UNHRC
United Nations Human Rights Council

TORONTO MODEL UNITED NATIONS
General Assembly Background Guide

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Directors Letter

Good Day Delegates of UNHRC

I'd like to extend my thanks for taking part in TMUN2025 and selecting the UNHRC as your committee of choice. Welcome to the United Nations Human Rights Council, a truly dynamic and influential body that we will be simulating at TMUN2025. My name is Jerone Arristan (he/him) and I have the pleasure of being part of your UNHRC dias.

Some background information on your director, I am a delegate just like you. I have been to multiple Model UN Conferences and have won awards just like some of you who represent true delegate behaviour in this committee. Alongside Model UN, I am the founder and chief of operations for my highschools engineering and electric vehicle team. In addition, I currently work as an IT Systems Administrator for the Archdiocese of Toronto. I love working with technology so if you have any questions regarding that whilst at TMUN or in the future do not hesitate. Alongside this, I am currently an Intelligence Operator with the Canadian Armed Forces which adds some interesting perspectives in my life.

This conference is truly a landmark event and one that people attend from far and wide. While a vast majority of us are from the GTA many come from areas outside of Toronto. This is the environment where many of us thrive. I am referring to the energy of a conference, the friends made along the way, lunch with other delegates and eventually rising up from your seat at closing ceremonies. I echo the sentiments of many other directors by saying, understanding the topic and addressing it in an educated and equitable fashion is key to success in Model UN. Whilst your fellow delegates might not carry themselves in a similar matter to you, Model UN presents an even playing field for all.

Conclusively, I wish to see participation and creativity from all delegates in UNHRC and can't wait to be along for the ride.

Yours Truly,

Jerone Arristan [**jeronearristan@gmail.com**]

Equity Disclaimer

Throughout this committee, we urge delegates to engage with one another in discussions related to the topics in this background guide with professionalism, respect, tact, and diplomacy. It is important to recognize that there may be differences in skill levels and language abilities among participants. We encourage delegates to ensure their positions accurately and thoughtfully reflect the perspectives of their assigned country or character, while being considerate and supportive of these differences.

This Background Guide and the TMUN UNHRC Committee addresses topics that may be disturbing to some delegates, including but not limited to: war-crimes, genocide, violence against women, LGBTQ2+ issues, intimate partner violence, culture & religion based violence, racism and discrimination.

We as a committee must understand that global conflict and human rights issues are sensitive topics and dynamically changing. TMUN recognizes the sensitive nature of these topics and encourages delegates to prioritize their well-being while ensuring they are able to engage with the material effectively. This may involve skipping certain sections of the background guide, taking time to emotionally prepare before engaging with the content, practicing self-care, or seeking support when needed. By managing these aspects, delegates can ensure they are well-equipped to understand the material and participate as competitive, thoughtful contributors.

We request all participants to be mindful of each other's boundaries and comfort levels. TMUN is dedicated to creating a respectful and inclusive environment where discussions are both productive and empathetic. If you have any equity-related concerns, require support with sensitive topics, or have questions, please feel free to contact the TMUN staff for assistance. Committee staff are present for your needs and any lack of equity or respect amongst delegates should be brought to dias or appropriate staff attention immediately.

Committee Description

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) was created with the intent to protect human rights around the world because of its concern about stability between member nations. The UNHRC is ready to uphold equal respect for the human which also suffered through concrete responses to enhance uniform regard by all states for standards of international human rights. As a competent authority, UNHRC deals with promotion of human rights globally, appropriate responses against violations along with coordination among states for effective responses to such challenges.

The UNHRC seeks to address a variety of human rights issues through creating a forum for debate and deliberation on civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. From persecution on political grounds, imbalance or UNEQUAL distribution of resources and economies, the body aims to address various issues plaguing humans and society as a whole. Structure and Membership There are, in total, 47 member states of the Council, elected through the General Assembly of the UN. It is using even geographical regions to assign socially ordered based continent approaches for the seats. There are 13 specifically allocated seats for member states based in Africa. Asian regions then get thirteen representatives. Eight Latin America and Caribbean states Seven of them are open to certain Western European and other nations, the only stand-alone among the countries on the list is Albania. While the Eastern European countries are allocated 6 positions, only 1 seat can be filled by Bulgaria.

Members serve three-year terms that are renewable once but no minister can remain indefinitely. The goal of this voting is to achieve plurality, whilst preventing any single state or states from commandeering the councils. This notwithstanding, a number of member states are reported to be in controversy as related to their respective human rights practices which are undermining the Councils authority. But the UNHRC vis-a-vis its commissions has been allowed to become just another polarised body in the milieu of world interaction with regard to matters Human. Key Functions and Mechanisms

The UNHRC operates through several latter mechanisms, which include the following; general pursuit of the ends of Human Rights:
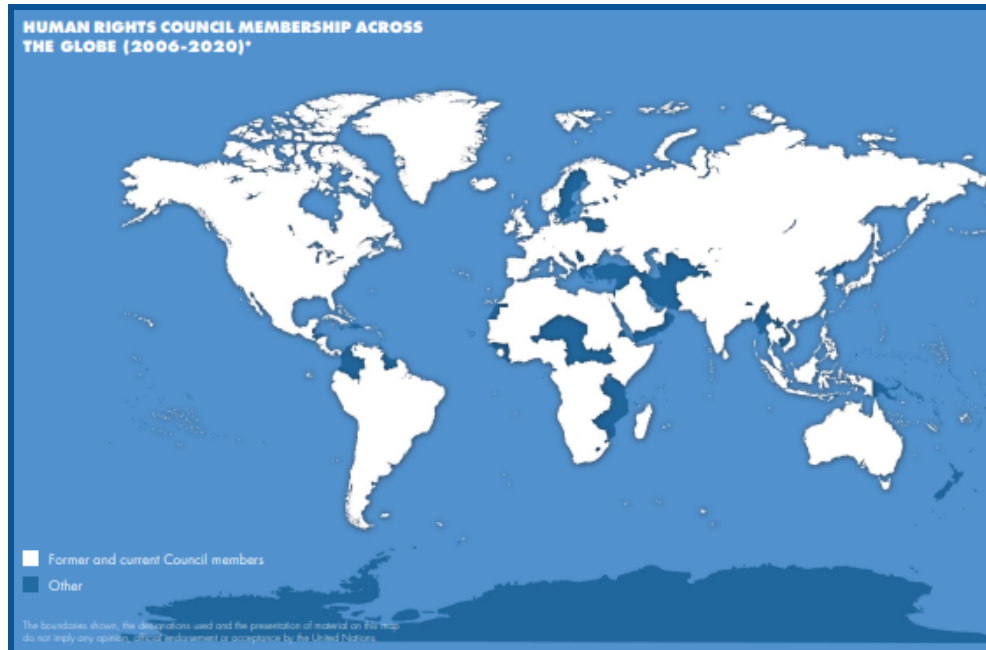
Universal periodic review (UPR) UPR is called as an active Monitoring mechanism for Human Rights Council members, peer-to-peer appraisal of human rights infringement for each nation having United Nations Charter over every 4 or five years. It triggers self-assessment and allows other countries to suggest programmes as part of a model. The UPR affirms the importance of state responsibility not only for enhancing the promotion and protection of human rights but also for subjecting states to limited yet enforceable standards as well.

Special Procedures

The UNHRC has the authority to appoint independent experts referred to as Special Rapporteurs, who specialise in studying particular human rights issues pertinent to identified countries or regions. Regardless of principles or frameworks, the policies are country-specific.These people go around the world collecting data on issues and recommendations for dealing with them so that he can provide an impartial view of events and contribute to improve international attention to the matter and its solution.

