

The Legal Protection Afforded to Women and Children Under International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

AHMED MOHAMMED BACHAKA
Usmanu Danfodiyo University

Abstract- This article examines the legal framework governing the protection of women and children under International Humanitarian Law (IHL), focusing on the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, their Additional Protocols of 1977¹, and relevant rules of customary international humanitarian law. It analyses the specific protections afforded to women against rape, sexual violence, forced prostitution, and humiliating or degrading treatment, as well as the safeguards granted to children concerning recruitment into armed forces, detention, family unity, education, and survival needs. The article further explores the interaction between IHL, international human rights law, and international criminal law, particularly the recognition of sexual violence and the recruitment of child soldiers as war crimes and crimes against humanity under contemporary international criminal justice mechanisms. It also evaluates the challenges of enforcement which, includes weak accountability structures, evidentiary difficulties, and the persistence of violations in modern armed conflicts. The article concludes that although the legal regime protecting women and children under IHL is extensive and well-developed, effective implementation remains limited due to political, institutional, and operational constraints. Strengthening compliance mechanisms, enhancing international cooperation, and improving domestic incorporation of international norms are therefore essential to ensure meaningful protection for women and children during armed conflict.

Index Terms- International Humanitarian Law, International Human Rights Law, Legal Protection, Women and Children

I. INTRODUCTION

Armed conflict has consistently produced its most devastating consequences not on combatants but on civilians. Within this civilian population, women and children constitute the most vulnerable group, facing heightened risks of displacement, starvation, sexual violence, trafficking, family separation, and psychological trauma. Contemporary warfare particularly non-international armed conflicts,

insurgencies, and urban combat have further intensified their exposure to harm. Consequently, modern international law recognizes that the general protection granted to civilians is insufficient; rather, women and children require special and reinforced legal safeguards.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL), also referred to as the law of armed conflict, is the body of rules designed to limit the effects of armed conflict for humanitarian reasons. Its central aim is to protect persons who are not or are no longer participating in hostilities and to restrict the means and methods of warfare. While IHL protects all civilians, it establishes a distinct legal regime granting enhanced protection to women and children because of their particular biological, social, and psychological vulnerability during armed conflict.

The principal sources of these protections are the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols of 1977, which collectively form the cornerstone of modern humanitarian law. These treaties recognize that women require protection against rape, enforced prostitution, indecent assault, and attacks on dignity, while children are entitled to protection relating to recruitment into armed forces, access to education, family unity, care, and survival. Over time, these safeguards have been reinforced by developments in international human rights law and international criminal law, particularly through the criminalization of sexual violence and the recruitment of child soldiers as war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The evolution of IHL demonstrates a shift from merely protecting civilians generally to establishing a special protection regime for categories of persons facing heightened vulnerability in war. This recognition reflects the humanitarian principle that equality sometimes requires differentiated protection.

Women and children are therefore not only protected as civilians but also as groups requiring additional safeguards due to their exposure to gender-based violence, exploitation, neglect, and forced participation in hostilities.

Despite the existence of a comprehensive legal framework, violations remain widespread across contemporary conflicts. Mass abductions, forced marriages, sexual slavery, and the use of child soldiers continue to be reported in many war-torn regions. The persistence of these abuses highlights a critical gap between legal norms and enforcement mechanisms, making the study of the protection afforded to women and children under IHL both legally significant and morally imperative.

This article therefore examines the scope and content of the legal protection afforded to women and children under International Humanitarian Law, the interaction between humanitarian law and other branches of international law, and the challenges affecting effective implementation in modern armed conflicts.

1.0 Meaning of International Humanitarian Law

International Humanitarian Law (IHL), also known as the law of armed conflict or the law of war, is the body of international rules that regulates the conduct of hostilities during armed conflict and seeks to limit its humanitarian consequences. It is primarily designed to protect persons who are not or are no longer participating in hostilities and to restrict the means and methods of warfare available to parties to a conflict.

IHL applies only in situations of armed conflict, whether international armed conflict between States or non-international armed conflict occurring within the territory of a State between governmental forces and organized armed groups or between such groups. Unlike international human rights law, which applies at all times, IHL becomes operative specifically when armed violence reaches the legal threshold of armed conflict.

