



MILITARISED MASCULINITIES
AND **HUMAN RIGHTS**
INVESTIGATIONS



About the organisation

Impunity Watch is an international non-profit organisation working with victims, survivors and communities affected by violence to transform deeply ingrained structures of impunity, deliver redress for grave human rights violations, and promote justice and peace.

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Disclaimer

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– Dr. Philipp Schulz & Gelena Vougianovits

Foreword

By Michelle Jarvis, Executive Director, Gender Justice Practitioner Hub

Human rights and international criminal law practitioners everywhere have a significant interest in strengthening their contribution to ending cycles of violence and, ultimately, contributing to a more peaceful and flourishing world. This Policy Report tackles an important and drastically under-explored component of that challenge – exposing and labelling militarised masculinities that drive unlawful violence, so that they can be transformed. As expressed in the Report (p. 19):



“ Addressing militarised masculinities, as a driver of violence, is integral to sustainably transition from conflict to peace and justice. ”

The Report commences the much-needed process of unpacking theoretical conceptions of militarised masculinities and creating practical guidance for those carrying out human rights investigations to address them in their work. It contributes to our pressing challenge of bridging silos between academia and practice. Although the focus of this Policy Report is on human rights investigations, there are also valuable takeaways for international criminal law (and other) practitioners, that could be explored further in the future.

As explained in the Report (p. 33), a ‘militarised masculinities’ lens involves examining ‘how masculine norms and expectations influence the perpetration of [unlawful] violence, the gendered targeting of victims and forms of violence, and barriers victims face in testifying, reporting and/or seeking services and assistance’. There are many reasons why practitioners may have been reluctant to focus on militarised masculinities in their work in the past: difficulties in understanding what the term means or how it could be relevant to their mandate; the discomfort of tackling anything that seems connected with patriarchy; concern that it is inconsistent with the reality of current legal frameworks that legalise militarised violence in certain circumstances; difficulties in accessing practical and effective training (which remains a major barrier for most gender issues beyond conflict-related sexual violence); and the tendency to conflate ‘gender issues’ with women/girls and/or conflict-related sexual violence, to name a few.

The Policy Report, in the conceptual framework developed and the concrete and detailed guidance for practical implementation, distils a clear and compelling explanation for practitioners to assist in the crucial task of transforming mindsets on this issue. Fundamentally, human rights/international crimes documentation work is concerned with ‘who did what to whom and why?’ Inquiries into militarised masculinities can help shine a light on the ‘why’. If violations are perpetrated by military actors, to what extent does the military culture in which those actors are embedded glorify violence, domination of others and aggression, as a precondition for manhood? In what ways are violations linked to these gendered ideals?

This is directly relevant to human rights mandates that include a focus on root causes of violence. It may also be relevant to work documenting specific rights violations or international crimes with elements that integrate a focus on gender-related drivers of illegal violence, such as gender-based persecution and torture for the prohibited purpose of discriminating against the victim. More generally, understanding militarised masculinities as a structural factor underpinning violations is highly relevant contextual evidence, in the same way that historical and political factors can be crucial to understanding the events in question. Ideally, established facts concerning militarised masculinities would also be considered in formulating measures to redress violations. Yet, as noted in the Policy Report (p. 20), currently there is insufficient focus on militarised masculinities in most transitional justice processes, squandering an important opportunity to transform discriminatory structures that drive violence:

“ [...] TJ processes risk merely documenting violations without challenging the gendered power structures that made those violations possible, allowing cycles of violence and impunity to persist. ”

Over the past eight years in my previous role as Deputy Head of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (Syria), I spent hours consulting with victims/survivors of the Syrian conflict who repeatedly emphasised that it is not enough to seek to punish the perpetrators of crimes. Syrians – as with most people affected by mass rights violations – want a justice process that leads to systems change. They want a process that transforms the structures that sustained repression and abuse and establishes a society based on human rights and equality.

Unquestionably, the Policy Report stirs up some uncomfortable truths. Militarised masculinities are likely also implicated in violence carried out by military actors that is considered lawful under our current legal frameworks. What would lawful violence perpetrated without the influence of militarised masculinities look like? Are the two things compatible at all? It is a tangled web. For now, at least, the uncontroversial zone of action is to address the role of militarised masculinities in the perpetration of unlawful violence. In parallel, we have an urgent need to transform the overarching values framework governing life on this planet to render any form of militarised violence obsolete.

Militarised masculinities are one example of structural gender factors that can drive violence, but not the only one. The highly gendered ideology of the Islamic State (IS/ Daesh), which ascribed rigid gender roles and violent punishments for their violation, is another example. Addressing structural gender factors that drive violence is a challenging, but essential, aspect of documentation work, whether for human rights or criminal law processes. In developing the Gender Strategy for the UN International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria (IIIM), we committed to ‘accurately reflecting gender as a structural factor driving violence in the Syrian conflict’*. This was one of the most difficult aspects of the Strategy to operationalise for many reasons, including: most practitioners are unfamiliar with this concept and have not had experience integrating this lens into their work previously; the challenge of understanding the structural gender factors specific to the multi-faceted Syria conflict; the difficulty of accessing pre-existing analysis of the structural gender factors in Syria tailored to the specific issues that arise in accountability

* IIIM-Syria Gender Strategy, public (technical) version, pp18-19 [IIIM Strategies – IIIM](#).

processes; and the unavailability of relevant training for practitioners. There is a pressing need for effective partnerships to help overcome these challenges, (along with other recurrent obstacles to strong gender justice outcomes) – a goal that is central to the work of the Gender Justice Practitioner (GJP) Hub that I now lead.

There is perhaps also a more overarching conceptual barrier to effectively addressing structural gender factors, stemming from the principle of individual criminal responsibility. There is an often-quoted passage from the Nuremberg Judgement that states:

“ Crimes against international law are committed by men, not by abstract entities, and only by punishing individuals who commit such crimes can the provisions of international law be enforced. ”

TRIAL OF THE MAJOR WAR CRIMINALS BEFORE THE INTERNATIONAL MILITARY TRIBUNAL, JUDGMENT, Oct. 1, 1946, 41 Am. J. Int'l L. 172, 221 (1947).

The concern at Nuremberg was that individuals involved in the commission of crimes should not be able to hide behind state structures to escape responsibility. That was an important principle to establish. However, we should not treat atrocities as individual crimes by individual perpetrators, without deep engagement with full range of discriminatory structures underpinning them. If we take this approach, we risk leaving affected communities feeling that the full truth was not told, and that the roots of conflict were not accurately addressed.

The Policy Report is part of an encouraging trend towards the development of practical guidance for practitioners on gender issues going beyond conflict-related sexual violence. While high-level policy guidance is important, it must be accompanied by practical tools and standard operating procedures that embed the principles in daily work-flows. It must also be accompanied by institutional commitment from the highest levels of leadership in the form of constant reinforcement and office-wide accountability for implementation. Otherwise, the guidance documents are left to gather dust, and we have little hope of truly transformed structures that can sustain lasting peace.

Executive summary

This policy report examines how human rights inquiries and investigations can address militarised masculinities. Drawing on research demonstrating that militarised masculinities – ideals of manhood that glorify military values and the use of force, shaping attitudes, institutions, and power relations – can contribute to violence, human rights abuses, impunity, and the recurrence of conflict, this report argues that understanding and addressing these gendered norms and practices is important for breaking cycles of violence, advancing accountability, and supporting non-repetition.

Human rights inquiry mechanisms – including Commissions of Inquiry, Fact-Finding Missions or other investigative and accountability mechanisms – are well placed to examine militarised masculinities as factors that may enable, shape, or sustain patterns of violence and harm. In addition to documenting serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, such mechanisms are increasingly mandated to also investigate underlying drivers, structural root causes, and enabling conditions of human rights violations. Through their findings and recommendations, inquiry mechanisms can shape accountability efforts, inform policy responses, and influence guarantees of non-repetition. However, despite growing attention to gender in human rights investigations, masculinities have received insufficient explicit consideration in inquiry mandates, methodologies, and reporting practices. Guidance on how inquiries can examine underlying structural drivers of violence remains underdeveloped, and practical guidance specifically on addressing militarised masculinities is currently absent. This report addresses this gap.

Recognising the political and operational constraints under which inquiry mechanisms operate, this policy report offers practical recommendations for integrating attention to militarised masculinities throughout investigative, analytical, and reporting processes.

It provides guiding questions, checklists, examples of emerging practice, case studies, and recommendations. These are designed to support human rights investigations in integrating attention to militarised masculinities into existing investigative approaches and processes. The policy report is therefore of relevance to investigative bodies, human rights analysts and practitioners, policymakers, the UN and civil society actors seeking to better understand and respond to violence and impunity.

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Introduction

In October 2025, the international community marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace and security (WPS), which set in motion a broader agenda on gender, peace and security. UNSCR 1325 significantly shaped policy engagement around gender and brought into view women's and girls' experiences of conflict, security, and peacebuilding. Given the ongoing discrimination and violence experienced by women and girls worldwide, this attention remains both necessary and urgent. At the same time, the place of men and masculinities within global engagement on gender, peace and security remains contested and underdeveloped.¹ Policy engagement on gender and security often falls short in understanding men's experiences as *gendered* and in examining masculinities as factors that can contribute to inequality, domination, exclusion and violence.

Impunity Watch's work with victims' and survivors' groups in contexts such as Guatemala, the Great Lakes Region, Syria, and Iraq has highlighted how militarised masculinities can fuel violence and human rights violations. Militarised masculinities link ideals of manhood to militarism, military service, and combat, while valorising aggression, dominance, toughness, and the use of force. They may function as one among several factors that shape, enable, or legitimise human rights violations and serious crimes under international human rights and humanitarian law. Militarised masculinities can also influence social and political institutions, governance practices, and power relations in ways that sustain structural inequalities, exclusion, and conditions of deprivation that may persist long after episodes of direct violence have ended. They can therefore contribute not only to individual violations and crimes, but also to the persistence of structural, social and institutional arrangements that permit violence, insecurity and impunity to endure over time.

Addressing and transforming militarised notions of manhood should therefore form part of broader efforts to disrupt cycles of violence, support peacebuilding, advance justice, and challenge impunity.² Yet transitional justice and peacebuilding initiatives have so far paid limited attention to militarised masculinities. This represents a missed opportunity to strengthen guarantees of non-repetition, promote more sustainable peace, and address factors that may contribute to the recurrence of violence.

One promising entry point for engaging with militarised masculinities lies in human rights inquiry (HRI) bodies and investigative mechanisms,³ including Commissions of Inquiry (Colis), Fact-Finding Missions (FFMs), and similar investigative bodies.

In addition to documenting violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, these mechanisms are often mandated to establish facts and circumstances surrounding violations, identify patterns, root causes, and enabling conditions, and recommend measures aimed at accountability, prevention, and non-repetition. Frequently deployed at the early stages of a conflict or crisis, inquiry mechanisms can shape broader accountability processes,

1 Gretchen Baldwin, "[Twenty-Five Years of Men, Boys and Masculinities in the WPS Agenda](#)", SIPRI Research Policy Paper, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), March 2026.

2 Philipp Schulz and Chloé Lewis, "[Pieces of the Same Puzzle: Men, Masculinities and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda](#)", *Politics & Gender* 21(3) (2025): 711-717.

3 In this report, we interchangeably refer to 'human rights inquiry (HRI) bodies' and 'investigative and inquiry mechanisms', which include various types of independent investigative and accountability mechanisms. They include human rights investigative bodies created by the UN Human Rights Council, as well as independent accountability mechanisms created by the UN General Assembly and tasked with determining individual criminal responsibility. When the term of 'human rights inquiry (HRI) body' is used, it may also refer to other investigative or inquiry mechanisms, unless otherwise specified.

inform institutional reform, and influence efforts to prevent future violations. Despite growing attention to gender in human rights investigations, militarised masculinities have received little explicit consideration within inquiry mandates, methodologies, or reporting practices.

Inquiry mechanisms offer promising avenues for examining militarised masculinities as factors that can lead to both immediate violations and the social, institutional, and structural elements that sustain violence over time. **This policy report argues that human rights inquiries should address militarised masculinities, not only to document what violations occurred, but also to explain why they occurred, why certain groups are targeted, how harmful practices become normalised within military, security, or armed group structures, and what conditions may enable their recurrence.** Recognising and attending to militarised masculinities can contribute to the broader aims of investigative bodies to identify drivers of violence, support guarantees of non-repetition, promote accountability, and challenge impunity.

In practice, however, inquiry mechanisms operate under significant political and operational constraints, including variations in mandates, limited resources, time pressures, political sensitivities, and differing levels of expertise in investigating gendered root causes in general, and militarised masculinities in particular. Guidance on investigating structural drivers and enabling conditions of violence remains uneven, and practical advice on engaging with militarised masculinities and the violations associated with them is currently non-existent.

This policy report provides practical guidance for integrating attention to militarised masculinities into inquiry mandates, investigative processes, analysis, and reporting. It explains why militarised masculinities matter as factors contributing to violence and impunity; demonstrates why human rights inquiry bodies are well positioned to address them within existing mandates; and outlines practical pathways for recognising and analysing these dynamics in investigative practice. The report offers actionable recommendations, guiding questions, evidence tables, practical checklists, and case studies aimed at supporting investigators, analysts, policymakers, and civil society actors in integrating attention to militarised masculinities into human rights investigations. In doing so, it demonstrates that addressing militarised masculinities is both analytically valuable and operationally feasible.

Objective & methodology

Objective

The overarching objective of this policy report is to **support human rights inquiries in understanding and addressing militarised masculinities as part of their existing mandates to investigate patterns of serious human rights violations, identify root causes and recommend measures for accountability and non-recurrence.** The aim of this report is *not* to identify gaps or point to shortcomings, but rather to practically support investigative bodies and their policy structures to better recognise and respond to the gendered power structures that shape patterns of violence, impunity and human rights violations, with a focus on militarised masculinities as drivers of violence.

The report focuses broadly on various types of **independent investigative and accountability mechanisms**, including human rights investigative bodies created by the UN Human Rights Council and independent accountability mechanisms created by the UN General Assembly tasked with determining individual criminal responsibility.

