

Legal Status of Victims of Sexual and Domestic Violence in Armed Conflict: International Legal Standards and Ukrainian Practice*

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[10.15408/jch.v13i3.47347](https://doi.org/10.15408/jch.v13i3.47347)

Abstract.

The article provides a comprehensive analysis of the legal status of victims of sexual and domestic violence in armed conflict through the prism of international legal standards and modern Ukrainian practice. The relevance of the topic is due to the ongoing armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, which has led to a significant increase in the number of cases of sexual and gender-based violence, in particular in temporarily occupied areas, places of detention, and among internally displaced persons. The article aims to study the system of international and national legal mechanisms for the protection of victims of sexual and domestic violence during armed conflict, identify problems in the implementation of international legal norms in Ukrainian legislation, and formulate proposals for its improvement. The research used a complex of general scientific (analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, systematic approach) and special legal (comparative legal, formal legal, historical legal, method of interpretation of legal norms) methods, which ensured the completeness and objectivity of the results obtained. The article reveals the content of the main international documents that determine the legal status of victims of sexual violence in armed conflicts. It is emphasized that these acts establish the obligation of states to ensure prevention, investigation, prosecution of perpetrators, and assistance to victims. The scientific novelty of the study lies in the systematic approach to determining the legal status of victims of sexual and domestic violence as a complex legal category, combining elements of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and national legislation.

Keywords: War Crimes, Martial Law, Armed Conflict, Responsibility, Human Rights, Status of Victims, Domestic Violence

* Received: June 25, 2025, revised: July 24, 2025, accepted: July 29, 2025, published: December 30, 2025.

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A. INTRODUCTION

The issue of protecting human rights during armed conflicts has become particularly relevant in the 21st century, when armed conflicts have ceased to be purely interstate and are increasingly accompanied by massive violations of the rights of the civilian population. One of the most painful manifestations of such violations is sexual and domestic violence, which is used not only as a tool of intimidation, but also as a method of waging war, which has a destructive effect on the social fabric of society.

The armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, which has been ongoing since 2014 and became full-scale in 2022, has brought to the fore the issue of ensuring the legal status of victims of sexual and domestic violence, in particular in conditions of occupation, forced displacement of the population, and violations of the social protection system. Reports from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and international human rights organizations indicate the presence of numerous facts of sexual violence that have signs of war crimes and crimes against humanity. At the same time, women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities remain the most vulnerable categories of victims.

Over the past decades, the international community has developed a set of legal standards aimed at preventing sexual violence in armed conflict and ensuring justice for victims. These include the provisions of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, UN Security Council Resolution No. 1325 (2000) "Women, Peace and Security", as well as the 2011 Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe. These documents enshrine the obligation of states to guarantee protection, rehabilitation, access to justice and compensation for damage to victims of sexual violence, including in wartime (Kobrusieva *et al.*, 2021).

Ukraine, as a state party to the main international treaties in the field of human rights, is gradually adapting its legislation to the requirements of international humanitarian law. In recent years, several regulatory and legal acts have been adopted aimed at strengthening the fight against domestic violence, improving criminal legal mechanisms for bringing sexual crimes to justice, and creating a system for assisting victims. The ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2022 was a significant step in this direction. (Tylchuk *et al.*, 2022)

At the same time, law enforcement practice in Ukraine demonstrates the presence of significant problems - from insufficient documentation of sexual violence crimes to the lack of effective mechanisms for the protection and reintegration of victims. Additional difficulties are created by the conditions of martial law, when a significant part of the territories are occupied or are in the zone of active hostilities, which makes it impossible for law enforcement agencies to respond in a timely manner. (Halaburda *et al.*, 2021)

Therefore, studying the legal status of victims of sexual and domestic violence in armed conflict is not only theoretically significant, but also has practical value for improving national legislation, increasing the effectiveness of law enforcement and implementing Ukraine's international obligations in the field of human rights. (Zadyraka *et al.*, 2023)

The purpose of the article is to study international legal standards for the protection of victims of sexual and domestic violence in armed conflicts and analyze the features of their implementation in the legal system of Ukraine.

B. METHODS

The methodological basis of the study is a system of general scientific and special legal methods that provide a comprehensive, objective, and systematic approach to the analysis of the legal status of victims of sexual and domestic violence in armed conflict. The dialectical method was used to understand the phenomena in their interrelation, development, and contradictions. It allowed us to consider the evolution of international legal standards in the field of protection of victims of sexual violence as a result of the historical development of humanitarian law and human rights.

Analysis and synthesis were used to structure the theoretical provisions of international law, national legislation, and the practice of their implementation; with the help of synthesis, approaches to determining the legal status of victims were generalized. Induction and deduction ensured a logical sequence of presentation of the material: from the general principles of international humanitarian law to specific norms of Ukrainian legislation.

