <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/role-human-rights-ngos-international-protection-sakshi-john>.

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directed towards women globally in various forms, whether at home or in society during times of peace or conflict. The conference considered these acts as obstacles to women's progress, prosperity, and the achievement of the three elements of the International Women's Decade – equality, development, and peace.

The early 1990s marked a strong push to support associations and their efforts to recognize that violence against women is a human rights issue. This involved exerting pressure on the international community to include women's rights in the broader human rights framework. An example of this is the gathering during the World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna in 1993. Thousands of signatures from numerous countries were presented to the conference, acknowledging that violence against women worldwide constitutes a violation of women's human rights. This led to an affirmation of the universality of women's rights and efforts to prevent violence against women²³.

The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women emphasizes that violence against women is a manifestation of gender inequality, leading to the dominance and exercise of discrimination by men over women. The declaration outlines various forms and types of violence against women, whether within the family, in the broader community, or perpetrated by political systems. It acknowledges that women of different ages experience discrimination, highlighting specific categories of women, such as minority women, refugees, detainees, disabled women, and those affected by armed conflict²⁴.

Political systems are urged to adhere to and implement a set of measures outlined in the declaration and international treaties concerning the legal protection of women to prevent and combat violence. These measures include preventing the use of customs and traditions as excuses, tightening sanctions against violators and perpetrators of crimes against women, such as assault, rape, and violence, and promoting awareness through education and information dissemination. This was emphasized by the Fourth World Conference on Women with the adoption of the Beijing Declaration in 1995.

During the formulation of the foundational system for the International Criminal Court at the Rome Conference, numerous international and non-governmental organizations, including settlement organizations, contributed to emphasizing the protection and preservation of women. They actively worked on tracking criminals who committed offenses against women and incorporating relevant provisions into the Charter. Indeed, the Rome Conference highlighted a range of crimes against women that would be punishable under the Rome Statute²⁵.

²³- United Nation (UN), Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, (consulted on 15/11/2023/08:30 PM), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-elimination-violence-against-women>.

²⁴- Charlotte Lindsey-Curtet, Addressing the Needs of Women Affected by Armed Conflict, (consulted on 20/11/2023/11:10 PM), <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/46e943780.pdf>.

²⁵- Pam Spees, Women's Advocacy in the Creation of the International Criminal Court: Changing the Landscapes of Justice and Power, (consulted on 20/11/2023/09:30 PM), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/375498>.

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The Popular Movement for Human Rights Education (PDHRE) provided valuable contributions, offering materials for the training of future generations of activists in the field of women's rights²⁶. PDHRE played a significant role in advancing women's rights through the pioneering booklet "Passport to Dignity" and the video series titled "Women Hold Up the Sky."

Since October 7, 2023, attacks on the rights of Palestinian women have become more severe and horrifying. They have been subjected to war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. About 70% of the casualties in Gaza, including women, children, journalists, medical staff, UN employees, and members of civil society organizations, are women. The impact has been particularly significant for mothers who lost their children, had them mutilated, suffered serious injuries, or do not know their whereabouts.

The suffering has intensified with the majority of hospitals in Gaza ceasing operations and the closure of primary healthcare centers. This has led to childbirth under inhumane, harsh, and dangerous conditions, such as giving birth without anesthesia or away from maternity wards amid bombings, shortage of supplies, medications, and absence of hygiene products.

Israel's actions against Palestinian women can be described as a violation of the right to life under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and as an act of genocide under the Genocide Convention. Several articles of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women address these violations. Women in Gaza feel forgotten, as the international community spends a long-time repeating statistic without effective solutions.

Conclusion:

International organizations, through international agreements and states via national legislation, have transformed individuals' obligation to fully implement the rights stipulated in international agreements and national laws. They have worked to empower women to exercise their rights and ensure their security. The collaboration between official and non-official entities is crucial to exert more efforts to reinterpret several international instruments for human rights and improve various mechanisms to guarantee protection and equality between men and women, especially in the face of the increasing global reality of violence.

Non-governmental organizations have played a crucial role based on the premise that women cannot truly exercise their human rights if they are unaware of these rights. To protect women's rights, there must be a dissemination of the culture of women's rights, how to protect them, and ways to enhance them. This involves certain conditions and mechanisms, whether at the official or non-official educational institution level, achieved through training and education for advocacy.

²⁶- Human Security Network, Understanding Human Rights Manual on Human Rights Education, consulted on 10/11/2023/02:43 PM), <https://www.etc-graz.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Manual-Eng-V1.pdf>.

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Countries contribute to protecting women and preventing persecution against them by encouraging women and feminist movements to monitor political systems' protective roles. This ensures that governments fulfill their obligations as outlined in human rights instruments. This opportunity allows authorized bodies, in accordance with international treaties, to hold their governments accountable by preparing and submitting reports to the specialized committees arising from international agreements related to the protection of women. This coordination achieves its goals through collaboration between domestic and international non-governmental organizations, using reports to understand the local reality by local organizations.

Furthermore, states and their political institutions should contribute to this field by facilitating the work of non-governmental organizations in volunteering, crafting public policies, and participating in and partnering for development. This involves training informal actors and seeking their input when developing policies for women's protection and empowerment, engaging in joint campaigns, and formulating coherent policies.