# Global Violence Against Women

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## Abstract

Gender-based violence exists in virtually every culture around the globe, although local manifestations are highly dependent on structural inequalities; cultural definitions of gender; and the levels of violence in the larger society. Responses to gender-based violence in the West began as criminal justice interventions but expanded in the 1990s to include a global perspective of women's human rights, as well as greater attention to the collection of internationally comparable data sets. The current discourse (2014) incorporates dialogue on the intersectionality of oppressions, rethinking the concept of agency and focusing attention on indigenous women's perspectives.

## Introduction

In the 1970s, with the growth of the women's movement in the Western world, advocacy about violence against women emphasized reforming the criminal justice model so that it would be responsive to cases of intimate partner and familial violence. In the United States, that campaign culminated in the passage of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in 1994, which for the first time provided federal funding for emergency women's shelters, hotlines, and other social services. The VAWA, as reauthorized in 2013, includes protections for immigrant women, LGBT populations, and Native American survivors of gender-based abuse.

In 1995, the UN Fourth World Conference on Women issued a precedent-setting articulation of women's human rights. Known as the Beijing Platform, this document is considered by many to be the clearest and most compelling argument to date, for seeing women's rights as 'human' rights. With the globalization of the women's movement have come data-collection initiatives that aim for international comparability (WHO, 2006; Johnson et al., 2008; DHS Macro, 2014), as well as ongoing refinement of the definition of global violence to women, which now includes 'cultural' forms of violence, such as female genital mutilation (FGM). The discourse on 'women's agency' in relation to global violence is increasingly understood as inseparable from community.

## International Institutional Response

The effort to address global violence against women is inextricably linked to the globalization of the women's movement. In 1947, the establishment of the United Nations' Commission on the Status of Women 'was among the most significant early developments' in the globalization of women's struggle for rights and equality. The Commission's mission was to 'raise the status of women, irrespective of nationality, race, language or religion' and to create "equality with men in all fields of human enterprise, and to eliminate all discrimination against women in the provision of statutory law, in legal maxims or rules, or in interpretations of customary law" (Penn and Nardos, 2003). These goals were, however, not specifically equated with the "need to eliminate sexual and physical violence against women and girls" (Penn and Nardos, 2003: p. 3). Nevertheless, the Commission was responsible for shaping the language of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights so that gender-insensitive language was removed and the document was tailored to affirm the inherent equality of women and men. Progress continued in 1952 when the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention of the Political Rights of Women (1954), which affirmed the inherent entitlement of women around the globe to "vote in any election, run for any political office, exercise any public function, and hold any public position that a man might hold" (Penn and Nardos, 2003). The Commission also began a partnership with UNESCO to develop equal access educational programs. And, although inequality in education is an ongoing problem in the twenty-first century, the beginning of consciousness about the disparity between girls' and boys' educations began with the Commission's early work.

From 1955 to 1962, the United Nations adopted two measures related to marriage, which were intended to reduce violence to women that was a consequence of marriage. The first was the Convention on the Nationality of Married Women (UN, 1958; Penn and Nardos, 2003), which was intended to secure nationality rights for women that is independent of the nationality of their spouses. The second measure related to the consent to marriage and minimum age for marriage (UN, 1964; Penn and Nardos, 2003), the purpose of which is to reduce the forced marriage of very young girls. The Convention, however, was weak, requiring premarital consent by both parties but leaving the minimum age of marriage to national governments.

The UN declared that 1975 would be known as International Women's Year and that the following 10 years would be the Decade of Women. During this fertile period for the confrontation of global violence against women, 'cultural' practices, such as FGM, were redefined as types of gender-based violence that constituted violations of women's human rights. The definition of violence continued to expand, incorporating structural and cultural concerns as well as health and survival-related issues. The Commission on the Status of Women, as well as General Assembly and the UN Economic and Social Council, began to focus on issues of poverty and structural inequality (Penn and Nardos, 2003). The first global conference on women's issues in Mexico City in June 1975 articulated

the World Plan of Action for the Implementation of the Objectives of International Women's Year, which consisted of three main objectives: promoting gender equality; facilitating the integration of women into all development efforts; and strengthening the contribution of women to the global movement for world peace (Penn and Nardos, 2003: p. 6). In 1979, the landmark Convention of the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the General Assembly. Since its adoption, more than 150 nations have agreed to be bound by its provisions, although many countries have ratified the Convention without passing national implementing legislation. The Convention establishes an international bill of rights for women and mandates the establishment of a Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, whose job it is to see that the provisions of the Convention are observed.

