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Atrocity prevention and WPS: Lessons for gender-sensitive conflict prevention

Understanding the gendered dimensions of mass atrocities is crucial in framing policy responses to these crimes. The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda conceptualizes how this can and should be done, but the Atrocity Prevention (AP) agenda has yet to be mainstreamed as the WPS agenda in relevant policy circles. Both AP and WPS deal with situations of (in)security and the protection of civilians from violent crimes, yet they have not mutually enriched each other.

This policy brief shows how gender-sensitive approaches to conflict in general, and the WPS agenda in particular, can benefit from applying an atrocity prevention lens. It argues that atrocity prevention is a necessary and useful perspective for diplomats and activists alike. Recognizing the interconnectedness of atrocities and their gendered dynamics, this policy brief also shows that the AP field can draw on lessons, achievements, and pillars from the WPS agenda.

Key points

- Mass atrocities include war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. They are often strongly gendered and distinctly impact vulnerable groups such as women and children. Sexual violence is a constant feature of atrocities.
- Preventing atrocities should be integral to the prevention pillar of the WPS agenda and to gender-sensitive tools such as the WPS Index.
- The AP field has developed analytical and political frameworks that can be utilized by policymakers, diplomats, researchers, and activists.
- Atrocity prevention holds a strong normative obligation through the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which can be used as a call to action to prevent atrocities, including gender-based atrocities.
- The AP field can learn from aspects of the WPS agenda, like its overall focus of gender in all phases of violent conflicts, and particularly its greater focus, consideration, and inclusion of civil society.

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Atrocity prevention and the Responsibility to Protect

Atrocities, defined under international law¹ as the three crimes of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, and potentially including ethnic cleansing as conducive to violations of humanitarian and human rights law, are not inevitable acts. These are human-made catastrophes. Their risk can be identified and predicted in a timely manner through assessments and warning mechanisms, and so they can be prevented.

Atrocities include the most severe human rights abuses and attacks on civilian populations, and they can happen as part of or outside armed conflict. Atrocity prevention is thus closely interlinked to the protection of civilians during armed conflict and to the prevention of severe human rights abuses, but it also acts as a separate research topic and policy agenda.

Within the broader field of atrocity prevention, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm establishes States' obligation to protect civilian populations against atrocity crimes. R2P was universally adopted by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in 2005 and built on existing international law, including the need for a UN Security Council (UNSC) mandate for forceful interventions to prevent atrocities. Although R2P has a clear prevention element, it is meant to generate action against ongoing or imminent threats of atrocities. As a last resort, such action includes the use of force by the international community. Therefore, R2P is more confrontational and contested than the broader atrocity prevention agenda, as it may challenge States' sovereignty.

To prevent atrocities and implement the R2P, several frameworks and action plans have been developed to guide policy responses². For instance, they can include a set of monitoring tools and mechanisms that are used for early warning and risk assessment, as well as laws and ethical principles.

The prevention of atrocities can vary widely depending on how early preventive efforts are implemented: *structural prevention* targets negative cultural norms and narratives, and situations of inequality; *direct prevention* monitors increasing rates of violence and provides psychosocial, economic, and legal support; and *late-stage prevention* inhibits the escalation of ongoing atrocities and establishes protection mechanisms for their victims.

Further atrocity prevention resources

A brief companion background report on gender-sensitive AP and its implementation is available at: <https://www.massatocityresponses.com/blog/implementing-gender-sensitive-atrocity-prevention>

A comprehensive overview of AP frameworks, governmental and civil society organizations, and scholarly resources is available at: <https://www.massatocityresponses.com/resource-guide>

Mass atrocities and gender

Gender dimensions are integral to atrocities, as evidenced in a wide range of current situations, including Ukraine, Palestine and Israel, Sudan, and Myanmar. Historically, the genocide in Rwanda and the wars in the former Yugoslavia were stark examples of how sexual violence was a core element of war crimes and the crime of genocide. Indeed, the crime of genocide in particular has a strong gender dimension, since perpetrators may aim to affect a population's ability to survive and reproduce.

