

Global Virtual Event of the Beyond Compliance Consortium: Emergent Themes Across Eight Contexts of Armed Conflict

26 March 2026

Event Summary

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Overview

The Beyond Compliance Consortium (BCC) is a co-productive, socio-legal research partnership that traverses the fields of international law, conflict studies, humanitarian protection work and human rights policy, and brings together these communities of scholarship and practice with people with lived experience of conflict. Funded with UK International Development from the UK government, we are undertaking a three-year theoretical, empirical, and operational research programme “Building Evidence on Promoting Restraint by Armed Actors,” with the aim to contribute to the effective prevention and reduction of humanitarian need and civilian harm, and the facilitation of full(er) protection in war.

The Global Virtual Event brought together findings from the [BCC’s conceptual framework](#) with insights from extensive empirical data collected in eight contexts of armed conflict by Country Research Units (CRUs) comprising BCC local researchers and partner organisations. It showcased emergent themes across these contexts with a focus on gendered and intersectional experiences of armed conflict, mental harm, intangible harm + need and factors of compliance + restraint.

Part I

Session 1: Problematising gender, age, and vulnerability

Speakers: *Jaël Zawadi (War Child), Mohamed al-Iriani (Yemen Policy Center), and Anki Sjöberg (Fight for Humanity)*

Moderator: *Ioana Cismas (University of York)*

CRUs from Yemen and the Democratic Republic of the Congo reflected on the differentiated experiences of armed conflict based on gender and age, as well as other intersecting identities which construct various forms of vulnerability.

In both contexts, the armed conflict led to shifts in traditional gender norms, primarily resulting in women taking on additional roles as breadwinners for their families. This had both positive and negative impacts, such as recognising women's agency but also exposing them to additional types of harm in public spaces. A key driver of harm for children was recruitment and *fear* of recruitment by armed actors.

While local, tribal, community, or religious norms are identified as playing a critical role in shaping compliance + restraint, these norms can be both protective and create harm. For instance, the same religious norms may protect women from harassment at checkpoints but reinforce other harms like gender-based violence in the home or contribute to loss of agency for women. Tribal norms and those linked to religion can enhance protections for certain groups, such as women and children. However, protection may be incomplete or requires contributions/payments. These protections may also not extend to those perceived as outsiders (migrants, children and women from minority groups). Internally displaced persons, migrants, and ethnic or religious minorities are often left outside such protections, and as a consequence, are more exposed to harm, quite often involving recruitment or sexual violence.

Engaging local actors can be important to driving compliance + restraint and understanding how local norms can be leveraged and shaped to enhance protection for all.

Session 2: Informal and community-based protection

Speakers: Rahma Abikar (Centre on Armed Groups), Ashley Jackson (Centre on Armed Groups), Ilwad Elman (Elman Peace), Marie Kortam (War Child), and Randa Hamo (IMPACT)

Moderator: Anastasia Shesterinina (University of York)

CRUs from Somalia and Syria shared findings on informal and community-based protection.

Harm is understood differently by differently positioned civilians and by different armed actors. In Somalia, civilians and low-ranked armed actors interpreted harm broadly, whilst senior armed actors defined harm in a narrow manner, primarily as physical violence.

In both contexts, civilians actively engaged in strategies toward their own protection in the absence of state or other forms of protection. Even where formal mechanisms exist, their influence in patterns of compliance + restraint are limited. The mechanisms that communities create are built out of existing social relationships.

Social relationships, solidarity and legitimacy are key levers for local leaders in influencing restraint. Engagement with the existing social infrastructure is a long-term investment that is often not aligned with donor project timelines.

Restraint can be driven by tactical approaches, legitimacy considerations and internal discipline, but can also break down in the absence of strategic need and accountability structures. Where restraint is internalised, it holds even in the absence of accountability mechanisms.