The fundamental purpose of IHL is to balance military necessity with humanitarian considerations. While it recognizes that parties to a conflict may seek

to weaken the enemy's military capacity, it prohibits methods of warfare that cause unnecessary suffering, superfluous injury, or indiscriminate harm to civilians. Thus, the law does not outlaw war itself; rather, it regulates how war is fought.

The modern framework of IHL is derived principally from the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols of 1977, supplemented by customary international humanitarian law developed through State practice and *opinio juris*. These rules establish protections for wounded and sick combatants, prisoners of war, and civilians, while also creating special protection regimes for vulnerable groups, including women and children.

At its core, IHL is guided by fundamental principles which include the principle of distinction (between civilians and combatants), proportionality (prohibiting excessive civilian harm relative to military advantage), military necessity, and humanity. Together, these principles ensure that even during armed conflict, human dignity remains legally protected.

1.3 The Historical and Conceptual Development of International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL) developed from a common moral foundation: the protection of human dignity. However, they evolved along different historical paths and for different purposes. IHL emerged to regulate conduct during armed conflict, while human rights law developed to regulate how a State treats individuals under its jurisdiction in times of peace and war. Over time, the two bodies of law have increasingly converged and now operate as complementary systems of protection. The roots of humanitarian regulation of warfare can be traced to ancient civilizations, religious teachings, and customary practices which imposed limits on violence in war. Many societies prohibited the killing of prisoners, the harming of women and children, and the destruction of crops necessary for civilian survival. However, these rules were moral or religious obligations rather than binding international legal norms.

The modern development of IHL began in the nineteenth century following the Battle of Solferino in 1859. The suffering of wounded soldiers inspired Henry Dunant to advocate for organized humanitarian relief and legal protections for war victims. This led to the establishment of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the adoption of the first Geneva Convention of 1864, which marked the birth of modern humanitarian law. The law initially focused on wounded combatants but gradually expanded to include prisoners of war and civilians.

1.3.1 Evolution of International Humanitarian Law

The humanitarian rules were progressively codified through successive treaties, culminating in the four Geneva Conventions of 1949. These conventions extended protection beyond wounded soldiers to prisoners of war and civilians, including special safeguards for women and children. The Additional Protocols of 1977 further modernized the law by regulating methods of warfare, strengthening civilian protection, and recognizing non-international armed conflicts as legally regulated situations.

Thus, IHL evolved from a battlefield code of conduct into a comprehensive legal regime governing armed conflict and protecting vulnerable populations.

Emergence of International Human Rights Law

Unlike IHL, International Human Rights Law developed primarily after the Second World War. The atrocities committed during the war demonstrated that State sovereignty could no longer shield governments from scrutiny regarding the treatment of their own populations. This realization led to the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, establishing a global standard of fundamental rights applicable to all human beings at all times.

Subsequent treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, transformed these principles into binding legal obligations on States. Human rights law therefore differs from IHL in that it governs State conduct continuously in peace, emergency, and

armed conflict although certain rights may be derogated during public emergencies.

Conceptual Relationship Between IHL and IHRL

Although historically separate, IHL and IHRL are now understood as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. IHL acts as the *lex specialis* during armed conflict, meaning it provides the more specific rules governing conduct of hostilities, while human rights law continues to apply alongside it to the extent possible. Together they create a layered protection system: IHL regulates violence in warfare, while IHRL safeguards inherent human dignity regardless of circumstances.

This convergence is particularly important for the protection of women and children. Human rights law guarantees equality, dignity, and freedom from discrimination, while humanitarian law provides practical battlefield protections such as protection from sexual violence, recruitment, and attacks on civilian objects. The interaction of these two legal regimes has strengthened accountability mechanisms and contributed to the criminalization of serious abuses under international criminal law.

In sum, both bodies of laws evolved from humanitarian principles but developed distinct operational frameworks. Their modern relationship reflects an integrated international legal order aimed at protecting individuals in both peace and war.

1.4. An overview of International Protection Mechanism: History, Organization, and Operations

The protection of victims of armed conflict particularly women and children depends not only on legal rules but also on institutions responsible for implementing, supervising, and enforcing those rules. International Humanitarian Law (IHL) therefore operates through an international protection mechanism composed of humanitarian organizations, monitoring bodies, and international criminal institutions. These mechanisms collectively ensure compliance, provide relief, monitor violations, and promote accountability.