Preventing mass atrocities such as war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and genocide should thus be a key goal for diplomats and activists mobilizing against sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in conflict. Similarly, such a focus should be integral to the WPS agenda and gender-sensitive approaches to prevention of conflict and human rights abuses.

Atrocities are gendered both in their justification and perpetration, and so is every aspect of their prevention. Some of their gendered factors include:

Gender factors of atrocities

- Development, establishment, and updating of monitoring and analysis frameworks benefit from specific gender dimensions
- Justification and preparation for atrocities:
 - choice of victims,
 - mobilization of perpetrators,
 - structural and cultural norms and narratives.
- Which atrocity crimes are perpetrated and against whom.
- Identity of perpetrators, victims, rescuers, policymakers, researchers, and mediators.
- Goal and scope of fact-finding missions.
- Accountability processes and legal ramifications.
- Academic research and post-atrocity analysis.

Preventing atrocities thus means preventing mass cases of extreme gendered violence, a goal shared by the WPS agenda. To this day, however, the WPS agenda and a gender-sensitive approach to conflict in general has yet to incorporate an atrocity prevention lens³ in diplomacy and advocacy.

WPS: Integrating an atrocity prevention lens

The WPS agenda's prevention pillar is directly parallel to AP. By calling for stronger accountability, legal frameworks, and support for preventive and peacemaking initiatives, the WPS agenda encourages preventive measures at all stages of implementation. An AP lens improves such focus by directing attention to include atrocities, often some of the worst crimes and violence people (and particularly women) can face.

Depending on the context, certain groups of people (often women, children, and LGBTQ+ people) are more vulnerable than others to atrocities for identifiable structural and cultural reasons. Since these norms and motivations can be monitored to provide early warnings, gender-based atrocities can be identified and prevented in a timely manner. However, early-warning indicators must consider women and sexual minorities not only as vulnerable victims, but also as active participants in the perpetration and prevention of atrocities.⁴

At an overarching level, including atrocities and atrocity risks in a WPS focus can bring the following benefits:

- Atrocity risk assessment and early warning can help **identify and draw attention to the risks of large-scale SGBV that are part of intended attacks on civilian populations**, and not just focus on civilian protection during conventional warfare or “collateral damage”.
- Additionally, an atrocity prevention lens draws attention to **situations that do not qualify as armed conflict, but still carry massive risks of attacks on civilian populations**, including risks of SGBV.
- Atrocity prevention adds a strong **focus on perpetrators and the drivers of violence against civilians, which are often gendered**, while the WPS agenda and gender-sensitive approaches to conflict often tend to focus on the gendered aspects of prevention and victimhood.

One specific measure that should be taken as a first step is the integration of an atrocity prevention lens in WPS National Action Plans (NAPs), as almost none of them feature any AP measures and commitments. Addressing AP and WPS issues as directly connected ensures the cross-pollination of these agendas, as demonstrated by the U.S. National Action Plan for WPS, which encourages the integration of WPS and AP in policies and training by targeting their shared focus on prevention.⁵

Similarly, the *WPS Index*⁶, which statistically investigates the inclusion, justice, and security of women globally, mirrors AP efforts by mapping situations of (in)security. For instance, gender-sensitive AP frameworks such as the Asia-Pacific Centre for R2P’s (2022) *Overview of Gender Responsive Early Warning Systems*⁷ describe indicators directly correlated to those of the WPS Index. As such, while the WPS Index partly mentions atrocities and their prevention, through an AP lens they may be directly addressed, accounted for, and prevented.

Parallels between the WPS Index and gender-sensitive AP

- Mapping contexts and situations of (in)security and potential violence
- Indicators of (in)security and risk of violence
 - Decreasing access to healthcare, economy, and society
 - Increasing discrimination, (sexual) violence, and hate speech
 - Political Violence Targeting Women (PVTW), including politicians, journalists, and activists

WPS and AP: What can AP draw from WPS?

