

WEEPING SOULS OF WARFARE: THE PROTECTION OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN UNDER IHL DURING HOSTILITIES*

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International Humanitarian Law (IHL) provides an extensive framework for protecting women and children during armed conflicts. Despite the safeguards enshrined in the Geneva Conventions, their Additional Protocols, and other global instruments, significant gaps persist in both the scope and enforcement of these protections. The changing nature of modern warfare, marked by sophisticated technology, non-state actors, and complex political agendas, has further tested IHL's ability to deliver effective protection. This study explores the shortcomings of the current legal framework, the continuing impact of conflicts across the globe, and the inconsistencies in applying IHL. It highlights the urgent need for legal reforms, dedicated protections, and proactive strategies to prevent hostilities and strengthen the rights and safety of women and children in conflict situations. The research employs a mixed method of doctrinal and qualitative approaches, examining the rights and protections afforded to women and children through an extensive literature review and analysis of primary and secondary sources. The findings reveal that while IHL offers a strong theoretical basis for protection, its real-world application is often hindered by political agendas, limited enforcement mechanisms, and the emergence of new forms of warfare. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for a renewed legal vision that not only governs armed conflict but actively works to prevent it, including a dedicated international instrument for women's and children's rights, the formation of an empowered global enforcement body, and the redistribution of power within international organizations to ensure neutrality and fairness in protecting those most vulnerable during times of war.

Keywords

protection of women and children, International Humanitarian Law, warfare, human rights, international organization

1. Introduction

It is often said that ‘war is inevitable’. *Heraclitus* wrote, “*Polemos is the father of all things*,” Polemos – war – and not divine Providence or the love of peace. Polemos “designates some as mortals and others as immortals”; he disenchants, demythologizes, and sows revolution. He “makes some men free, and others slave” (Glucksmann & Canto-Sperber 2024).

* DOI 10.21868/PGnG.2025.2.4.

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Albert Einstein, the greatest genius of the twentieth century, in a letter dated July 30, 1932, asked the century's most influential psychologist Sigmund Freud, "*Is there any way of delivering mankind from the menace of war?*" (Parens 2014, 34). In reply, Freud sent an elaborate and long letter to Einstein. He stated in his letter that, "*Like every living being, man is driven by two equally powerful instincts. One, eros, is creative, unifying; the other, thanatos (or the death instinct), is aggressive and destructive. What makes human beings so responsive to the drums of war is a natural passion for destruction, a primal urge to reduce life to inert matter. And when this death instinct can ally itself with the creative drive through a great purpose, as when war is unleashed for the purity of the Aryan race, or for the glory of the brotherhood of Allah – the combined instinctual gratification is well-nigh irresistible.*" (Gordon 2008). Although Henry Parens rejected Sigmund Freud's view in his book, back then *Albert Einstein* called Freud's letter "*truly classic... something altogether magnificent.*" (Gordon 2008).

The "inevitability of war" is a widely discussed topic. War is often seen as an unavoidable truth, even in our dreams. Therefore, in this current era, with multiple ongoing conflicts worldwide, more attention should be focused on reducing suffering during warfare. While this study is conducted under safe conditions, the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights (hereinafter Geneva Academy) is simultaneously monitoring over 110 armed conflicts across the globe (Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights). The widespread displacement and suffering caused by armed conflicts and war deeply affect people. This raises the question: if war is unavoidable and inevitable, how can the suffering it causes be reduced?

Safeguarding women and children during armed conflicts has always been a central objective of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Although the Geneva Conventions (hereinafter GC), their Additional Protocols (hereinafter AP), and other global instruments provide notable protections for these vulnerable groups, significant gaps persist in both their scope and enforcement. The realities of contemporary warfare, marked by sophisticated technology, the involvement of non-state actors, and complex political agendas, have further tested IHL's ability to deliver effective protection. This study explores the shortcomings of the current legal framework, the continuing impact of conflicts across the globe, and the inconsistencies in applying IHL. It also underscores the urgent need for legal reforms, dedicated protections, and proactive strategies to prevent hostilities and strengthen the rights and safety of women and children in conflict situations.