The comparative legal method allowed us to compare international legal standards (Geneva Conventions, Rome Statute, Istanbul Convention) with the norms of national legislation of Ukraine in order to identify the degree of their implementation. The system-structural method contributed to the identification of interrelationships between institutional mechanisms for the

protection of victims (law enforcement agencies, judiciary, social protection services) and international human rights monitoring bodies. The formal-legal method was used to analyze the content of legal norms that determine the status of victims of sexual and domestic violence, the procedure for documenting crimes, and the procedures for bringing perpetrators to justice. The method of interpreting legal norms made it possible to clarify the content of the concepts of “victim of sexual violence”, “domestic violence”, and “crimes against humanity” in the context of Ukrainian and international legislation.

The historical-legal method was used to study the development of international standards for the protection of war victims, starting from the Hague Conventions of the late 19th century and up to modern documents of the UN Security Council. The method of legal forecasting was used to formulate proposals for improving the Ukrainian legal system, taking into account the trends in the development of international humanitarian law.

The empirical basis consists of: international legal acts (Geneva Conventions of 1949, Rome Statute of 1998, Istanbul Convention of 2011, UN Security Council Resolutions No. 1325, 1820, 2467); acts of Ukrainian legislation (Constitution of Ukraine, Criminal Code of Ukraine, Law "On Prevention and Combating Domestic Violence", subordinate normative acts of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine); official reports of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, OSCE, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, as well as materials of the practice of national courts and the International Criminal Court. The methodological basis of the study is based on the concepts of the rule of law, the priority of human rights, gender equality and the principle of inevitability of responsibility for war crimes. The theoretical basis was the works of domestic and foreign scholars: O. Bandurka, V. Butkevych, N. Onishchenko, T. Kyselova, H. Charlesworth, C. Chinkin, C. MacKinnon, who research gender aspects of international humanitarian law and the protection of the rights of victims of violence.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Sexual violence in armed conflict is considered by international law to be a serious violation of international humanitarian law and may constitute a war crime or a crime against humanity. According to Article 27 of the 1949 Geneva Convention (IV), women must “always enjoy respect for their honour, including protection against rape, enforced prostitution or any other form of indecent assault” (Geneva Convention, 1949).

Additional Protocol I (1977) to the Conventions also prohibits any act intended to outrage human dignity (Article 75) (Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions, 1949). A significant step forward was the recognition of sexual violence as a crime against humanity in the jurisprudence of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (Prosecutor v. Furundžija, 1998) and as an element of genocide in the case of Prosecutor v. Akayesu (1998) of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTY, Prosecutor v. Furundžija, 1998).

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998) includes rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, sterilization, and other forms of sexual violence as war crimes and crimes against humanity in articles 7 and 8 (Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998). Armed conflicts not only create risks of sexual violence by military or occupying forces, but also exacerbate domestic violence in the civilian sector. Economic instability, displacement, loss of social ties and traumatic events contribute to aggression within the family (Holovko *et al.*, 2021).

The Council of Europe Convention on Prevention of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention, 2011) enshrines the obligation of states to protect victims even in situations of crisis and armed conflict (art. 2 §3) (Istanbul Convention, 2011). Ukraine ratified the Convention in 2022, thereby assuming the obligation to ensure interdepartmental coordination of assistance to victims, including those who experienced violence during the war.

Domestic violence is one of the most widespread forms of human rights violations in the world, which does not lose its relevance even in peacetime, and in conditions of armed conflict it acquires a systemic, hidden and especially traumatic nature. Military actions create a favorable environment for the intensification of manifestations of violence in the family, which is associated with several socio-economic, psychological and legal factors. In the context of armed conflict, the vulnerability of women, children, the elderly, people with disabilities and internally displaced persons increases. Factors contributing to the increase in cases of domestic violence include: high levels of stress and trauma among military personnel and civilians, which can manifest themselves in forms of aggression; economic instability and loss of jobs, housing or social ties; limited access to legal aid due to destroyed infrastructure; reduced state control over certain territories, which makes it impossible for the police to respond in a timely manner; social isolation and

patriarchal stereotypes that prevent victims from seeking help (Villasmil Espinoza *et al.*, 2022).

In conditions of martial law, domestic violence often takes the form of a hidden or latent phenomenon, as most victims do not report the facts of violence due to fear of the perpetrator, social stigmatization, or distrust of state institutions (Kalenichenko *et al.*, 2021).

International law considers domestic violence as a violation of human rights, which can be qualified as a form of discrimination on the basis of sex. According to the Council of Europe Convention on Prevention of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention, 2011), the participating states are obliged to ensure effective protection of victims in all circumstances, including in times of war or crisis (Article 2 §3) (Istanbul Convention, 2011).