Complaint Procedure; It is a tool that enables individuals, groups and even organisations to file complaints with the Council regarding human rights violations. And, in this manner, the Council can document endemic human rights violations and engage with the state concerned on the issue privately so that it can be addressed without repeating. The Complaint Procedure, for example, allows the story of those trampled on to be heard putting the Council within reach of people worldwide.

Human Rights Resolutions and Reports It should be mentioned that both the UNHRC periodic reports and use resolutions are on certain human rights issues either specific to the country or concerning all countries. Such actions may include calls for investigations and the establishment of sanctions including or other diplomatic measures, depending on the severity of the human rights situation. This kind of resolution is expected to change UN behavior, globally raise awareness as well as force a national change in practice. The Committee does not address individual cases; however, it supports the Council by providing its expertise and noting recommendations for addressing broader human rights problems. And a lot of referrals to other bodies too. In the pertinent fields, there has been a great deal of attention on Tunisia, North Korea, Iran. Syria, as well as Myanmar and Yemen. This confirms that the Council has fulfilled its charge, to address matters in these areas including free expression, torture, exploitation and discrimination as well refugee rights and other minority interests on farms in western Saharan too.

HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP ACROSS
THE GLOBE (2006-2020)*

■ Former and current Council members
■ Other

The boundaries shown, the designations used and the presentation of material on this map
do not imply any opinion whatsoever endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations

The UNHRC has for instance targeted the allegedly Muslim women, advocated and supported LGBTIQ rights inclusive policies, as well as women and child violence and exploitation policies. The fact that more and more countries comply and take seriously the recommendations given is a clear indication that there has been some positive effect on the member states by the UPR. Even when the country is not mentioned, compliance has been manifested in legislative, policy and institutional changes across many member states. Context must be supplied to the current circumstance. Abuses were noted as being carried out. Most nations stayed silent. There have been no blind spots since the US moved away strategically from the region. But how can that be injustice if the US has not taken action? Dictatorship be called stayed weden challenged So much for how US officials have referred to peaceful protests in Iran. In fact, the UNHRC has always been controversial since its establishment and has constantly been responding to criticisms.

The selection method for making the Council's membership is also criticised by some who point out that many of the current members come from states with a significant history of human rights abuses which sometimes obstructs the work of council. There are also problems about the clearly politicised nature of some actions by the Council in this regard, with many resolutions — and even investigations — being politically motivated. Moreover, the reality that the Council cannot punish states for violations of its own voluntary resolutions and recommendations renders such covenants near impossible to implement. Its efficacy principally relies upon the individual adaptation and startup of the suggestions by part states. For these deficiencies, there seems to be fronted recommendations for reform actions that would allow the

Council to weigh and cope with pushing ahead for the desire of human rights. Conclusion The UN Human Rights Council is a key actor on the human rights stage, and in exercising her functions, By this, we mean the Council specifically of its important initiatives and mechanisms as well as other programs that deal with these issues such as violation, calling for changes and supporting the international human rights apparatus. During its transition, the Council will be pursuing protection and promotion of the universal human rights that are recognized in international law consistent with operating as a body seeking to build a democratic world community on the basis of respect for, and observance of, human rights fully for all.

Topic A - Civilians at risk in Global Conflict Zones
Overview

Civilians have increasingly become the primary victims in modern armed conflicts, facing direct attacks, displacement, starvation, and lack of access to medical aid. International humanitarian law (IHL), primarily codified through the Geneva Conventions, emphasizes the protection of civilians, but its implementation remains challenging amid asymmetric warfare and urban conflicts. Recent crises, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Gaza and the ongoing war in Ukraine, have exposed systemic failures to ensure the safety of non-combatants, exacerbated by inadequate international enforcement mechanisms and a lack of political will among states.

The concept of safety zones — demarcated areas designed to protect civilians from the effects of conflict — has existed since World War II but has seen mixed success. The failures in places like Srebrenica during the Bosnian War have highlighted the dangers of underfunded and poorly enforced protection mechanisms. While safety zones like those implemented in Syria by international coalitions have had some success, they remain contentious due to sovereignty concerns, political interference, and logistical hurdles.

In Gaza, the lack of protected corridors and the widespread targeting of civilian infrastructure in 2023 have raised urgent questions about the efficacy of current systems. Beyond legal frameworks, operational challenges include ensuring neutrality, gaining combatant compliance, and addressing

resource limitations for displaced populations. This topic calls for innovative approaches to uphold the principles of IHL, redefine safety zone implementation, and penalize violations more effectively.

Timeline

Pre-20th Century Foundations of Civilian Protection

- **1864**: The First Geneva Convention is adopted, marking the establishment of modern international humanitarian law (IHL). While focused on wounded soldiers, it lays the groundwork for protecting civilians by emphasizing non-combatant status.
- **1899-1907**: The Hague Conventions establish limitations on the methods of warfare, codifying the principle that civilians should not be targeted. This era sees the formalization of the distinction between combatants and non-combatants in conflict zones.
- **19th Century Context**: Despite these legal developments, civilian populations frequently bear the brunt of colonial conflicts, with mass atrocities committed in campaigns such as the Herero and Namaqua genocide (1904-1908).

World Wars and the Creation of Modern IHL (1914-1945)

- **World War I (1914-1918)**: Civilians face chemical weapon attacks, forced displacement, and starvation due to blockades. The war's unprecedented brutality prompts calls for stricter protections.
- **1939-1945**: World War II sees systematic attacks on civilians, including the Holocaust, the strategic bombing of cities, and the use of nuclear weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These events catalyze the post-war expansion of IHL.
- **1949**: The Geneva Conventions are revised to include comprehensive civilian protections under Common Article 3, addressing internal and international conflicts.

Post-War Developments and Cold War Era (1945-1990)

- **1948**: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) establishes civilian protection as a human right.
- **1977**: Two Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions expand protections for civilians in both international and internal conflicts. Protocol I introduces concepts such as safety zones and human rights-based military operations.

- **1980s**: Proxy wars during the Cold War, including those in Vietnam and Afghanistan, see large-scale civilian casualties. In Afghanistan, over 1 million civilians die, largely due to Soviet aerial bombardments.

Post-Cold War and the Era of R2P (1990-2010)

- **1991**: Gulf War showcases precision-guided weapons designed to minimize civilian harm, but post-conflict sanctions exacerbate civilian suffering.
- **1992-1995**: The Bosnian War introduces the concept of UN-declared "safe zones." The Srebrenica massacre, where over 8,000 Bosniak men and boys are killed, underscores the dangers of poorly enforced zones.
- **1994**: Rwandan Genocide kills over 800,000 civilians, as the international community fails to intervene. This tragedy led to the establishment of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine in 2005.

Contemporary Conflicts (2010-Present)

- **2011**: NATO's intervention in Libya is justified under R2P, though the aftermath raises questions about civilian safety in power vacuums.
- **2014-2021**: The Syrian Civil War devastates civilian populations, with chemical weapons attacks and the siege of Aleppo becoming emblematic of modern urban warfare.
- **2023**: In Gaza, Israeli airstrikes target densely populated areas, killing over 15,000 civilians, including those sheltering in UN-designated safe zones.

