



**SEPTEMBER 2025**

# **The Failure of Multilateral Institutions to Protect Women**

By Meaghan Mobbs, Independent Women's Center for Safety and Security Director and Combat Veteran

## **HIGHLIGHT**

Multilateral institutions, especially UN Women, UNRWA, and other United Nations entities, have repeatedly failed to protect women from gender-based violence. Their failures are evident in delayed or muted responses to sexual atrocities, the erosion of sex-based protections, the hypocrisy of elevating authoritarian regimes to leadership roles, and recurring internal scandals—including abuses by UN personnel themselves—all of which betray their core mandate to safeguard women.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The United Nations was founded on the promise of protecting the vulnerable, upholding human dignity, and advancing peace and equality worldwide. Central to that mission has been the pledge to safeguard the rights of women and girls, particularly in times of crisis. Yet, decades after enshrining gender equality as a global priority, the UN's record is marred by systemic failures, political compromises, and moral abdications.

From **tolerating sexual exploitation** by its own peacekeepers to elevating **authoritarian regimes to positions of influence** over women's

rights, the institution has too often placed diplomatic convenience and internal self-preservation above its core mandate. These are not isolated lapses but recurring patterns that reveal a deeper rot: an organization structurally incapable, or unwilling, to hold itself and its member states accountable when women’s safety is at stake.

This paper examines the most glaring examples of that failure, from the UN’s muted response to the mass sexual violence committed by Hamas on October 7, to its refusal to define “woman” in international law and its willingness to let countries like Saudi Arabia lead global gender bodies. Taken together, these failures illustrate why the UN, in its current form, cannot be trusted to defend those it claims to protect—and why meaningful reform or a fundamental rethinking of international engagement is urgently required.

## **SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND EXPLOITATION BY UN PEACEKEEPERS**

One of the most disturbing failures of the United Nations in recent years has been its inability to prevent, or even effectively address, sexual violence and exploitation by its own personnel, particularly in peacekeeping missions. In conflict zones around the world, where women and girls are already vulnerable to the horrors of war, the UN has contributed to their suffering by tolerating sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers, who were supposed to protect them.

In 2024 alone, more than **100 allegations of sexual exploitation** and abuse by UN peacekeepers were reported, with the majority of cases occurring in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR). Shockingly, many of the victims were women and girls who were already living

in desperate conditions. These abuses often involve the coercion of vulnerable women—including in exchange for food, money, or promises of protection—reinforcing the power imbalance between those meant to protect and the civilians they are sworn to serve. Worse still, few perpetrators have faced prosecution, as accountability for these crimes often lies with the troop-contributing countries. In the case of **peacekeepers from Sri Lanka involved in a child sex ring in Haiti**, no member of the Sri Lankan military was prosecuted, despite overwhelming evidence.

The UN has been slow to implement meaningful reforms. While it has reiterated its “zero-tolerance” policy for sexual exploitation and abuse, this commitment has often been little more than lip service. For example, while training programs for peacekeepers on the issue have been implemented, the cultural and systemic changes required to root out sexual violence within peacekeeping operations remain largely absent.

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A **2024 UN survey**, as reported by the Associated Press, found concerning beliefs among some UN staff regarding sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA). Specifically, the survey of 64,585 UN staff revealed that 3.65% (approximately 2,360 individuals) believed it was acceptable to pay for sex, and a smaller portion, close to 1% (about 555 staffers), believed it was acceptable to engage in sexual activity with a child. These findings indicate that a minority

of UN personnel hold views that conflict with the UN's zero-tolerance policy on SEA, which is alarming given the organization's mission to protect vulnerable populations.

Additionally, the **survey** highlighted a significant rise in distrust toward UN leadership, with 6% of respondents (around 3,700 staff members) expressing a lack of confidence in leaders' ability to address SEA, doubling from 3% in 2023. This suggests internal challenges in fostering accountability and trust, which could contribute to a culture where impunity persists. There has also been an **18% decline across 122 UN entities in workforce confidence** in leadership's commitment to addressing sexual misconduct, further pointing to systemic issues.

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The issues of underfunding and poor coordination only deepen the crisis. The UN's Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA), meant to provide essential survivor assistance, remains chronically underfunded. In 2023, it **could only support a fraction of the required programs** due to limited contributions from member states. Meanwhile, fragmented funding streams across agencies, such as UNHCR and UNICEF, further fuel the inconsistency in prevention and response efforts. The Office of the Special Coordinator on SEA itself acknowledges a lack of centralized coordination, resulting in disjointed and ad hoc responses, particularly in high-risk areas such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo

(DRC) and the Central African Republic. These **two countries alone accounted** for 102 of the 758 SEA allegations in 2023 and 2024.