1.4.1 Historical Development of International Protection Mechanisms

The institutional protection of war victims began in the nineteenth century following the humanitarian movement inspired by the Battle of Solferino in 1864. The adoption of the first Geneva Convention of 1864 introduced the idea that neutral organizations could operate during armed conflict to assist victims irrespective of nationality. This marked the birth of organized humanitarian protection.

After the Second World War, the unprecedented scale of atrocities including genocide, mass displacement, and systematic abuse of civilians demonstrated that humanitarian assistance alone was insufficient without enforcement. Consequently, the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 established supervisory roles for neutral humanitarian bodies and introduced obligations on States to search for and prosecute grave breaches.

Later developments strengthened enforcement through international criminal justice. The creation of ad hoc tribunals in the 1990s and eventually a permanent international criminal court expanded the protection system beyond relief to accountability, criminalizing sexual violence and the recruitment of child soldiers.

1.4.2 Organizational Structure of the International Protection System

The international protection regime operates through three interrelated institutional pillars:

(a) Humanitarian Supervisory Bodies

The primary guardian of IHL is the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). It functions as a neutral and independent institution mandated to protect and assist victims of armed conflict. Its core responsibilities include:

- a) Visiting prisoners of war and detainees
- b) Monitoring treatment of civilians
- c) Facilitating family reunification
- d) Providing medical and humanitarian relief
- e) Promoting compliance with IHL

In addition, United Nations humanitarian agencies provide specialized protection. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees protects refugees and displaced persons, many of whom are women

and children, while the United Nations Children's Fund focuses specifically on child protection, education, and reintegration of former child soldiers.

(b) Monitoring and Human Rights Mechanisms

Human rights bodies complement humanitarian institutions by monitoring violations and reporting abuses. These include treaty monitoring committees and fact-finding bodies established under international conventions. Their functions include:

- a) Investigating violations
- b) Documenting abuses
- c) Issuing recommendations
- d) Supporting victim protection programs

Although they lack direct enforcement powers, their reports often form the evidentiary basis for international prosecutions and sanctions.

(c) International Criminal Accountability Mechanisms

The enforcement pillar of the protection regime is International Criminal Court of Justice. The permanent court responsible for prosecuting serious international crimes is the International Criminal Court. It exercises jurisdiction over genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, including rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, and recruitment of child soldiers.

Before its establishment, accountability was pursued through ad hoc tribunals such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, which recognized sexual violence as a prosecutable international crime and helped developed jurisprudence protecting women and children.

1.4.3 Operational Functions of the Protection Mechanism

The international protection system operates through four principal methods:

- a) Preventive Action Dissemination of IHL rules, training armed forces, and early warning monitoring.
- b) Humanitarian Assistance Delivery of food, shelter, medical care, and evacuation of civilians.

- c) Supervision and Reporting Monitoring detention facilities and documenting violations.
- d) Accountability and Prosecution Investigating and prosecuting individuals responsible for grave breaches and international crimes.

Through these coordinated activities, the system ensures both immediate relief and long-term deterrence against violations.

International protection under IHL is therefore not limited to legal norms but operates through a complex institutional framework combining humanitarian action, monitoring, and criminal accountability. Humanitarian organizations provide direct protection, human rights bodies ensure oversight, and international courts enforce responsibility. Together, these mechanisms transform humanitarian law from abstract rules into a practical system designed to safeguard civilians especially women and children during armed conflict.

United Nations Mechanisms

The United Nations plays a central role in supervising compliance with International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL). It operates through treaty-monitoring bodies and international criminal accountability institutions that investigate violations, interpret treaty obligations, receive complaints, and, in certain cases, prosecute perpetrators. These mechanisms are particularly significant for the protection of women and children during armed conflict, as they address sexual violence, torture, unlawful detention, discrimination, and other grave abuses.

a) United Nations Treaty-Based Tribunals (Treaty Bodies)

Treaty-based bodies are committees of independent experts established under specific international Conventions to monitor State compliance. They do not function as criminal courts but act as supervisory and quasi-judicial mechanisms. Their main functions include:

- a) Reviewing periodic State reports
- b) Issuing General Comments interpreting treaty provisions

- c) Receiving individual communications (complaints)
- d) Conducting inquiries into serious violations

These bodies strengthen humanitarian protection by clarifying States' obligations toward vulnerable persons, especially women and children affected by armed conflict.

b) International Criminal Court

The International Criminal Court (ICC) is the permanent International Court established to prosecute individuals responsible for the most serious international crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and aggression.