The policy report is guided by three core questions and directions:

1. It establishes **why** it is important to tackle militarised masculinities as part of broader efforts to achieve accountability and justice.
2. It outlines **why** human rights inquiries bodies are pertinent entry points to investigate militarised masculinities as a structural driver of violence.
3. It provides practical guidance on **how** human rights inquiries can integrate analysis of militarised masculinities into their mandates, investigation and reporting. The report provides practical toolkits, checklists and guiding questions that investigative bodies and human rights investigators can integrate into their work to illuminate the workings of militarised masculinities.

Methodology

This policy report employs a comprehensive methodological approach, combining an extensive literature review with key informant interviews and critical document analysis. Interviews and consultations were conducted with victims' representatives, civil society advocates, transitional justice experts and human rights investigators from across contexts.

To amplify the voices and rights of affected communities, the research involved ten interviews with victims and survivors' representatives. These interviews provided cogent insights into the impact of militarised masculinities on cycles of violence, conflict and impunity; and identified human rights inquiries as important spaces to engage with militarised masculinities from the perspectives of victims and survivors themselves.

Seventeen consultation meetings were held with various transitional justice experts and current and former human rights investigators and analysts who were involved with human rights inquiry bodies across various contexts, timeframes and in different roles and capacities. These consultations were instrumental in gaining a deeper understanding of the mandates and objectives of investigative bodies, as well as the challenges and possible entry points in investigating broader root causes and addressing militarised masculinities.

Lastly, to provide a comprehensive assessment of the roles of human rights inquiry bodies and investigative mechanisms in addressing militarised masculinities, this report also draws on a systematic review of existing mandates and documents of a range of contemporary human rights inquiry bodies and accountability mechanisms across settings. These include core OHCHR policies, guidelines, and frameworks on human rights investigations, as well as the mandates, reports, and press releases of a representative sample of ten selected UN-mandated human rights inquiry bodies, investigative and accountability mechanisms, including Commissions of Inquiries and Fact-Finding Missions.⁴

4 Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan; the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic; International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to assist in the investigation and prosecution of persons responsible for the most serious crimes under International Law committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011; the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel; Commission of Inquiry on Burundi; The Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar; Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua; the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan; Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela; Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine.

1. Why is it important to address militarised masculinities?

Impunity Watch's work, engagement and research with victims and survivors of past and ongoing conflicts across different transitional justice settings has established that militarised masculinities are a core driving force of violence and human rights violations.⁵ In most societal contexts, it is predominantly men who commit violence, whether in times of conflict, peace, or in between. Yet men are not naturally violent: they are socialised into the use of force, violence and oppression through broader societal processes. Among these are militarisation processes, which produce militarised masculinities.

In a nutshell:

Militarised masculinities connect ideals of manhood with militarism, military service, dominance, and combat, based on the premise that men can acquire masculine status through the display of violence and force. Militarised masculinities also permeate armed groups and state security institutions, where they normalise and naturalise the use of violence. In this way, **militarised masculinities fuel cycles of conflict and facilitate human rights violations**. If left unaddressed, militarised masculinities can become an obstacle to justice and accountability and foster impunity. It is therefore a global responsibility to address militarised masculinities as a driver of violence and conflict.

What are masculinities?

Masculinities refer to the multiple ways of being and doing 'maleness', encompassing anything that is associated with being a man in any given culture. Masculinities are socially constructed roles, behaviours, expectations and meanings which define what is typical and appropriate for, and expected of, men and boys. Typical elements include the expectation for men to be the provider and protector, to be strong, to be (hetero)sexually active, rational, fearless, and/or competitive.⁶

Across and within different settings, multiple versions of masculinities exist in relation to each other and in relation to patriarchal gender orders. It is therefore appropriate to think of *masculinities* in plural, rather than one singular and universally accepted notion of manhood. These multiple masculinities intersect with other dimensions of identity and power categories, including ethnicity, race, age, sexuality, socio-economic status or class, producing intersectional variations of different masculinities.

Out of those multiple constructions, some forms of masculinities are valued as more important than others. The culturally dominant concept of manhood in a society is called hegemonic masculinity. Various other notions of masculinities exist in relation to this hegemonic masculinity.⁷

5 Philipp Schulz, "Comparative Research on the Connection between Militarised/Violent Masculinities and Impunity", InIIS Working Paper No.47/2025, Bremen: InIIS.

6 Impunity Watch, "Youth Perspectives on Gender and Masculinities in Burundi, the DRC, Mali and South Sudan – Promoting effective Transitional Justice policies in Africa," Impunity Watch policy brief, July 2023, 3.

7 RW Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

Despite these variations and power differences between masculinities, the vast majority of men uphold and benefit from patriarchal privileges.⁸ Masculinities also function as a structuring logic beyond the individual: they represent both identities and ideologies, and shape collective practices, structures and societal institutions and their institutional cultures.⁹ This may occur through assigning meaning to certain behaviours and practices as ‘masculine’. In these ways, masculinities are norms and patterns of practice that position men within gender relations and structures of power.

What are *militarised masculinities*?

Times of conflict, militarisation and insecurity often exacerbate the masculine traits and expectations to be strong, forceful and protective. This produces **militarised masculinities, which connect ideals of manhood with militarism, military service and combat**. Militarised masculinities prioritise dominance, toughness and control while devaluing care, vulnerability, compromise and non-violence. Men can acquire masculine status and benefit from patriarchal privileges through the display of militaristic values such as toughness, violence, aggression and courage. **Militarised masculinities capture the fusion of certain masculinities with the exercise of violence and the performance of aggression.**¹⁰ They can therefore motivate and encourage men to participate in violence.¹¹

Militarised masculinities operate on a personal, individual level; within armed groups and state security institutions; but also across political, social and economic systems and structures. At the structural level, they normalise hierarchy, discipline and the use of violence to maintain power. They are deeply gendered and highly patriarchal. They rely on the control of women’s bodies, the marginalisation of civilians and non-conforming men, and narratives of male “protection” that legitimise repression and abuse.

Although the military or other armed groups are often the primary vehicle for (re-)producing militarised masculinities, the ways that ideals of manhood can become militarised are diverse. This includes cultural processes such as film, popular culture and social media, as well as education, religion, sports, virtual worlds (such as gaming), or the government. That said, militarised masculinities are at their most dangerous when enacted through the military and other militaristic structures – such as rebel or guerrilla groups, armed gangs, local defence units and military police – that can carry out and legitimise large-scale violence.

Just like masculinities in general, militarised notions of manhood, too, are multiple and variable.¹² They also intersect with other aspects of identity such as ethnicity, economic and social class, age groups, (dis)ability and sexual orientation. This necessitates an intersectional perspective. People in armed groups thus display and reproduce different versions of militarised masculinities, which are differently valued. In practice, this means that certain groups of men – mostly from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds – are often tasked with carrying out violence, while other groups of more privileged men coordinate or command these acts.

8 RW Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept”, *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 841 : (2005).

9 Henri Myrntinen et al., *The Routledge Handbook of Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding*. (London: Routledge, 2025): 5.

10 Kimberly Theidon, “Reconstructing Masculinities: The Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration of Former Combatants in Colombia,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 31, no. 3 : (2009) 1.

11 David Durie-Smith and Noor Huda Ismail, “Militarized Masculinities beyond Methodological Nationalism: Charting the Multiple Masculinities of an Indonesian Jihadi,” *International Theory* 11, no. 159-139 : (2019) 2.

12 Claire Duncanson, “Forces for Good? Narratives of Military Masculinity in Peacekeeping Operations,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 11, no. 1 (2009): 63–80.

For example, research by Impunity Watch shows that during the period of ISIL's operation in Iraq between 2014 and 2017, men from disadvantaged backgrounds typically had to carry out violent acts, which were ordered by privileged men in positions of power. During the Colombian civil war, too, it was mostly men from the poorest sectors of society, and often those with lower levels of education, who ended up in the army and non-state armed groups; and black men in particular were more vulnerable to being recruited for the harshest, most violent duties within armed groups.

Young men are particularly susceptible to recruitment into militarised groups and settings, which often promise a (false) sense of stability, freedom and security under violent and insecure circumstances. In many settings around the globe, military service is mandatory for young men. There are often very few alternatives for young men in conflict-affected settings to make a reliable income, and joining an armed group or the military is frequently the only option.

In Syria, for instance, boys and young men were particularly susceptible to being recruited into armed groups, including ISIL. These dynamics are also observable in post-conflict contexts where Impunity Watch operates, including in Guatemala and Burundi, where young men are recruited into armed groups or state security forces, based on (unrealistic) promises of an income and masculine status through military service. In these contexts, young men are confronted with and absorb militaristic ideals of masculinities.

While it is primarily men with guns who can enact militarised masculinities, civilian men who are impacted by large-scale militarisation, and women integrated into armed forces can also embody and (re-)produce these militarised notions of manhood. Civilian men are often overlooked in policymaking and programming on gender and security, or they are perceived as inherently peaceful or as passive victims. This glosses over the fact that civilian men can embody militarised masculinities too, and frequently commit various forms of gender-based violence against women, girls and persons with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions and sex characteristics (SOGIESC).

Women, too, can be militarised. Across contexts, women often exert pressure on men to use violence and to perform militarised ideals. For example, in World War I the '*White Feather*' campaign in Britain pressured men to fight; and in contemporary conflict settings such as Colombia or Northern Ireland some women expect men to embody militarised notions of manhood and to protect their nation and community. Women themselves are also increasingly incorporated into state armies or non-state guerrilla groups, where they perform militaristic ideals and use violence themselves – evidenced by increasing numbers of (and attention to) female combatants.¹³ Often, the integration of women into armed forces is interpreted as a sign of progress in terms of equality. In previous work, however, Impunity Watch has shown that “in reality, women [in armed groups] are often only accepted as ‘equals’ if they live up to similar masculine standards, showing themselves capable of committing violence [...] In this way, women can also embody militarised masculinities.”¹⁴ At the same time, all-female groups such as the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) in Syria have also contributed to a process of challenging militaristic and masculinised logics within armed settings.

13 Erika Svedberg, “Militarization, Women, and Men: Gendered Militarizations”, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (2021): 1–13.

14 “Transforming militarised masculinities. A global responsibility for a more just and peaceful world,” Impunity Watch policy brief, 2013, 8.

Militarised masculinities are thus not necessarily tied to specific roles (e.g. soldiers, combatants, peacekeepers), bodies (male, female), or the actions associated with men and women in the military; but rather the types of gendered relations that militarism legitimises. Nevertheless, the most prevalent type of this militarised manifestation of manhood is a violent and aggressive warrior type relying on violence, dominance, oppression and hypermasculinity.

Masculinities, militarism, conflict and violence

Militarised masculinities can contribute to violence by shaping social norms, identities, and institutional cultures in ways that legitimise, reward, or normalise the use of force. This stems from the mutually reinforcing relationship between militarism and certain forms of masculinity. Processes of militarisation and war often rely on the mobilisation of masculine ideals that valorise strength, toughness, sacrifice, and the willingness to use violence. Conversely, these ideals of manhood are reinforced and reproduced through military institutions, armed conflict, and the social prestige often attached to combat and military service. In other words, militarism frequently relies on militarised forms of masculinity, while militarised masculinities are sustained and reinforced through militarism and organised violence.

As the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) has observed, militarism "needs a gender ideology as much as it needs soldiers and weapons."¹⁵ This ideology is often enacted through specific forms of masculinity that associate manhood with aggression, dominance, control, and the capacity to wield force. Traits such as rationality, toughness, violence, and aggression are frequently valorised both within military institutions and within broader societal expectations of manhood. This may further intensify under conditions of militarisation, armed conflict, and combat. Such mutually reinforcing constructions can contribute to conflict dynamics and sustain cycles of violence.

Militarised masculinities thus constitute a social and institutional logic that helps reproduce patterns of violations and impunity. They can contribute to direct forms of violence, including killings, torture, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and other serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. They may also contribute to longer-term patterns of deprivation, exclusion, and militarised governance that, in some contexts, amount to structural forms of violence.

For example, military cultures that valorise domination may contribute to strategies aimed at punishing or subjugating civilian populations through the destruction of crops, livestock, housing, or other means of survival. These are direct violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, and consequences often extend far beyond the immediate act. The destruction of livelihoods can generate prolonged displacement, food insecurity, exclusion from resources, and other forms of deprivation that persist long after active hostilities have ceased. In this way, militarised masculinities may contribute not only to direct violence, but also to the longer-term social and institutional conditions through which harm and insecurity are reproduced.

Processes of militarisation, and the masculinities they help produce, may also facilitate continuums of violence that extend beyond the battlefield. Individuals who have been socialised into militarised understandings of manhood may continue to valorise aggression, control, and the use of force even after active conflict has ceased. This can include intimate partner violence, violence against children, and violence directed at women, girls, and persons with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex

15 Colleen Burke, "Women and Militarism," *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*, 1998.

characteristics. The effects of militarised masculinities may extend across public and private spheres, blurring the distinction between ‘wartime’ and ‘peacetime’ violence.¹⁶

To be clear, militarised masculinities are only one among many factors that contribute to violence and conflict. Other drivers include socio-economic grievances, political exclusion, colonial legacies, racism, and gender inequality. Militarised masculinities do not exist separately from these dynamics; rather, they intersect with and often reinforce them. They are closely connected to patriarchal structures and gendered power relations that shape opportunities, vulnerabilities, and access to power across societies. Understanding militarised masculinities therefore provides an important lens for examining how broader systems of inequality and violence are reproduced and sustained.