The International Year of the Woman was followed by global conferences on women in Copenhagen in 1980 and in Nairobi in 1985. Both gatherings brought nongovernmental organizations into prominence and influence. But it was the Nairobi conference, in particular, which cut across traditional lines of race, class, and culture to form alliances and coalitions among women from the Global North and South. A document entitled the 'Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women' expressed an increased urgency in the need to address cultural issues, such as FGM, as human rights issues. Because of the strength of this platform, CEDAW rectified the omission of gender-based violence from its own Convention in 1992 and categorized gender-based violence for the first time as a kind of discrimination under CEDAW. In 1993, building on the wave of grassroots human rights activism that had culminated in the Vienna Conference on Human Rights in June of that year, the UN General Assembly passed the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the "first international human rights instrument designed exclusively to deal with violence against women" (Penn and Nardos, 2003).

In September 1995, the United Nations held the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. It was the largest UN conference to date, significant not only for the number of nations represented but also for the largest-ever representation of nongovernmental organizations. The Platform for Action which emerged from that conference is "among the most comprehensive human rights documents ever articulated on behalf of the world's women" (Penn and Nardos, 2003: p. 11). It established a list of 12 'priority action' areas including the persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women; inequalities in and unequal access to education and training; inequalities in and unequal access to health care; violence against women; effects of armed conflict on women; inequality in economic structures and policies and resources; inequality between women and men in sharing power and decision-making at all levels; insufficient methods to promote the advancement of women; lack of respect for and protection of women's human rights; stereotyping of women in the media and unequal access to media and communication systems; gender inequalities in the management of natural resources and in safeguarding the environment; persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl child (UN Women, 1995; Penn and Nardos, 2003: p. 12). The Beijing Platform is

appropriately lauded as a landmark for women's human rights and much progress has been made in achieving the platform's goals. Although an increasing number of advocates and organizations recognized that legal and political measures were insufficient to confront the magnitude of global violence against women, new definitions were elusive.

## Beyond Legal Interventions

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the discourse had turned from political definitions to ones rooted in situated understandings of social inequalities. In many parts of the world, women and girls have no access to legal mechanisms that can aid them, regardless of the lofty ideals that are codified by national and international assemblies. Violence between intimate partners began to be viewed as inseparable from "the violence of poverty, hunger, social exclusion, and humiliation" (Merry, 2009) and as

> … an umbrella term for a wide range of violations from rape during wartime, to sexual abuse in prisons, to insults and name-calling within marriages. Although the early movement against gender violence in the USA and internationally centered on rape and battering in intimate relationship international, activists continue to expand the scope of violence against women, to include cultural practices such as genital-cutting, illegal acts such as dowry deaths, the trafficking of women as sex workers, the effects of internal wars such as displaced people and the vulnerability to violence experienced by migrants in the context of contemporary globalization.
>
> Merry, 2009: p. 3

Indeed, understanding the intersectionality of gender with other forms of oppression locates violence not only in the gendered identities of the parties, but also in relation to cultural definitions and gender norms. Issues such as education and labor have become crucial in analyses of both definition and intervention. The World Bank reports that "two thirds of the 960 million illiterate people in the world are women and, of the 130 million children who received no primary education in 1990, 81 million were girls" (Penn and Nardos, 2003: p. 25). Such inequalities increase the likelihood that women and girls will experience gender-based violence through early pregnancy, forced marriage, sexual harassment, sexual violence, and early death in child-bearing (Penn and Nardos, 2003).