Historical Analysis

1. Ancient and Early Modern Practices

The principle of protecting civilians during conflicts can be traced to ancient civilizations, where limited efforts were made to mitigate harm to non-combatants. The Roman Empire occasionally spared civilian populations during conquests, particularly when they posed no military threat or could be integrated into the empire's economy. Similarly, Islamic warfare ethics, as outlined in the Qur'an and Hadith, emphasized sparing women, children, and the elderly during conflicts, reflecting an early form of humanitarian considerations. These principles, however, were not universally upheld and often depended on the specific circumstances or leaders in power.

The medieval period saw some codification of protections for civilians, albeit inconsistently applied. The concept of "just war," developed by theologians like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, sought to limit the scope of warfare to combatants, sparing civilians from harm. However, practices such as the sack of cities during the Crusades demonstrated the gap between theory and practice. Siege warfare often devastated civilian populations, as starvation and disease were used as weapons.

By the early modern period, conflicts like the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) and the Napoleonic Wars highlighted the increasing toll on civilian populations. These wars devastated entire regions, and atrocities such as massacres and the destruction of villages were commonplace. This era demonstrated the need for structured international agreements to protect civilians, though such frameworks were still centuries away.

2. Modern Origins of Civilian Protection

The industrialization of warfare in the 19th century brought new challenges to the protection of civilians. Weapons became more lethal, and conflicts were increasingly fought on larger scales, directly impacting civilian populations. The American Civil War (1861–1865) was a turning point, as General Francis Lieber drafted the **Lieber Code** in 1863. This document, one of the first attempts to codify the laws of war, prohibited the targeting of civilians, marking a significant step toward modern humanitarian law.

The St. Petersburg Declaration of 1868, a multilateral agreement, sought to ban the use of explosive weapons that caused unnecessary suffering, implicitly addressing civilian harm. Similarly, the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 codified rules of war, including the treatment of non-combatants. These agreements represented the growing international recognition of the need to protect civilians, though enforcement remained weak.

The early 20th century saw the formal establishment of international humanitarian law (IHL) with the Geneva Conventions of 1864 and their later revisions in 1906 and 1929. These agreements primarily focused on combatants but laid the groundwork for later expansions that would include civilians. Despite these advances, World War I (1914–1918) exposed the limitations of existing laws, as civilians were targeted through chemical weapons and blockades, leading to mass starvation

3. Failures and Evolution During the World Wars

World War II (1939–1945) marked a turning point in the history of civilian protection. Civilians bore unprecedented levels of violence, from the Holocaust—where six million Jews and millions of others

were systematically murdered—to the indiscriminate bombing of cities like Dresden and Hiroshima. These atrocities underscored the inadequacy of existing international laws and fueled post-war efforts to strengthen civilian protections.

The Geneva Conventions of 1949, drafted in the aftermath of the war, expanded IHL to explicitly include civilian protections. Common Article 3, applicable in internal conflicts, prohibited violence against civilians, while the Fourth Geneva Convention provided comprehensive protections for civilians in occupied territories. These advancements were complemented by the establishment of the Nuremberg Trials, where targeting civilians was prosecuted as a war crime, setting a precedent for accountability.

The Cold War era (1947–1991) posed new challenges, as proxy wars in regions like Vietnam and Afghanistan saw widespread civilian casualties. The Vietnam War (1955–1975), in particular, highlighted the limitations of IHL, as napalm and chemical agents like Agent Orange caused immense suffering. Despite these failures, the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions in 1977 further clarified civilian protections, prohibiting attacks on civilian infrastructure and introducing the concept of safety zones.

These historical developments demonstrate both the progress and persistent challenges in protecting civilians during conflicts. While the legal frameworks have expanded significantly, enforcement remains inconsistent, and the evolving nature of warfare continues to test the limits of IHL.

Key UN Instruments and Mechanisms

1. **Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols:**
   - Backbone of IHL, outlining explicit protections for civilians and prohibiting attacks on civilian infrastructure.
2. **UN Security Council Resolutions:**
   - E.g., Resolution 1973 (Libya) and Resolution 2139 (Syria) emphasized humanitarian access and civilian protection.
3. **International Criminal Court (ICC):**
   - Established by the Rome Statute (1998), the ICC prosecutes individuals for war crimes, including deliberate attacks on civilians.
4. **UN Peacekeeping Missions:**
   - Deployed in over 70 missions since 1948, these forces often play a critical role in protecting civilians in conflict zones.

5. **Special Rapporteurs and Commissions of Inquiry:**
    ○ E.g., the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories monitors violations against civilians.
6. **Responsibility to Protect (R2P):**
    ○ Adopted at the 2005 World Summit, R2P emphasizes the international community's obligation to intervene when states fail to protect their populations.

Current Situation: Failures of the UNHRC in Protecting Civilians in War Zones

Despite the significant frameworks established by international humanitarian law (IHL), the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has faced substantial challenges in effectively protecting civilians in active conflict zones. While the UNHRC has made substantial efforts to document human rights violations, issue condemnations, and coordinate international responses, its capacity to implement substantial, timely protection for civilians has been deeply hindered by several systemic issues, including political gridlock, lack of enforcement mechanisms, and underfunding. These failures have been most apparent in recent and ongoing conflicts such as those in Gaza, Yemen, and Syria, where civilians continue to suffer immense harm despite the UNHRC's involvement. This topic concerns a multitude of nations in the UNHRC and places into perspective numerous human lives.

One of the primary factors contributing to the failure of the UNHRC in protecting civilians is political gridlock. As a body composed of member states with diverse geopolitical interests, the UNHRC is often paralyzed by internal divisions. Major powers, such as the United States, Russia, and China, use their influence within the Council to shield themselves or their allies from scrutiny. This dynamic undermines the effectiveness of the Council's resolutions and interventions. For example, the UNHRC has consistently been unable to pass binding resolutions that would directly address civilian casualties in Gaza. When Israel's military operations have resulted in mass civilian casualties, the UNHRC has been hindered by political pressure from Western powers who either defend Israel's right to self-defense or prevent more forceful actions in the name of sovereignty. As a result, the resolutions passed have often

been diluted and ineffective. In contrast, when other states or factions have been accused of civilian harm, such as in Syria, the geopolitical dynamics prevent a unified response.

In addition to political gridlock, the UNHRC suffers from a fundamental lack of enforcement mechanisms. The Council's primary function is to issue recommendations, issue reports, and raise awareness, but it does not possess the legal authority to compel states or non-state actors to comply with its directives. This lack of enforcement means that even if the UNHRC identifies a situation where civilians are at risk, it cannot take immediate or decisive action to stop the violence. For example, in the case of Syria, the UNHRC has issued numerous reports documenting violations against civilians by both the Syrian government and opposition forces, including the use of chemical weapons, deliberate attacks on hospitals, and the indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas. Despite these extensive reports and calls for action, the UNHRC's recommendations have not led to any significant changes on the ground. The Security Council's paralysis, due to vetoes by Russia and China, has prevented any effective enforcement of civilian protection mechanisms. In some cases, the inability of the UNHRC to intervene decisively has allowed these violations to continue unchecked, further escalating the suffering of innocent civilians.

A glaring example of the UNHRC's ineffectiveness in protecting civilians is the situation in Gaza. The Gaza Strip has long been a flashpoint in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and over the years, the civilian population has borne the brunt of the violence. The 2023 Gaza conflict, in particular, exposed the stark limitations of the UNHRC. Throughout the conflict, Israel's airstrikes on Gaza resulted in thousands of civilian casualties, and while the UNHRC issued several statements and resolutions condemning the violence, it was unable to take any decisive action to prevent further harm to civilians. The UNHRC did call for a ceasefire and demanded that humanitarian aid reach civilians, but these actions were largely symbolic. While the UNHRC's reports and resolutions provided much-needed documentation of the atrocities, the lack of enforcement and real power meant that the situation on the ground remained unchanged. One of the most critical failures was the failure to establish effective safety zones or humanitarian corridors. The blockade on Gaza, combined with the absence of neutral peacekeepers to enforce civilian protection, allowed for the continuation of violence with little regard for the safety of non-combatants.