Militarised masculinities in armed groups and security institutions – a breeding ground for impunity

Militarised masculinities are expressed through individual attitudes and behaviours, but they are also embedded within institutional cultures. State security institutions and armed groups frequently reproduce and reward militarised ideals of manhood. Through recruitment, training, socialisation, promotion structures, and organisational norms, these institutions may encourage loyalty, toughness, obedience, and the willingness to use force while discouraging vulnerability, empathy, restraint, or dissent. Non-state groups, such as rebel or insurgency movements, also typically rely on militarised notions of masculinity, which are often instrumentalised to recruit, enlist and then keep men in armed groups. In conflict settings like Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, and in Kosovo, political and military actors have valorised militaristic masculinities to recruit combatants and mobilise them for the conduct of war.¹⁷

Other security institutions can be militarised too: Our research in Burundi shows that youth groups created by political parties around the 2015 political crisis draw in young men based on promises of jobs through political connections. In this way, large groups of young men are indoctrinated with militarised discourses and the use of repression for political gain. In the military police forces in Chile or in local defence units in places such as Uganda, violence and force are used to protect the nation, but also to maintain internal control.¹⁸ Impunity Watch’s research in Guatemala similarly demonstrates the prominence and acceptance of militarised masculinities in the police, with far-reaching effects for women and people with diverse SOGIESC within the police and for society at large.

These dynamics are by no means limited to conflict-affected settings in the Global South. The continued influence of heavily masculinised paramilitary cultures in post-conflict Northern Ireland illustrates how militarised notions of manhood can persist long after formal hostilities have ended.

All of these dynamics create conditions that not only tolerate violence but may actively celebrate and reward its use. By privileging domination, hierarchy, and coercive forms of authority, militarised masculinities can shape social and political institutions in ways that sustain unequal access to power, resources, and protection. In some contexts, these dynamics contribute to structural forms of violence by producing enduring patterns of deprivation, exclusion, insecurity, or marginalisation that persist beyond episodes of direct violence.

¹⁶ Jessica Doyle & Monica McWilliams, “Intimate Partner Violence in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies: Insights and Lessons from Northern Ireland”, Political Settlements Research Programme, 2018.

¹⁷ Hannah Wright, “Masculinities, conflict and peacebuilding: perspectives on men through a gender lens”, Saferworld, November 2014.

¹⁸ Rebecca Tapscott, “Militarised masculinity and the paradox of restraint: mechanisms of social control under modern authoritarianism”, *International Affairs* 96 no. 6 (2020): 1565–1584.

The normalisation of violence can often be observed in the symbols, stories, rituals, and cultural practices reproduced within military and armed-group settings. Former combatants of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC), for example, recalled songs they were required to sing during training that celebrated violence and dehumanised opponents: *“I want to bathe in a pool, full, full of blood, subversive blood or am I the black vampire, I never had a mother, I will never have her, the last one I had, last night I stung her.”*¹⁹ Such practices do not merely reflect violence; they help normalise, legitimise, and reproduce it.

In February 2025, a two-star general serving in the German Armed Forces and NATO reportedly remarked during a meeting with soldiers that “if rape is inevitable – relax and enjoy.”²⁰ This shocking example demonstrates how sexual and gender-based violence can be minimised, normalised, or trivialised within institutions formally tasked with providing security and protection. When such attitudes are expressed or tolerated at senior levels of command, they risk shaping organisational cultures more broadly, with significant consequences for how violence is understood, addressed, or ignored.

When institutions charged with protecting human rights and the rule of law normalise and valorise (gender-based) violence, they do more than cause immediate harm: they undermine the legitimacy and credibility of the state or institution itself. This creates a societal and overtly state-sanctioned culture in which violence is perceived as acceptable, necessary or inevitable, in which victims are discouraged from seeking justice, while perpetrators may come to expect protection or leniency.²¹ Militarised masculinities may also discourage accountability by associating empathy, restraint, or criticism of fellow combatants with weakness, disloyalty, or a failure to embody idealised forms of manhood. Such dynamics can foster institutional cultures in which violations are concealed, tolerated, inadequately investigated, or insufficiently sanctioned.

These conditions constitute a breeding ground for impunity. Impunity thrives when those in positions of power can tolerate, justify, or enable violations and other harms without fear of consequences. Such environments are sustained by both individual decisions and broader power relations and institutional structures that shield perpetrators from scrutiny and accountability.²² When violations are not effectively investigated or sanctioned – but are instead tolerated, justified, or even celebrated – institutions become increasingly shaped and captured by militarised and masculinist logics. As a result, perpetrators are protected, victims are silenced, and cycles of violence and repression are reproduced, allowing impunity to persist.

Transforming militarised masculinities as a global responsibility

Militarised masculinities therefore can be core drivers for violence, conflict and human rights violations. They lead to and sustain impunity with direct consequences for broader efforts of ensuring accountability and justice. They are not only reproduced through individual attitudes or interpersonal relationships, but are deeply embedded across societal structures and in institutions of power, including armed forces, police, militias, and political leadership structures.

It must therefore be a global priority to systematically address and transform militarised notions of manhood. It is also important to reform the institutions that embody and reproduce this phenomenon. Tackling militarised masculinities is fundamentally important to disrupting cycles of violence, ending conflict, facilitating peace, and challenging impunity.

¹⁹ Marisol Ortiz Acosta, “Men for Peace and not for war: masculinities in transition”, Peace Academy, 18 October 2021.

²⁰ Waltraud Schwab, „Rape Culture im Militär. Der arme Soldat, der vergewaltigen muss“, taz, 25 May 2025.

²¹ “Transforming militarised masculinities. A global responsibility for a more just and peaceful world,” Impunity Watch policy brief, 2023, 8.

²² A more extensive conceptualisation of impunity, as applied by Impunity Watch, can be found on the [organisation's website](#).

This requires influencing institutional and organisational cultures that value militarism and violence. It also entails ensuring that groups of men can adopt less violent, more positive, collaborative, and peaceful ways of fulfilling gender roles and expectations. To end violence and oppression, it is important to work with militaristic men to promote alternative and more peaceful forms of masculinities, that value and favour non-violence, reconciliation and gender equality.

Despite a persistent gap of attending to militarised masculinities, however, the international community increasingly recognises its importance, and there are growing efforts to engage men and boys in the fight against gender inequalities, including at the level of the United Nations. This recognition has led to a growing proliferation of programs targeting men to promote gender-equitable peace and security. Various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local programmatic efforts engage men and boys to advance gender equality and non-violence and to promote more peaceful and egalitarian constructions of manhood, and to transform violent masculinities as a structural cause of violence. The *Community of Practice on Men, Masculinities and Feminist Peace*,²³ for instance, brings together organisations and individuals to collaborate on advocacy, research and initiatives to challenge militarised masculinities and to mobilise men to promote feminist peace.

However, transforming masculinities requires not only community-level engagement with men and boys, but also institutional reform, accountability mechanisms, and justice processes that challenge the gendered logics underpinning violence, power and protection. Ultimately, transforming masculinities requires broader societal transformation processes, aimed at fostering equality and justice.

Militarised masculinities and transitional justice

There is still a long way to go in more systematically addressing militarised masculinities across the globe. This is particularly acute within broader peacebuilding or transitional justice efforts. As a set of measures to deal with the legacies of human rights violations and to facilitate transitions from conflict to sustainable peace, transitional justice mechanisms are important processes to tackle root causes of violence. **However, most transitional justice processes fall short in sufficiently addressing militarised manifestations of manhood.**

While mainstreaming gender has become a central element of transitional justice policy and programming, this primarily boils down to a focus on women and girls, and is overwhelmingly concerned with redressing conflict-related sexual violence. Given the pervasive scope of gender inequalities and violence against women and girls, this focus remains urgently needed. However, *only* focusing on women and girls ignores how the experiences of men and boys are also gendered, and how they are also heavily impacted by violence and conflict in gender-specific ways. Equating ‘gender’ with ‘women and girls’ also ignores the influence of masculinities in transitional justice processes, as well as the broader systems of power, militarisation and impunity that sustain and reproduce masculinities and violence.²⁴ Addressing militarised masculinities as a driver of violence is therefore integral to sustainably transitioning from conflict to peace and justice.

23 The *Community of Practice: Men, Masculinities and Feminist Peace* is co-led by PAX, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and the Kroc Institute VIP Lab.

24 Hamber, Brandon, “Masculinity and transitional justice: An exploratory essay.” *The International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1, no. 390–375 : (2007) 3

Core guidelines and policies on transitional justice, however, remain mute on masculinities. Nor do they mention the specific problems stemming from militarised masculinities. The 2023 UN *Guidance Note on Transitional Justice*, the 2020 report on *Integrating a Gender Perspective in Transitional Justice*, the *European Union Transitional Justice Policy* or the *African Union Transitional Justice Policy* do not mention masculinities. In practice, too, the majority of transitional justice processes pay insufficient attention to men's experiences as gendered – whether it is truth commissions, criminal proceedings or reparation schemes.²⁵

Where there is emerging attention to men and masculinities in transitional justice and peacebuilding contexts, the focus is primarily on sexual violence against men and boys and how these crimes impact survivors' sense of manhood.²⁶ How militarised masculinities drive these forms of gender-based violence, as well as human rights abuses more generally, is insufficiently addressed. As a result, transitional justice processes risk merely documenting violations and addressing violent symptoms, without challenging the gendered power structures that make those violations possible, allowing cycles of violence and impunity to persist. Documenting the structural drivers of violence – including militarised masculinities – thus constitutes a crucial part of addressing the causes of violence and, ultimately, facilitating accountability.

Moving forward, transitional justice policies and mechanisms must explicitly recognise militarised masculinities as structural drivers of violence and impunity. Core UN and regional transitional justice frameworks should be revised to integrate an analysis of masculinities into truth-seeking, accountability, reparations and guarantees of non-recurrence. Without confronting the gendered logics that normalise violence, dominance and militarism, transitional justice risks becoming an exercise of merely responding to violations, and will remain severely limited in facilitating sustainable peace and promoting accountability.

²⁵ Philipp Schulz, Heleen Touquet and Brandon Hamber, "Masculinities and Queer Perspectives in Transitional Justice", Routledge (2024).

²⁶ Philipp Schulz, "Male Survivors of Wartime Sexual Violence: Perspectives from Northern Uganda", University of California Press (2021).

2. Why are human rights inquiries pertinent entry points to address militarised masculinities?

In the broader context of justice and accountability processes, **human rights inquiry (HRI) bodies and independent investigative and accountability mechanisms are a pertinent entry point for engagement with militarised masculinities.**

While regional inter-governmental bodies or states also establish inquiry bodies, here we focus primarily on **independent investigative mechanisms** created by the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) and accountability mechanisms created by the UN General Assembly (GA). This includes Commissions of Inquiry (ColIs) and Fact-Finding Missions (FFMs), but also other criminal investigative bodies mandated by the United Nations. These inquiry and investigative bodies are one pillar of the wider peacebuilding and transitional justice ecosystem, but they hold significant agenda-setting power in shaping broader justice, accountability and non-repetition processes.

In a nutshell: _____

Human rights inquiry bodies are pertinent entry points for addressing militarised masculinities. They are often explicitly mandated to investigate root causes and driving forces of violence, including gender-based discrimination as a structural enabler of violence and conflict. Human rights inquiries also hold significant agenda-setting power for shaping broader justice, reform, non-repetition and accountability processes. In this capacity, HRIs are important avenues for recognising and engaging with the linkages between militarism, masculinities and human rights violations.

Human rights inquiries and investigations are particularly well placed to address militarised masculinities because their mandates often extend beyond the documentation of individual crimes to the analysis of patterns, root causes, institutional cultures and social norms that produce systematic violations. Within this framework, attending to militarised masculinities is relevant as this helps to explain why particular forms of violence emerge, why certain groups are targeted, and why harmful practices become normalised and accepted within military, security or armed group structures and institutions.

As outlined above, norms that equate manliness with domination, toughness and aggression may contribute to strategies involving collective punishment, attacks on civilian livelihoods, or the destruction of infrastructure essential for survival. These practices give rise to violations investigated by human rights inquiries – such as attacks on civilians, sexual violence and starvation-related crimes – while also creating longer-term conditions of structural deprivation and exclusion. Attention to militarised masculinities can therefore strengthen HRI's analyses of patterns of violations and inform recommendations aimed at non-recurrence. Various HRIs are explicitly authorised to examine military doctrines, command climates, gendered power relations and ideological frameworks that enable violence.²⁷ **Because HRI analyses shape how violence, harm and victimisation are framed across criminal accountability, sanctions, reparations and institutional reform, they represent a critical entry point for making militarised masculinities visible as a structural driver of atrocity and impunity.**

²⁷ UNOHCHR, *Commissions of Inquiry and Fact-Finding Missions on International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law, Guidance and Practice*, 2015: 6

What are human rights inquiries?

Human rights inquiries and investigations are central mechanisms to document violations of international criminal law, international humanitarian law and international human rights law; and to identify the patterns, dynamics, and causes of human rights abuses. Applying and developing international criminal investigative methodologies, they gather and verify information about human rights violations, create an historical record of events and provide a basis for further investigations or accountability proceedings. They also recommend measures to redress violations, provide justice, and ensure the non-recurrence of violence in the future. The bodies that conduct HRI's also review existing judicial and accountability mechanisms, and recommend measures to strengthen legislation to protect human rights, to redress violations, to provide justice and accountability for victims, and to challenge impunity. Over the last twenty years, various commissions have been established to investigate some of the most serious human rights abuses across the world, including in Darfur, Lebanon, Libya, Israel/Palestine, Syria, the Central African Republic, and Ukraine.

Why are human rights inquiries pertinent entry points to address militarised masculinities?

Based on these broad objectives, this policy report identifies human rights inquiries as relevant entry points for addressing militarised masculinities in conflict and post-conflict situations for four interrelated reasons:

- ◆ Human rights investigations hold a lot of normative and agenda-setting power to influence broader accountability, reform and non-repetition processes.
- ◆ Many HRIs explicitly aim to promote accountability for human rights abuses, challenge impunity and guarantee the non-recurrence of violence, which requires engagement with the origins and drivers of violence and human rights violations.
- ◆ Several HRIs are also explicitly mandated to investigate and report the root causes and driving forces of violence, conflicts and human rights abuses - including the gender-based factors that led to violence.
- ◆ HRIs are in a unique position to examine military and armed group cultures, gendered power relations, command climates and survivor experiences, enabling them to capture how militarised masculinities operate as institutionalised systems of power that structure violence and domination.