Similarly, women and girls work more daily hours than men but own very little of the world's wealth – performing nearly two-thirds of the work hours, receiving one-tenth of the world's income, and owning less than one-hundredth of the world's property (Frankenhaeuser et al., 1991). Women's unpaid workload and the increasing number of households headed by poor single women have resulted in more women and girls seeking employment outside the home, as well as in women migrating from rural to urban areas for jobs; with both trends exposing women to risk of gender-based violence. According to the UN's Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, economically disadvantaged women are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, harassment, and slavery than other women (Penn and Nardos, 2003: p. 25). Globalization, migration, and urbanization have created a market for women

in global sweatshops, which have created black holes of lawlessness and impunity where gender-based violence can flourish. The maquiladora factories along the US–Mexican border, particularly in Ciudad de Juarez, are the sites of hundreds of unsolved 'femicides' since 1993 (Segura and Zavella, 2007; Eisenstein, 2009).

Such black holes have left women and girls vulnerable to trafficking for sexual exploitation, the fastest growing criminal industry in the world. At least 20.9 million adults are bought and sold worldwide into commercial sex slavery and forced labor annually, as well as about 2 million children (ILO, 2012; UN, 2012). Women and girls make up about 98% of victims exploited for sexual purposes. Human trafficking of US citizens within the UN is also a growing business (UN, 2012). Experts estimate that at least 244 000 American children and youth – most of them very young girls – are trafficked within the United States each year for sexual exploitation. The average age of recruitment of girls into forced prostitution is 12–14 years (Estes and Weiner, 2001).

At the time of this writing (2014), the socio-cultural definition of gender-based violence has become instrumental in both grassroots and national campaigns (Bahun-Radunovic and Rajan, 2008; Merry, 2009), although efforts to reform legal and criminal justice systems continue (Bond and Phillips, 2008; Bahun-Radunovic and Rajan, 2008).

## Types of Global Violence against Women

### Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence

Violence against women by their male partners sustains patriarchal family structures, creates a hierarchy of male domination, and maintains women in a position of subordination (Seager, 2009: p. 28). Domestic or intimate partner violence is the most ubiquitous form of violence against women around the world. There "is virtually no place where it is not a significant problem … and women of no race, class or age are exempt from its reach" (Seager, 2009: p. 28). Although prevalence rates are difficult to compare because of definitional and measurement issues, a UN global review reports that 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence. Some national violence studies show that up to 70% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime from an intimate partner (UN Women, 2012). In Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa, and the United States, intimate partner violence accounts for between 40 and 70% of female murder victims (Krug, 2002). Although advocates continue the struggle to expose and eradicate intimate partner violence, in many countries it is still condoned by the state as a 'private matter' (Seager, 2009: p 28).

### Sexual Violence

Women around the world experience rape, often by men they know. In many countries, advocates have succeeded in changing the definition of rape from nonconsensual sex to a "violent act intended to assert male domination and control" (Seager, 2009: p. 58). Nevertheless, in most if not all countries, rape carries a social stigma that reduces reporting. Experts estimate that the actual incidence of rape may be 50 times greater than the number actually reported. In the US, up to 700 000 rapes are estimated to occur each year (Seager, 2009: p. 58). In South Africa, a woman is raped every 83 seconds (Seager, 2009: p. 58.) Around the world, the problem of institutional rape is on the rise, as is the rape of women in prisons, jails, border-crossings, and refugee camps (Segura and Zavella, 2007; Leatherman, 2011).

The subject of rape as a weapon of war drew international attention through the testimonies of female survivors of genocide in Bosnia–Herzegovina, as well as through the subsequent establishment of the International Crimes Tribunal for Yugoslavia in 1993. The Tribunal "created new categories of crime that were themselves gendered" (Giles and Hyndman, 2004) and for the first time in history, rape was prosecuted as a weapon of war and a crime against humanity (Giles and Hyndman, 2004). Women told stories of rape as a genocidal tool; of being imprisoned in rape camps; of being tattooed and marked with enemy insignia; and of being forced to bear their captors' children. Radhika Coomaraswamy commented on these atrocities by noting that "to rape women with impunity and to mark their bodies with the symbols of the other side is to assert domination and to symbolically assault ethnic identity in its most protected space" (Coomaraswamy, 1999: p. 10). Mass rape is also an efficient means of displacing surviving postconflict populations, whose families and communities are torn apart by shame, horror, and trauma (Coomaraswamy, 1999; Giles and Hyndman, 2004).