Another aspect contributing to the UNHRC's failure in civilian protection is its chronic underfunding and lack of sufficient resources. The UNHRC's capacity to respond to conflict-related crises is hampered by its reliance on member state contributions, which are often insufficient for its needs. The UNHRC is tasked with overseeing numerous conflict zones simultaneously, including Syria, Yemen, and Gaza, but the scale of its operations often falls short due to budgetary constraints. A glaring example is

the situation in Yemen, where the UNHRC has struggled to provide adequate monitoring of human rights violations despite the country being embroiled in a brutal civil war. The humanitarian crisis in Yemen, which has resulted in widespread famine, disease, and the death of tens of thousands of civilians, has been documented extensively by UN bodies, but the lack of on-the-ground monitoring and intervention has made it nearly impossible to stop these abuses in real-time. The absence of adequate resources for field-based operations has meant that civilians in conflict zones like Yemen continue to face violations without sufficient international protection or support.

Case Study: Syria 2011

A case study that highlights the inadequacies of the UNHRC's response is the ongoing civil war in Syria. Since the onset of the conflict in 2011, Syria has been a battleground for international powers, with both the Syrian government and various opposition groups committing gross human rights violations against civilians. The UNHRC has documented and condemned the use of chemical weapons, barrel bombs, and airstrikes targeting civilian areas, but its ability to implement measures to stop these actions has been minimal. Despite evidence provided by the UNHRC and other UN bodies, the Security Council has failed to adopt any binding resolutions that would enforce consequences on the perpetrators. Russia's veto power in the Security Council has played a significant role in preventing any meaningful action from being taken against the Syrian government. The inability of the UNHRC to prevent these violations, coupled with the lack of enforcement power, underscores the limitations of the Council in protecting civilians in conflict zones.

Furthermore, the UNHRC's focus on monitoring and documentation, while vital, often falls short in the face of escalating violence. While it has produced several high-profile reports, including those on the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar and atrocities in Yemen, its actions have been limited to calling attention to violations rather than implementing concrete protective measures. In these situations, the real-time needs of civilians, such as access to safe zones or immediate humanitarian assistance, are not met by the UNHRC's mandate.

In conclusion, the current failures of the UNHRC in protecting civilians during conflicts stem from a combination of political gridlock, lack of enforcement mechanisms, insufficient resources, and the challenges of responding to rapidly escalating crises. While the UNHRC plays a critical role in raising awareness and documenting violations, its inability to take decisive, effective action in real-time continues to leave civilians vulnerable to the horrors of war. The cases of Gaza, Syria, and Yemen illustrate the stark realities faced by civilians in conflict zones and the significant gaps in international law

and enforcement that hinder the protection of these vulnerable populations. Addressing these shortcomings will require significant reforms within the UNHRC, including stronger enforcement powers, better resources for field operations, and greater political will among member states to prioritize civilian protection above national interests.

Possible Solutions to Strengthen Protection of Civilians in War Zones

The protection of civilians during armed conflict remains a pressing issue for the international community, with ongoing conflicts in Gaza, Syria, and Yemen highlighting the inadequacies of current frameworks. However, there are several potential solutions that could strengthen the role of the UNHRC and improve the protection of civilians in these contexts. These solutions encompass both operational improvements and broader institutional reforms within the United Nations, particularly in terms of enforcement mechanisms, resources, and international collaboration.

1. Strengthening Enforcement Mechanisms

A critical shortcoming of the UNHRC in protecting civilians is the lack of enforcement power. The UNHRC primarily issues recommendations and raises awareness, but it lacks the authority to compel states or non-state actors to comply with its resolutions. To address this, the international community could consider granting the UNHRC greater enforcement capabilities, such as the ability to impose sanctions, authorize peacekeeping interventions, or facilitate the use of force in extreme cases. This would make the Council's decisions more impactful and responsive to the urgent needs of civilians in conflict zones.

For instance, when clear violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) are documented, the UNHRC could have the power to refer these cases directly to the International Criminal Court (ICC) or impose targeted sanctions on individuals responsible for war crimes. This could serve as both a deterrent and a mechanism for accountability. Strengthening enforcement mechanisms would also require coordination with the UN Security Council, though this would be difficult due to the ongoing political gridlock, as seen in the case of Syria, where Russia's veto power has blocked meaningful action.

2. Rapid Deployment of Peacekeeping Missions

Another potential solution is the creation of specialized, rapid-response peacekeeping missions that can be deployed quickly to conflict zones to protect civilians. These missions could be staffed with personnel specifically trained to operate in highly volatile, urban environments where most modern conflicts occur. One of the main challenges of peacekeeping operations has been the delay in deployment, which allows human rights abuses to escalate before intervention occurs.

The success of peacekeeping missions in places like Liberia and Sierra Leone, where peacekeepers helped to protect civilians during and after the civil wars, shows the potential of such an approach. However, these missions are often underfunded and lack sufficient resources. A new model of peacekeeping, one that is specifically designed to address the unique challenges of protecting civilians in urban warfare, could significantly reduce casualties and provide a more visible international presence in conflict zones. This would require both political will from member states and long-term funding commitments.

3. Use of Technology to Monitor and Protect Civilians

In the digital age, technological advancements can play a significant role in protecting civilians. Drones, satellite imagery, and AI-powered surveillance systems can provide real-time data on the movements of military forces, monitor the targeting of civilian infrastructure, and document violations of IHL. By using these technologies, the UNHRC and other international bodies can create an early warning system that alerts the international community to impending attacks on civilians or critical infrastructure.

For example, during the conflict in Syria, organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have used satellite imagery to confirm the destruction of hospitals and civilian infrastructure. By enhancing the use of such technologies under UN auspices, the international community could create a stronger deterrent against violations. Additionally, technology could be used to monitor the delivery of humanitarian aid and ensure that it reaches those most in need. However, this solution would require addressing concerns about privacy, data protection, and the potential misuse of surveillance technologies.

4. Increasing Accountability through International Tribunals

To ensure accountability for those who commit atrocities against civilians, the international community could further develop existing mechanisms such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) and create specialized tribunals for specific conflicts. The ICC has been successful in prosecuting individuals responsible for war crimes in various regions, including the Democratic Republic of Congo and the

former Yugoslavia. However, the ICC's jurisdiction is often limited, and the lack of cooperation from some states undermines its effectiveness.

A potential solution could involve creating ad hoc tribunals for specific conflicts, such as the one established for Rwanda. These tribunals could have a more focused mandate and the authority to try individuals responsible for gross human rights violations in real-time, instead of waiting for years after the conflict has ended. A more effective international criminal justice system would serve both as a deterrent to potential perpetrators and as a means of providing justice for victims. Additionally, countries could be encouraged to strengthen their own national legal systems to address war crimes and crimes against humanity, in line with international standards.

Bloc Positions

In addressing the protection of civilians in war zones, member states of the UNHRC often have differing positions based on their political, economic, and strategic interests. These divergent perspectives can significantly shape the direction of debates and resolutions within the Council. However, they are not strict in their practices and associated partnerships.