1.1. Scope of the study

We are living in an era where identifying the "David and Goliath" is more challenging than dealing with the situations confronting the world community. In other words, due to social boundaries, identifying the evil force that runs through the veins of *Homo sapiens* is more difficult than preventing such a force. While we may not have witnessed the atrocities of the First and Second World Wars, the War in Vietnam, the War in Korea, or the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, this generation is witnessing ongoing international conflicts across the globe, including wars between Russia and Ukraine, Palestine and Israel, as well as civil wars in Sudan, Syria, and Myanmar.

The scope of this study is immensely relevant in the current epoch. The application of Humanitarian Law in armed conflict and warfare is not limited; rather, it is expansive, making the content of this research both pragmatic and significant. This research aims to discover effective ways to implement Humanitarian Law to protect women and children from the atrocities of warfare and modern armed conflict. It also seeks to identify and suggest to the international community how to work collaboratively to reduce, rather than exacerbate, the adverse effects of warfare on women and children, thereby building a future where humanity can survive in harmony and peace.

1.2. Literature review

This paper examines a critical dimension of study, containing a vast and multifaceted arena of academic discussion on IHL, reflecting the evolving nature of legal norms and recent developments in humanitarian concerns. There is a substantial amount of research on the protection of women and children under IHL, where authors, jurists, and legal experts across the world have expressed their findings and opinions regarding this much-discussed area. As noted in the introduction, besides international instruments, to analyze the collected data on current hostilities occurring in the present world, we shall scrutinize relevant books, journals, publications, reports, news articles, and internet websites.

The existing literature is reviewed in this paper, which, through an academic approach, highlights the impact of war on women and children, identifying them as the most vulnerable victims of modern warfare. Academic and legal analyses frame these casualties within the context of IHL. These analyses highlight how deliberate targeting, siege warfare, and neglect of civilian safety increase vulnerability, while also focusing on the need for accountability mechanisms to prevent and punish such violations.

Parens (Parens 2014) discussed the human psychology of conflicts, war, and aggression, emphasizing that war is a human construct influenced by sociopolitical elements rather than an inevitable event. This theoretical observation highlights the necessity of having a proper legal framework, such as IHL, to control and reduce the impacts caused by wars on vulnerable populations, especially women and children, who suffer disproportionately in war zones. *Nicholson* (Nicholson 2004) traced the evolution of warfare from medieval Europe, where women and children were typically viewed as collateral damage without formal protection. *Pictet* (Pictet 1994) and *Kabir and Chowdhury* (Kabir & Chowdhury 2015) codified the rules of IHL that progressively recognize non-combatants' rights, derived from conventions explicitly addressing women and children's protection in hostile events.

Bothe et al. (Bothe, Partsch & Solf 1982) provide an authoritative review of the existing legal provisions for protecting victims of armed conflicts, highlighting women's and children's vulnerabilities, which require special safeguards from sexual violence, forced recruitment of child soldiers, and violation of civilians' rights, among others. *Krill* (Krill 1985) specifically focuses on the protection of women and children, emphasizing how IHL prohibits gender-based violence and ensures humane treatment during warfare. However, *Chernova* (Chernova 2024) criticizes the traditional principles adopted in contemporary humanitarian law for their insufficient nature regarding

integrating gender justice, which is hampered by warfare. *Plattner* (Plattner 1984) and *Arnold* (Arnold 2006) examine the legal status and offered protections regarding the safeguard of children in armed conflicts, highlighting the concept of ‘child soldier’ and special protections offered under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereinafter UNCRC). *Kilkelly, Lundy and Byrne* (Kilkelly, Lundy & Byrne 2013) discuss domestic incorporation with the provisions of UNCRC, underlining the challenges toward enforcement of the existing frameworks despite widespread ratification. Moreover, *Haydon* (Haydon 2020) and *Bosch* (Bosch 2012) provide a vast analysis on the protection of children from detention, prosecution, and execution.

More recent studies on the protection of women and children under IHL are also included through various contemporary scholarly works and reports that portray the direct and indirect effects of warfare. Women and children are more likely to experience sexual assault, forced displacement, and loss of access to healthcare and education during and after wars, according to reports from *ReliefWeb* (ReliefWeb 2024) and the *Center for Preventive Action and the Council on Foreign Relations* (Center for Preventive Action 2023–2024). A growing awareness of the need for gender- and age-sensitive humanitarian interventions is demonstrated by the *UN press* (United Nations 2024), which also notes that record-high violations in recent conflicts have prompted the international community to investigate ways to reinforce norms protecting women and children during hostilities. *Brandão* (Godoy Brandão 2023) underscores how stereotypes and cultural biases hinder effective gender justice in warfare.