Its jurisdiction is particularly relevant to armed conflict because it criminalizes:

- a. Rape and sexual slavery
- b. Forced pregnancy
- c. Enlistment and conscription of child soldiers
- d. Attacks on civilians and humanitarian workers
- e. The ICC therefore transforms humanitarian protections into enforceable criminal responsibility, ensuring that violations against women and children are punishable at the international level.

c) Human Rights Committee

The Human Rights Committee monitors implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). It examines State reports and receives individual complaints alleging violations such as arbitrary detention, unlawful killings, and denial of fair trial.

In armed conflict situations, the Committee ensures that non-derogable rights including the right to life and freedom from torture remain protected. Its interpretations influence how States must treat detainees, civilians, and particularly vulnerable groups like children.

d) Committee Against Torture

The Committee against Torture supervises the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. It

addresses abuses frequently occurring during armed conflict, including:

- a) Interrogation torture
- b) Sexual violence in detention
- c) Inhuman treatment of prisoners

The Committee may investigate systematic torture and require States to provide remedies for victims, many of whom are women and minors detained during conflicts.

e) Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

This Committee monitors compliance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). It is central to conflict-related protection because it addresses gender-based violence, trafficking, forced marriage, and wartime sexual abuse.

Through its General Recommendations particularly those addressing women in conflict and post-conflict situations the Committee requires States to prevent, investigate, and punish gender-based violence committed during hostilities.

f. Committee on the Rights of the Child

The Committee on the Rights of the Child supervises the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict. It addresses:

- a) Recruitment of child soldiers
- b) Child detention
- c) Education disruption
- d) Family separation

The Committee provides detailed guidance on rehabilitation and reintegration of children affected by armed conflict and obligates States to criminalize under-age recruitment.

United Nations mechanisms collectively provide monitoring, interpretation, and enforcement of international legal protections. Treaty bodies supervise compliance, while the ICC enforces criminal accountability. Together they create a layered international protection framework ensuring

that violations against women and children during armed conflict are documented, condemned, and, where possible, prosecuted.

1.5 Protection of Women's Rights under International Humanitarian Law

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) recognizes women as civilians entitled to general protection and, in addition, as a category requiring special protection because of their vulnerability to sexual violence, exploitation, pregnancy-related risks, and social discrimination during armed conflict. The law therefore establishes both general civilian safeguards and specific gender-based protections applicable in international and non-international armed conflicts.

1.5.1 General Protection of Women as Civilians

Women benefit from all rules protecting civilians from the effects of hostilities. Parties to a conflict must distinguish at all times between civilians and combatants and must not direct attacks against civilians. Consequently, women are protected against:

- a) Direct attacks and indiscriminate bombardment
- b) Collective punishment
- c) Starvation as a method of warfare
- d) Forced displacement except for imperative security reasons

They are also entitled to humane treatment, respect for honor and family rights, and protection of their dignity. These guarantees apply irrespective of nationality, ethnicity, or political affiliation.

1.5.2 Special Protection against Sexual Violence and Abuse

One of the most significant developments in IHL is the explicit prohibition of sexual violence against women. The law recognizes that rape and related abuses are not incidental acts of indiscipline but serious violations of humanitarian law.

Women must be specially protected against:

- a) Rape
- b) Enforced prostitution
- c) Sexual slavery
- d) Indecent assault
- e) Outrages upon personal dignity

These acts constitute grave breaches and may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. The prohibition applies to both international and internal armed conflicts and binds all parties, including non-state armed groups.

1.5.3 Protection of Pregnant Women and Mothers

IHL grants additional safeguards to pregnant women and mothers of young children due to their medical and nutritional vulnerability. Parties to a conflict must provide:

- a) Priority access to medical care
- b) Adequate food and shelter
- c) Evacuation from besieged or encircled areas
- d) Special accommodation in detention

Pregnant detainees and mothers of infants may not be subjected to the death penalty, and their cases must be treated with particular humanitarian consideration.

1.5.4 Treatment of Women in Detention

Where women are detained for security reasons, IHL imposes strict safeguards designed to preserve dignity and prevent abuse. Women must be:

- a) Held separately from men (except family units)
- b) Supervised by female guards
- c) Protected from sexual harassment and violence
- d) Provided with sanitary and medical facilities

Interrogation methods involving intimidation, coercion, or humiliation are prohibited, and torture or cruel treatment constitutes a grave breach of humanitarian law.