1. Western Liberal Democracies (e.g., United States, United Kingdom, European Union)

Western liberal democracies generally support stronger measures to protect civilians in conflict zones, including the imposition of sanctions on violators of IHL, the deployment of international peacekeeping forces, and the use of technological solutions such as drones and satellite surveillance to monitor and respond to violations. They also tend to advocate for the expansion of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, which holds that the international community has a duty to intervene in cases of large-scale atrocities, even if this means violating a state's sovereignty.

However, these countries also often face criticism for their selective application of humanitarian interventions. For example, the 2011 NATO-led intervention in Libya, which was justified by the need to protect civilians, remains a controversial issue, with critics arguing that it led to prolonged instability in the region. In conflicts like Yemen, Western powers have also been criticized for selling arms to parties accused of committing war crimes, such as the Saudi-led coalition, despite advocating for civilian protection in other contexts.

2. Developing Countries (e.g., China, Russia, India)

Developing countries often prioritize state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs over the international protection of civilians. These nations argue that foreign interventions—whether military or humanitarian—risk exacerbating conflicts and undermining national sovereignty. Despite not being exactly developing nations per se, countries like Russia and China have used their veto power in the UN Security Council to block resolutions that they perceive as infringing on the sovereignty of states, such as those addressing human rights violations in Syria.

For these nations, the protection of civilians must be balanced against the principle of non-interference, and interventions should only occur with the consent of the government in question. They are often wary of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, viewing it as a potential tool for Western interventionism. In some cases, these countries also seek to avoid being held accountable for their own actions in conflict zones, such as Russia's involvement in Ukraine, where accusations of civilian targeting have been widely reported.

3. Middle Eastern and African States

In the Middle East and parts of Africa, the protection of civilians in conflict zones is often seen through the lens of regional stability. These states may call for international humanitarian assistance to alleviate suffering but are more reluctant to endorse military interventions, especially when the intervention could shift the regional balance of power. For example, the Arab League's stance on Syria has been largely supportive of the Assad regime, despite documented civilian harm. Similarly, in the case of Gaza, many Middle Eastern countries have condemned Israel's actions and called for stronger UN interventions but are wary of more profound international military involvement, which could inflame broader regional conflicts.

African nations, many of which have experienced prolonged internal conflicts, tend to emphasize the importance of a strong regional approach, with institutions like the African Union (AU) playing a central role. The AU often advocates for African-led peacekeeping missions rather than relying on Western-led interventions, reflecting concerns about sovereignty and the long-term impacts of foreign military presence.

Discussion Questions

1. How can the UNHRC improve its ability to respond swiftly to humanitarian crises in conflict zones?

2. What measures should be taken to ensure that the principles of international humanitarian law are effectively enforced, particularly in the face of geopolitical resistance?

3. Should the international community be willing to intervene in sovereign conflicts under the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, even when it goes against the wishes of the government involved?

4. How can the use of modern technology, such as satellite surveillance and AI, be integrated into the UNHRC's efforts to protect civilians in conflict zones?

5. What role do regional organizations (such as the African Union or Arab League) play in ensuring civilian protection, and how can the UNHRC collaborate with them effectively?

6. In the context of selective humanitarian interventions, how can the international community ensure that interventions are not driven by political or economic interests?

7. How should the UNHRC handle the challenge of enforcing civilian protections in urban warfare, where distinguishing between combatants and civilians becomes more difficult?

Additional Resources

1. https://www.imf.org/en/About/Factsheets/Sheets/2016/07/14/12/21/IMF-Quotas
2. https://www.worldbank.org/en/about/leadership/voting-powers
3. https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/reform
4. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/voting-system/qualified-majority/
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Topic B - Gender Based Violence

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Overview

The United Nations defines gender-based violence (GBV) as acts that inflict physical, mental, sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, and other deprivations of liberty. GBV is violence directed at an individual based on their gender, and it is deeply rooted in societal power imbalances. In recent years, it has increasingly affected LGBTQ+ individuals, raising concerns about their right to life, liberty, and freedom.

Gender-based violence

Forcibly displaced and stateless people face higher risks of gender-based violence (GBV).

UNHCR is committed to protect the people we work with and for from GBV. Together with partners, governments, women-led organizations and communities, UNHCR works to address GBV and implement quality programming to prevent and respond to GBV and mitigate its risks.

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While GBV has historically been associated with violence against women and girls, it now encompasses a broader spectrum of individuals, particularly those with different gender expressions and identities. This rise in violence reflects ingrained social expectations, behaviors, and identities associated with gender roles that are often entrenched in societies across the globe. UN Women defines GBV as practices based on traditional attitudes, where women are regarded as subordinate to men. These societal norms perpetuate widespread violence and coercion, including family violence and abuse.

GBV manifests in various forms, including physical aggression, economic manipulation, verbal abuse, and psychological harm, often within intimate relationships. The prevalence and severity of such violence can be traced back to structures of power and privilege that continue to dominate many societies today. These inequalities are influenced by the state's economic and political conditions, with rates of GBV often correlating with a nation's broader socio economic issues. For instance, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), higher levels of violence against women and girls tend to occur in societies with lower economic activity, particularly in contexts where female employment rates are significantly lower.

In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, surveys indicate that 30 percent of women experience domestic violence. To address and mitigate the impact of GBV, it is crucial to consider the root causes of this

violence, including societal norms, cultural customs, and economic inequalities. Effective resolutions and policies must take into account these factors, aiming to create a more equitable and just society where gender-based violence is not tolerated.

Timeline

1878 — A significant step in the women's rights movement was marked by the First International Congress on Women's Rights. Notable feminists Marie Deraismes and Léon Richer, alongside representatives from 16 other nations, gathered to push for the advancement of women's rights in various areas, including education, employment, morality, and legislation. The committee sought to establish a permanent organization to advocate for women's rights and to bring about societal and legal changes for women around the world.

December 1937 — The Nanjing Massacre, also known as the Rape of Nanking, remains one of the most brutal episodes in modern history. During this event, Japanese soldiers committed widespread atrocities against the residents of Nanjing, China, including an estimated 20,000 instances of sexual violence. These attacks involved door-to-door searches, with victims subjected to gang rapes, torture, and mutilation, often resulting in their deaths. The impact of this violence was deeply felt, with long-lasting effects on the survivors and their communities.

December 10, 1948 — After the devastation of World War II, the United Nations was formed, and in the same year, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was drafted with the participation of over 50 member states. Article 2 of the UDHR declared that everyone, regardless of sex, was entitled to equal rights and freedoms, providing an essential legal foundation for advancing women's rights globally.

November 25, 1960 — The Mirabal sisters, known for their activism in the Dominican Republic, were assassinated by the country's dictator, Rafael Trujillo, after they became leaders of resistance movements against his regime. Their deaths became a symbol of martyrdom for women in the country, representing the fight for freedom and justice. In honor of their legacy, November 25th is now observed as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

March 4, 1994 — In a landmark resolution (1994/45), the United Nations Human Rights Council appointed a Special Rapporteur dedicated to addressing violence against women and girls. The resolution

was crucial because it not only recognized gender-based violence as a violation of human rights but also helped to integrate this issue into the broader human rights framework, emphasizing its global importance and need for international action.

April 19, 2015 — In Hanoi, Vietnam, a troubling incident occurred at the Ho Tay Water Park, where 70-80 men carried out acts of sexual assault against more than 20 women and girls within the park. The response from local authorities was shockingly dismissive, with the female vice-general director of Hanoi Entertainment Services attributing the assaults to the victims' choice of bikinis. Park officials also failed to offer any assistance to the victims, highlighting the alarming societal attitudes that enable the continuation of gender-based violence.