From the existing literature, it is evident that current IHL scholarship has given insufficient attention to enforcement politics and the lack of integration of cyber and economic warfare into IHL analysis. Therefore, this research will focus on a case-based comparison of recent conflicts and the mechanisms to implement IHL to ensure the protection of children and women during warfare.

1.3. Methodology

Using a mixed method of doctrinal and qualitative approaches, this article will examine the rights and protections of women and children during armed conflicts and warfare. The study will be developed primarily through an extensive literature review, focusing on the Geneva Conventions (GC), their Additional Protocols (AP), and other relevant international instruments adopted by the global community that address the protection of vulnerable groups in armed conflicts, especially women and children. In addition, a wide range of secondary sources such as books, peer-reviewed journal articles, research reports, news publications, and international case precedents will be analyzed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

Using an analytical method, the collected data will be critically examined to identify existing legal protections, gaps, and challenges in the implementation of IHL concerning women and children. The study will interpret the findings to address key research concerns and evaluate the extent to which current international frameworks are effective in mitigating the adverse impacts of warfare on these groups. Lastly, this qualitative and analytical study explains some case studies regarding the practical situations of women and children during warfare by providing a comparative study of incidents taking place in Ukraine, Gaza, Syria, Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan, Myanmar,

and Ethiopia. It aims to derive well-reasoned suggestions and practical conclusions, contributing to the development of more effective mechanisms for ensuring the protection of women and children in contemporary armed conflicts.³

1.4. Objectives of the study and research questions

The research shall be carried out with the following particular objectives and goals:

- (a) Conduct a thorough study of international instruments related to the rights and protection of women and children during humanitarian situations.
- (b) Identify the shortcomings in existing legal instruments in this regard.

In this article, we shall find the answers to the following questions:

- (a) Are the existing instruments of IHL sufficient for providing protection to women and children in wartime?
- (b) What steps can be adopted to combat the challenges and improve IHL?

2. Protection of women and children under IHL during warfare

As it is stated, *“No nation can ever be worthy of its existence that cannot take its women along with the men. No struggle can ever succeed without women participating side by side with men. There are two powers in the world; one is the sword and the other is the pen. There is great competition and rivalry between the two. There is a third power stronger than both, that of the women.”* (Khalid 2023). Women are the fuel of a society; consequently, without women, the progress of a society is unimaginable. In other words, women are one of the sensitive portions of society, and their victimization may cause greater damage to society compared to damage to anything else. Hence, to cause harm and grave damage to a society, nation, or country, women have become the unmanifested primary target of war nowadays.

What is more, *“Children are the world’s most valuable resource and its best hope for the future”* (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum), as said by U.S. President John F. Kennedy. How a nation will be able to encounter and deal with the future depends upon how that nation grooms its future generation. So, it may be stated that children are the most sensitive portion of a population, containing the future of a nation, and are often targeted in hostilities between two separate parties.

Before the Second World War, there was no distinctive international structure of statutory instruments regarding humanitarian law devoted to ensuring the protection of women and children in periods of serious danger of war. Indeed, the lessons learned from the horror of two world wars, within a short term of 20 years, made clear how vital it was to create a body of public international law to safeguard civilian populations, including children, during times of violent conflict, which resulted in the conventions of August 12th, 1949, also known as the GCs. Since the Second World War, the international community has witnessed the appearance of new kinds of conflicts. Methods and means of warfare have become increasingly sophisticated. Conflicts

³ Even though the study has been conducted with the highest effort, there are some limitations, such as the financial scarcity to conduct this research with its utmost efficacy; and the research has been conducted within a limited period, therefore, the limited time available may be the biggest constraint and obstacle to conducting this study most efficiently.

opposing regular armed forces and irregular combatants are more frequent. In modern warfare, losses are much more severe among civilians, including women and children (Plattner 1984, 140).

2.1. Comprehensive protection for women under IHL

IHL provides an extensive framework to ensure the protection of women during armed conflicts, recognizing their specific vulnerabilities and needs. Though no single treaty exclusively addresses women, various provisions within the GCs of 1949 and their AP I and II of 1977 offer robust safeguards for women in all circumstances, whether as civilians, detainees, combatants, or prisoners of war (Krill 1985, 339).