According to Leatherman (2011), sexual violence as a weapon of war has expanded to epidemic proportions. In 2006, the UN reported 27 000 sexual assaults during conflicts in Congo's South Kivu province alone (Leatherman, 2011: p. 120). Conflict-related sexual violence crosses thresholds related to type of sexual violence; target of sexual violence; extreme coercion of the sexual subject; and the loss of neutrality or safe space for the victims of sexual predation. The type of sexual violence is often public gang rape, perpetrated in schools, marketplaces, churches or other locations not normally conflict-related. Violated bodies are often left on display. Rape may also be performed with material objects – bottles, guns, spears – or victims may be knowingly raped by individuals carrying HIV/AIDS, with the intention of infecting the victim. The range of targets of sexual violence continues to expand – women in their 80s and children as young as 2 years old are currently (2014) raped with impunity in the Congo (Leatherman, 2011). Extreme coercion – forcing an unwilling perpetrator to commit acts of sexual violence, such as forced incest – imbues a sense of powerlessness and loss of agency among victim populations. Conflict-related sexual violence acknowledges no neutral zones or white flags and is perpetrated in churches, sanctuaries, refugee camps, homes, and other supposedly safe places. Such egregious sexual violence destroys the fabric of families; creates lasting wounds, such as PTSD and mental health disorders; neutralizes and disempowers communities that might once have considered fighting back; and normalizes sexual violence in postconflict society.

In 2000, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1325 (S/Res/1325), which aims to protect women and girls from violence, including rape as a weapon of war. It also advocates for the inclusion of women in conflict

resolution programs. The Inter-Agency Task Force on Women, Peace and Security facilitates collaboration on this Resolution among more than 20 UN agencies, as well as *between* UN entities and nongovernment organizations working on the ground in specific conflict areas (Olonisalom et al., 2011).

## Traditional and Cultural Practices

FGM is a "cultural practice involving the removal of various parts of the genitalia of girls and young women" (Penn and Nardos, 2003: p. 89). It is performed in at least 27 African nations and in several countries in Asia and the Middle East (Yoder et al., 2013), as well as by immigrant and refugee communities in Western nations. Experts cite Sudan, Ethiopia, Mali, Egypt, Sierra Leone, and India as countries with the highest rates of FGM (Penn and Nardos, 2003: p. 88). Although the practice has come under fierce criticism by medical and mental health professionals around the world, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that in 1994, at least 114 million girls and women endured some type of FGM (Penn and Nardos, 2003: p. 89). FGM procedures, usually performed without anesthesia and in unsanitary conditions, can result in complications such as shock, hemorrhaging, urinary retention and infection, fever, painful intercourse, complications during childbirth, and death. There are three types of FGM. The first, 'clitorectomy' (sunna) involves partial or complete removal of the clitoris. 'Excision' involves the removal of the clitoris and the labia minora. 'Infibulation,' the most dangerous and most common form of FGM, involves the removal of the clitoris, the labia minora, as well as the inner surface of the labia majora, followed by the sewing together of the vulva so that a small opening for urine and menstrual blood remains. A process known as 'defibulation' – a surgical reopening – must sometimes be performed before sexual intercourse is possible. Scar tissue created by infibulation often inhibits childbirth or makes it extremely painful.

In countries where FGM is pervasive, women sometimes report submitting to it (for themselves or for their daughters) as a means of community acceptance – a necessary prerequisite for marriage and employment. Uncut girls are often considered ugly, unclean, promiscuous, and unmarriageable. For this reason, women's empowerment within communities and education about health issues must be addressed if FGM is to be eradicated. In many countries, indigenous women are speaking out against the procedure. In Kenya, for example, advocates have created alternative rites of passage for girls, which include a community-based initiation to womanhood that does not include genital cutting (Chege et al., 2001).