October 2017 — The #MeToo movement gained significant momentum, particularly on social media, as actress Alyssa Milano encouraged women to share their experiences of sexual abuse. The campaign rapidly spread, providing a platform for survivors of sexual assault to speak out and demand justice. In Canada, the movement led to an increased demand for victim support services, revealing the widespread nature of sexual abuse and the urgent need for systemic changes.

May 11, 2023 — The U.S. Department of Homeland Security released alarming information regarding the rising hate crime rates targeting the LGBTQ+ community. Among the reported statistics, DHS highlighted how high-profile attacks on schools and faith-based institutions have historically inspired copycat attacks. Furthermore, the department expressed concerns that this growing trend could lead to larger-scale attacks on critical infrastructures, such as healthcare facilities and public spaces, potentially escalating the risks to LGBTQ+ individuals and communities.

Historical Analysis

Gender-based violence (GBV) has deep historical roots that are intricately connected to cultural, political, and social structures that continue to shape modern societies. This violence is not just a result of isolated actions but is deeply embedded in societal norms and practices related to gender. Historically, gender roles and the pressures to conform to societal expectations of masculinity and femininity have been pivotal in perpetuating harmful behaviors against individuals who do not adhere to these norms. This violence spans various forms, including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse, and is perpetuated by the normalization of such behaviors in many societies.

A significant contributor to gender-based violence is the cultural construction of gender itself—the roles, expectations, and behaviors that define what it means to be a particular gender. The

violence that emerges from these constructed roles is often systemic, reinforced by the prevailing societal ideologies, and deeply entrenched in both historical and modern institutions. Across different cultures, the manifestations of gender-based violence often share similarities, with similar social structures fostering similar patterns of violence. In many societies, traditional beliefs about gender hierarchy continue to influence both public attitudes and private behaviors, perpetuating cycles of violence.

In the case of China, for example, gender-based violence has been identified as being rooted in cultural ideologies rather than economic or political factors. While the country's rapid economic growth might be expected to influence attitudes toward women's rights, research has shown that the rates of gender-based violence in China remain alarmingly high, despite the country's development. Chinese scholars argue that this persistence is not linked to economic factors but to deeply ingrained cultural attitudes and historical ideologies. These include tightly defined gender roles and a long-standing tradition of hegemonic masculinity, which places men in dominant positions over women. These cultural structures, built upon historical patriarchal practices, continue to perpetuate gender-based violence. The issue of GBV in China is not merely a product of modern-day economic conditions but is firmly grounded in its cultural history, where women have often been subjugated to the whims of traditional gender norms.

The political dimensions of gender-based violence are also crucial in understanding its historical context. During periods of war, for instance, sexual violence has often been used as a weapon of dominance and control. In the aftermath of World War II, for example, the exploitation of women through sexual violence was widespread. The defeat of Germany by the Allied forces led to instances where American soldiers, among others, exploited German women as a means to assert dominance and exercise control over the defeated nation. This violence, much of which was non-consensual, resulted in the rape and sexual assault of hundreds of thousands of women, underscoring the ways in which gender-based violence is used as a tool in warfare to assert power and humiliation over the enemy. Similarly, the Nanjing Massacre, also known as the Rape of Nanking, demonstrated how sexual violence became an inherent part of war crimes during the conflict between China and Japan. These acts of violence were not just isolated incidents but were indicative of a broader historical pattern where poorly structured government systems and unchecked military aggression allowed such atrocities to occur.

In modern contexts, the intersection of gender-based violence with issues of gender and sexual identity continues to evolve. Since the 1993 adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, there has been significant progress toward advancing women's rights globally. Many governments have worked to address gender inequality and violence, but discrimination against individuals in non-heterosexual relationships remains widespread, exacerbating

gender-based violence. In particular, LGBTQ+ individuals continue to face violence and legal discrimination, with legal systems often being complicit in perpetuating these abuses. For instance, in the United States, in 2023 alone, 70 anti-LGBTQ+ laws were passed, further marginalizing this community. These laws not only fuel discrimination but also contribute to physical and emotional violence against LGBTQ+ individuals. This pattern is reflective of how legal frameworks can either reinforce or help dismantle systems of violence and discrimination.

Judicial systems that harbor prejudice against those of different gender and sexual identities further perpetuate violence. In many countries, discriminatory laws and practices ensure that marginalized individuals, particularly women and LGBTQ+ persons, remain vulnerable to physical and psychological harm. Without legal protection and support, the victims of gender-based violence are left without adequate recourse, which in turn reinforces the cycle of violence. Thus, addressing gender-based violence requires a comprehensive approach that involves reforming legal systems, educating societies, and enacting policies that protect all individuals, regardless of their gender or sexual identity.

Gender-based violence has been a pervasive issue throughout history, influenced by cultural norms, political dynamics, and legal structures. While significant progress has been made in recognizing and addressing the issue, particularly for women's rights, the persistence of GBV against marginalized groups, especially LGBTQ+ individuals, remains a significant concern. The roots of this violence are deeply intertwined with historical power structures, and addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach that includes legal reform, cultural change, and the empowerment of all genders to live free from violence. Without tackling these foundational issues, the cycle of gender-based violence will continue to affect countless individuals around the world.

Past UN/International Involvement

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

On December 18, 1979, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), a key document in the fight for gender equality. As of today, 186 of the 193 UN member states have ratified the convention, leaving only a few, including the United States, Iran, Sudan, and Somalia, among others, yet to do so. CEDAW established legally binding standards to advance women's rights and spotlight areas where women face inequality, such as employment, health care, family planning, marriage, and family life. The treaty acknowledges that discrimination against women undermines the principles of equality and human dignity. It compels

ratifying nations to take steps towards eliminating discrimination and promoting equality for women in every sector of society.

CEDAW is significant in its standardization of women's rights across different nations, focusing on those areas most affected by gender discrimination. For example, Article 14 stresses the importance of recognizing and addressing the specific challenges faced by rural women and girls, whose roles in the survival and welfare of their families are often overlooked. Since its adoption, CEDAW has influenced the passage of various laws, such as those banning gender-based discrimination in land ownership in Rwanda, promoting gender equality in Mongolia, and instituting domestic violence laws in countries like Turkey, Nepal, South Africa, and South Korea. Furthermore, CEDAW's impact has been seen in policies aimed at protecting marginalized groups, such as national investigations into missing indigenous women in Canada, the criminalization of femicide in Panama, and the enactment of anti-trafficking legislation in Ukraine and Moldova. Despite its success, CEDAW's reporting system, which relies on moral persuasion for compliance, has been criticized for its inefficiency and lack of enforcement power, as it depends on voluntary state cooperation.

The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women

In 1993, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, recognizing violence against women as a global human rights violation rather than a culturally accepted practice. The declaration defines violence against women as any act of gender-based violence that results in physical, sexual, or psychological harm, including threats, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. It acknowledges that such violence stems from historically unequal power dynamics between men and women, perpetuating the idea that women are inferior to men. This declaration categorizes violence into three main forms: physical, sexual, and psychological violence.

