



The role of casualty recording in the promotion and protection of the human rights of women and children in conflict and post-conflict situations: Submission to the Call for inputs to inform the report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

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ECC is an independent, non-governmental organisation which works to ensure all casualties of armed conflict and other situations of gross human rights violations are individually recorded, identified and acknowledged. ECC convenes the Casualty Recorders Network, a global initiative of independent casualty recording initiatives, and supports the development and implementation of best practice among casualty recorders worldwide. ECC is a Registered Charity (No. 1166974) in England and Wales and has been in special consultative status with ECOSOC since 2021.

This submission has been prepared by ECC in collaboration with Casualty Recorders Network members. Please find below our responses to selected questions from the Call for Inputs.

Q2. Investigation and prosecution of violations

Comprehensive casualty records which identify individual victims are vital for investigating violations with a gender- and/or child-based focus. Aggregated statistics or mortality estimations do not provide the details necessary to investigate individual cases, or to adequately evidence trends in killings which could indicate war crimes or gross human rights violations.

Casualty Recorders Network (CRN) members, the Humanitarian Law Centre-Serbia and the Humanitarian Law Centre-Kosovo¹, compiled a database of more than 13,000 deaths during the 1998 – 2000 conflict in Kosovo. Information from this research contributed to the evidence at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

The study 'Stolen Futures'² by the Every Casualty Programme at Oxford Research Group compiled and analysed casualty records from several CRN members to provide insights into the methods and means responsible for 11,420 child deaths in Syria between 2011 and

¹ <https://www.hlc-rdc.org/en/>

² <https://everycasualty.org/stolen-futures-press-release/>

2013. This analysis revealed, inter alia, a pattern of children being tortured and summarily executed, including by sniper fire, contrary to international law.

Analysis of individual casualty data from Gaza since October 2023³ reveals a disproportionately high number of fatalities among women and children. When compared with fatality data from other conflicts, this indicates a pattern of indiscriminate attacks which may be evidence of war crimes.

Casualty records can also help identify situations where apparently unrelated deaths are part of a wider pattern of violations of the right to life, as in the case of femicide. Systematic documentation of these deaths is a vital precursor to effective action, as recommended in the 2015 report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls.⁴

To be most effective in supporting investigations, casualty information should be recorded in as much detail as possible from the outset of violence, and continue until all casualties are identified and documented. This process typically takes place over decades, and needs to be conducted consistently to avoid losing vital evidence. Regrettably, a major obstacle to accountability globally is the lack of support and resourcing dedicated to independent casualty recording mechanisms – both civil society-led and UN-mandated – and at the national level.

Q4. Access to justice and remedies

Timely and reliable documentation of casualties is important for supporting widows and orphans to assert their rights. In many contexts, a woman whose husband has died in conflict will be eligible for a war widow's pension. This pension may be her only source of income. However, to access this pension she must have proof of her husband's death. In countries with poorly equipped civil registry systems and deathcare services, and especially where these systems are disrupted by conflict, a formal death certificate may not be easily available.

This was the case in 1999, approximately 200,000 ethnic Serb and Roma civilians fled from Kosovo to Serbia. Those who could not work were not eligible for state pensions until age 45. For female-headed households often the only available income was from state allowances given to children whose fathers had died or disappeared in the war. Claiming

³ <https://everycasualty.org/free-public-webinar-identifying-genocide-by-its-fingerprints/>

⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-violence-against-women/femicide-watch-initiative>

this allowance required families to provide proof of death, which often required women to return to the area they had fled – at high personal risk - to seek evidence.⁵

This problem is exacerbated where the male relative's remains have not been found or identified. This frequently arises where explosive weapons are used and bodily remains are obliterated. Similarly, in cases of mass killings where bodies are disposed of in a mass grave, and forensic expertise is unavailable, it may not be possible to identify the remains. In these contexts, an independent but reliable record of conflict deaths may be the only evidence available to women seeking to claim pension rights.

Similarly, widows and orphans are at high risk of losing access to inheritance and property rights if they cannot document the death of their husband or father. This problem is compounded in situations where families have been displaced and/or their home has been destroyed, as vital identity documents and other paperwork (such as deeds to property) may also have been lost. In some contexts, widows who cannot provide evidence of their husband's death are at risk of losing custody of their own children.⁶ They may also be unable to travel with their children internationally without proof of their husband's consent or death, and so cannot travel to seek asylum without abandoning them.