One of the most significant normative achievements of IHL in relation to women is the clear and unconditional prohibition of sexual and gender-based violence. Provisions such as Article 27 of GC IV and Articles 75 and 76 of AP I categorically outlaw rape, enforced prostitution, and comparable abuses in both international and non-international armed conflicts (Krill 1985, 342). The precision of these prohibitions represents a notable strength of the legal framework, particularly given their subsequent recognition in international criminal law as constituting war crimes and crimes against humanity. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these norms is frequently undermined in practice. The predominantly gender-neutral language of IHL, while intended to ensure equal protection, often inadequately reflects the structural and gender-specific nature of violence experienced by women during armed conflict. Persistent obstacles to enforcement, including stigma, underreporting, limited access to judicial remedies, and the involvement of non-state armed groups, further weaken the practical impact of these protections, exposing a persistent gap between formal legal guarantees and their real-world implementation.

The law also ensures preferential treatment for pregnant women and mothers of small children, guaranteeing them access to food, healthcare, and protection from displacement or forced labor (Krill 1985, 343). According to GC IV Article 38(5), states must continue applying domestic protections to such vulnerable groups. Internees must be housed in separate facilities, supervised by women, with adequate sanitary conditions and medical care (Krill 1985, 343). Women in detention or under the control of opposing forces are entitled to humane treatment. They must have separate quarters and be supervised by female personnel. Pregnant women or mothers with infants should not be transferred if medically inadvisable, and arrangements for early release or repatriation are encouraged [GC IV Article 132(2)]. While IHL does not categorically abolish the death penalty, it imposes critical limitations [AP I Article 76(2)]. Moreover, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) discourages executing pregnant women and mothers of dependent children, which is also applicable in internal conflicts, and explicitly prohibits executing pregnant women and minors [AP II Article 6(4)].

During hostilities, warring parties must distinguish civilians from combatants and avoid targeting non-combatants (AP I Article 48). IHL also emphasizes this distinction and forbids acts aimed at spreading terror [AP II Article 13(1)]. Special protections for pregnant women and mothers are reinforced in hospital zones and aid distribution mechanisms under GC IV and AP I (WHO 2025). Moreover, IHL addresses the growing

participation of women in combat. Female prisoners of war must receive the same respect and protection as their male counterparts, with separate living quarters and punishments administered under female supervision [GC III Article 14(3)]. In internal armed conflicts, Common Article 3 and AP II uphold similar standards for female fighters. Overall, IHL adopts a gender-sensitive approach (Godoy 2023) to conflict, ensuring that women's rights and dignity are upheld across all contexts of warfare, thereby reaffirming the core humanitarian principles even amidst the harsh realities of war (Chernova 2024).

2.2. Comprehensive protection of children under IHL

IHL and related international instruments provide both general and special protections for children during armed conflicts (Plattner 1984, 141). While definitions of children vary globally, the key treaties of IHL offer clarity. The GCs and APs recognize children as those under 15 years (Arnold 2006), whereas the UNCRC defines children as individuals under 18 (UNCRC Article 1). This creates an ambiguity in these globally accepted legal instruments regarding the age and definition of children.

A significant source of legal uncertainty in protecting children under IHL stems from inconsistent age standards for recruitment and participation in hostilities. While the Geneva Conventions (hereinafter GCs) and their Additional Protocols (hereinafter APs) prohibit the recruitment and direct involvement of children under 15, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereinafter CRC) defines a child as any person under 18 years of age. This discrepancy undermines the coherence of the legal framework and poses substantial enforcement challenges. Although the Rome Statute classifies the recruitment of children under 15 as a war crime, it leaves those aged between 15 and 17 insufficiently protected, allowing their exploitation under claims of voluntary enlistment. Such inconsistency complicates state obligations, weakens accountability mechanisms, and creates tension between viewing child soldiers as victims requiring protection and as actors potentially subject to criminal responsibility. Consequently, despite the progressive evolution of child protection norms, divergent age thresholds continue to impede the effective safeguarding of children in armed conflict.