Within domestic settings, this includes acts such as battery, marital rape, dowry-related violence, and child sexual abuse. Beyond the household, it covers a wide range of abuses, including sexual harassment, rape, trafficking, forced prostitution, and sexual intimidation at work. It also highlights state-perpetrated violence, condemning practices that are often legalized or tolerated by governments. Articles 2 and 4 of the declaration set forth crucial guidelines for the global approach to tackling violence against women. For instance, Article 4 emphasizes that personal safety should take precedence over state-imposed cultural practices that condone such violence, providing a legal and ethical basis for intervention and reform. This declaration marked a significant shift in how the international community

views gender-based violence, framing it as an issue of human rights that demands global action and commitment.
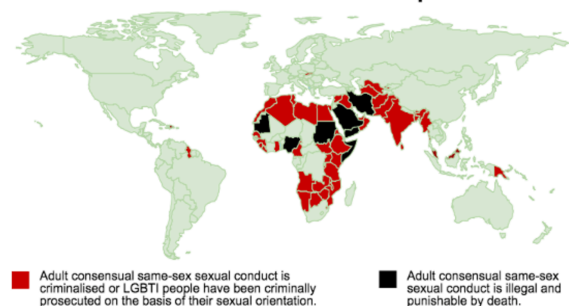
UNFPA Involvement

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has been actively involved in efforts to address gender-based violence through various programs and initiatives. One such program is the United Nations Joint Global Programme on Essential Services, launched in 2013 by UNFPA and UN Women. This initiative aims to establish globally accepted guidelines for the provision of essential services in sectors such as healthcare, justice, policing, and social services, specifically targeting women and girls in low and middle-income countries. The program focuses on enhancing access to critical services for victims of gender-based violence, particularly in nations that face significant challenges such as poverty, poor governance, or ongoing conflict.

In 2013, the 57th Commission on the Status of Women highlighted the elimination of violence against women and girls as a priority theme. Following this, 45 member states committed to taking action, which was reinforced through the UNFPA's second phase of implementation in 2016. This phase included comprehensive strategies to ensure that countries developed viable plans to provide essential services and uphold international safety standards for women and girls. Periodic reviews of essential services in countries such as Peru, Egypt, Mozambique, Cambodia, Guatemala, Pakistan, and Vietnam have been essential in addressing the risks of gender-based violence, which are often exacerbated by war, displacement, and poverty. Through such programs, the UNFPA has played a critical role in promoting accountability and ensuring that vulnerable populations receive the support they need in the fight against gender-based violence

Current Situation

Gender-based violence (GBV) has evolved in the present era, but harmful practices such as honour killings and female genital mutilation continue to persist across the globe. This violence is a growing pandemic, affecting approximately one in three women during their lifetime. In 2018, research by UN Women found that one in seven women had experienced either physical or sexual

Countries where same-sex relationships are a crime

Adult consensual same-sex sexual conduct is criminalised or LGBTI people have been criminally prosecuted on the basis of their sexual orientation.

Adult consensual same-sex sexual conduct is illegal and punishable by death.

violence by an intimate partner or husband. Additionally, the statistics reveal that 92 percent of victims of sexual exploitation are women. Although data on male survivors is limited, it is clear that men and boys also experience gender-based violence, though often to a lesser degree. The most common forms of GBV faced by women are intimate partner violence (IPV) and non-partner sexual violence (NPSV), both of which are rooted in societal settings that place women in positions of lesser social and economic power compared to men, perpetuated by laws, cultural practices, and social norms.

LGBTQ+ Community

One of the most vulnerable groups for gender-based violence globally is the LGBTQ+ community, including individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual. Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals experience sexual violence at significantly higher rates than their heterosexual counterparts. The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Projects (NCAVP) further highlights that approximately half of bisexual women and transgender people will experience sexual violence during their lifetime. In countries where homosexuality is criminalized, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the LGBTQ+ community faces additional risk, as these laws stigmatise individuals and further expose them to violence. Presently, 64 countries have legal frameworks that criminalize consensual same-sex acts, with penalties ranging from imprisonment to the death penalty. In 2023, for example, Iraq proposed a bill that would impose life imprisonment for "acts of sexual deviance," specifically targeting homosexual relations. Conversely, some nations, like Gabon in Africa, are making strides by decriminalizing same-sex unions, marking progress for LGBTQ+ rights.

Intimate Partner Violence

Intimate partner violence (IPV), which includes controlling behavior and emotional abuse, is primarily observed in heterosexual relationships, irrespective of the cultural, religious, or socioeconomic context. In many cultures, gender norms dictate that men have authority over their female partners, leading to the normalization of mistreatment. In some Asian cultures, for example, women are socialized to tolerate abuse and are expected to be subservient. The United Nations and the World Health Organization define intimate partner violence as any behavior by a current or former partner that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm. This can include physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and controlling behaviors. Many women remain in violent relationships due to a range of factors, such as fear of retaliation, concern for their children, lack of family or social support, economic dependency, and fear of losing custody in the event of a divorce. In 2020, intimate partner violence was responsible for 58

percent of the 81,000 women and girls who lost their lives due to gender-based violence. Data from survivor reports reveals that over a quarter of women aged 15-49 worldwide have experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner. This percentage varies significantly across regions, with 20% of women in the Western Pacific, 22% in high-income countries, 25% in the Americas, 33% in Africa, and Southeast Asia, and 31% in the Eastern Mediterranean region. A study from 2020 indicates that younger, economically dependent, and less empowered women are particularly vulnerable to IPV, as their roles as caregivers and lack of financial independence leave them reliant on their partners.

Non-Partner Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is defined by the World Health Organization as any sexual act or attempt to obtain a sexual act through coercion, or any act targeting a person's sexuality without consent. This includes rape, attempted rape, unwanted sexual touching, and other non-contact forms of sexual violence. Unlike IPV, non-partner sexual violence (NPSV) is often perpetrated by strangers or acquaintances and is linked to societal factors that normalize such violence, such as family honor beliefs, sexual purity ideologies, male entitlement, and inadequate legal responses. The World Bank estimates that 6% of women and girls worldwide between the ages of 15 and 49 have experienced NPSV. In countries like Australia and New Zealand, 19% of women report experiencing NPSV, while in North America, the statistic is 15%. These numbers underscore how pervasive the issue is across different regions, particularly in societies where gender inequality is entrenched.

To address these alarming statistics, UN Women's Global Flagship Programme, Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces, has been working to prevent and respond to sexual harassment and violence in public spaces. Launched in 2010, this program operates in regions including Africa, the Arab States, Asia-Pacific, North America, Europe, and Latin America. The program aims to develop data collection and analysis to identify and implement strategies for addressing sexual violence in urban environments. It has helped cities like Montreal, Canada, create awareness tools for government officials and foster collaborative responses in over 12 cities globally. The initiative aims to empower women and girls to report incidents of violence and create safer public spaces through comprehensive local coordination.

Case Study: Afghanistan

Afghanistan has become one of the most dangerous countries for women due to ongoing political instability and conflict. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 has resulted in the erosion of women's rights,

with a devastating impact on their freedoms and safety. Following the Taliban's takeover, UN experts reported that 20 years of progress for women and girls in Afghanistan were wiped out. The regime imposed severe restrictions, including bans on women attending secondary and post-secondary schools, working in NGOs, and even accessing basic health services. Women who attempted to resist these restrictions faced brutal consequences. For instance, women who defied the dress code or women's rights campaigns were subjected to physical violence, including beatings by Taliban enforcers. One extreme case involved a woman who was publicly executed by stoning under the charge of adultery, though reports later revealed that she had taken her own life before the execution. The international community has condemned these actions, and organizations like the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights have called for the reversal of the Taliban's decrees to restore women's basic rights and freedoms.