In societies where women are not commonly included in the paid workforce, remarriage may be the only source of securing stable income for widows and their children. Where effective casualty recording initiatives exist, these can provide confirmation that a disappeared person is reliably presumed dead, saving widows from years trapped in limbo. In 2003, Afghanistan's supreme court issued a ruling allowing a woman whose husband had been missing, presumed dead, for four or more years to be declared a widow. Previously, women had to wait 70 years to be eligible to remarry if they could not provide evidence of their husband's death.⁷

Children orphaned by armed conflict who do not know the fate of their parents experience the additional trauma of ambiguous loss. They are also vulnerable to institutionalisation and trafficking, if there are no death records which can help identify next of kin. In contrast, where effective casualty records exist, these can facilitate children's reunification with family members even decades after separation. In one example, CRN member Fundación de Antropología Forense Guatemala helped reunite a man who had been abducted as a toddler from the Dos Erres massacre with his father.⁸ The father had spent decades believing his

⁵ <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2026/01/14/the-village-of-war-widows-how-women-in-kosovo-rebuilt-life-after-war/>

⁶ <https://everycasualty.org/syrian-network-for-human-rights-and-every-casualty-counts-address-commission-of-inquiry-on-syria/>

⁷ <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/islamic-ruling-help-war-widows>

⁸ <https://www.documentary.org/screening/finding-oscar>

entire family was killed in the massacre, and the child had been adopted abroad unaware of his true identity.

In Sudan, the justice system has been severely weakened by the conflict, with courts in many areas no longer functioning effectively. Survivors of gross human rights violations have extremely limited access to justice. CRN member ACJPS⁹ reports that women and children face particular barriers to legal recourse including lack of education and legal awareness, lack of funds to finance legal action, and social stigma for speaking out.¹⁰

In South Sudan, CRN member GLOSIPAD notes that the ongoing failure to operationalise the Hybrid Court contributes to a significant accountability gap for conflict-related crimes, including those targeting women and children.¹¹

CRN member Yemen Data Project¹² systematically documents civilian casualties of armed violence across the country, disaggregating by age and sex. In one such example, Yemen Data Project documented the death of 16 civilians, including 12 children and three women, in a single airstrike on Sana'a in April 2025. These records could provide an evidentiary basis to support future accountability efforts, but in the current absence of effective judicial or transitional justice mechanisms prospects for redress remain limited.

Legal education and legal aid initiatives, such as those operated by CRN member KAHRDO in Southwest State of Somalia, are important measures for improving access to justice, especially for women.¹³

Q5. Reparation programs

Although relatives of those unlawfully killed in armed violence are entitled to legal accountability and reparation, in practice this is commonly the exception rather than the rule. In situations of massive loss of life, including genocide and full-scale war, national legal systems do not have the capacity to investigate and prosecute every case. International or special tribunals established to address grave violations and war crimes typically focus on perpetrators with the highest level of responsibility, or particularly grave emblematic cases.

In light of this, most victims will not benefit from a judicial process of accountability for the perpetrators. The most effective forms of reparation come in the form of recognition of their loss, memorialisation of the deceased, and – particularly for widows and orphans –

⁹ <https://www.acjps.org/>

¹⁰ <https://www.acjps.org/publications/sudanese-women-paying-the-price-of-war>

¹¹ <https://www.glosipad.org/>

¹² <https://yemendatapoint.org/>

¹³ <https://kalkalhuman.org/>

financial assistance to compensate for the loss of the household's primary earner. In Colombia, this has included scholarships for children orphaned in the conflict.

In Sudan, CRN member ACJPS systematically documents violations affecting women and children, including sexual violence, unlawful killings and enforced disappearances. Whilst formal reparations mechanisms are currently absent in Sudan, continuous casualty recording and documentation by organisations such as ACJPS play a significant role in preserving evidence. This lays the foundations for future accountability and restorative justice processes. By recording testimonies and patterns of abuse, documentation helps ensure that violations are not erased from public memory and that survivors – including women and children - are acknowledged as rights holders entitled to justice and remedy.¹⁴

Q6. Participation of victims and affected communities

Women not only participate in but frequently lead civil society initiatives to search for, identify, memorialise and seek justice for those killed or disappeared in armed conflict. Well-known examples include the Mothers of Srebrenica¹⁵ and Madres de la Plaza de Mayo¹⁶. The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo compiled lists of the missing, testified in international fora, and maintained pressure for prosecutions and accountability in the decades following Argentina's transition to democracy. Their actions led to hundreds of junta officials being convicted for their role in gross human rights violations. Their work was also instrumental in driving international discourse and action on issues around Missing Persons in armed conflict, including the creation of the UN Working Group on Enforced Disappearances.