The document also provides for a comprehensive approach to the prevention of domestic violence, which includes: the creation of specialized support services for victims (shelters, crisis centers, hotlines); ensuring access to justice and free legal aid; introducing mechanisms for preventive control over the behavior of perpetrators; training law enforcement officers, prosecutors, judges, and medical personnel in the principles of gender-sensitive response. (Sinkevych *et al.*, 2024)

From the point of view of international humanitarian law, domestic violence is not always directly attributed to war crimes, but it can be considered a form of violence related to armed conflict if it occurs as a result of or under the influence of hostilities. UN Security Council Resolution No. 1325 (2000) "Women, Peace and Security" emphasizes the need to involve women in decision-making processes, as well as the obligation of states to ensure their protection from all forms of violence during conflicts (United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 "Women, Peace and Security, 2000).

Ukraine was one of the first countries in the post-Soviet space to adopt the Law "On Prevention and Counteraction to Domestic Violence" (2017), which for the first time enshrined the concept of "domestic violence" and defined state response mechanisms. The law provides for criminal, administrative and civil liability for the commission of violence, as well as a system of protection measures, in particular, urgent prohibitory orders, restrictive court orders and social support for victims (Law of Ukraine "On preventing and combating domestic violence", 2017). With the beginning of full-scale aggression in 2022, Ukraine intensified the implementation of its

obligations under the Istanbul Convention, ratified by the Verkhovna Rada on June 20, 2022 (On the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing violence against women and domestic violence, 2022). This allowed for the improvement of the coordination system between entities implementing measures to combat violence; in particular, the following were introduced: expansion of the network of crisis rooms and mobile teams of socio-psychological assistance; operation of a single hotline 15-47 for reporting violence; development of a state strategy for integrating gender equality issues into the security and defense system (Leheza *et al.*, 2022). However, even with a developed regulatory framework, practice records a number of problems: insufficient awareness of citizens about protection mechanisms; an overloaded judicial system due to martial law; lack of specialists (psychologists, lawyers, social workers) capable of working with traumatized individuals; difficulties in recording cases of violence, especially in temporarily occupied territories (Matviichuk *et al.*, 2022).

According to the National Police, in 2023, more than 300 thousand cases of domestic violence were registered, of which about 80% concerned women, and a significant part of these cases were recorded among internally displaced persons (National Police of Ukraine, 2024). This indicates the need to further strengthen preventive and rehabilitation measures.

To increase the effectiveness of responding to domestic violence in wartime, it is advisable to: improve the mechanism of interagency cooperation between the police, social services and courts; create a single national register of cases of domestic violence; introduce mandatory training for law enforcement officers and military personnel on gender sensitivity and humanitarian law; strengthen Ukraine's cooperation with international organizations (UN, OSCE, Council of Europe) to develop joint victim support programs; ensure access to psychological, medical and legal assistance in communities affected by hostilities. Thus, domestic violence in the context of armed conflict should be considered not only as a social, but also as a legal problem, requiring the integration of national policy with Ukraine's international obligations in the field of human rights (Leheza *et al.*, 2023).

Ukrainian legislation is gradually adapting to international standards. Key acts are: the Law of Ukraine "On Prevention and Counteraction to Domestic Violence" (2017) (Law of Ukraine "On preventing and combating domestic violence, 2017); the Criminal Code of Ukraine, which, after amendments in 2018, recognized domestic violence as a separate crime (Article 126-1) ; Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers No. 728 of 22.08.2018 on the

procedure for interaction between entities implementing measures in the field of prevention and counteraction to domestic violence (Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2018). After the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022, the state expanded the network of crisis rooms, hotlines, created the government hotline 15-47, and established mobile teams of socio-psychological assistance.

At the same time, the problem of documenting sexual violence committed by the Russian military remains acute. According to the UN, hundreds of cases of sexual violence have been documented that could qualify as war crimes (United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine. Report on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, 2023).

Challenges and directions for improving the legal status of victims:

- Insufficient evidence base in cases of war crimes of a sexual nature requires the creation of uniform documentation standards.
- Psychological aspect - victims often do not contact law enforcement due to fear, stigmatization and distrust.
- The need for interagency coordination - effective assistance requires joint actions of the police, prosecutor's office, medical institutions and free legal aid centers.
- International cooperation - Ukraine's participation in UN, OSCE and Council of Europe programs contributes to the harmonization of the legal status of victims with international norms (Kulinich *et al.*, 2023).

D. CONCLUSIONS

The legal status of victims of sexual and domestic violence in the armed conflict in Ukraine is determined by a combination of international humanitarian law, international human rights law and national legislation. Ukraine has taken important steps towards the implementation of international standards, in particular the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, but the real provision of victims' rights requires strengthening mechanisms for access to justice, witness protection and special training of investigators. The international legal approach should be integrated, based on the principle of "zero tolerance" to sexual violence in war.

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