Dowry murder (bride-burning or dowry death) is "the murder of a woman who is set on fire by her husband or in-laws for the purpose of keeping the dowry that the woman brought into the marriage. By burning his wife, the husband can remarry and obtain another dowry" (Penn and Nardos, 2003: p. 97). Dowry murder, particularly common in India but also occurring in other parts of Asia and the Middle-East, is most commonly done by pouring kerosene on a woman and setting her on fire. Because many homes have kerosene-fueled stoves, those who commit the murder may attribute the death to a cooking accident (Penn and Nardos, 2003: p. 97). Studies on rate and prevalence of dowry murder in India show

that it persists in all levels of society, despite the passage of the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961. Families in lower socio-economic levels may use it as a way to escape subsistence poverty. Educated classes may use it as a method of retaining their status (Penn and Nardos, 2003: p. 99). Ironically, because the Dowry Prohibition Act criminalizes both dowry-giving and receiving, it discourages reporting of the dowry-related crime. Experts estimate that 5000 women per year in India may be victims of dowry-related murder. However, it is important to understand that violence in India, as in many developing countries, is often viewed by the West "in its most extreme incarnation" (Narayan, 1997: p. 101). It is helpful to remember that "the level of reported homicide by a partner in proportion to the country's population is, in fact, similar in India as in the United States …" where spousal murders are related not to dowry but to gun violence (Narayan, 1997: p. 99).

Honor killing, an ancient practice in which men kill female relatives in the name of family honor, are also on the rise in the twenty-first century. These killings occur in societies where women are not only considered the property of male relatives but also the standard bearers of male familial honor. Although exact numbers are difficult to obtain, experts estimate that in 1997 in one province of Pakistan alone, 300 women were killed to protect or avenge family honor. In Yemen, approximately 400 honor killings took place in 1997, and 52 honor killings in Egypt during the same year (Penn and Nardos, 2003; Bahun-Radunovic and Rajan, 2008). Women are killed for refusing arranged marriages; for being victims of rape; for wearing clothes male relatives deem inappropriate; or for adhering to Western standards of behavior (Penn and Nardos, 2003; Patel and Gadit, 2008). Unfortunately, honor killings are rapidly spreading to the West, with the increase in refugee and immigrant populations from countries where the tradition is entrenched.

## Measuring Gender-Based Violence

The past three decades have shown increasing refinement of methods for collecting data on gender-based violence. The first population study of gender-based crimes among the general population was carried out in the late 1960s in the United States. These victimization surveys interviewed large samples of adults, asking about their perceptions and experience of the crime in the 12 months prior to the interview (Johnson et al., 2008: p. 11). This methodology became increasingly popular in the 1970s as a tool for assessing the level of crime in society (Johnson et al., 2008) and was further refined in other Western developed nations. Researchers considered these data important complements to official police data because many crimes – particularly rape and domestic violence – are never reported to the police (Johnson et al., 2008). But although these data provided information on crime from the victims' perspective, it became increasingly clear that they were not adequately measuring gender-based crimes. Factors included lack of sensitivity in wording of questions; lack of special training for interviewers; lack of safety supports for women interviewees who might be in danger for disclosure; the traumatization caused by the reporting; and the undercounting of women's experiences of lifetime or long-term violence. Such critiques led

to the redesign of the US-based National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) in 1992 to improve and expand screening questions, which increased prevalence rates.

Statistics Canada was the first agency to take on a major revamping of the methodology of measuring women's victimization. In 1993, "a survey dedicated to exploring a wide range of women's experiences of violent victimization was developed and implemented, using the basic crime victimization survey methodology" but with female interviewers who were specially trained and the referral of respondents to community agencies and supports for interviewers (Johnson, 1996, 1998). Since then, similar surveys in the US, Australia, New Zealand, Finland, and Sweden have been successfully carried out.

Population-based surveys of representative samples of women are now generally recognized as the "most reliable method of acquiring statistically reliable estimates of the nature and extent of violence against women. At least 70 countries have conducted population surveys on violence against women but, although there are commonalities among the surveys, there are enough important differences to prevent reliable country-to-country comparison of results" (Johnson et al., 2008: p. 14). Those problems include the definition of violence; the specific wording of questions; reference periods (previous year or adult lifetime); and sampling methods.