Over time, the protection of children in conflict has evolved. The 1977 APs expanded upon the 1949 GCs (Bothe, Partsch & Solf 1982, 52). Adopted in 1989 and supplemented by three Optional Protocols (hereinafter OPs), the UNCRC established a comprehensive framework for child protection (Kilkelly, Lundy & Byrne 2013, 442). The Committee on the Rights of the Child, formed in 1991, monitors compliance (Skelton 2017). IHL ensures general protection for children as part of the civilian population, shielding them from direct attacks, coercion, torture, and terror tactics in both international and non-international armed conflicts (AP I Article 51). Instruments like AP I, AP II, and Common Article 3 of the GCs reinforce these norms (Plattner 1984, 141).

Beyond general safeguards, children benefit from special protection due to their vulnerability. Furthermore, preferential treatment is mandated for children under 15, pregnant women, and mothers of young children, particularly regarding food, medical care, and humanitarian aid (GC IV Article 38 point 5). Occupying powers must not interfere with such protections, and states are obligated to implement child-friendly laws

and seek international support when necessary (GC IV Article 5). Common Article 3 of the GCs guarantees humane treatment for all non-combatants, including children (GC Common Article 3). Moreover, the UNCRC upholds a child's right to basic needs and adequate living standards (UNCRC Article 4). IHL also mandates safe evacuation, urgent medical care, and protection of children in conflict zones [AP I Article 78; AP II Article 4 para. 3(e)]. Additionally, the UNCRC opposes unjust separation from parents and ensures alternative care for orphans (Reynaert, Bouverne-De Bie & Vandeveld 2009, 518), promoting family reunification, communication rights, and the protection of children's identity and well-being during war (Kabir & Chowdhury 2015, 153).

The UNCRC and GCs prohibit illegal transfers, hostage-taking, and abduction (Panelius 2021). The Rome Statute and APs classify such acts as war crimes and grave breaches of IHL (Schwarz 2014). The UNCRC and OPs prohibit the sexual abuse, exploitation, and trafficking of children (UNCRC Article 34). International Tribunals [see e.g. The Prosecutor v. Anto Furundzija (1998) (ICTY); The Prosecutor v. Jean-Paul Akayesu (1998) (ICTR); The Prosecutor v. Alfred Musema (2000) (ICTR); The Prosecutor v. Dragoljub Kunarac, Radomir Kovac and Zoran Vukovic (2000) (ICTY) etc.] and the Rome Statute [Article 7 para. 1(g)] establish a precedent by prosecuting sexual abuse against minors, acknowledging it as a war crime and a crime against humanity (Boot 2002, 708). IHL also provides protections for children from recruitment as soldiers, detention as POWs, and the death penalty (Bosch 2012, 45). According to the UNCRC, APs, and the OP, children under the age of 15 cannot be recruited, and the participation of individuals under the age of 18 is restricted (UNCRC Article 38). This creates a clear inconsistency and ambiguity in the age limit for recruitment under IHL, specifically between 15 and 18 years old. The UNCRC and GCs require that detention must be a last resort, and children must be kept separate from adult prisons, receiving care, education, and legal assistance (Haydon 2020, 16). Moreover, for those under 18, the death penalty and life imprisonment without the possibility of release are prohibited by the UNCRC, GC IV, and APs (Danilescu 2023, 85). Lastly, children must have access to humanitarian relief, healthcare, nutrition (GC IV Article 89), and education during times of conflict, as required by the UNCRC (Article 24) and GCs (GC IV Articles 14 and 17). APs stress the importance of safety zones, evacuation, and extra safeguards for children (AP II Article 4 para. 3).

3. Current scenario and violations of IHL in ongoing wars

IHL plays a vital role in protecting women and children in times of war, emphasizing the prevention of suffering and safeguarding human dignity. Despite the protections offered by IHL, violations against women and children in conflict zones remain a grave concern. We know that IHL results from the balance struck between the principle of humanity and the principle of necessity (Pictet 1994, 527). The protection of women and children during warfare is both a legal requirement and a moral necessity that embodies the principle of humanity as well as the principles of human rights. However, *'War is the ultimate violation of human rights,'* as stated by Lena Halldén (Albertsdóttir 2023). Where there is war, there are violations of the norms of International Humanitarian Law and, consequently, Human Rights. In the recent past,

no war has occurred within the limitations drawn by the principles adopted by the international community.