That being said, member states' reluctance to increase contributions to the Trust Fund is not only understandable but prudent, stemming from legitimate concerns over transparency, results, and the risk of enabling inefficiency. The Fund relies on voluntary donations, yet persistent SEA scandals, such as the aforementioned occurrences in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Central African Republic, have eroded public and governmental trust, making states wary of associating with a system where accountability remains elusive despite repeated pledges.

For the Trust Fund specifically, hesitancy is also amplified by criticisms that it supports only a fraction of needs, not due to funding alone but because of ineffective delivery and a lack of mechanisms for true justice or redress, leading some to view contributions as propping up a flawed apparatus rather than driving change.

The failings of peacekeeping missions themselves cannot be overstated. The DRC, for example, was the subject of a **2020 independent review**, which highlighted the inadequacy of community engagement and weak reporting mechanisms. These deficiencies leave women and girls vulnerable to violence—not just from armed groups, but in some cases, from UN personnel themselves. Peacekeeping missions are often under-resourced, with insufficient personnel trained to support women and girls or specialized protection units. Additionally, logistical and cultural barriers prevent victims from coming forward to report abuse. While mechanisms like the Victim Rights Advocate and community-based complaint systems exist, the uneven availability of support services such as psychosocial care and legal aid only exacerbates the

situation, leaving many women without the necessary resources for recovery.

The lack of accountability remains a critical failure. Despite the UN's efforts to investigate SEA allegations, troop-contributing countries (TCCs) are the ones tasked with disciplining offenders. This system has repeatedly led to lenient outcomes, with repatriation often serving as **the only consequence for perpetrators, rather than prosecution**. In 2023, only a small percentage of allegations led to criminal accountability, further entrenching perceptions of impunity. The results of the 2024 staff survey underscore these issues, revealing deep distrust in the UN's ability to effectively address SEA. The UN's reliance on TCCs undermines any **real enforcement of its policies**.

Though the UN has taken steps to address these issues—such as implementing mandatory pre-deployment training, improving personnel vetting processes, and introducing a victim-centered **“New Approach”** in 2017—these efforts have fallen short. The 2019 Strategy on **Action for Peacekeeping (A4P)** placed accountability front and center, and while female representation in peacekeeping forces has increased, it still stands at a **mere 7.4% of uniformed personnel**.

Secretary-General António Guterres has made eliminating SEA a priority, but the persistence of allegations and the prevailing attitudes among staff indicate that these measures are insufficient. The lack of a comprehensive, globally coordinated strategy, coupled with the continued underfunding and systemic

gaps, remains a serious threat to the safety and dignity of women and girls worldwide.

## **SAUDI ARABIA'S HYPOCRISY IN LEADING THE UN WOMEN'S RIGHTS COMMISSION**

Equally troubling is the UN's appointment of Saudi Arabia to chair the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), a body charged with promoting gender equality worldwide. Saudi Arabia's human rights record is abysmal when it comes to women's rights. The Kingdom's laws and practices still subject women to extreme restrictions, **including the male guardianship system**, which requires women to have male approval for a range of activities, from traveling abroad to making medical decisions. Women who speak out for their rights are frequently silenced through **imprisonment**, and those who defy the system **risk severe punishment**.

Despite this, Saudi Arabia was selected to chair the CSW in 2024. This appointment is not only an insult to the many women around the world who suffer under the regime's policies but also undermines the credibility of the UN itself. The CSW's mandate is to promote and protect women's rights, but how can an organization whose very leadership is beholden to a regime that treats women as second-class citizens be trusted to fulfill that mandate?

Saudi Arabia's role in the CSW is a glaring contradiction, one that reflects the UN's broader failure to address the interests of women in a meaningful and substantive way. While the UN pays lip service to gender equality, it continues to

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afford the Kingdom's leaders a platform of power, despite their abhorrent record on women's rights.

This situation exposes the UN's failure to uphold its stated values and highlights the inherent contradictions within the institution. In practice, the UN prioritizes political relationships and diplomatic convenience over the very principles it was founded to champion. By allowing countries like Saudi Arabia to lead women's rights bodies, the UN undermines its own credibility and perpetuates the very oppression it claims to oppose. It sends a message that political considerations will always outweigh the protection of human rights, especially when it comes to the rights of women and girls.