Human rights inquiries hold agenda-setting power

Investigative bodies are often (but not always) deployed in the early stages of a political crisis, conflict or situation of serious human rights concerns. This puts them in a unique position compared to other (often more prominent) transitional justice mechanisms, such as criminal tribunals or truth commissions. These mostly become operational only after a conflict has been formally declared over, and a process of dealing with the past has been initiated. Human rights inquiries are also often positioned as the primary (or even only) impartial actors in situations of serious human rights violations, especially when broader transitional justice processes are politically compromised, delayed, or insufficient.

In this capacity, **human rights inquiries hold a lot of normative and agenda-setting power in shaping broader transitional justice ecosystems** as well as in future justice, redress and accountability efforts. For instance, if a Col or FFM recognises the influence of militarised masculinities in fuelling cycles of violence and conflict and proposes recommendations to

address them, then post-conflict policies or justice frameworks can take up these insights, and develop programs aimed at transforming militarised masculinities as an essential step towards ending violence and facilitating peace. Interviews with a range of stakeholders revealed that recommendations provided by HRIs often serve as important starting points for transitional justice practitioners and civil society actors in implementing transitional justice-related programming. One peacebuilding practitioner from Latin America emphasised that “if an investigative body would recognise militarised masculinities as a driver of violence, this would constitute an important pathway for [civil society actors and transitional justice practitioners] to implement programming on this”, thereby further advancing justice and accountability agendas. This recognition also raises the stakes for political action and puts pressure on political actors to tackle impunity in a meaningful way.

Human rights inquiries aim to promote accountability and ensure non-repetition

In addition to documenting serious violations of human rights, investigative bodies also aim to promote accountability for such violations, to counter impunity and prevent recurrence of violence. To do so, they must engage with underlying causes and drivers of violence – including militarised masculinities.

As stated in the *OHCHR Guidance and Practice Note on CoIs and FFMs*, inquiry bodies are designed to “assist in ensuring accountability for serious violations, which is fundamental in order to deter future violations, promote compliance with the law and provide avenues of justice and redress for victims.”²⁸ In practice, different commissions explicitly mention the aims of fostering accountability, challenging impunity, and ensuring non-recurrence in their mandates.

For example, the International Commission of Inquiry for Burundi (1995) was mandated to recommend measures that “prevent any repetition of deeds similar to those investigated by the commission and, in general, to eradicate impunity and promote national reconciliation in Burundi [...]”.²⁹ The 2014 UN Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory and East Jerusalem is also mandated “to make recommendations, in particular on accountability measures, all with a view to avoiding and ending impunity [...]”³⁰ and guided by “the aim of preventing the repetition of the recent human rights violations.”³¹ The Report of the Secretary-General’s Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka also explicitly states that victims of human rights abuses have “the right to truth” and require “institutional guarantees of non-recurrence.”³²

HRI findings are not only used for prosecutions and truth-seeking, but also to inform vetting, sanctions, and security sector reform. CoIs and FFMs frequently provide information that determines which individuals and units should be excluded from future military, police or security institutions. Because militarised masculinities are embedded in command cultures, unit practices and informal hierarchies, identifying them in HRI reporting is essential to prevent the re-engagement of violent actors and the continuation of abusive institutional cultures under post-conflict security sector reform processes. **If human rights inquiries aim to tackle impunity, a recognition of and engagement with militarised masculinities is required.**

28 UNOHCHR, *Commissions of Inquiry and Fact-Finding Missions on International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law, Guidance and Practice*, 2015: 6.

29 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1012 (1995) of 28 August 1995.

30 Human Rights Council Resolution S-21/1 of 23 July 2014, para. 13.

31 Commission on Human Rights resolution S-5/1 of 19 October 2000; endorsed by the Economic and Social Council in its decision 2000/311 of 22 November 2000

32 Report of the Secretary-General’s Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka”, 31 March 2011, para. 266.

Human rights inquiries also aim to uncover root causes of crimes and violence

While HRIs are primarily mandated to document direct violence amounting to serious crimes, violation of international humanitarian law, and grave human rights violations, they are also increasingly expected and mandated – by the United Nations, states and victims alike – to uncover and foreground the underlying and systemic causes of this violence. As noted in the *OHCHR Guidance and Practice Note on Cols and FFM*s, “many [Cols] have delved into the *root causes* of the violence and violations, triggering transitional justice mechanisms that address the rights to the truth, justice, remedies and reparations, and guarantees of non-recurrence [...]”³³ For example, the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan was explicitly mandated by the Human Rights Council to: “investigate and establish the facts, **circumstances and root causes of all alleged violations and abuses of human rights** and international humanitarian law, and related crimes, in the context of the ongoing armed conflict that had begun on 15 April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, as well as other warring parties.”³⁴ The Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic was similarly mandated to “investigate all alleged violations of international human rights law ... [and] to *establish the facts and circumstances* that amount to such violations.”³⁵

The catalogue of root causes and driving forces that lead to human rights abuses in the first place include ethnic or political tensions, socio-economic inequities and grievances, colonial histories, or racial and gendered inequalities. **Human rights inquiries are pertinent entry points for engaging with militarised masculinities as a driver of violence and human rights abuses.**

Human rights inquiries and gender

As noted in the OHCHR 2015 guidance and practice note on Cols and FFMs, attention to gender “helps to better understand the causes and types of human rights violations committed.”³⁶

In the past decade, OHCHR and different Cols and FFM

s have made important progress in integrating a gender perspective in human rights investigations, and in addressing the gender dimensions of human rights violations. The *OHCHR Manual on Human Rights Monitoring* recognises that attention to gender is crucial “to ensure that all violations against men and women of all ages and sections of society are recognised and accounted for.”³⁷ Since 2009, Cols and FFMs are required to have specific sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) investigators/gender advisers to support the integration of a gender perspective. In 2018, the OHCHR issued a specific guidance and practice note on integrating a gender perspective into human rights investigations, recognising that “awareness of specific norms related to gender-based discrimination and adequate gender analysis can prevent overlooking critical human rights violations or abuses.”³⁸

Due to this evolving recognition of the gender dimensions of human rights violations, the vast majority of contemporary investigative bodies are integrating attention to gender into their mandates, investigations and reporting. The most consistent engagement with gender

33 UNOHCHR, *Commissions of Inquiry and Fact-Finding Missions on International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law, Guidance and Practice*, 2015: 6

34 Resolution 54/2, the Human Rights Council; UN Human Rights Council, 2023: 4

35 [Resolution S-17/1](#), Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic 2011.

36 UNOHCHR, *Commissions of Inquiry and Fact-Finding Missions on International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law, Guidance and Practice*, 2015: 14.

37 *Manual on Human Rights Monitoring*, (chapter 15) *Integrating Gender into Human Rights Monitoring* UN OHCHR, 2011, 4.

38 *Integrating a gender perspective into human rights investigations. Guidance and Practice*, UN OHCHR, 2018, 11.

in human rights inquiries comes through the investigation and documentation of crimes of sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls, but increasingly also against men and boys, and persons with diverse SOGIESC.

Important examples of the documentation of SGBV include the *Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, which published a conference room paper on sexual and gender-based violence ('I lost my dignity'), noting that "sexual and gender-based violence against women, girls, men and boys has been a persistent issue in Syria since the uprising in 2011."³⁹ The *Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan*, too, issued a report on conflict-related sexual violence against women and girls, noting that these types of human rights abuses are "widespread and systematic."⁴⁰ The *Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar* similarly issued a comprehensive report documenting sexual and gender-based violence and the gendered impact of the ethnic conflicts in Myanmar.⁴¹

Several investigative bodies have also paid specific attention to men and boys as victims of sexual violence. This includes the *Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela*, the *Independent Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine* in its 2024 report to the Human Rights Council, the *OHCHR Sri Lanka accountability project* and the *Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem and Israel*. The *Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic* also specifically notes how crimes of sexual violence against men directly impact survivors' gender identities, and that they imply long-term physical and mental health issues.⁴² The comprehensive report of the OHCHR on the situation of human rights in Sri Lanka describes patterns of sexual violence and abuse committed against Tamil men.⁴³

Besides documenting gender-based forms of human rights violations, and their gendered impact and consequences, **various investigative bodies are also mandated to uncover gender-related drivers and root causes of violence**. The *OHCHR Guidance and Practice Note on CoIs and FFMs* advises investigative bodies to specifically "gather and analyse contextual information to understand the nature, extent and underlying causes of discrimination against women, and to define whether [...] broader gender discrimination should be a priority for investigation."⁴⁴

In practice, several CoIs and FFMs or other investigative mechanisms are also explicitly mandated to investigate structural gendered root causes. For instance, the *Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua* is mandated to investigate "[...] the possible **gender dimensions** of [human rights] violations and abuses, **and their structural root causes**." The *International Independent Commission of Inquiry on the OPT* is mandated "to take full account of intersecting forms of discrimination, including **gender-based discrimination, as both a driver and a root cause of conflict**." The *International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) on the Syrian Arab Republic*⁴⁵ stands out as an investigative and accountability mechanism that pays focused attention to gender aspects. The IIIM's Gender Strategy and

39 "I lost my dignity': Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic," conference room paper of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, March 2018: 1.

40 Conflict-related sexual violence against women and girls in South Sudan. Conference room paper of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, UN Human Rights Council, March 2022, 1.

41 Sexual and gender-based violence in Myanmar and the gendered impact of its ethnic conflicts, Human Rights Council, A/HRC/42/CRP.4

42 'I lost my dignity': Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic," 5.

43 Situation of human rights in Sri Lanka, Comprehensive report of the OHCHR, A/HRC/57/19, September/October 2024: para 27-29.

44 Ibid. 64.

45 The IIIM is not directly a CoI or FFM, but rather a mechanism to assist in investigating persons responsible for serious violations under international law.

Implementation Plan explicitly “situates the discrimination and violence faced by women and girls within **patriarchal social, political, legal and economic systems, and recognises the discriminatory hierarchy embedded in social constructions of gender** that severely disadvantage women and girls in times of peace and war.”⁴⁶

Human rights inquiries and militarised masculinities

In practice, gender integration in human rights inquiries remain heavily oriented towards documenting gender-based violations, rather than towards uncovering the gendered frameworks and structures that give rise to violence. While HRIs have generated extensive documentation of SGBV, the gendered dynamics that produce and sustain large-scale violence remain under-examined, even when their effects are clearly documented. This includes the ways in which military cultures, command hierarchies, recruitment practices and combat ideologies are shaped by militarised constructions of masculinity that normalise brutality, domination and violence.

So far, **the roles of militarised masculinities in fuelling human rights abuses and cycles of violence are only marginally reflected in human rights investigations globally**. On a policy level, the 2011 OHCHR *Manual on Human Rights Investigations* as well as the 2018 *Guidance Note on Integrating Gender in Human Rights Investigations* do not mention masculinities, and thus provide no information or guidance regarding the importance of paying attention to and addressing militarised masculinities in crisis situations. Instead, **there is a tendency to touch on aspects related to gender inequality or patriarchy, but without explicitly mentioning masculinities**. The OHCHR guidance note acknowledges “communities with a strong patriarchal culture” and “pre-existing gender-based discrimination and gender inequalities can influence the economic, social, civil and political dimensions of women’s and men’s experiences of a conflict/crisis”⁴⁷ –yet without linking these dynamics explicitly to militarised masculinities. In practice, too, the vast majority of CoIs and FFMs do not mention militarised masculinities as a driver of violence.

Noteworthy exceptions are two conference room papers on conflict-related sexual violence, by the *Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan* and the *Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory*. The Commission on South Sudan notes that the “patterns of rape and sexual violence perpetrated are underpinned by gender inequality [...] and represent a **violent expression by armed men in contexts of conflict and insecurity in which masculinity is shored up by rape and sexual violence**.” The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the OPT includes a specific sub-section on “masculinity, nationalism and militarisation” as linked to the systematic use of sexual and gender-based violence, yet without making explicit how militarised masculinities fuel gender-based violence.

When militarised masculinities are not *explicitly* recognised and analysed, violence tends to be framed as the product of individual perpetrators, rather than as the outcome of structural drivers, including gendered military cultures, command hierarchies and ideologies of domination. This narrows the scope of accountability and reform, leading to prosecutions and vetting processes that merely address violent symptoms and leave the underlying logics of violence untouched. As a result, abusive actors and units are often recycled into post-conflict security institutions, and the same patterns of brutality and dehumanisation are reproduced under the banner of reform.

⁴⁶ IIIM Gender Strategy and Implementation Plan (Technical Version, 30 September 2022): 9

⁴⁷ Integrating a gender perspective into human rights investigations. *Guidance and Practice*, UN OHCHR, 2018, 38.

Attention to militarised masculinities should not be understood as an attempt to attribute responsibility to abstract gender norms or identities. Understanding and attending to these dynamics provides a framework for examining how militarised masculinities are produced, reinforced, rewarded and mobilised through institutions, command structures, recruitment systems, training practices, political discourses, media narratives and other socio-political structures. Human rights inquiries are encouraged to focus on how these dynamics can contribute to patterns of violence, harm, impunity and recurrence at both the individual and structural levels, and to identify opportunities for accountability, reform and prevention.

Overlooking the roles played by masculinities in fuelling cycles of violence and fostering impunity is a missed opportunity for human rights investigations in achieving their objectives of promoting accountability, contributing to non-repetition, and investigating the root causes and driving forces of human rights violations.

Tensions between mandates, expectations and practical implementation challenges

While human rights inquiries are important mechanisms to address the diverse driving forces of violence, there are also several limitations, challenges and constraints to their potential in this regard. Analysis for this report has revealed that **persistent tensions exist between the official mandates and objectives of human rights inquiries in promoting accountability and non-recurrence or documenting root causes, and very practical constraints and implementation challenges.**

This means that even well-founded analytical priorities risk being deprioritised in practice, particularly when they are perceived as additional thematic layers, rather than as integral to core investigative objectives.

The challenges HRIs face include:

1. Varying mandates

The mandates of HRIs vary, and not all investigative bodies are specifically mandated or expected to investigate root causes of human rights abuses.