Addressing how WPS and AP are linked fills a normative gap because both agendas are, at their core, centered on the protection of civilian lives. The WPS agenda, which situates gendered protection, participation, and preventive measures within peace and security concerns, would thus be strengthened by adding a focus on atrocity prevention. Likewise, normative frameworks focusing on AP (such as R2P, relevant international humanitarian law, and human rights law) could draw on gains made in the WPS field.

AP as a research and policy-field has made efforts to apply a gender perspective, but it has not been sufficiently implemented into practice. Examples of gender-specific policymaking, such as the WPS agenda, can resolve this shortcoming, as its focus on gender allows it to identify and target issues and dynamics that would otherwise go unnoticed.

For instance, sexual and gender-based violence continues to be perpetrated and often goes unpunished. Although it may be prevented by detecting and monitoring gender inequality, careless external intervention can also worsen the situation.⁸ To ensure an appropriate outlook and response, early-warning indicators and policies must be centered and informed by on-the-ground knowledge, so the WPS agenda’s focus on the participation of affected communities can help AP improve civil society inclusion.

This is possible because WPS efforts directly empower and target civil society, policymakers, and security networks in a dynamic manner, unlike the linear and hierarchical chain of responsibility for AP found in R2P (States, then regions, then international community). Following this approach, AP may empower its actors in a multilateral and more effective manner as well.

Despite its successful approach, however, the WPS agenda continues to face challenges with its implementation. Women’s voices have remained absent from policymaking, commitments have not turned into action, and violence has remained rampant and unpunished.⁹ Similarly, major obstacles to gender-sensitive AP remain unresolved in the form of insufficient funding for projects, initiatives, and staffing, inadequate gender equality in governmental and peacebuilding organizations, and weak operationalization of policies and measures.

The WPS and AP agendas clearly share core issues yet to be resolved to carry out verifiably successful work. Connecting the two approaches grants a chance to join forces and resources, address their shared vulnerabilities, and create viable solutions. WPS and AP can thus learn from one another, ensuring the prevention of SGBV and atrocity crimes. Since atrocity prevention frameworks and gender-sensitive outlooks already exist, what is missing are gender- and atrocity-sensitive measures and commitments to improve current prevention approaches.

The way forward

Commitments for gender- and atrocity-sensitive efforts ought to be aware of current issues and approaches to prevention, and link AP and WPS.

As recommended by the UNSG, gender-sensitive AP should be implemented with partnerships and policies related to WPS, by institutionalizing and mainstreaming gender-sensitive regional and international measures, fighting impunity and CRSV, and creating environments to jointly promote WPS and AP.¹⁰

Recommendations for atrocity-sensitive WPS

- Include an atrocity prevention lens in WPS and gender-sensitive conflict approaches through training in atrocity risk factors and early warning indicators.
- Educate policymakers through gender-sensitive research and training, such as the UN *High-Level Seminars on Gender and Inclusive Mediation Processes*.¹¹
- Encourage, normalize, and institutionalize the empowerment of civil society in WPS and AP research, frameworks, and responses by increasing its participation and locally led consultancy.
- Ensure continuous dialog between policymakers and civil society, connecting the WPS Focal Points Network with AP-focused initiatives, R2P Focal Points, and AP NGOs.
- Incorporate the continuum of gendered violence (social and economic discrimination, denial of opportunities and reproductive rights, domestic violence, displacement, and human trafficking) into AP tools and approaches.¹²
- Connect the WPS agenda with partnerships, Security Development Goals, and AP NGOs.¹³
- Establish AP-WPS collaborations, goals, and research in WPS NAPs akin to the U.S.
- Support and engage with the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect¹⁴ and institutions monitoring risk factors.

Notes

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- 6 Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo. 2023. Women, Peace, and Security Index 2023/24: Tracking sustainable peace through inclusion, justice, and security for women. Washington, DC: GIWPS and PRIO.
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- 8 Murphy, Ray, and Róisín Burke. 2015. "Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and the Responsibility to Protect: Where Does Gender Come In?" *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 26 (1): 227–255. 229.
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The project

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The Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies is a research, education and documentation center in Oslo focusing on the Holocaust, other genocides and the situation of minorities in contemporary societies.