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## **THE INCONSISTENT AND INEFFECTIVE ADVOCACY ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE**

The UN's record on gender-based violence is similarly lacking. While the organization has undertaken significant efforts to raise awareness about the prevalence of violence against women and girls, these efforts have often been inadequate and inconsistent. The organization's responses to instances of sexual violence in conflict zones—including ongoing crises in places like Afghanistan, Yemen, and Sudan—have often been slow and ineffective.

Take, for example, the situation in Afghanistan following the Taliban's return to power in 2021. While the UN initially condemned the Taliban's treatment of women, its response has been

tepid and insufficient. UN Women's agencies have continued to operate in Afghanistan, but their impact has been minimal, and the women who remain under Taliban rule are subject to daily violence and oppression. Unsurprisingly, the UN HRC resolution on Afghanistan has been near meaningless. The UN's **lack of a coherent and forceful strategy** in Afghanistan, as well as its failure to directly challenge the Taliban's regime, illustrates a broader tendency to fail to take meaningful action when it comes to women's rights in conflict zones.

Similarly, the UN's response to the **humanitarian crisis in Sudan** has exemplified its inability to protect women and girls from gender-based violence. As violence escalates in the country, women and children have become prime targets for sexual violence and exploitation. And the violence is extreme. **There are well-documented** instances of child rape, gang rape, and sexual slavery, which amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. Despite calls for international assistance, the UN has been slow to provide resources and has struggled to implement effective protection measures. More than **12 million remain at risk** for conflict-related sexual violence.

The UN's failure to take decisive action in these and other conflict zones is a direct result of its structural and political weaknesses. Its inability to respond effectively to gender-based violence undermines its credibility as a global champion for women's rights and perpetuates the suffering of those who are already most vulnerable.

## **THE FAILURE TO DEFINE A WOMAN**

The United Nations' failure to clearly define what a woman is has also become a glaring example of the organization's dysfunction and its inability to provide consistent, coherent protection for women's rights globally. This

ambiguity undermines the very foundations of international frameworks meant to protect women, exacerbating gender inequalities and eroding vital protections for women in conflict and beyond. The UN's hesitancy to define "woman" in legal and policy contexts has led to significant consequences for the rights and safety of women, particularly in areas related to gender-based violence (GBV), women's participation in peace processes, and sex-based protections.

You cannot protect what you cannot define.

A particularly prominent instance of this failure was seen in 2021 when UN Women was **embroiled in a debate over whether to include transgender women as part of its advocacy for women's rights**. The debate centered on whether the rights of transgender individuals should be prioritized at the expense of traditional sex-based protections for women. This issue came to a head during discussions on the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), where member states pushed for a clearer definition of "woman" in relation to gender equality. Yet, the UN failed to issue a definitive stance, resulting in significant policy ambiguity. This confusion can be seen as recently as last year, when UN Women UK elected to have a **biological man** who identified as a woman as its "UK Champion."

This is about more than semantics. Legal and policy frameworks designed to protect women often rely on the biological definition of sex to ensure targeted protection. For example, **UN Security Council Resolution 1325**, which addresses women's involvement in peace and security processes, and other international treaties related to sexual violence in conflict, have historically centered on women's biological sex to identify those in need of protection. The

failure to clearly define "woman" complicates the implementation of such protections.

If the term "woman" is left open to interpretation, the UN risks diluting the scope of these protections, undermining the ability to deliver assistance and legal safeguards to those most at risk—biological women and girls in conflict zones.

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The ambiguity surrounding the definition of "woman" also undermines the ability of international bodies to address gender-based violence effectively. For instance, the legal definition of rape under international law is often tied to the sex of the victim. The failure to clearly define "woman" can lead to gaps in how sexual violence is prosecuted and how victims are identified. This can have particularly grave consequences in conflict zones, where women are frequently targeted for sexual violence as a weapon of war.

The absence of a concrete definition of "woman" also results in policy inconsistencies. In some countries, the rights of transgender individuals are prioritized without adequate consideration for the needs and protections of women as a distinct group. In other contexts, the rights of women are entirely overlooked in favor of broader gender identity frameworks that fail to differentiate between sex-based discrimination and gender identity. The lack of a clear, consistent framework within the UN leads to confusion at the national level, where different interpretations of "woman" can result in either overreach or underreach in protecting women's rights.

## CASE STUDY

### OCTOBER 7 AND THE ABANDONING OF ISRAELI WOMEN

The October 7, 2023, attacks on Israel by Hamas marked a devastating day for the country, with civilians targeted in a horrific wave of violence, including systematic sexual violence against women. The **scale and brutality of these crimes** not only shocked the international community but also exposed a glaring failure in the response of multilateral institutions, particularly the UN, in protecting the rights and safety of women in conflict zones.