1.5.5 Protection against Forced Prostitution and Trafficking

Armed conflict often increases trafficking and forced marriage. IHL expressly prohibits enforced prostitution and any form of indecent assault. These prohibitions apply regardless of cultural practices or military necessity and cannot be justified under any circumstances.

Modern international criminal law has reinforced these protections by recognizing sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, and enforced sterilization as

international crimes prosecutable against individuals responsible for such acts.

1.5.6 Women in Occupied Territories

In occupied territories, the occupying power assumes responsibility for the welfare of the civilian population, including women. It must ensure:

- a) Public order and safety
- b) Access to medical services
- c) Protection from violence by occupying forces or civilians
- d) Respect for family honour and religious convictions

The occupying power must not compel women to serve in its armed forces or engage in forced labour connected with military operations.

International Humanitarian Law therefore provides a comprehensive protection regime for women in armed conflict. Women are protected not only as civilians but also as persons exposed to gender-specific harms such as sexual violence, exploitation, and reproductive vulnerability. Through both humanitarian and criminal enforcement mechanisms, the law aims to preserve dignity, bodily integrity, and equality even during hostilities. However, effective protection ultimately depends on compliance and enforcement by States and armed groups.

1.6 Protection of Children's Rights under International Humanitarian Law

Children are among the most vulnerable victims of armed conflict. Their physical immaturity, psychological dependence, and social reliance on family structures expose them to risks such as recruitment into armed forces, trafficking, displacement, separation from parents, denial of education, and long-term trauma. International Humanitarian Law (IHL) therefore grants children not only the general protection accorded to civilians but also special protection measures tailored to their age and developmental needs. These protections apply in both international and non-international armed conflicts.

1.6.1 General Protection as Civilians

As civilians, children must not be the object of attack. Parties to a conflict are required to distinguish between civilian populations and combatants and must avoid indiscriminate attacks affecting children. Accordingly, children are protected against: Direct attacks and bombardment, Collective punishment, Starvation as a method of warfare, and Forced displacement except for imperative military reasons. They must be treated humanely in all circumstances and protected against violence to life, health, and dignity.

1.6.2 Special Care and Assistance

IHL recognizes that children require particular care due to their age. Parties to a conflict must ensure: Access to food, clothing, and medical care, Evacuation from combat zones when necessary, Maintenance of education, and Protection of orphaned or separated children. Whenever possible, children should remain with their families. If separation occurs, authorities must facilitate tracing and reunification.

1.6.3 Prohibition of Recruitment and Participation in Hostilities

One of the most important protections concerns the involvement of children in armed conflict. IHL prohibits the recruitment and participation of children below fifteen years of age in hostilities and requires parties to give priority to older recruits when recruiting persons between fifteen and eighteen years. The recruitment, enlistment, or use of children under fifteen in hostilities constitutes a war crime under international criminal law. This rule applies to both State armed forces and non-state armed groups.

1.6.4 Treatment of Children in Detention

Children deprived of liberty during armed conflict must receive special treatment reflecting their age and vulnerability. They must be: Detained separately from adults (except family units), Provided education and recreational activities, protected from torture or cruel treatment and Allowed contact with their families

Death penalty must not be imposed for offences committed by persons under eighteen years of age at the time of the offence.

1.6.5 Protection of Education and Cultural Development

Education is considered essential for a child's development even during armed conflict. Parties to a conflict must facilitate the proper working of institutions devoted to the care and education of children and must not target schools or objects indispensable to their survival unless they are used for military purposes.

1.6.6 Children in Occupied Territories

In occupied territories, the occupying power bears responsibility for ensuring children's welfare. It must: Facilitate education, Provide medical services, Maintain public health and hygiene and Avoid changing the personal status or nationality of children. Children must not be compelled to serve in the occupying power's armed or auxiliary forces.

International Humanitarian Law provides an extensive protection framework recognizing children as a uniquely vulnerable group during armed conflict. By prohibiting recruitment, ensuring care and education, safeguarding family unity, and criminalizing their exploitation, the law seeks to preserve the physical and psychological development of children even in wartime. However, the continued existence of child soldiers and attacks on schools demonstrates that effective enforcement remains a major challenge requiring stronger international cooperation and accountability.