2. Time constraints

The timeframes for investigations and reporting of different investigative bodies also vary significantly. It is common for a CoI or a FFM to have a relatively short mandate, which may then be (repeatedly) extended. Accountability mechanisms working directly (or primarily) on criminal accountability and legal proceedings – such as the IIIM on the Syrian Arab Republic – often have particularly strict mandates, where timeframes are determined by the need for legal analysis of crimes. This often omits the period leading up to the perpetration of crimes, including broader causes and drivers of conflict. These time constraints impose structural barriers for delving deeper into underlying and systemic issues in the countries under investigation, even if mandates may officially mention the investigation of circumstances and root causes.

3. Access restrictions

Human rights investigators often face restricted access to situations under scrutiny, limiting the scope of what they can document and investigate. Sometimes they do not have any access to the countries under investigation, due to security constraints or political sensitivities, which severely limits their ability to gather evidence and to document root causes in particular.

4. Financial constraints

Inquiry bodies typically operate with limited financial and material resources and under tight deadlines. These conditions influence the scope and depth of their investigations and reporting. This has been exacerbated by the current political climate and the ensuing budget cuts for humanitarian, human rights, and gender, peace and security work.

5. Reporting limitations

The reports issued by human rights inquiry bodies are constrained in depth and length, at times with relatively tight word limits. This does not allow sufficient room to delve into the root causes and underlying factors of violence. Most UN reports have a word limit of 10,700 words, which is insufficient to thoroughly report on human rights abuses, let alone deeper root causes. Many Commissions have therefore adopted the practice of attaching annexes to their reports, to substantiate their contents.

6. Political sensitivities

Commission reports have to take into account political sensitivities, which similarly restricts the space to unpack deeper systematic questions. Investigative bodies operate within highly politicised environments in which certain issues are more sensitive than others. Human rights investigations must navigate, among others, the expectations and constraints of states (those under investigation and those providing support) and UN agencies. Analysing militarised masculinities directly implicates state armed forces, security institutions and dominant narratives of heroism, protection, and national identity, rendering it politically complicated for investigators, UN agencies and member states. Even when mandates allow for gendered root-cause analysis, there are often implicit pressures to frame violence in legally or politically safer terms, rather than directly interrogating the gendered military cultures and power structures that sustain it. In particular, the language of militarised masculinities often stirs up political tensions that HRIs need to navigate.

7. Complexity and gaps in expertise

Investigative bodies operate with varying levels of expertise among investigators on certain issues, including gender dynamics or root-cause analysis. Many investigators have profound expertise in international law, and some may have a background of working with police forces in their countries of origin. However, they are not always equipped with relevant knowledge to investigate deeper societal and structural inequalities. Human rights investigators, analysts and gender advisors are typically required to navigate a proliferation of guidelines, policies and methodological frameworks, which leave little room for additional tasks or requirements. When it comes to militarised masculinities specifically, consultations have shown that there is a significant gap of knowledge, information and understanding regarding the linkages between masculinities, militarism, violence and human rights abuses. **As such, human rights inquiry bodies and relevant staff need specific guidance to better understand and unpack these linkages.**

These tensions between the formal mandates and objectives of Commissions and practical implementation challenges raise broader questions about the mandate-practice gap of international bodies and mechanisms, and about the depth and transformative potential of human rights inquiries and their recommendations on ending impunity and guaranteeing non-repetition of violence.

Human rights inquiries face several challenges with regards to uncovering root causes and systematic drivers of crimes and violence more broadly, and an investigation of militarised masculinities as a driving force of domination and violence in particular. One key challenge concerns the relationship between direct and structural violence: While some manifestations of structural violence may constitute crimes or legally cognisable human rights violations that fall within the remit of investigative and accountability mechanisms, others are enabling conditions that shape patterns of violence without necessarily constituting prosecutable offences. Strengthening the link between structural drivers of violence and the concrete harms they produce may provide an important entry point for human rights inquiries seeking to address underlying causes while remaining relevant to accountability processes. Such an approach also recognises that while some forms of structural violence may be addressed through criminal accountability, others may require complementary transitional justice measures, including truth-seeking, reparations, institutional reform, memorialisation, and guarantees of non-recurrence.

This raises several questions of how human rights inquiries can resolve these tensions and make meaningful recommendations for accountability and non-recurrence that address gendered root causes of violence; and more specifically, how investigative bodies can practically integrate an analysis of militarised masculinities as a structural driver of violence into their mandates, investigations and reporting.

3. How can human rights inquiries integrate and address militarised masculinities?

The first two sections of this report provided conceptual and analytical guidance on why integrating militarised masculinities into human rights inquiries is important, aiming to influence change at the political, policy and institutional level. In consultations with different stakeholders and experts, a recurring concern was the lack of clarity and guidance on how to practically address and investigate militarised masculinities, and how to apply this to human rights investigations.

This section provides clear and practical pathways for human rights inquiries on how to better recognise and address militarised masculinities in their mandates, investigations, and reporting. So far, such specific practical guidance on how to engage with militarised masculinities as part of broader justice and accountability processes in general, and for human rights inquiries specifically, does not exist. This report thereby addresses a persistent practical gap, outlining several pathways to integrate militarised masculinities into the work of human rights inquiries. These pathways operate across four mutually reinforcing levels:

1. Policy and mandate-setting;
2. Investigative practices throughout inquiry cycles;
3. Skills, tools and institutional capacities; and
4. Engagement with civil society and victims' groups.

The different pathways and recommendations provided here are intended as practical entry points that need to be adapted to specific mandates, contexts, resources and political realities. Their potential application will benefit from continued engagement and consultation with relevant stakeholders. To make these pathways as concrete as possible, this report includes toolkits, checklists and guiding questions, alongside a case study example, in the Appendixes.

In a nutshell:

Human rights inquiries must integrate attention to militarised masculinities throughout their mandates, investigations, documentation and reporting. At the policy level, core UN guidelines and policies should be revised to explicitly acknowledge militarised masculinities as a potential driver of conflict and human rights violations. Integration must occur across all phases of inquiries – including mandate formulation, investigative methodologies, evidence collection and analysis, and the formulation of findings and recommendations – rather than being treated as a stand-alone gender consideration. Staff and investigators need specialised knowledge on investigating root causes in general, and on militarised masculinities as a driving force of violence in particular. This requires clear institutional responsibility, alongside guidelines, checklists, guiding questions, lessons learned and training modules to ensure consistent and accountable implementation.

Integrating militarised masculinities into human rights inquiries

An important first step for human rights inquiries to attend to militarised masculinities is that **overarching frameworks, policies and guidelines at the policy level are modified to include specific recognition of, and guidance on, militarised masculinities. This includes core guidelines such as the OHCHR Guidance Note on Integrating Gender in Human Rights Investigations and the OHCHR Manual on Human Rights Monitoring and its chapter on gender.**

Through in-depth consultations with various gender justice experts and stakeholders from different backgrounds, we have learned that practical investigations, documentation and reporting are directly shaped by, and rely on, policy guidance. If OHCHR guidelines and frameworks and official mandates of investigative bodies were to directly recognise the roles of militarised masculinities as drivers of violence, then investigative teams would have a concrete practical and political foundation to attend to these dynamics. This does not require creating additional or parallel frameworks, but rather embedding an analysis of militarised masculinities within existing approaches to gender, root-cause and pattern analysis already employed by human rights inquiries. This also includes documents such as gender strategies on human rights inquiries in general, or specific gender strategies and implementation plans, such as by the accountability mechanism IIM on Syria.

For human rights inquiries and investigations, it is **important that engagement with militarised masculinities becomes an integral component of streamlining gender throughout all phases of human rights inquiries**, including conception, planning, screening, investigation, documentation, reporting and evaluation. Rather than adding standalone guidance, attention to militarised masculinities should be embedded in existing investigative frameworks and methodologies. Recognising the linkages between militarised masculinities and cycles of violence influences what sources of evidence and information investigators consider; whom they interview; what patterns of human rights abuses they document; the findings they put forward; and the recommendations they propose. Any engagement with militarised masculinities in HRIs must be grounded in do-no-harm principles, survivor-centred approaches and strict ethical safeguards, ensuring that investigations do not reinforce stigma, expose individuals to risk, or instrumentalise gender analysis in ways that undermine victims' rights, dignity and safety.

Human rights investigators and staff working for country or regional desks within OHCHR require specific guidance and expertise on investigating and documenting root causes and systematic factors of violence and human rights violations in general, and on gender-related aspects and on militarised masculinities in particular. Human rights inquiries' staff at UN and other levels need specific training on how to engage with and attend to masculinities in the context of human rights investigations. Civil society actors have an important role to play in this regard, in advising relevant stakeholders – including at the OHCHR and various investigative bodies – and in providing workshops or training for staff and investigators on why and how to address militarised masculinities as part of human rights investigations. At the same time, some civil society actors themselves also require specialised training and guidance on militarised masculinities.

Human rights investigators also need specific toolkits and a list of guiding questions to help them to recognise and subsequently investigate, document and report the roles of militaristic masculinities in driving cycles of violence and human rights abuses.

Finally, attention to militarised masculinities should be reflected in internal review and quality-assurance processes, including the review of draft findings and recommendations by senior investigators and gender advisers. This would help to ensure that gendered root-cause analysis generated during investigations is not lost during the report drafting, political clearance of report finalisation stages.

As outlined above, human rights inquiries are confronted with numerous challenges and constraints, including limited timeframes and budgets, restricted access, political sensitivities and limitations in gaining access to, for instance, (ex-)combatants or perpetrators of human rights abuses. Therefore, investigative bodies and accountability mechanisms often rely on submissions made by civil society actors, victims' groups or non-governmental organisations, who can submit written statements to either the Human Rights Council (HRC) and its committees, but also to CoIs and FFMs directly.⁴⁸ The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic or the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, for example, regularly receive, process and work with such submissions.

Civil society actors and victims' groups working in countries and with victims' and survivors' communities often have privileged access to certain information, including victims' testimonies but also the accounts of perpetrators and (ex-)combatants. Civil society actors carry a lot of potential to collect evidence on militarised masculinities as a driving force of violence. These actors should therefore be encouraged to submit evidence, data and information to relevant investigative bodies in their countries of operation and investigation on the roles of militarised masculinities and their linkages to cycles of violence. Lessons learned from integrating attention to militarised masculinities should be systematically captured and fed back into OHCHR guidance, training materials and future mandates, allowing human rights inquiries to progressively strengthen their approaches over time.

⁴⁸ UN Human Rights Council, [NGO Participation in the Human Rights Council](#).

4. Recommendations

Based on these insights, this policy report puts forward several broad initial recommendations on *why* and *how* to integrate militarised masculinities in human rights inquiries. These recommendations are directed to international organisations and actors supporting human rights inquiries at the policy level, as well as different investigative bodies at the practical level. The recommendations are intended to directly inform the work of human rights investigators and analysts. These recommendations will benefit from future consultations with human rights investigators, analysts, gender advisors and transitional justice experts. Through future and upcoming engagement on this matter, we will further develop and refine these recommendations – with a focus on the political implications, messaging and implementation of addressing militarised masculinities in human rights inquiries and accountability investigations. To this end, we will host a high-level policy workshop in Geneva in September 2026 on this topic. Any meaningful integration of militarised masculinities into human rights investigations requires institutional and political support, beyond the responsibilities of individual investigators and gender advisers. Investigative mechanism leadership, commissioners, supportive Member States, and international organisations and civil society organisations actively need to champion and communicate the relevance of examining militarised masculinities as an enabling factor of violence, impunity, and recurrence. Building communities of practice and networks of support across investigative bodies, gender experts, transitional justice practitioners, and affected communities can strengthen legitimacy, facilitate peer-learning, and foster the political buy-in necessary for sustained institutional change.

The recommendations provided here are intended as practical entry points for further reflection and institutional development. They do not constitute a prescriptive model applicable to all inquiry bodies, but rather seek to identify promising avenues through which human rights investigations may strengthen their engagement with militarised masculinities as a driver of violence. Their implementation will necessarily depend on the specific mandate, context, resources, and political environment of each investigative mechanism.

A. Human rights inquiries must pay attention to militarised masculinities

Human rights inquiries and investigative mechanisms – including CoIs and FFMs – should explore and implement dynamic and innovative ways to attend to the issues stemming from militarised masculinities as part of their mandates, reporting, investigation, documentation and reporting. In particular investigative bodies that are explicitly mandated to identify root causes of human rights violations and/or provide guarantees of non-repetition of violence must pay attention to the linkages between militarised masculinities, human rights abuses and impunity.

- ◆ To fulfil their mandates of investigating the root causes and structural factors of human rights abuses in episodes of violence and violations of international humanitarian law, inquiry bodies need to be attentive to the roles played by militarised masculinities at the onset, perpetuation, continuation, and impact of violence. This requires that different human rights inquiry bodies integrate analyses of masculinities at all stages of their work, from mandate design to fact collection, reporting, and recommendations. This includes documentation of how masculine norms and expectations influence the perpetration of different forms of human rights violations, and the layers of gendered harms stemming from these forms of violence. The following approaches and techniques can be used by human rights inquiries and other investigative bodies:

- ▶ Investigative bodies can draw on the testimonies and accounts of victims and survivors of human rights violations to establish who perpetrated violence and crimes, and what the dynamics of human rights abuses and violations are;
 - ▶ Investigations should conduct systematic pattern analyses of different forms of human rights abuses, including of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), which can reveal the underlying influence of militarised masculinities.
 - ▶ HRIs can investigate military cultures and processes of militarisation across armed groups to gain a deeper understanding of the linkages between militarism, masculinities and violence. This may include, for instance, documentation and investigation of military songs, pamphlets, publications or online and social media presences.
 - ▶ In addition – if timelines permit and safe, politically-sensitive access can be granted – human rights inquiries should conduct interviews and consultations with (ex-) combatants and (potential) perpetrators of crimes, to better understand the root causes of violence and to identify the connections between militarised masculinities and human rights abuses.
 - ▶ This integration should build on and strengthen existing gender analysis frameworks, rather than creating additional parallel requirements for investigators.
- ◆ HRIs must find dynamic and innovative ways to make the issue of militarised masculinities visible in multiple ways. If the structures of human rights investigations prohibit reflecting these dynamics in their reporting and documentation, then conference room papers issued by Commissions or Missions constitute one avenue. The *Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan* and the *Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory* offer important examples in this regard. Conference room papers offer more space to explore underlying and systematic issues, including root causes, gender-based discrimination, and explicitly the influence of militarised masculinities in driving cycles of violence.
 - ◆ Findings related to militarised masculinities must inform justice, reform and peacebuilding processes. Recommendations by HRI on the issue of militarised masculinities should be explicitly taken up by states, transitional justice mechanisms, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes, security sector reform processes and peacebuilding actors. This is important to ensure that accountability, reform and guarantees of non-recurrence address not only individual violations, but also the gendered military cultures, power relations and norms that sustain cycles of violence and impunity.