Although not as extensive as World War II, significant international and non-international violent conflicts have continued to occur since 1946. Data collected by Uppsala University in Sweden suggests that around 285 distinct armed conflicts have taken place since 1946 (Infoplease 2023). In 2023 alone, approximately 59 armed conflicts were ignited worldwide, according to the Peace Research Institute of Oslo (PRIO), primarily driven by the wars in Ukraine and Gaza (Al Jazeera 2024a). The Geneva Academy monitors around 110 armed conflicts worldwide on a daily basis, focusing on regional aspects (Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights). For the purpose of this study, recent incidents and their after-effects, centering on human suffering, mainly focused on women and children, shall be discussed.

One of the most discussed armed conflicts today is the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, which has lasted over two years. Repressed tension escalated when Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy took initiatives to formally join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (hereinafter NATO) (Singh 2023, 83). Due to Russia's threats of invading Ukraine, UN Security Council meetings were held to de-escalate tensions between the two nations (Ekpe & Abumbe 2024, 2). However, in February 2024, Russia launched a major offensive in Eastern Ukraine (Center for Preventive Action 2024e). Since then, the war has continued, and tensions have spread worldwide. Both Russia and Ukraine have kept their war casualties confidential (Kumar 2024). While 3.7 million people are internally displaced and 6.5 million have fled Ukraine, more than 3,799 women and 289 girls have been killed (UN Women 2025). 14.6 million people need humanitarian assistance (Center for Preventive Action 2024e). Reports suggest that among 13,883 killed civilians, around 726 were children, and among 35,548 injured civilians, around 2,234 were children (Statista 2025). Moreover, Ukraine's birth rate has been dropping by almost 7% a year since 2013, according to the Ministry of Health (Kyiv Post 2024).

The conflict between Palestine and Israel is one of the oldest ongoing wars of the century, beginning just after World War II. Between 1947 and 1949, at least 750,000 Palestinians from a population of 1.9 million became refugees beyond the borders of the state. Zionist forces took more than 78 percent of historic Palestine, ethnically cleansed and destroyed about 530 villages and cities, and killed about 15,000 Palestinians in a series of mass atrocities, including more than 70 massacres (Center for Preventive Action 2024d). This conflict is still ongoing and deserves a distinctive and dedicated study.

After October 7, 2023, when Hamas launched an unexpected major attack on Israeli-controlled territory, approximately 251 Israelis and foreigners, including women, were taken hostage (BBC News 2024a). This long-running conflict then escalated to another dimension. Since then, the conflict has spread into other parts of the region, including Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iran. According to UNICEF, 4,312 Palestinian and 70 Israeli children were verified as killed or mutilated in 2023; over 23,000 reported cases of children killed or injured in that year have yet to be verified due to insecurity, movement restrictions, and significant risks to humanitarian personnel operating in the Strip (UN 2024). Other sources report that since October 7, 2023, around 1,200 Israelis

have died, and 5,431 were injured. Through retaliation attacks by Israeli forces in Gaza, 41,802 Palestinians were killed, and 96,844 were injured. At least 16,456 of those killed are children and over 11,000 are women (Al Jazeera 2024b). A UN report suggests that women and children make up about 70% of the UN-verified Gaza conflict deaths (Moench 2024). A UK-based monitoring group, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), has recorded 503,064 fatalities in the Syrian Civil War (McIntyre 2020, 261) up until August 2024. It is said that around 139,609 of at least 162,390 civilian casualties were attributable to the Syrian government and its supporters by March 2023. The group estimated that the actual toll from the war was more than 613,400, with an additional 55,000 civilians believed to have died of torture in government-run prisons (SOHR 2023). Although the Assad regime has been overthrown by a transitional government led by President Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria remains restive. Reports suggest that in March 2025 alone, 1,562 people were murdered in Syria, including 33 medical staff, 99 women, and 102 children (SNHR 2025).