On October 7, Hamas launched an unprecedented and coordinated attack on Israeli civilian populations. As the militants rampaged through towns and villages, they systematically targeted women, subjecting them to rape, abduction, and in many cases, murder. In total, hundreds of Israeli women were abducted, assaulted, and taken as hostages. Reports from **Israeli authorities** and **independent investigations** confirmed the scale of sexual violence, with victims ranging from children to elderly women. These crimes were not random acts of violence but part of a broader, **orchestrated effort** by Hamas to terrorize Israel, using sexual violence as both a weapon of war and a tool of humiliation.

The sexual violence endured by these women was horrific. Victims were often forced into captivity, raped in front of family members, or subjected to sexual torture. This violence was not only an affront to their dignity but also aimed at breaking the spirit of the Israeli people and destabilizing the country. The psychological and physical toll on the survivors was immeasurable, with many facing long-term trauma, health consequences, and a complete disruption of their lives.

#### **The UN's Inadequate Response**

The UN clearly failed to mount an effective response to the violence. Despite the international prominence of the UN's mission to uphold the rights of women and girls, particularly in times of conflict, its reaction to the mass sexual violence committed by Hamas was alarmingly muted. There was no immediate condemnation of the violence from the UN's leadership, nor was there a coordinated response to provide support for the victims or ensure the protection of Israeli women.

In the aftermath of the October 7 attacks, the UN's initial response was catastrophically subdued. The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, issued a general statement condemning the violence but did not single out the horrific sexual violence that occurred or explicitly call out Hamas for committing war crimes. The failure to issue an unequivocal condemnation of Hamas' deliberate use of sexual violence against civilians, especially women, was a glaring and purposeful omission.

The UN's failure to mobilize rapid relief for victims of sexual violence is another example of its systemic ineffectiveness. While various UN agencies, such as **UN**

**Women** and **UNHCR**, are tasked with providing gender-specific protection and support during conflict, there were no visible efforts from these bodies to offer immediate assistance to Israeli women. There were no emergency provisions for trauma counseling, medical aid for survivors of sexual violence, or other forms of support. In contrast, Israel's government and **civil society groups had to step in**, bearing the full burden of addressing the urgent needs of survivors.

A key element of the UN's mandate in conflict zones is ensuring accountability for perpetrators of sexual violence. However, the UN's failure to hold Hamas accountable for its role in orchestrating mass sexual violence is indicative of the broader dysfunction within the institution. While the UN has historically been quick to criticize Israeli actions in Gaza, its lack of focus on Hamas' war crimes during the October 7 attacks demonstrated a profound political bias. This selective response undermines the credibility of the UN's commitment to justice, as it suggests that the rights and safety of women are less of a priority when the perpetrators are aligned with certain political or ideological factions.

### **Institutional Failures and Systemic Issues**

The October 7 attacks highlight deeper systemic issues within the UN that contribute to its inability to protect women in conflict zones. The failure to protect Israeli women is not an isolated incident but part of a larger pattern of ineffectiveness and bias within multilateral institutions.

The UN's response to gender-based violence often reflects political considerations rather than the urgency of the situation. In this case, the UN's hesitation to explicitly address Hamas' war crimes against Israeli women can be linked to the broader geopolitical climate surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The **UN's historical tendency to condemn Israeli actions**, while downplaying or excusing atrocities committed by Hamas, further exemplifies how political biases influence its ability to address gendered violence. This politicization detracts from the UN's core mission to protect the most vulnerable, leaving women at the mercy of violent extremists.

The October 7 attacks on Israeli women serve as a tragic and undeniable example of the UN's failure to protect the most vulnerable in conflict zones. Despite the clear mandate and the tools at its disposal, the UN's response was slow, inadequate, and politically compromised.

By failing to prioritize the protection of women and girls, especially in the face of systematic sexual violence, the UN has once again demonstrated its inability to live up to its stated commitments. Until the UN reforms its structures, places women's safety at the core of its peacekeeping and humanitarian efforts, and holds perpetrators of sexual violence accountable, regardless of political considerations, it will continue to fail the women it is charged with protecting.

## **INSTITUTIONAL FAILURES**

The failures highlighted above are symptomatic of broader institutional problems within the United Nations. While the UN's founding charter emphasized the importance of human rights, the reality is that the organization is often more focused on political expediency and maintaining relationships with powerful states, even when those states have poor records on women's rights. This tendency has resulted in the perpetuation of a culture of impunity, where those with power are allowed to continue violating women's rights without facing meaningful consequences.