B. Frameworks, guidelines and policies on human rights investigations must recognise militarised masculinities as drivers of violence

To influence changes in policy and implementation, and to ensure that human rights investigations engage with militarised masculinities, overarching policy frameworks and guidance on human rights investigations need to explicitly recognise and reflect the impact of militarised masculinities among the root causes and driving forces of violence.

- ◆ Core publications and guidelines must be updated to include specific recognition of and guidance and instructions on the importance of attending to militarised masculinities. This applies to the UNOHCHR Guidance Note on Integrating Gender in Human Rights Investigations and the UNOHCHR Manual on Human Rights Monitoring in particular. This also includes gender strategies focused on human rights investigations at the OHCHR level, and specific gender strategies and implementation plans of specific investigative bodies or accountability mechanisms, such as the Syria IIM and other bodies.

- ◆ Regional organisations supporting human rights inquiries and broader accountability efforts – such as the European Union (EU) or the African Union (AU) – similarly need to update their policy frameworks. This includes, for instance, the EU’s Policy Framework on support to transitional justice, or the AU Transitional Justice Policy.
- ◆ To ensure consistent implementation, responsibility for integrating engagement with militarised masculinities should be explicitly assigned within inquiry teams – including through terms of reference for gender advisers, team leaders and reviewers – and reflected in internal quality-assurance and review processes.
- ◆ Member States need to provide adequate funding and resources that allow human rights inquiry bodies to attend to militarised masculinities, and to revise their guidelines, policies and frameworks to this end.
- ◆ At the level of the United Nations, the Human Rights Council and the Security Council have important roles to play in ensuring that recommendations provided by human rights inquiry bodies and investigative mechanisms on matters related to militarised masculinities are taken forward and implemented.

C. Human rights investigators require specific knowledge on militarised masculinities

Human rights investigators need to be equipped with resources and knowledge on investigating the root causes and driving forces of human rights violations. This includes awareness of gender-based discrimination, as well as specific knowledge about the impact of militarised masculinities on fuelling cycles of violence, conflict and human rights abuses.

- ◆ Specific guidelines, publications and reports – like this policy report – are necessary to provide concrete insights and information for investigators on why attention to militarised masculinities is important, and how to integrate it into human rights investigations and documentations.
- ◆ This also requires specific workshops and training for staff and investigators working on human rights, peacebuilding and gender. Civil society actors have an important role to play in advocating for the importance of attending to masculinities in human rights documentations, and in providing qualified training possibilities for staff and investigators at the UN and in different CoIs and FFMs.
- ◆ Designated gender advisers also play an important role in fostering this engagement with and attention to militarised masculinities. Gender advisers must broaden the work of human rights investigations beyond a primary investigation and documentation of sexual and gender-based violence, and also ensure thorough investigations of gender-based root causes of violence. Gender advisers must be aware of, and trained on, the roles played by masculinities in fuelling violence perpetrated against people of all genders and sexual orientations.
- ◆ Lessons learned from integrating attention to militarised masculinities should be systematically documented and fed back into policy and practice guidance, training materials and future mandates, to progressively strengthen institutional practice across inquiries.

Annex A: Checklist

Integrating attention to militarised masculinities in human rights inquiries

This report offers a checklist that provides practical guidance for integrating attention to militarised masculinities into human rights inquiries, investigations, reporting and documentation. The checklist is intended to support broader investigative processes, structures, and institutions, as well as transitional justice and human rights investigation practitioners, investigators and analysts.

Attention to militarised masculinities is not intended to assign responsibility to abstract gender norms or individual identities. The objective is to understand how militarised forms of masculinities are produced, reinforced, and mobilised by institutions, armed groups, political actors, command structures, recruitment systems, training practices, and broader social and political environments. Human rights inquiries should focus on identifying the actors, institutions, policies, practices, and systems that enable, reward, legitimise, or reproduce militarised masculinities and the harms associated with them.

The checklist complements existing guidance and checklists on gender-sensitive investigations and documentation – including the *OHCHR Guidance and Practice Note on Integrating a Gender Perspective into Human Rights Investigations* and the *2026 Guidance and Practical Tool on Intersectionality in investigations of serious human rights violations and international crimes* by the Justice Rapid Response and UN Women.⁴⁹ It is not intended to create a separate thematic stream of investigation, but to strengthen existing approaches to root-cause analysis, pattern identification, institutional responsibility and guarantees of non-recurrence.

Attention to militarised masculinities should remain context-specific, evidence-based, mandate-driven and proportionate to the operational realities of each inquiry. Not all forms of violence are necessarily driven by militarised masculinities, and investigators should avoid unsupported assumptions or overgeneralisation. However, where evidence suggests that militarised gender norms shape patterns of violence, recruitment, domination, institutional culture or impunity, these dynamics should be meaningfully integrated into analysis and reporting.

Given the breadth of these dynamics, investigators should not seek to document all manifestations of militarised masculinities. Attention should be directed towards those dimensions that help explain patterns of human rights violations, harms, impunity, institutional responsibility, and risks of recurrence. The checklist therefore aims to provide practical entry points for integrating a focused analysis of militarised masculinities into existing investigative frameworks.

⁴⁹ Justice Rapid Response and UN Women, “Intersectionality in investigations of serious human rights violations and international crimes: Guidance and Practical Tool”, 2026.

A. Mandate, conception and planning

- ✓ Ensure that members of the investigation and documentation team have baseline awareness of gendered root causes of violence, including how militarised masculinities shape conflict dynamics and patterns of abuse.
- ✓ At the planning stage, ensure awareness that gendered drivers of violence concern not only victims, but also perpetrators, armed actors, and security institutions, including a recognition of how masculinity is constructed, rewarded and enforced. Examples may include military cultures rewarding brutality or aggression; recruitment campaigns portraying violence as proof of manhood; or political rhetoric framing militarised protection and domination as masculine duties.
- ✓ Ensure that Gender Advisers, team leaders and relevant investigators possess working knowledge of the linkages between masculinities, militarism, violence, conflict and impunity, or have access to specialised expertise and materials.
- ✓ Integrate attention to militarised masculinities within existing gender, root-cause and pattern analysis frameworks, rather than treating it as a separate or additional thematic layer.
- ✓ Encourage reflective awareness within investigation teams of how their own positionality, professional background or exposure to militarised environments may shape analytical assumptions about violence, authority and gender norms.
- ✓ Ensure that investigation teams are aware of how militarised masculinities may affect women and girls, men and boys, and persons with SOGIESC, including through recruitment, detention, torture, sexual violence, forced perpetration or other forms of coercion.
- ✓ Identify which institutions, actors, policies, practices or command structures may contribute to the production, reinforcement, legitimisation or reproduction of militarised masculinities, and consider how these factors relate to patterns of violations, institutional responsibility, impunity, or risks of recurrence.
- ✓ Consider how militarised masculinities may be (re-)produced through the militarisation of boyhood, child recruitment, violent initiation practices and intergenerational socialisation into organised violence.
- ✓ Identify whether political, religious, community or media actors contribute to legitimising or reinforcing militarised masculine norms linked to violence, authority or exclusion.
- ✓ Ensure that investigative planning incorporates specialised safeguarding, confidential, child-sensitive, trauma-informed and survivor-centred methodologies where children or former child soldiers may be interviewed.

B. Methodology and evidence collection

- ✓ When developing investigation methodologies, ensure that attention to gender inequalities, patriarchy and masculinities is embedded across all stages of investigation and documentation.
- ✓ Map patterns of human rights violations against women and girls, men and boys, and persons with diverse SOGIESC, paying attention to who perpetrates violence against whom, in what contexts, in which forms and with what types of harms; and what the targeting strategy behind those violations is. For example, investigators may observe that certain forms of violence are directed differently against men, women, boys, girls or persons with diverse SOGIESC, including sexualised torture, forced nudity, public humiliation, forced marriage or coercive recruitment practices.
- ✓ Identify and engage a broad range of witness categories, including survivors, insider witnesses, former combatants, defectors, detainees, women associated with armed groups or security actors, family members of fighters, community leaders, teachers, child-protection actors, medical personnel and psychosocial practitioners, where relevant and appropriate (also see evidence table provided below).
- ✓ Recognise that insider witnesses may include former combatants, former members of security institutions, defectors, support personnel, family members or others with direct internal knowledge of organisational practices, recruitment systems, command cultures and disciplinary structures.
- ✓ Pay attention to how boys, girls and gender-diverse children are recruited, trained, coerced or socialised into armed violence, including through schools, propaganda, community structures or economic dependency.
- ✓ Ensure that investigations involving children, former child soldiers or survivors of sexual violence apply specialised safeguarding, confidentiality, child-sensitive, and trauma-informed interviewing approaches.
- ✓ To **understand** militarised masculinities in contexts where direct access is limited, consider indirect or contextual sources, such as military symbols, narratives, songs, training materials, graffiti, propaganda, memoirs, public speeches, or online and social media content. In some contexts, propaganda videos, songs, online narratives or public speeches have glorified “warriorhood”, martyrdom, domination or militarised protection, reinforcing violent masculine ideals among recruits and wider communities.
- ✓ To **analyse** how militarised masculinities are performed, glorified or disseminated, make use of digital and open-source evidence, including videos, online propaganda, social media content, messaging applications and public speeches.
- ✓ To gather potential **evidence** of militarised gender norms and violent masculinities, where feasible, examine military training manuals, propaganda materials, online content, songs, speeches, symbols, detention practices and social media narratives.
- ✓ Document how armed actors recruit, socialise, discipline and reward members, including the role of violent initiation rituals, humiliation, gendered expectations and notions of masculinity, honour, domination or protection.

C. Interviews, investigation and analysis

- ☑ Ensure that engagement with perpetrators or armed actors is conducted in line with do-no-harm principles, survivor-centred approaches and strict ethical safeguards.
- ☑ Take into account how patriarchal structures and militarised masculinities are not just objects of investigation, but can also affect investigative processes. Understanding the gender dynamics of investigations is important to guide interactions with witnesses and analysis patterns.
- ☑ During interviews and analysis, examine how gender identities, norms and expectations, as well as patriarchy, shape patterns of violence, including sexual, physical, psychological and symbolic harm. Illustrative examples may include:
 - a. public acts of violence intended to establish dominance or humiliation,
 - b. detention practices involving forced nudity or emasculation,
 - c. violent initiation rituals imposed on recruits,
 - d. or punishment of individuals perceived as weak, disobedient or insufficiently masculine.
- ☑ When analysing and conducting interviews, pay attention to questions such as:
 - ▶ How are masculinity, power and violence connected in this context?
 - ▶ How do military or armed-group cultures normalise, reward or discipline violent behaviour?

In some contexts, witnesses may describe command structures that rewarded aggression, tolerated abuse against civilians or encouraged recruits to demonstrate loyalty and masculinity through acts of violence.
 - ▶ How do perpetrators (including those actors forced to perpetrate violence) describe, justify or make sense of their actions?

Perpetrators may frame violence through narratives of protection, honour, discipline, revenge, sacrifice or defence of community identity, often linked to militarised understandings of masculinity and authority.
- ☑ Where relevant, analyse how militarised masculinities intersect with age, ethnicity, race, class, disability, religion, or displacement status, shaping who is recruited, targeted, protected or rendered disposable. For example, boys and young men from marginalised, displaced or economically vulnerable communities may face heightened recruitment pressures, while women and girls may experience different forms of coercion, exploitation or symbolic violence.
- ☑ Where appropriate and ethical, triangulate information by engaging with family members or close associates of armed actors, to better understand social pressures, norms and expectations surrounding violence.
- ☑ Analyse how detention, torture, interrogation practices or public punishment may reflect militarised performances of domination, humiliation, emasculation or gendered control.
- ☑ Examine whether armed actors reward brutality, aggression, sexual violence or domination as markers of loyalty, authority or masculine legitimacy.

- ✓ Identify whether violence is used performatively to communicate power, discipline communities, humiliate opponents or reinforce group cohesion.
- ✓ Where relevant, analyse the role of militarised masculinities in the recruitment and socialisation of boys, girls and young men and women, including forced perpetration or suppression of emotional vulnerability.
- ✓ Consider whether there are examples of resistance to militarised gender norms, including alternative, non-violent forms of masculinity, protection or leadership within communities or institutions.

D. Documentation and reporting

- ✓ Ensure that findings related to militarised masculinities are documented and analysed within sections addressing root causes, patterns of violations, enabling environments or institutional responsibility, rather than being confined to sections on sexual and gender-based violence. For example, militarised masculinities may also help explain patterns of torture, enforced disappearance, forced recruitment, territorial control, public punishment or institutional tolerance of abuse.
- ✓ Avoid framing violence exclusively as individual misconduct where evidence points to institutional, cultural or gendered systems of power that enable or sustain abuse and human rights violations. In some contexts, repeated patterns of violence across multiple units or locations may point to broader institutional cultures, command practices or militarised norms that incentivise or tolerate abuse.
- ✓ Pay close attention to language and framing in reports, avoiding terminology that normalises, glorifies or legitimises militarised violence, heroism or sacrifice where evidence indicates coercion, abuse or systemic harm.
- ✓ Where space constraints limit analysis in main reports, consider conference room papers, annexes or thematic notes as appropriate avenues for more in-depth examination.
- ✓ Ensure internal review and quality-assurance processes assess whether gendered root-cause analysis, including attention to masculinities, is meaningfully reflected in findings and conclusions.
- ✓ Document how militarised masculinities shape institutional cultures, detention practices, command structures, propaganda, recruitment systems or civilian governance structures, where relevant.
- ✓ Ensure that reporting reflects differential impacts on women and girls, men and boys, and persons with diverse SOGIESC, while avoiding reductive or stereotypical portrayals.
- ✓ Avoid framing militarised masculinities as inherent traits of particular cultures, communities, ethnicities or groups. Analysis should remain structural, contextual and evidence-based.
- ✓ Where relevant, document how online propaganda, political rhetoric or public narratives reinforce militarised masculine ideals linked to violence or exclusion. Avoid language that idealises militarised violence, glorifies perpetrators as heroic protectors, or reproduces narratives equating masculinity with aggression, sacrifice or domination.

