



**Advancing WPS and Gender Perspectives in IHL:  
Moving from Analysis to Implementation**

# **Where Protection of Civilians and Women, Peace and Security Meet**

## **Event Report**

UN Protection of Civilians Week | 21 May 2025 | 10:30-12:00 | New York

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## Context

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Armed conflict generates devastating civilian harm, with women and girls profoundly affected. The UN Secretary-General's 2024 *Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict* report documented an alarming 72% increase in civilian casualties, with twice as many women killed compared to the previous year. Beyond fatalities, the gendered impacts of conflict—including displacement, unequal access to aid and services, and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)—underscore the urgent need to integrate gender considerations into protection of civilians (PoC) frameworks.

Despite these persistent risks, the practical convergence of international humanitarian law (IHL), PoC mandates, gender analysis and Women, Peace and Security (WPS) commitments are rarely addressed in a unified way. To encourage policymakers to understand and promote more integrated approaches, DCAF —Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance—convened the side event “*Where Protection of Civilians and Women, Peace and Security Meet*” as part of the UN PoC Week. The event was co-organised with the Permanent Mission to the United Nations of Liechtenstein, and co-sponsored by the Permanent Missions of Australia, Canada, Jamaica, the Philippines and South Africa, as well as the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, CIVIC, IPI, PAX and the Stimson Centre.

## Objectives and Format

The event brought together nearly 100 participants, including diplomats and other state officials, military officers and legal, humanitarian and protection practitioners from within the UN system, regional organisations and civil society. It aimed to:

- ⇒ Highlight the legal obligations under IHL for gender-responsive protection;
- ⇒ Explore the gendered dimensions of civilian harm; and
- ⇒ Share operational lessons and best practices for mainstreaming WPS principles into PoC policies and operations.

The session was opened by Ambassador Frank Büchel (Liechtenstein) and Ms Elyse Mosquini (Head of the ICRC's Delegation to the UN) and moderated by Ms Cristina Finch and Dr Megan Bastick of DCAF. The expert panel comprised Ms Saba Azeem (Project Lead for PAX's PoC Programme in Iraq), Major Andre Dennis (Jamaica Defense Force Gender Advisor), Ms Vanessa Murphy (ICRC Legal Advisor), Lieutenant Commander Lisa Steel (Royal Australian Navy Fleet Gender Advisor) and Mr Koffi Edem Wogomebou (Senior PoC Advisor, MINUSCA).

## Key messages

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### A gender and WPS lens on civilian harm is needed

Protection strategies must go beyond generic references to “civilians” and engage with how gender norms, roles, and identities shape vulnerability and resilience in conflict. From targeted sexual violence to differential access to aid and healthcare, to forced labour and forced marriage, civilian harm plays out in deeply gendered ways. At the same time, women's participation and influence in decision-making are critical to the effective protection of women and girls.

PAX's fieldwork in Iraq shows how airstrikes often produce long-term but different social consequences for women and men—untreated physical injuries, economic and social marginalization and poor access to justice. Impacts extend to their children when, for example, being unregistered leaves children unable to access education. Research also showed how the presence of female police officers enabled greater trust and improved reporting of violations.

MINUSCA's work in the Central African Republic offered practical examples of gender-responsive protection using Community Alert Networks and Joint Protection Teams with female personnel. These mechanisms enhanced situational awareness. They helped military and police personnel to engage with local women's organisations to address CRSV and prevent escalation of community tensions, demonstrating women's critical role as actors in community-based protection.

*"Intelligence that reflects gender-specific information improves the relevance and quality of military decision making."*

Speakers highlighted the critical need for gender analysis to inform every aspect of PoC—from policies, training, intelligence gathering, early warning, threat assessments and operational design to after-action reviews. Understanding gender analysis and gender perspectives should be a core professional requirement for all working within PoC contexts. Operational data on gendered security issues should be systematically collected and shared within mission environments. Civilian-military coordination with local women should be strengthened, supporting women not only as beneficiaries but as actors of change.

## **Gender perspective in protection operationalizes legal obligations**

Integrating gender into PoC is more than good practice, it is required under IHL. The panel considered gender responsiveness as an integral part of four key aspects of IHL obligations:

1. The requirement to anticipate and avoid, or at least minimize, civilian harm in certain ways in the conduct of military operations, including through the principles of distinction, precautions, and proportionality (for example, issuing warnings before attacks in formats accessible to women);
2. The prohibition of discrimination on the basis of sex and other similar criteria (for example in access to healthcare services);
3. The obligation to uphold IHL's specific rules regarding the treatment of women (for example, accounting for sex and gender-specific needs in detention); and
4. The prohibition of sexual violence, requiring tailored prevention and response strategies.

Legal Advisors have a critical role in ensuring that IHL is applied in a gender-responsive manner and that gender perspectives are embedded in key documents and policies (rules of engagement, guidance on the use of force, etc.) However, most Legal Advisors – as well as other military personnel involved in planning operations – lack the education, tools and access to gender data to effectively integrate gender perspectives. Coordination between Legal and Gender Advisors tends to be weak: their workstreams often operate in parallel, missing critical opportunities for integrating gender considerations into military decisions and operational planning.

Drawing on the experience of the Jamaica Defence Force, speakers recommended joint scenario planning and training for Legal and Gender Advisors, along with the use of community input via civilian-military cooperation when appropriate —and especially from women—to inform military planning processes and IHL operational decisions.

Leadership in military, humanitarian and peace operations must ensure that legal frameworks are interpreted and operationalized in ways that reflect the gendered dimensions of civilian harm. This

includes ensuring IHL processes account for gendered impacts, actively mitigating gender bias and discrimination in the application of IHL, and prioritizing action on sexual and gender-based violence.

DCAF's new [IHL Community of Practice for WPS](#), bringing together Legal Advisors and gender experts, was welcomed as an initiative to strengthen gender-responsive interpretation and application of IHL across contexts.

## Leadership and accountability must drive institutional change

Speakers stressed that the success of PoC hinges on leadership that takes gender and WPS seriously by setting clear expectations, allocating resources, and embedding gender expertise into command structures. Leadership must frame gender integration as everyone's responsibility. In many missions, responsibilities for gender analysis, work on SGBV and engagement with local women fall on the few Gender Advisors or female personnel—rather than being organised as a mission-wide responsibility. Gender Advisors and female personnel are thus often burdened with unrealistic expectations, without adequate support or clear authority, and at times without the proper training.

Panelists also warned that simply increasing women's presence in peacekeeping and military settings is insufficient. Women's meaningful participation—not numbers—must be the benchmark.

Speakers stressed the importance of embedding gender in military training, professional military education, military manuals and standard operating procedures. The Philippines Armed Forces' earmarked WPS budget was highlighted as a good practice in resourcing institutional change.

Accountability at every level for gender-responsive protection outcomes must be institutionalized. Leaders should be evaluated and held to account for meeting institutional responsibilities under WPS and IHL frameworks.

## Next Steps

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This event formed part of DCAF's programme to advance the integration of gender perspectives and WPS commitments in IHL, supported by the Government of Liechtenstein. Key takeaways were shared with the PoC Week coordinating committee to inform the informal output document for the week.

DCAF thanks all panellists and co-sponsors for their engagement and contributions to the discussion.

**For more information on DCAF's work on gender, WPS and IHL, including the IHL Community of Practice for WPS and future workshops and events, see:**

[Advancing WPS and gender perspectives in International Humanitarian Law | DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance](#).