

# **Integrating Women, Peace and Security and gender perspectives in civilian harm mitigation frameworks**

**Expert roundtable report**

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Megan Bastick

Arissandra Egorova

## Executive summary

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This briefing outlines the findings and priorities arising from an expert roundtable examining how gender perspectives and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda can be meaningfully integrated into Civilian Harm Mitigation (CHM) frameworks. The event brought together 23 experts from military, legal, humanitarian, and policy sectors. Discussions focused on three core themes: the gendered dimensions of civilian harm and relevance of international humanitarian law (IHL); operational innovations and good practice in integrating gender and WPS into CHM; and the development of a Community of Practice to advance gender-responsive CHM through stronger integration of gender perspectives in IHL.

Preventing gendered civilian harm is not only a matter of justice and protection, but also of legal compliance under IHL and operational effectiveness. Military and civilian actors require practical tools, institutional guidance, and context-sensitive strategies to mainstream gender perspectives in all phases of CHM planning and response. Enhancing the protection of civilians in contemporary armed conflict—particularly large-scale urban operations and technologically mediated warfare—requires a nuanced understanding of how harm manifests differently according to gender and other factors, and how to translate this awareness into actionable planning and command decisions. Moreover, it requires leadership commitment and clear accountability mechanisms.

## Context

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Armed conflicts around the world have horrific consequences for civilians. For this reason, it is urgent to develop frameworks that not only mitigate civilian harm but do so in a way that reflects the lived realities of all civilians—women, men, boys, and girls. Civilian Harm Mitigation (CHM) frameworks – named as such or otherwise referred to as protection of civilian policies, or a collection of measures aimed at reducing civilian harm from military operations – have emerged as a key tool to support compliance with IHL. Yet, the integration of gender perspectives into these frameworks is largely underdeveloped. Gendered dimensions of civilian harm, including indirect effects such as displacement, food insecurity, and limited access to healthcare, are often left unaddressed in military operational planning and legal review, even when reasonably foreseeable in the circumstances ruling at the time.

In response to this critical gap, in December 2024, DCAF - the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, launched a two-year project, supported by the Government of Liechtenstein, to “move gender and IHL from analysis to implementation” and advance the integration of gender perspectives and WPS commitments in IHL. The project has established a new IHL Community of Practice for WPS to foster dialogue and collaboration across sectors, will convene a series of expert roundtables, and will develop a repository of model language and good practice aiming to inform the revision of military doctrine including manuals, legal doctrine, and operational guidance. This is a report of the first of the project’s expert roundtables.

## Overview and objectives

On 22 May 2025, in the margins of the UN Protection of Civilians Week in New York, DCAF convened an expert roundtable on “Integrating WPS and Gender Perspectives in Civilian Harm Mitigation Frameworks.” Hosted by the Permanent Mission of Liechtenstein to the United Nations, the event provided a unique forum for in-depth dialogue between professionals and practitioners in the field.

Held under the Chatham House Rule, the roundtable aimed to:

- ⇒ Draw out how civilian harm is gendered, and useful sources of data and evidence.
- ⇒ Reflect upon progress and gaps in how gender and WPS are addressed in civilian protection and CHM approaches.
- ⇒ Discuss innovative and practical ways to integrate gender perspectives in CHM frameworks, in particular in military operations and planning.
- ⇒ Identify shared challenges and opportunities across institutions.
- ⇒ Develop a shared vision for the Community of Practice for WPS and inform its development.

## Understanding the gendered dimensions of civilian harm in armed conflict and the role of IHL

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Civilian harm in armed conflict is never gender-neutral. The experiences of harm—its nature, frequency, location, and impact—are shaped by gender norms, roles, and status within households and communities. While men and boys are often at higher risk of direct targeting and arbitrary detention, women and girls frequently face harm related to displacement, loss of livelihoods, and sexual and gender-based violence. This is not to say that such gendered impacts are uniform across contexts – but trends are discernible. These patterns are compounded by age, disability, and other identity factors, requiring a multidimensional analysis.

In contexts such as Gaza, recent hostilities have resulted in higher female casualties than has typically been recorded in other urban armed conflicts due to strikes on residential buildings, where women and girls are more likely to be located during the day. In South Sudan, women have reported choosing to expose themselves to the risk of sexual violence when seeking food or water, rather than sending male family members who may face being killed. In Ukraine, documentation of sexual violence against men and boys in detention reveals how gender stereotypes can obscure the full spectrum of civilian harm.