Case Study: Thailand

Thailand, while reporting 30,000 annual cases of gender-based violence to the Ministry of Public Health's One Stop Crisis Center, faces significant issues with underreporting and inadequate legal responses. Of the reported cases, only a fraction—around 5,000—are recorded by the police, and just 1,500 lead to arrests. Despite the existence of health and social services aimed at addressing violence, much of the assistance is not easily accessible, and there is significant mistrust in the judicial system. The country has one of the highest rates of gender-based violence in Southeast Asia, and this has been compounded by structural issues, such as a lack of education on sexual violence and cultural norms that normalize violence. For instance, rape culture is perpetuated through media, including soap operas and news broadcasts, making it harder for survivors to come forward and seek help. The country's failure to address these systemic issues has led to a situation where sexual violence continues to be normalized and underreported.

Possible Solutions and Controversies

Improving and Implementing Essential Services

Essential services for individuals who have experienced gender-based violence (GBV) are fundamental in providing secure environments and resources to help victims break free from cycles of abuse. These services are critical in helping women and girls recover from the trauma of violence and prevent its recurrence by addressing the underlying causes. The United Nations Joint Global Programme on Essential Services for Women and Girls highlights four primary service sectors: social, health, police, and justice services. These services must be coordinated effectively, taking into account government policies, legal frameworks, and financial resources. A comprehensive approach to implementing these services includes psycho-social counseling, crisis information, legal advocacy, safe accommodations, financial support, and employment assistance for survivors.

However, the implementation of such services requires a nuanced, context-specific approach. What may work for one community or victim may not be suitable for another. Countries must consider the unique political, historical, economic, and cultural circumstances when developing responses to GBV. For example, in areas with significant socioeconomic disparities or entrenched gender norms, services may need to be adapted to meet the needs of marginalized groups. While the essential services package provides necessary guidelines for the coordination of services, the effectiveness of these services relies on local implementation, ensuring that they are accessible and culturally relevant. Furthermore, international cooperation and assistance can help fill gaps in services where national governments struggle, ensuring that local needs are met in a manner that respects each community's context.

Data Systems

Effective data collection and monitoring systems are crucial for understanding and addressing gender-based violence. Accurate data helps identify the prevalence of violence, track trends, and assess the effectiveness of interventions. In many countries, however, inadequate or inconsistent data systems result in an underestimation of the scope of GBV. For example, Thailand's national data system has been criticized for underreporting cases of gender-based violence, resulting in skewed statistics that do not accurately reflect the extent of the problem. Improved data collection systems that monitor violence in urban and rural areas are essential for creating consistent, reliable data, which can then inform more effective policies and interventions.

However, the implementation of such data systems raises significant challenges and potential controversies. One major concern is that the collection and dissemination of data on GBV could violate national sovereignty. Some countries may resist international pressure to improve their data collection systems, especially if they feel it compromises their control over domestic policies. Additionally, the question of who should oversee these monitoring systems is contentious. While national governments should take the lead, international organizations like the United Nations can provide crucial support, especially in countries with weak governance structures. National action plans, such as Canada's initiative to end violence against Indigenous women, offer an example of how data systems can be integrated into a broader national strategy to address GBV. However, there is a risk that relying solely on national action plans might overlook the benefits of international cooperation, which can bring expertise and broader insights into local challenges.

Education Tools

Empowering women and girls through education is a key strategy in preventing and addressing gender-based violence. Education provides women with the tools to make autonomous decisions, challenge harmful gender norms, and improve their economic and social status. However, the effectiveness of educational programs varies depending on regional and national contexts. Gender-based violence is deeply intertwined with the perpetuation of norms, stereotypes, and cultural practices that reinforce unequal power dynamics between men and women. Education plays a pivotal role in addressing these issues, but it must be adapted to local needs and contexts.

In many countries, gender-based violence is exacerbated by poverty, lack of access to education, and societal expectations. In South Africa, for example, widespread poverty and a lack of legal protections have contributed to a high rate of GBV. In this context, many women are forced into caregiving roles for large families, and their economic dependency increases their vulnerability to violence. The lack of formal education for girls is another contributing factor. Data from Girls Not Brides indicates that more than 60% of women in South Africa between the ages of 20 and 24, with little or no formal education, were married before the age of 18. In addition to early marriage, limited education also restricts women's ability to access economic opportunities and escape from abusive relationships. Educational interventions, particularly those targeting girls and young women, are essential in breaking the cycle of violence. However, challenges remain in less-developed countries where cultural and economic barriers make it difficult to implement effective educational programs. For example, societal expectations around women's roles often prioritize domestic duties over education, leading to higher rates of early marriage and adolescent pregnancies.

The potential of education in advancing gender equality is often overlooked in these settings. Educational programs must go beyond academic learning to include life skills, economic empowerment, and awareness of rights. International assistance can help implement education-focused initiatives in communities, but these must be tailored to each region's specific cultural and societal norms. Empowering women and girls through education is a powerful tool for prevention, but it requires concerted effort from both local governments and international organizations.

Discussion Questions

1. How does your country address legal frameworks and policies concerning gender and gender-based violence? Do these frameworks include sufficient measures to ensure the accountability of perpetrators?

2. Reflect on the culture(s) in your state. Are there socially-accepted practices that contribute to power inequalities and stereotypes between genders in your country? How much should countries value their international influences when making laws in their own country?

3. What challenges have LGBTQ+ people in your country faced regarding gender-based violence? How has your country taken action to address and alleviate these concerns?

4. Should nations prioritize legal reforms and punitive measures or education and awareness campaigns as their primary strategy? How should the international community support such efforts?

5. How can research, data, or even technology be used to leverage public awareness?

6. What existing challenges does your country face that must be addressed to properly tackle gender-based violence?

7. What social standards in your country prevent progress towards eliminating gender-based violence?

8. How can this be addressed using international influence?

Additional Resources

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW):

https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms
discrimination-against-women

Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women:

https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-elimination-violence-
againstwomen

UN Women Essential Services: Ending Violence Against Women:

https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/services-for-all-wom
en

UN Women: Essential Services Package for Women and Girls Subject to Violence:

https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/12/essential-services-package-for
-womenand-girls-subject-to-violence

UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women (UN Trust Fund):

https://www.unwomen.org/en/trust-funds/un-trust-fund-to-end-violence-against-women

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): Policy on the Prevention of, Risk Mitigation and Response to Gender-based Violence:

https://www.unhcr.org/media/unhcr-policy-prevention-risk-mitigation-and-response-gender-base
d-violence2020-pdf

Membership of the Human Rights Council
Membership

The Council is made of 47 Member States, which are elected by the majority of members of the General Assembly of the United Nations through direct and secret ballot. The General Assembly takes into account the candidate States' contribution to the promotion and protection of human rights, as well as their voluntary pledges and commitments in this regard.

The Council's Membership is based on equitable geographical distribution. Seats are distributed as follows:

1. African States: 13 seats
2. Asia-Pacific States: 13 seats
3. Latin American and Caribbean States: 8 seats
4. Western European and other States: 7 seats
5. Eastern European States: 6 seats

By 31 December 2022, 123 UN member states will have served as Human Rights Council Members, reflecting the UN's diversity and giving the Council legitimacy when speaking out on human rights violations in all countries:

African states: Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana,Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia.

Asia-Pacific States: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, China, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Qatar, Republic of Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, Viet Nam.

Latin America & Caribbean States: Argentina, Bahamas, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of).

Western European & others States: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America.

Eastern European States: Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czechia, Croatia, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, Poland, Republic of

Moldova, Republic of North Macedonia, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine.

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