Despite differences in definition and cultural manifestation of gender-based violence, there exist several exemplary efforts to measure gender-based violence internationally. In 2005, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a report on violence to women by intimate partners. It was based on 24 000 interviews with women in 10 countries (Bangladesh, Brazil, Peru, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Thailand, Japan, Samoa, Namibia, and Serbia/Montenegro) (WHO, 2006). The study found important variations among nations, as well as among rural and urban populations within nations. Finding showed that between 15 and 71% of women who had ever been in an intimate relationship had experienced physical or sexual assault during their lifetime (WHO, 2006; Merry, 2009).

The Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) are household surveys sponsored by Macro International and the US Agency on International Development (DHS Macro, 2014), which focus on health-related practices and behaviors in 90 developing countries. DHS country surveys contain a Domestic Violence Module which collects representative data on lifetime experience of intimate partner violence. DHS surveys use large nationally representative samples, as well as a standardized questionnaire and a methodology to ensure comparisons over time and among countries. The module includes nine questions related to acts of physical and sexual violence, as well as a series of questions describing psychologically controlling or abusive behaviors. Comparability problems remain, however, because some countries opt out of the domestic violence module or reduce it to a single prevalence-gathering question (Johnson et al., 2008).

The International Violence Against Women Survey is an important data collection method which "incorporates a standardized methodology and has as a primary focus the strengthening of legal measures and improving criminal justice responses to violence" (Johnson et al., 2008: p. 15). Analysis of survey results from nine countries provide information not only on women's experiences but also on how the criminal justice system responds and how civil society may effectively intervene (Johnson et al., 2008: p. 167).

## Rethinking Agency

When the Beijing Platform was still hot off the press, indigenous women pointed out that the platform was flawed due to its overemphasis on gender discrimination and on an individual rights-based philosophy (UN Women, 1995; FIMI, 2006). Before the conference adjourned, more than 100 indigenous women from 26 countries had written a declaration outlining their critique of the Platform's theoretical viewpoint (UN Women, 1995). For indigenous women, human rights violations "are based not only on gender but on the interplay of gender" with other aspects of identity (Cunningham, 2006; FIMI, 2006: p. 10). Issues omitted in the Beijing Platform include the dispossession of territories, pollution of water, forced relocations, and other activities which, although not gender-based in their intent, have a "disproportionate effect on women" (FIMI, 2006: p. 13). Indigenous women call for an integrated analysis of violence against women that "recognizes both the near-universality of violence against women and the specificity of violence perpetrated on the basis of distinct but overlapping identities" (FIMI, 2006: p. 10). They point out that "for indigenous women, the systematic violation of their collective rights as indigenous people is the single greatest risk factor for gender-based violence – including violence perpetrated within their communities" (FIMI, 2006: p. 7).

The current discourse on global violence against women challenges scholars in the Global North *and* South to rethink agency as it relates to gender-based violence and to women's alternative ways of "being and seeing in the face of violence" (Campbell and Mannell, forthcoming). Scholars hope to 'push the boundaries of how we conceptualize agency' and to break down the neoliberal assumption that encourages women to think that leaving situations of violence is the only appropriate course of action. Current discourse pays particular attention to situations of extreme poverty, armed conflict, and migration as they challenge an individualistic-behavioral approach to gender-based violence (Campbell and Mannell, forthcoming). It also acknowledges the need to actively engage men on all levels of violence prevention and cessation (Kimball et al., 2013). Seeking global cooperative strategies capable of adapting to localized contexts (Bahun-Radunovic and Rajan, 2008) advances the struggle to end global violence against women.

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*See also:* Crime and Gender; Feminist Criminology and Gender Studies; Gender and Education; Gender and Feminist Studies in Geography; Gender and Place; Gender and Women's Studies, Applied Research On; Gender and the Law; Gender, Economics of; Gender: Gendering of Categories; Intimate Partner Abuse, Applied Research On; Teens, Gender, and Self-Presentation in Social Media; Trafficking of Women and Children in Latin America; Women and Criminal Justice; Women and Psychiatry; Women's Status and National and International Security.

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