Sudan, the largest country in the African region, experienced a civil war from 1983 to 2005, lasting 22 years. This conflict displaced over 4 million people and resulted in an estimated 2 million deaths. The death toll from Sudan's recent civil war is widely disputed, with local health professionals estimating it could range from 20,000 to 150,000. This follows a two-decade conflict in South Sudan and Darfur that killed over 2 million people. Since April 2023, it is believed that over 7 million Sudanese, mostly women and children, have been displaced from their homes and are facing starvation in the desert (Jenkins 2024). According to UN reports, Yemen is experiencing the world's worst humanitarian disaster. It states that 4.5 million people, or one in seven of the population, have been displaced, and 24.1 million people, 80% of the population, require humanitarian aid and protection (BBC News 2023a). Furthermore, UNICEF estimates that approximately 9.8 million children need humanitarian assistance, and over 4.5 million people have been displaced since 2015 (UNICEF 2024). Although the Afghan war officially ended with the withdrawal of coalition forces led by the USA and NATO on August 30, 2021, its aftermath continues to be significant. Reports indicate that the U.S. war in Afghanistan is still claiming lives due to the war-induced collapse of infrastructure, public health, security, and the economy. 92% of the population faces some level of food insecurity, and 3 million children are at risk of acute malnutrition. Some regions are currently experiencing famine, with at least half the population living on less than \$1.90 per day (Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs 2023).

Myanmar has struggled with effective governance among its multiethnic population since gaining independence from British rule in 1948. A violent military onslaught on Rohingya communities has forced over 700,000 people to flee to Bangladesh since August 2017 (Rahman & Sakib 2021, 1). However, according to a report published by UNHCR, "As of 31 December 2023, 971,904 Rohingya refugees have been issued documentation jointly by the Government of Bangladesh and UNHCR. More than half (52%) are children, while 52% comprise women and girls" (UNHCR 2023a). As of September 30, 2024, approximately 1,341,224 Rohingya refugees are seeking asylum in countries other than Myanmar, and about 1,129,624 of them have become stateless (UNHCR 2023b). The UN Human Rights Commissioner called the situation in Rakhine State "*a textbook example of ethnic cleansing.*" (Center for Preventive Action 2024a). As a result, the conflict caused 2,164 recorded civilian deaths, including women and

children, and 745 fatalities from explosive weapons in 2023. This represents a 121% and 155% increase in injuries and deaths over 2022, respectively. The military is attributed with 88% of the deaths and 85% of these civilian injuries, mainly affecting women and children (ReliefWeb 2024).

The internal conflict in Ethiopia, from 2020 to 2022, was one of the most fearsome military escalations of the century. The Ethiopian government engaged in combat with insurgents from Tigray, a region ruled by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) (Center for Preventive Action 2023). In 2021 alone, 5.1 million Ethiopians became internally displaced, setting a record at the time for the most people internally displaced in any country in a single year (Center for Preventive Action 2023). Unfortunately, the massacre in January 2024 at Merawi, Ethiopia, was not the first, but it was the most horrific to date, with more than fifty civilians, including pregnant women, killed by government forces (Amnesty International 2024; BBC News 2024b). Similar civilian fatalities were documented in the ancient Amhara towns of Lalibela and Majete in September 2023 (Abebe 2024). Reports suggest that, as a result of the prolonged conflict, over two million people have been displaced, and up to 600,000 people are said to have perished in the battle or due to the artificial famine in Tigray (USHMM).

4. Main findings

Throughout this study, we have examined the protection of women and children under International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and the numerous hostilities occurring worldwide. The main findings can be summarized as follows.

4.1. Shortcomings of IHL in safeguarding women and children

Despite the extensive provisions within IHL instruments designed to protect women and children, several limitations exist, as detailed below:

- a) *Focus on Regulation Rather Than Prohibition of Violence*: IHL aims to control and regulate armed conflicts rather than eliminate the use of force entirely. Consequently, it cannot provide complete protection to civilians, especially vulnerable groups like women and children.
- b) *Barriers to Essential Services*: In conflict situations, women and children frequently face greater challenges in accessing medical care, food, shelter, and humanitarian aid. IHL provisions do not always adequately address these inequalities.
- c) *Continued Sexual Violence Despite Prohibitions*: Even with clear prohibitions in IHL, sexual violence against women and children remains widespread during wartime. Weak enforcement and insufficient resources often allow perpetrators to act with impunity.
- d) *Implementation Challenges*: The effective application of IHL is particularly difficult in areas controlled by non-state actors or in fragile states with weak governance. As a result, many of its legal provisions remain theoretical rather than practically enforceable.
- e) *Emergence of New Warfare Strategies*: Modern conflicts increasingly involve advanced technologies such as AI-enabled drones, cyber operations, economic

warfare, and cultural manipulation. These new methods of warfare create gaps that existing IHL frameworks are not equipped to manage.

- f) *Restrictions on Humanitarian Access*: "Security concerns" are often invoked to block or delay humanitarian assistance. Such restrictions deprive civilians, especially women and children, of urgent supplies like food, healthcare, and shelter.