The application of AI in targeting processes introduces additional risks. AI-enabled systems may, for example, use demographic proxies that result in the over-targeting of young men. These developments underscore the need to critically evaluate how gendered assumptions are encoded into targeting algorithms and operational procedures.

IHL provides the legal bedrock for CHM. Its principles of distinction, proportionality, and precautions are critical, yet their implementation often lacks the granularity required to account for gender-specific civilian harm. For instance, proportionality assessments rarely consider indirect effects such as the loss of access to maternal healthcare, the impacts of school closures on recruitment to armed groups, or the risks of gender-based violence and forced or early marriage that accompany displacement. Precautionary measures, too, often fail to anticipate or address gendered access to information, evacuation routes, or shelter.

Legal obligations under IHL—including the duty of military operations to take constant care to spare civilians—must be interpreted and operationalised in ways that account for how gender influences civilian risk. Integration of gender perspectives into military manuals and gender-sensitive planning and operational processes that incorporate legal compliance are critical priorities. Both Legal Advisers (LEGADs) and Gender Advisers (GENADs) should be present during planning and assessment processes to ensure these considerations are embedded from the outset.

## **Good practice and operational innovation: integrating gender and WPS in CHM frameworks**

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Effective integration of gender and WPS into CHM frameworks depends on institutionalising practice across doctrine and mission planning, implementation, and review. This should move beyond *ad hoc* or tokenistic measures to system-wide transformation.

### **Mission objectives and doctrinal integration**

Mission objectives should incorporate the protection of civilians. Planners and operators must be explicitly required to take the unique characteristics of the civilian population into account in shaping effective measures to anticipate, mitigate, and respond to civilian harm, including its gendered dimensions.

Military doctrine that embeds gender perspectives in CHM offers institutional stability and sustainability. However, even well-crafted doctrine risks limited uptake if not matched by training, leadership engagement, and field-level support.

Key doctrinal shifts that are needed include:

- Recognising gender-specific patterns of harm in collateral damage estimation.
- Requiring inclusion of GENADs in planning and decision-making processes.
- Addressing the gendered implications of information operations and psychological warfare.
- Framing gender analysis as a standard component of operational design and review.

### **Data and analysis**

The collection and analysis of sex- and age-disaggregated data is a critical resource for gender-responsive CHM. Without it, militaries risk relying on incorrect assumptions that civilian populations and the risks they face during armed conflict are homogenous and operating with corresponding blind spots in their human terrain analysis. Disaggregated data

enables the identification of distinct harm patterns, such as gender-specific mobility restrictions, loss of livelihoods and victimisation, or differentiated access to aid.

Civilian casualty tracking mechanisms, post-strike civilian harm assessments, After Action Reviews, and investigations should seek to integrate gender analysis and sex- and age-disaggregated data. Public health data, school attendance figures, and local service access records can enrich military assessments of civilian impact.

Good quality data is not always available in the granular manner needed to inform tactical decisions. In such scenarios, macro-level data on gender-related norms, civilian demographics and trends may be sourced from, for example, GENADs or civilian-military coordination.

### **Training and integrated advisory functions**

Commanders, planners, and LEGADs must all take responsibility for integrating gendered analysis. This includes incorporating gender analysis and sex- and age-disaggregated data into operational planning when feasible. After Action Reviews, and assessments of proportionality and precaution. Basic and advanced CHM and Protection of Civilians (PoC) training modules should address gendered harm, including modules tailored for special operations forces, intelligence personnel, and civilian liaison officers. IHL training should also integrate its gender-related provisions.

GENADs within mission structures have at times improved the quality and responsiveness of CHM by bringing technical knowledge of how gender norms influence harm and protection strategies. However, GENADs' impact is constrained when their roles are poorly defined, under-resourced, or disconnected from command leadership structures, mission objectives, and operational planning. GENADs need sufficient expertise to engage in a range of military operational planning processes, including intelligence preparation and planning. Deeper GENAD training, as well as clear job descriptions and reporting lines, elevating these positions within chains of command, and providing access to key planning forums are essential.