- ✓ Where relevant, reporting may also document how political rhetoric, online propaganda, religious discourse or public narratives contribute to legitimising militarised masculinities, violence or exclusionary forms of authority.

E. Recommendations, accountability and guarantees of non-recurrence

- ✓ Ensure that recommendations explicitly take into account the influence of militarised masculinities and the need to transform them.
- ✓ Formulate recommendations that address non-recurrence, accountability and institutional reform. This can include measures aimed at transforming violent military, security or armed-group cultures, and that are explicitly directed at transitional justice mechanisms; disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes; security sector reform processes; and peacebuilding actors.
- ✓ Ensure that recommendations on vetting, sanctions, prosecutions, reparations or security sector reform do not inadvertently reinforce militarised masculine norms, hierarchies or practices.
- ✓ Where appropriate, recommend further investigation, reform or monitoring of gendered military doctrines, command cultures, recruitment practices or training systems linked to patterns of abuse. For example, investigations may identify training cultures that reward aggression, tolerate humiliation or normalise violence against civilians, women, detainees or marginalised communities.
- ✓ Encourage continued engagement with civil society actors, victims' groups and local organisations to support ongoing documentation and monitoring of gendered drivers of violence, including militarised masculinities.
- ✓ Encourage reform measures that address violent training cultures, detention practices, recruitment systems and command structures that perpetuate militarised masculinities.
- ✓ Ensure that recommendations address child recruitment, militarised socialisation of boys, girls and intergenerational reproduction of violent gender norms.
- ✓ Support education, prevention and community-based initiatives promoting alternative, non-violent and gender-equitable forms of masculinity.
- ✓ Consider how memorialisation, truth-telling, reparations and transitional justice processes may either reinforce or challenge militarised masculinities.
- ✓ Investigators may also identify examples of resistance to militarised gender norms, which may provide important entry points for prevention efforts, peacebuilding measures and guarantees of non-recurrence. Examples may include individuals, communities or institutions promoting non-violent, inclusive or gender-equitable forms of protection, leadership and conflict resolution.

This checklist is intended as a flexible analytical support tool, to be adapted to mandates, contexts and constraints, and to complement, not replace, existing OHCHR guidance on gender and human rights investigations

Annex B: Guiding questions:

What to look for when integrating militarised masculinities into human rights inquiries?

To complement the checklist, this policy report also provides a list of overarching guiding questions. Human rights inquiry staff – including investigators and analysts – should ask themselves these questions when designing and planning an investigative mission; when carrying out investigations and documentations of human rights abuses; when reporting findings and when formulating recommendations. The guiding questions are intended to support human rights inquiry staff and members throughout all phases of an inquiry and investigation. Since manifestations of militarised masculinities vary significantly across contexts, armed actors and institutional settings, analytical approaches must remain context-specific, evidence-based and mandate driven. The guiding questions should therefore be adapted to specific mandates, contexts and operational constraints.

A. Root causes and drivers:

- ◆ What are the key driving forces and root causes of human rights abuses in the situation under investigation?
- ◆ How do gender inequalities, patriarchal social structures and militarised forms of masculinity contribute to causing, enabling or sustaining these violations, alongside political, economic, ethnic or historical factors?
- ◆ How do processes of militarisation, securitisation or prolonged conflict interact with gender norms and expectations related to strength, authority, honour, protection or control?
- ◆ In what ways do dominant constructions of masculinity shape legitimacy, power and status within armed actors, security institutions or political movements?

B. Patterns of violations and gendered harms:

- ◆ What are the overarching patterns of human rights violations, including crimes of sexual and gender-based violence?
- ◆ To what extent do identified violations reflect direct manifestations of militarised masculinities, and to what extent are they enabled by broader institutional, cultural or structural norms associated with militarisation?
- ◆ To what extent and how do militarised masculinities fuel direct forms of violence – such as sexualised torture, gendered humiliation or violence?
- ◆ How do these direct forms of violence, combined with institutional cultures and command structures, contribute to the perpetuation of structural violence and environments in which the use of violence is normalised and tolerated?
- ◆ Who is most affected by which forms of violence, when, where and under what circumstances?

- ◆ How are different forms of violence gendered in their commission, methods, targets and impacts? This specifically includes violence against women and girls, men and boys, and persons with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions and sex characteristics (SOGIESC).
- ◆ Which forms of violence, harm or victimisation appear under-reported, minimised or silenced, and how might gender norms, expectations around masculinity, shame, stigma or honour contribute to this invisibility?
- ◆ How are detention, torture or interrogation practices shaped by militarised gender norms and performances of domination, humiliation or emasculation?
- ◆ Are detainees or prisoners subjected to sexualised violence, forced nudity, gendered humiliation or attacks targeting perceived masculinity, femininity or sexuality?
- ◆ How are fear, obedience and control enforced within military environments?

C. Perpetrators, armed actors and institutions:

- ◆ Who are the different perpetrators involved in human rights violations or international crimes under investigation (including state forces, non-state armed groups, militias or auxiliary forces)?
- ◆ What are the intersectional identities, roles and positions of alleged perpetrators within formal or informal command structures, and what forms of individual, command or institutional responsibility may arise?
- ◆ How do alleged perpetrators understand, justify or narrate their involvement in the commission, ordering, facilitation, tolerance or concealment of specific violations?
- ◆ What role do masculine ideals, gender identities or expectations play in the perpetration, justification, normalisation or concealment of particular violations?
- ◆ How do command structures, leadership practices, institutional cultures and accountability mechanisms contribute to the commission, authorisation, facilitation, tolerance or prevention of specific violations?
- ◆ What forms of conduct, coercion or abuse are implicitly or explicitly sanctioned, incentivised, ignored or rewarded within these structures, and how do these relate to the patterns of violations under investigation?
- ◆ To what extent do militarised masculine norms shape recruitment practices, operational conduct, decision-making, target selection, treatment of victims, or other behaviours relevant to the commission of specific violations?

D. Militarisation, recruitment and socialisation:

- ◆ How do recruitment and demobilisation practices within and across armed groups or security institutions operate in the country under investigation?
- ◆ Who is primarily recruited, and on what grounds (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, class, displacement status)?

- ◆ Through which pathways do individuals enter armed groups or security forces (e.g. conscription, abduction, voluntary enlistment, economic or social incentives), and how do these processes shape, and how are they shaped by, militarised masculine identities?
- ◆ What gender roles, ideals, hierarchies and expectations, and specifically which forms of masculinities, are produced and reinforced through training, discipline, reward and punishment within military or armed-group cultures?
- ◆ How do processes of demobilisation, disarmament or reintegration address (or fail to address) militarised masculine identities?
- ◆ What is the risk or potential that militarised masculinities are reproduced in post-conflict civilian or security settings?
- ◆ How are boys, girls and children with diverse SOGIESC specifically targeted, recruited, coerced or socialised into armed violence?
- ◆ How are notions of manhood, bravery, obedience, protection or sacrifice constructed and imposed on recruits, particularly boys, girls and young men and women?
- ◆ Are recruits subjected to violent initiation rituals, forced perpetration or practices intended to suppress vulnerability and normalise violence?

E. Language, symbols and performances of violence:

- ◆ What gendered language, symbols, rituals or performances accompany human rights abuses and acts of violence?
- ◆ How are militarised masculinities promoted or performed through propaganda, online spaces, social media, political rhetoric or public narratives?
- ◆ Do perpetrators use gendered, sexualised, ethnic or dehumanising slurs, insults or threats?
- ◆ How are masculinity, power and domination communicated through uniforms, weapons, bodily practices, public displays, propaganda or online narratives, and towards which audiences (victims, communities, peers, commanders, the wider public)?

F. Intersectionality and differential impact:

- ◆ How do militarised masculinities intersect with age, ethnicity, race, class, disability, religion or displacement status, shaping who is recruited, targeted, protected or rendered disposable?
- ◆ How do these intersections influence access to justice, visibility of harm and patterns of impunity?

G. Accountability, reform and non-recurrence:

- ◆ How do militarised masculinities contribute to patterns of impunity, including tolerance of abuse, lack of accountability or the recycling and continuation of violent actors into post-conflict institutions?
- ◆ What implications do findings on militarised masculinities have for accountability measures; institutional reform; disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration; security sector reform; and peacebuilding processes?
- ◆ What gender-transformative recommendations are needed to address these dynamics and to contribute meaningfully to guarantees of non-recurrence and prevention of future violence?
- ◆ How can accountability and justice contribute to preventing the intergenerational reproduction of militarised masculinities and cycles of violence?
- ◆ Are there examples of alternative or non-violent masculinities that may support prevention, reconciliation or peacebuilding?

Annex C: Evidence table: Where, how and with whom to identify evidence on militarised masculinities

(Applicable to both in-person and remote investigations)

To complement the checklist and the list of guiding questions, this policy report also provides an evidence table, offering concrete guidance on where, how and with whom to identify evidence on militarised masculinities. This table provides illustrative entry points for identifying concrete evidence, specific information or documentation related to militarised masculinities as a driver of violence and human rights abuses. It is intended to further support investigators in locating, analysing and triangulating relevant information across different phases of an inquiry and under varying access conditions.

Evidence relating to militarised masculinities may serve different investigative purposes and should not be understood as having the same evidentiary value in all cases. Some information may contribute directly to establishing elements of specific human rights violations or international crimes and the responsibility of perpetrators. Other information may help explain patterns of violations, institutional practices, command cultures or enabling environments that contribute to the commission, repetition or tolerance of abuses. In some contexts, evidence may also reveal broader societal dynamics, risk factors or early warning indicators that have not yet resulted in serious violations but may contribute to future harms if left unaddressed. Investigators should therefore assess such evidence according to its relevance to the mandate, including its potential contribution to attribution, pattern analysis, root-cause analysis, institutional accountability and prevention.

Not all sources will be available or appropriate in every context; investigators should apply professional judgment, ethical safeguards and do-no-harm principles when collecting and analysing such evidence.

Analytical dimension	What to look for	In-person sources	Remote / indirect sources
Recruitment & socialisation	Gender norms shaping who is recruited and how armed identities are formed	(Ex-)combatants; defectors; community leaders; families of fighters; youth leaders	NGO reports; academic studies; UN reporting; diaspora testimonies
Child recruitment & militarised boyhood	Violent initiation, coercive socialisation, gendered role assignment	Former child soldiers; teachers; caregivers; child-protection actors	UNICEF reporting; NGO documentation; propaganda targeting children and youth
Women insider witnesses	Internal group dynamics, domestic violence, command culture	Wives/partners of commanders; women ex-combatants	NGO interviews; testimonies
Detention & torture practices	Gendered humiliation, emasculation, sexual torture	Former detainees; detention monitors; forensic experts	Leaked prison footage; court filings; UN reports; NGO reports

Analytical dimension	What to look for	In-person sources	Remote / indirect sources
Training & discipline	How violence, obedience, toughness and domination are taught, normalised or rewarded	Former fighters; trainers; detainees; military defectors	Training manuals; leaked documents; propaganda videos; memoirs
Command culture & incentives	What behaviours are tolerated, rewarded or punished within armed actors or security institutions	Insider witnesses, including former combatants, defectors, former officers, support personnel, whistleblowers and others with internal knowledge.	Court records; sanctions listings; UN panels of experts; investigative journalism
Patterns of violence	Gendered targeting, symbolic or performative violence, repetition across units or locations	Survivors; witnesses; medical personnel; local NGOs	Incident databases; satellite imagery (pattern analysis); verified open-source material
Sexual and gender-based violence	Sexualised violence as domination, punishment or humiliation	Survivors of all genders; healthcare providers; psychosocial workers	NGO documentation; UN reports; judicial filings; verified digital evidence
Language & symbolism	Gendered, sexualised or dehumanising language accompanying violence	Survivor testimonies; community interviews	Videos, audio recordings, social media posts, graffiti, speeches
Digital propaganda & online militarisation	Warrior imagery, glorification of violence, online humiliation	Journalists; digital investigators	Social media platforms; Telegram channels; videos; speeches
Militarisation of everyday life	Normalisation of armed masculinity in civilian spaces	Teachers; parents; women's groups; religious leaders	Media analysis; school materials; public ceremonies; online forums
Accountability & impunity	Silencing, protection or recycling of violent actors	Victims' lawyers; judges; journalists; TJ practitioners	Vetting records; amnesty laws; Security Sector Reform policy documents

Note: Evidence related to militarised masculinities will often emerge through patterns across multiple sources, rather than through isolated incidents or individual testimonies. Such evidence should be corroborated and triangulated, in line with established OHCHR evidentiary standards.

Illustrative investigative questions by witness type

Corresponding with the evidence table, the report suggests some illustrative investigative questions, for different categories and types of witnesses and sources of information. These questions are indicative and illustrative, and should always be adapted to context, mandate, trauma-informed methodologies and do-no-harm principles.

Possible lines of inquiry and questions include:

Insider Witnesses

(e.g. former combatants, defectors, former security personnel, women associated with armed groups, family members of fighters or commanders)

- ◆ What did it mean to “be a man” within the group or institution?
- ◆ What (gendered) behaviours were respected, rewarded or punished?
- ◆ How were men, women, boys, girls or persons with diverse SOGIESC treated differently?
- ◆ What (intersectional) profile of individuals was primarily recruited?
- ◆ How were recruits trained to treat civilians?
- ◆ Were acts of violence encouraged, tolerated or ignored?
- ◆ Were violent initiation rituals, punishments or humiliations used?
- ◆ What happened to members who refused orders or failed to conform?