1.8 Conclusion

International Humanitarian Law establishes a comprehensive legal framework aimed at reducing human suffering during armed conflict and preserving human dignity even in the midst of war. Within this framework, women and children receive not only the general protection accorded to civilians but also special safeguards reflecting their heightened vulnerability to violence, exploitation, and long-term social harm. The law recognizes that equality in protection requires differentiated treatment where specific risks exist.

For women, the law prohibits rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, and other forms of gender-based violence, while also providing special care for pregnant women, nursing mothers, and female

detainees. For children, IHL guarantees protection against recruitment into armed forces, safeguards their access to food, medical care, education, and family unity, and requires humane treatment in detention. These protections have been reinforced by international criminal law, which classifies sexual violence and the use of child soldiers as war crimes and crimes against humanity, thereby transforming humanitarian obligations into individual criminal responsibility.

Despite the breadth of the legal regime, contemporary armed conflicts continue to reveal widespread violations against women and children. The persistence of sexual violence, trafficking, attacks on schools, and child recruitment demonstrates that the principal challenge lies not in the absence of law but in inadequate compliance and enforcement. Weak domestic implementation, political considerations, and difficulties in gathering evidence often hinder accountability.

Therefore, the effectiveness of protection of women and children under International Humanitarian Law depends largely on the willingness of States and armed groups to respect their obligations, the capacity of international monitoring bodies to supervise compliance, and the readiness of international and domestic courts to prosecute offenders. Strengthening dissemination of humanitarian norms, incorporating them into national legislation, supporting victim-centered justice mechanisms, and enhancing international cooperation remain essential steps towards ensuring that women and children are meaningfully protected during armed conflict.

Ultimately, International Humanitarian Law represents humanity's attempt to impose legal restraint on warfare. While it cannot eliminate war, its faithful implementation can significantly reduce suffering and preserve the dignity, safety, and future of the most vulnerable members of society.

1.9 Recommendations

In order to ensure effective protection of women and children during armed conflict, the following legal, institutional, and operational measures are recommended:

a) Strengthening Domestic Implementation

States should incorporate rules of International Humanitarian Law into national legislation and criminal codes, including explicit criminalization of sexual violence, recruitment of child soldiers, and attacks against civilians. Domestic courts must be empowered to exercise jurisdiction over grave breaches and international crimes through universal jurisdiction and cooperation with international judicial mechanisms.

b) Training and Dissemination of Humanitarian Norms

Armed forces, security agencies, and non-state armed groups should receive continuous education and operational training on humanitarian obligations, particularly regarding the protection of women and children. Military manuals, rules of engagement, and command responsibility structures must reflect gender-sensitive and child-protection standards.

c) Enhancing Accountability Mechanisms

States should cooperate with international criminal justice institutions and ensure investigation and prosecution of perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Witness protection programs and victim-centered procedures should be strengthened to encourage reporting of sexual and gender-based violence.

d) Protection in Detention and Displacement Settings

Authorities managing detention facilities and displacement camps must establish separate accommodation, adequate sanitation, medical care, and protection services for women and children. Monitoring access by independent humanitarian organizations should be guaranteed to prevent abuse and exploitation.

e) Prevention of Child Recruitment

Governments should adopt strict age-verification mechanisms during recruitment and criminalize enlistment of minors by both state and non-state armed groups. Rehabilitation and reintegration programs including education, psychosocial support, and vocational training should be provided for former child soldiers.

f) Gender-Sensitive Humanitarian Assistance

Humanitarian relief programs must integrate gender-responsive approaches, ensuring access to reproductive health services, maternal care, and protection from trafficking and forced marriage. Special attention should be given to widows, pregnant women, and girls in conflict-affected areas.

7. Strengthening International Cooperation

States, humanitarian organizations, and international institutions should cooperate in information-sharing, early warning monitoring, and coordinated response mechanisms to prevent large-scale violations. Support for international monitoring bodies and fact-finding missions should be increased.

8. Post-Conflict Justice and Rehabilitation

Post-conflict reconstruction should include compensation schemes, trauma counseling, community reintegration, and access to education for affected women and children. Transitional justice mechanisms should address sexual violence and child recruitment to prevent cycles of impunity.

The protection of women and children under International Humanitarian Law requires not only legal recognition but practical enforcement through legislation, training, accountability, and humanitarian cooperation. Implementing these recommendations will significantly enhance compliance and ensure that humanitarian norms function effectively during armed conflict.

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- [62] Additional Protocol I 1977, arts 52 and 77; Geneva Convention IV 1949, art 50.