4.2. Present conflict situations

Despite ongoing interventions by international bodies such as the UN, EU, AU, and Arab League, violent conflicts remain widespread. It is estimated that approximately 56 state-based conflicts are currently taking place, manifesting as international, internal, or mixed forms of conflict, collectively surpassing one hundred active hostilities (Humanitarian Action 2024).

In 2023, the UN confirmed 32,990 grave violations affecting 22,557 children across 26 conflict zones. Among these, 5,301 children were killed, while 6,348 were injured or maimed, representing a 35% increase compared to previous years (UN 2024). Although it is well recognized that women and children are among the worst-affected groups in wars, reliable statistics regarding their suffering are often concealed, underreported, or left undocumented (Bendavid et al. 2021, 522).

4.3. Ambiguity in applying IHL

The enforcement of IHL is not uniform and often depends on the nature of the conflict. The involvement of numerous actors – political, criminal, ethnic or religious – makes its implementation highly complex. Additionally, IHL rules cannot be enforced against groups or states that have not consented to its treaties or conventions. This lack of universality undermines its effectiveness. Such ambiguity exposes significant gaps in IHL. While much effort is devoted to theoretical development, the lack of practical mechanisms for enforcement continues to prevent IHL from fully achieving its fundamental aim of protecting civilians, especially women and children.

4.4. Political influence on IHL

The role of politics in shaping and applying International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is undeniable. Powerful states often enforce or ignore IHL selectively, depending on their political or strategic priorities. For instance, during conflicts in Afghanistan and Yemen, Western nations imposed economic sanctions, which deepened famine and civilian suffering, yet these outcomes received little international attention. Conversely, when grave violations are committed by Israel, the same Western bloc, led by the United States, frequently remains silent. This selective enforcement undermines the universality of IHL and weakens confidence in its fairness and legitimacy.

5. Recommendations

After careful consideration, the following recommendations are proposed to fulfill the humanitarian objective of protecting women and children in times of armed conflict.

5.1. Updating IHL to reflect modern warfare

Warfare has entered a new dimension, with its methods and strategies, such as cyberattacks and economic coercion, changing rapidly. These changes have revealed serious gaps in the proposed protections under IHL. To meet the evolving expectations of humanity, IHL must be revisited and updated.

5.2. Strengthening legal protections for women

Unlike the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereinafter UNCRC), which ensures protection for children during hostilities, there is no dedicated international treaty exclusively addressing women's rights in conflict situations. As a result, women's suffering often goes unnoticed and unrecorded at the global level, making it difficult to evaluate the true impact of war on them. To address this gap, existing international rules should be expanded and amended. Moreover, it is important to develop a supplementary protocol or convention focused on women in armed conflict.

5.3. Creating a specialized enforcement mechanism

Although tribunals such as the Nuremberg and Tokyo Trials, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL), and the International Criminal Court (ICC) were created to prosecute grave violations, these bodies depend on states for enforcement and lack their own executive powers. Therefore, a more feasible alternative would be to create a specialized IHL compliance unit within an existing international organization to monitor violations affecting women and children and to ensure the necessary support.

5.4. Promoting more equitable decision-making in international bodies

While many international institutions aim to preserve peace, their effectiveness is often hindered by the political dominance of powerful states. The frequent use of veto power, especially in the UN, obstructs collective action and undermines humanitarian goals. While the elimination of veto power may be politically unfeasible, incremental reforms that reduce the influence of a single state can significantly improve responsiveness to crises affecting women and children.

6. Conclusion

This research highlights that while IHL offers a strong theoretical basis for protecting women and children, its real-world application is inconsistent, often hindered by political agendas and limited enforcement mechanisms. Civilians continue to face severe harm during hostilities, exacerbated by outdated legal provisions, selective application, and the absence of effective preventive strategies. The shifting dynamics of modern warfare call for a renewed legal vision – one that not only governs armed conflict but actively works to prevent it. This vision should include a dedicated

international instrument for women's and children's rights, the formation of an empowered global enforcement body, and the redistribution of power within international organizations to ensure neutrality and fairness. Ultimately, the strength and legitimacy of IHL will depend on the global community's ability to rise above political divisions, act collectively, and prioritize the humanitarian imperative to protect those most vulnerable in times of war.

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