In contexts including Mexico and Colombia, female relatives of people who have gone missing in armed conflict, including victims of enforced disappearances, are regularly at the forefront of efforts to uncover the truth. Women compile information about missing and deceased persons, identify and exhume mass graves, and deliver forensic identification services. They also lead advocacy initiatives for legislative reform and accountability. Since 2011, there has been an annual march in Ciudad de México on Mothers Day, in recognition of the crucial work conducted by women searching for the disappeared.¹⁷

Despite their dedication, women often face barriers to this work including threats, harassment, and killing. In contexts where male relatives have been killed or gone missing,

¹⁴ <https://web.acjps.org/sudan-armed-conflict-a-war-on-women/>

¹⁵ <https://enklave-srebrenica-zepa.org/english.index.php>

¹⁶ <https://madres.org/>

¹⁷ <https://www.infobae.com/mexico/2026/05/10/xiv-marcha-de-la-dignidad-nacional-14-anos-de-madres-buscadoras-exigiendo-verdad-y-justicia-en-mexico/>

women leading these accountability initiatives also face the burden of domestic responsibilities as well as meeting the family's financial needs. Where they cannot prove the death of a husband or relative, their economic situation may be made worse by inability to access compensation or legal rights of ownership to shared property.

CRN members have reported that in some conflict and post-conflict contexts women are better able to access information on casualties than men. Although they may face additional security and cultural constraints, female researchers are generally considered less threatening and more approachable than male colleagues. They may also be subject to fewer security checks than men in higher risk areas, as they are not considered to pose a threat.

Q8. Prevention and guarantees of non-repetition

Comprehensive casualty records provide evidence of the impact of specific military tactics and weapons on distinct demographic groups. This knowledge can be used to adapt military protocols to better protect civilians, including women and children. In one example, CRN member Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) analysed casualty records from Afghanistan to reveal that international forces were responsible for more than 60 per cent of civilians killed by airstrikes between 2016 and 2020, and that 37 per cent of those killed were children.¹⁸ Similar research, showing the devastating impact of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, led to the adoption of the *Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas*. The Declaration itself recognises 'the importance of efforts to record and track civilian casualties', disaggregated by sex and age, to help inform better protection of civilians.¹⁹

Casualty records play an important role in ensuring public recognition of loss. Where other accountability mechanisms are weak, acknowledgement of harm is an important step in diminishing cycles of revenge violence and unresolved grievances which help drive conflict. They are also valuable resources for educational initiatives around genocide prevention, reconciliation, and peacebuilding.

¹⁸ <https://aoav.org.uk/2021/40-of-all-civilian-casualties-from-airstrikes-in-afghanistan-almost-1600-in-the-last-five-years-were-children/>

¹⁹ <https://ewipa.org/the-political-declaration> - Preamble, para. 1.8.

Recommendations

States should:

- Make all feasible efforts to record and track civilian casualties, ensuring appropriate data collection, disaggregated by sex and age. When possible, this data should be shared and made publicly available.
- Ensure that casualty recording systems and policies are in place and report publicly on all casualties believed to have resulted from hostilities or violence and their circumstances, including for reparations and accountability;
- Seek out and make maximum use of the disaggregated data and analysis provided by casualty recorders to inform decisions and policies to protect, respect and fulfil women and children's human rights, including for accountability, reparations and prevention of harm and violations;
- Support and facilitate the work of independent casualty recording entities, including by ensuring on-the-ground access and access to information;
- Bolster political, logistical and financial support for independent casualty recording work, whether carried out by the United Nations, civil society or national entities;
- Ensure use of casualty records to support the identification of missing persons.

National statistical offices should:

- Collaborate and develop the required modalities to report on indicator 16.1.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals on conflict-related deaths and related official statistics, leveraging the information on individual records and other data and analysis on the human rights impacts, in consultation with OHCHR.

International, regional and State security forces and non-State armed groups should:

- Ensure that casualty tracking systems are in place, and that data and analysis are used to mitigate harm during operations, review procedures and prompt further inquiry where appropriate;
- Establish the necessary channels for regular engagement with casualty recorders, in a safe and secure manner, to clarify the facts of incidents that resulted in civilian harm or violations.

The Human Rights Council should:

- Encourage its mechanisms to use available casualty recording data and analysis in order to contribute to the Council's assessments and deliberations.

Civil society casualty recorders should:

- Ensure transparency by publishing methods, aims and results, as well as disaggregated findings, in situations in which security and consent permit;

- Strengthen collaboration to consolidate casualty records for broader use, including by seeking consent from victims and their families, where needed, with a view to increasing coverage, sharing the information and maximizing its impact on human rights;
- Collaborate to further develop and implement internationally agreed definitions, principles and standards of casualty recording with a view to harmonizing methodology and best practices, while recognizing the diversity of contexts and resources.