It is important to focus not just on community-led protection, but a broader social infrastructure and ecosystem. Even there, caution is necessary as traditional social structures can recreate discriminatory realities, particularly in regard to gender and minority inclusivity.

Part II

Session 3: Intangible harm + need and factors of compliance + restraint

Speakers: *Lina Maria Acosta Hilamo (the Nasa Indigenous community), Piergiuseppe Parisi (University of York), Lauren Spink (CIVIC), and Vladyslav Iierusalymov (Kyiv School of Economics)*

Moderator: *Katharine Fortin (Utrecht University)*

CRUs from Colombia and Ukraine shared observations on intangible harm + need and factors driving compliance + restraint.

In both contexts, communities' view of harm includes collective, cultural, spiritual, environmental and territorial impact, as well as individual harm. While some forms of harm are commonly experienced by all civilians, certain groups are specifically targeted, such as community leaders and children. Violence in the armed conflict was perceived to impact the collective identity of impacted communities.

Shifting conflict dynamics in Colombia are leading to an erosion of even minimal restraint by armed actors, who are fragmented and increasingly sustaining themselves financially through illicit economies. Research suggests that community-based self-protection strategies are most effective, but that this depends on the type of armed group exercising violence, their relationships with the communities and the conflict dynamics. Such strategies of self-protection include various modes of collective organisation, permanent assemblies, community councils, and community-based unarmed protection groups.

In Ukraine, protection of civilians and restraint were perceived as connected to values, morality, and identity rather than driven by IHL obligations. Conceptions of harm are viewed as interconnected with and contextualized through the experience of occupation. The research pointed to a 'sense' by some armed actors that IHL needs to be updated to reflect modern warfare methods and dynamics.

Session 4: The omnipresence of mental harm

Speakers: Samantha Holmes (University of York) and Sworo Paul Duku (War Child)

Moderator: Ezequiel Heffes (Humanitarian Affairs Expert)

CRUs from Myanmar and South Sudan shared key findings related to the omnipresence of mental harm.

Mental harm refers to the psychological and social impacts of conflict affecting emotions and sense of safety, relationships and trust within families, and behavior and social interaction. It may or may not develop into mental health disorders. Mental harm can often be hidden and invisible, and it is primarily expressed through emotions, social disruption, or behaviors, demonstrating the importance of framing conversations around mental harm in a way that centers the lived experience. Diagnostic and disorder-driven approaches may overlook the full range of harm.

Mental harm can occur on its own as a direct result of conflict but also as a concurrent or reverberating impact of other types of harm. Uniquely, all other harms have the potential to inflict a “mental harm shadow.” It can be caused by a variety of experiences, such as direct violence, loss of livelihood, recruitment, loss of loved ones, separation from family members, stigma, disruption of family relationships and community ties, displacement, and the slow erosion of socio-cultural or economic circumstances. Children are disproportionately impacted by mental harm.

While strengthening compliance with IHL can address *some* mental harm, it cannot address *all* experiences of mental harm, for example, incidental mental harm caused by airstrikes or the anticipation of airstrikes on lawful military targets. Mental harm can be experienced continually, not only in the moment or immediate aftermath of an attack. IHL compliance is one strategy for reducing mental harm. When it comes to determining the proportionality of a planned attack, nothing explicitly limits the interpretation of “injury” of civilians to only physical harm, and thus armed actors should be encouraged to consider foreseeable mental harm that their attack may cause and implement mitigations in response. At the same time, by focusing on lived experiences of mental harm, it is clear that tools beyond those associated with compliance strategies will be key in order to reduce or prevent this suffering.

Communities need support to address mental harm through psychosocial support and trauma recovery services, reintegration support for survivors, protection and care for children without primary guidance, and community-based approaches to rebuild trust. Responses should go beyond clinical care, as short-term interventions are insufficient to break cycles of harm. Mental harm persists long after physical violence ends. Mental harm should be mainstreamed into ongoing protection efforts.