GENAD roles must not be regarded as only for female personnel. These positions should be filled by individuals—regardless of gender—who possess technical competence and contextual awareness.

### **Civil-military coordination**

Civil-military engagement mechanisms can provide critical pathways for incorporating gendered knowledge. Community-based organisations, especially those led by women may, where appropriate, offer real-time information about civilian needs and vulnerabilities. This exchange can inform, for example, evacuation planning, protection strategies, and impact assessments.

Relying solely on female personnel for community engagement can undermine outcomes — especially if they do not have sufficient preparation for patrolling roles. Ensuring that all personnel tasked with civilian engagement are properly trained and supported, including regarding collecting information on gender-based violence patterns, is imperative.

## Strategic communication and framing

Framing matters. Language such as “human terrain analysis,” “patterns of civilian life,” or “vulnerability assessment” can gain traction where direct references to “gender” or “WPS” may be politically contested. Nonetheless, strategic adaptation must not lead to the dilution of legal obligations or abandonment of feminist principles. Squaring this circle requires practitioners to make informed, context-specific decisions about the risks and prospects for roll back or progress in the specific forum within which they are operating; generalized recommendations of preferred terminology are to be avoided if they cannot be contextualised.

In some defence sectors, the shift from “WPS” to “human security” is gaining traction. While this may offer broader framing, it risks sidelining core issues such as gender-based discrimination and institutional misogyny. The trade-off between palatable language and normative integrity must be carefully assessed.

## Developing the IHL Community of Practice for WPS

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DCAF’s establishment of an IHL Community of Practice for WPS offers a platform to support armed forces and regional and multilateral institutions to move from discussion to sustained practice. This initiative seeks to build peer dialogue and support, co-develop tools, and foster cross-sector learning among military, legal, and civilian actors.

### Key priorities for the Community of Practice might include:

#### ***Operational tools and tactics***

- Development of typologies of gendered harm—before, during, and after operations—that can inform battle-space awareness.
- Design of field-adapted tools such as decision trees, planning matrices, and scenario checklists that enable commanders and planners to identify gendered risks.

#### ***Doctrine and policy development***

- Collation of sources to inform the review and update of military doctrine, rules of engagement, and/or operational manuals to embed gender-responsive CHM and PoC.
- Production of guidance notes that translate IHL obligations into gender-sensitive planning and operational standards.

#### ***Training and capacity-building***

- Development of modular training packages for militaries.
- Establishment of mentoring and exchange platforms across militaries and between military and civilian actors.

#### ***Inclusive participation***

- Structured engagement with women-led and crisis-affected organisations to inform tools, frameworks, and responses.
- Inclusion of perspectives from peacekeeping, law enforcement, and humanitarian sectors.

### ***Platform for exchange and collaboration***

- Launch of a digital platform to host case studies, training materials, policy templates, and evaluation tools.
- Regular convenings—virtual and in-person—on thematic priorities such as AI and peer-to-peer warfare.
- Collaboration with existing networks including the WPS Chiefs of Defence Network.

To maximise impact, the CoP should maintain a clear focus on its added value: translating IHL and WPS principles into practical tools and procedures for military and legal practitioners. A light, flexible structure with defined deliverables and rotational leadership can promote inclusivity and responsiveness.

## **Conclusion**

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Gender-responsive CHM is not optional. It is a requirement under IHL: a foundation of the WPS Agenda, and a strategic imperative for all armed forces. The realities of contemporary warfare—urban operations, algorithmic targeting, and the risk of large-scale peer-to-peer warfare—demand a more sophisticated and inclusive understanding of civilian harm.

Effective CHM requires anticipatory planning, integrated analysis, and accountability at all levels of command. Integrating gender perspectives enhances operational effectiveness, reinforces legal compliance, and builds trust with civilian populations. Achieving this requires institutional investment, trained personnel, and political will.

The IHL Community of Practice for WPS is welcomed as a timely and necessary mechanism to support this transformation. Facilitating knowledge exchange, developing operational tools, and embedding inclusive approaches will enable practitioners to close the gap between normative commitments and battlefield realities. DCAF and its partners will continue to support and expand this initiative in close collaboration with stakeholders across the security, legal, humanitarian, and civil society domains.