Moreover, the UN's bureaucratic structure often prevents swift action when it comes to addressing violations of women's rights. The overlapping mandates of various UN agencies, combined with a lack of coordination and resources, frequently lead to disjointed and ineffective responses to gender-based violence and inequality. The UN's reliance on member states to police themselves further weakens its ability to hold violators accountable. The lack of oversight and consistent enforcement of the organization's own policies on women's rights has allowed a cycle of inaction to persist.

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These structural issues go beyond a few isolated failures; they represent a systemic problem within the UN that prevents the organization from being an effective force for change. As long as the UN remains beholden to powerful states and continues to operate in

an environment where political considerations outweigh human rights, it will fail to protect and empower women and girls globally.

Immediate and comprehensive reforms are long overdue. Needed reforms should focus on the following key areas:

### **Accountability for Sexual Violence by Peacekeepers**

The UN must establish a fully independent body to investigate and prosecute allegations of sexual violence and exploitation by peacekeepers. This body should be empowered to hold perpetrators accountable, regardless of their national affiliation. Furthermore, the UN should require troop-contributing countries to be more transparent about their efforts to hold their personnel accountable for misconduct. The UN should also commit to providing adequate support for victims, including psychological care and compensation for those who have suffered as a result of peacekeeper misconduct.

### **Reevaluating Leadership in Women's Rights Bodies**

The UN should implement a rigorous vetting process for countries nominated to leadership roles in bodies such as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). Saudi Arabia's appointment to chair the CSW should serve as a wake-up call that the UN's leadership in gender equality must be held to a higher standard. The UN must ensure that countries with poor records on women's rights are not given platforms to influence global policy on women's issues.

### **Improving Response to Gender-Based Violence in Conflict Zones**

The UN must adopt a more proactive and robust strategy for responding to gender-based violence in conflict zones. This includes ensuring that UN peacekeepers are adequately

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trained to prevent sexual violence, deploying rapid response teams to assist survivors, and providing essential support services in conflict areas. The UN must also engage more directly with local communities to ensure that women’s voices are heard and that their needs are met during and after conflict.

### Enhancing Internal Oversight and Coordination

The UN should establish stronger internal oversight mechanisms to ensure that all its agencies are fulfilling their mandates with respect to women’s rights. Greater coordination between agencies like UN Women, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and the UN Peacekeeping Force is necessary to ensure that the UN’s efforts on behalf of women are more effective and coherent. The UN must also commit to increased transparency in its operations, providing the global public with clear reports on its progress and shortcomings.

### CONCLUSION: A CALL TO DEFUND THE UN

Even with these recommendations, it is increasingly clear that the UN, as it is currently constituted, is failing to fulfill its primary mandate: the protection of human rights. The organization’s systemic dysfunction, its tolerance

of sexual violence, and its willingness to turn a blind eye to the oppression of women in countries like Saudi Arabia make it an institution that no longer deserves the global financial and political support it currently receives.

The time has come for the United States and other donor nations to reevaluate their financial commitments to the UN. Rather than pouring more resources into an organization that has shown a consistent inability to address rising conflict and human rights violations, we must consider alternative strategies to promote women’s rights and global security.

The money currently funding a broken institution could be better spent on direct humanitarian assistance, targeted interventions to combat gender-based violence, and support for local organizations that are working tirelessly on the frontlines to protect women and girls.

It is time to stop funding failure. The UN has shown, time and again, that it cannot be relied upon to safeguard the rights of women and girls. Until it reforms its structure, accountability mechanisms, and approach to gender equality, it should no longer receive financial support from those who are committed to empowering women and upholding human dignity. Defunding the UN is not an outright rejection of international cooperation, but a call for accountability and reform in an institution that has failed to live up to its responsibilities.

The United Nations must do better. The organization was created to protect the vulnerable, uphold human dignity, and promote peace and security worldwide. It’s time to acknowledge it has failed.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO!

### Get Informed

Learn more about the role of masculinity in the military. Visit:

- [The UN Has Failed](#)
- [The UN: 500 Days of Hypocrisy](#)
- [Emerging Global Threats: Putting America's National Security First](#)

### Talk to Your Friends:

Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what's going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

### Become a Leader in the Community:

Start an Independent Women's Network chapter group so you can get together with friends each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.

### Remain Engaged Politically:

Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

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Independent Women is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility. Independent Women, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.