Survivors and Victims

- ◆ Did perpetrators use gendered, sexualised or humiliating language?
- ◆ Were specific groups targeted differently?
- ◆ Did perpetrators perform violence publicly or symbolically?
- ◆ Were detention, torture or abuse linked to notions of masculinity, honour or domination?

Child Witnesses or Former Child Soldiers

(Only with specialised safeguards and child-sensitive methodologies)

- ◆ How were children recruited or pressured to join?
- ◆ Were boys and girls assigned different roles?
- ◆ Were boys expected to prove bravery, loyalty or manhood through violence?
- ◆ Were children punished for fear, hesitation or disobedience?

Eyewitnesses

(e.g. individuals who directly observed incidents, attacks, detention practices, recruitment or public acts of violence)

- ◆ How did perpetrators behave during the incident?
- ◆ Did perpetrators use gendered, sexualised, humiliating or dehumanising language?
- ◆ Did violence appear intended to intimidate, humiliate or publicly establish dominance?
- ◆ Were certain groups targeted differently (e.g. women, men, boys, girls or persons with diverse SOGIESC)?
- ◆ Did perpetrators appear to follow orders, coordinated practices or institutional patterns?
- ◆ Were symbols, uniforms, chants, slogans or public performances used during the violence?
- ◆ Did perpetrators reward, celebrate or encourage acts of brutality or humiliation?
- ◆ Did bystanders, community members or authorities appear fearful, supportive or complicit?

Alleged Perpetrators / Persons of Interest

(Where engagement is appropriate, ethically feasible and consistent with mandate, due process and do-no-harm principles)

- ◆ How do individuals describe their role within the group, institution or chain of command?
- ◆ How do they justify, explain or rationalise acts of violence?
- ◆ What expectations existed regarding loyalty, obedience, masculinity or discipline?
- ◆ Were recruits expected to demonstrate strength, aggression or willingness to use violence? If so, how?
- ◆ What behaviours were rewarded, tolerated or punished within the group?
- ◆ How were civilians, detainees, women, men, children or persons with diverse SOGIESC perceived and treated?
- ◆ Were violence, humiliation or punishment framed as necessary forms of discipline, protection or authority?
- ◆ What happened to individuals who refused orders, showed fear or challenged abusive practices?
- ◆ Were members trained or encouraged to suppress emotional vulnerability or empathy?
- ◆ Did commanders or peers encourage particular forms of violent behaviour?

Annex D: Common pitfalls and how to avoid them

Integrating militarised masculinities responsibly and effectively into human rights inquiries

Experience from past investigations, as well as consultations with investigation experts, gender advisers and transitional justice practitioners, highlight a number of recurring challenges when integrating attention to militarised masculinities into human rights inquiries and related accountability processes. Awareness of these is essential for strengthening analytical quality, safeguarding investigative integrity and ensuring that findings meaningfully inform recommendations and guarantees of non-recurrence. Common pitfalls and challenges and how to avoid them are listed here:

1. **Reducing masculinities to individual attitudes, behaviours or psychological traits.** When this occurs, violence risks being framed as personal pathology, rather than as a systemic or institutional practice. To avoid this, analyses should focus on the broader structures through which violence is produced, sustained and normalised, including command hierarchies, training systems, disciplinary practices, incentive structures and accountability mechanisms, rather than solely on the motivations or beliefs of individual perpetrators.
2. **Treating attention to masculinities as synonymous with attention to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), particularly violence against men and boys.** While SGBV often constitutes an important entry point for gender analysis, and while sexual violence against men and boys is heavily underpinned by masculinities, limiting analyses of masculinities to this domain obscures the broader ways in which militarised masculine norms may shape coercion, domination, recruitment, torture, enforced disappearance, territorial control and other forms of violence and repression. A more comprehensive approach examines how militarised masculinities influence multiple dimensions of violence, institutional culture and impunity.
3. **Pathologising or essentialising (groups of) men, armed actors or particular communities as inherently violent.** Such approaches risk undermining credibility, provoking resistance and oversimplifying complex social and institutional dynamics. Militarised masculinities should be understood as socially and institutionally produced, historically contingent and ultimately transformable, rather than as innate or biologically determined traits. Attention to militarised masculinities is not intended to assign collective blame to men, military personnel or particular groups, but rather to examine how gendered systems of power, militarisation and institutional cultures may contribute to violence and impunity.
4. **Treating masculinities as a standalone thematic add-on. In such cases, gender analysis may become disconnected from core investigative findings and recommendations.** Attention to militarised masculinities should instead be integrated throughout root-cause analysis, assessments of patterns of violations, examinations of enabling environments and recommendations on accountability and non-recurrence, rather than confined to isolated sections or thematic paragraphs.

- 5. Political sensitivities and institutional resistance.** Findings implicating military cultures, security institutions or dominant narratives of authority may be diluted, softened or excluded during drafting, review or reporting processes. This risk can be mitigated by grounding analysis firmly in corroborated evidence, observable patterns and mandate-relevant findings, and by framing militarised masculinities as directly relevant to accountability, institutional reform and guarantees of non-recurrence.
- 6. Operational constraints and the proliferation of investigative tools and frameworks.** Investigators operating under limited time, staffing or access conditions may deprioritise additional guidance if it is perceived as overly complex or burdensome. To avoid this, attention to militarised masculinities should be integrated into existing gender, root-cause and pattern analysis methodologies, rather than introduced through parallel or separate processes.
- 7. Overreach, assuming that all violence in conflict settings is necessarily driven by militarised masculinities or unsupported inferences regarding causality.** Analysis should therefore remain evidence-based, context-specific and proportionate, recognising that militarised masculinities interact with political, economic, ethnic, ideological and historical drivers of violence.
- 8. Findings on militarised masculinities remain descriptive and fail to translate into concrete institutional change.** To address this, findings should inform recommendations on accountability; security sector reform; detention systems; disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration; child protection, education, transitional justice and peacebuilding processes, ensuring that gendered drivers of violence are addressed as part of broader guarantees of non-recurrence.

Throughout this process, analyses of militarised masculinities should remain evidence-based, mandate-driven, survivor-centred and proportionate to the operational realities of each inquiry. It does not require exhaustive examination in every context, particularly where access, security or mandate limitations apply, but should be pursued wherever evidence suggests that militarised gender norms play a meaningful role in shaping patterns of violence, institutional culture or impunity.

Annex E: Case study: The Colombian Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition Commission

In moving forward, important insights and lessons learned can be gained from the experiences of other processes from around the world. One insightful case study for attending to militarised masculinities is the Colombian peacebuilding reconciliation and transitional justice process, in particular the Colombian Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition Commission (*Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición*, CEV).

The mandates, politics and processes of truth and reconciliation commissions (TRC) differ from those of UN-mandated human rights inquiries, and therefore cannot directly be compared. The Colombian context, too, is unique in its inclusive attention to and engagement with gender and masculinities. Despite these specifics and divergences, there are important lessons to be learned from these processes and from the Colombian context on why and how to attend to masculinities. The Colombian CEV serves as a significant example that has paid considerable attention to the linkages between militarism, masculinities and cycles of violence. It shows the value of recognising and explicitly naming militarised masculinities for broader justice, accountability and reform processes that build on those reports and findings.

During their four-year mandate, the CEV was tasked with investigating human rights abuses committed during the Colombian conflict and documenting the impact of the civil war. The findings from this investigation were published in a final report in 2022, which draws on almost 15,000 interviews with more than 28,000 participants, including survivors, victims and witnesses as well as ex-combatants.⁵⁰ The final report also includes a specific chapter on the experiences of women and people with diverse SOGIESC, titled *‘Mi Cuerpo es la Verdad’* (My Body is the Truth).⁵¹

The CEV report, and its chapter on gender, is the first-ever truth commission report that engages with militarised masculinities in quite some depth.⁵² It is unique in that it specifically mentions and investigates the links between militarism, masculinities, violence, and conflict. For instance, the report states that the patriarchal structures in Colombia have produced a continuum of violence, and that this has manifested through the persistence of militarism and militarised masculinities as well as through widespread sexual violence against women and girls:⁵³

“The Commission found that all armed and civilian groups [and] parties to the conflict in Colombia reproduced a patriarchal and violent model of masculinity, which was in many cases misogynistic and prejudiced, and shaped their actions. Therefore, questioning those masculinities and demilitarising them is one of the fundamental ways to de-escalate the conflict and build peace.”⁵⁴

50 “Sistematización de casos e informes recibidos por la Comisión de la Verdad,” (Colombia: Comisión de la Verdad, 2018–2022).

51 *Mi cuerpo es la verdad*, 128.

52 This section of the report offers a brief illustration of how the Colombian CEV has attended to militarised masculinities, and what its effects, achievements and challenges were. For a more detailed assessment, see: Ortiz-Acosta and Otálora-Gallego, *Masculinities in the Colombian Truth Commission’s final report. Challenges and opportunities for gender-transformative justice*: 251 – 262.

53 *Mi cuerpo es la verdad*, 116.

54 *Mi cuerpo es la verdad*, 128.

In their detailed analysis of masculinities in the CEV report, Colombian transitional justice experts and practitioners Marisol Ortiz-Acosta and Germán Otálora-Gallego emphasise:

“ The report’s main point is that the way masculinities have been experienced and constructed in connection to militarism partly explains the patterns of gender-based violence in the Colombian armed conflict [...] and why the conflict has lingered until today.⁵⁵ ”

The report explicitly recognises the persistence of militarised masculinities and their links to various cycles of violence during the armed conflict, including (but not limited to) sexual and gender-based violence.⁵⁶ While sexual and gender-based violence served as an important analytical entry point, the CEV’s analysis of militarised masculinities extended beyond SGBV to include forced recruitment, territorial control, intimidation, enforced disappearances and everyday forms of coercion, demonstrating how masculinities shape a broad spectrum of violent practices. As such, the CEV report also directly articulates the need to address and deconstruct these masculinities in order to prevent future human rights abuses and break out of cycles of violence.

Consultations with various stakeholders who were involved with the CEV – from investigators to consultants and gender advisors – demonstrate that this engagement with masculinities was integrated into the mandate, investigation and reporting of the commission in different ways. On the one hand, the personal interest, knowledge and expertise of key individuals involved with the CEV was instrumental for this focus on masculinities. This includes the influence of certain Commissioners, but also gender advisors and particular researchers and investigators, who contributed existing knowledge and understanding regarding these dynamics and included them in the Commission’s investigation and research. These insights confirm our recommendation that policies and frameworks on human rights investigations should reflect the impact of militarised masculinities, and that human rights investigators need to be equipped with relevant knowledge, information and awareness regarding these dynamics.

The Commission’s investigation of crimes of SGBV committed during the Colombian conflict revealed the masculine dimensions of these forms of violence. Through interviews with victims and survivors of sexual violence, the CEV established the linkages between the masculinities of perpetrators with cycles of gender-based violence. These insights then led to wider analyses of the systematic patterns of these crimes, as well as to an investigation of the connections between militarisation and masculinities, as this policy report has also established. In addition, the CEV conducted interviews with former combatants and perpetrators of violence, to better understand and document the links between militarised masculinities and cycles of violence.

These insights provide important lessons for other transitional justice mechanisms, including human rights inquiries. These bodies are equally equipped to pay attention to the gender identities and the masculinities constructions of perpetrating actors of human rights violations. Even if testimonies or accounts of (ex-)combatants and perpetrators are unavailable to Cols

⁵⁵ Ortiz-Acosta and Otálora-Gallego, *Masculinities in the Colombian Truth Commission’s final report. Challenges and opportunities for gender-transformative justice*: 8.

⁵⁶ *Mi cuerpo es la verdad*, 128.

– due to lack of access, limited resources and timeframes, or political sensibilities – human rights inquiries can nevertheless pay attention to the patterns of violations, and to military cultures and their masculine dimensions.

Despite making important progress, the CEV – and in particular its recommendations – nevertheless also fall short in fully advancing a transformative gender justice approach that would address the root causes of patriarchy and militarisation. The main recommendations of the CEV report do not mention masculinities at all, and the fifty recommendations of the gender chapter only mention masculinities once, in relation to implementing symbolic reparations aimed at transforming militarised masculinities.⁵⁷ At the same time, one of the report's main recommendations – the need for security sector reform – would have benefited from a masculinities perspective, and did not fully reflect on the ways in which masculinities in security institutions fuel violence and insecurities.

These limitations of the CEV's recommendations are themselves instructive. While the Commission developed a sophisticated analysis of militarised masculinities, this insight was not translated into transformative recommendations, particularly in relation to security sector reform. This illustrates a broader challenge: without explicit attention to masculinities at the recommendation stage, even strong gender analysis risks remaining descriptive rather than transformative. For human rights inquiries, this underscores the importance of ensuring that findings on militarised masculinities directly inform recommendations on accountability, reform and non-recurrence

Despite these limitations, the CEV report constitutes an important step forward for transitional justice processes in terms of incorporating and engaging with militarised masculinities, by explicitly acknowledging the links between masculinities, violence, and war. The report, therefore, offers important lessons learned for how to engage with masculinities in transitional contexts, and these have also informed the recommendations of this policy paper. At the same time, it is also important to acknowledge that the CEV's engagement with masculinities was facilitated by a political and institutional space that allowed for critical reflection on the armed conflict, including the role of state and non-state actors. This space is often far more constrained for UN-mandated inquiries operating amid ongoing conflict.

While the Colombian CEV operated in a post-agreement transitional justice context, several elements of its engagement with militarised masculinities are directly transferable to human rights inquiries. These include the systematic analysis of perpetrator identities and armed-group cultures, the use of survivor testimonies to reveal gendered logics of violence, and the triangulation of victim, perpetrator and contextual evidence to identify masculinities as a structural driver of abuse.

⁵⁷ Ortiz-Acosta and Otálora-Gallego, *Masculinities in the Colombian Truth Commission's final report. Challenges and opportunities for gender-transformative justice*.

