

# EVAP Ep. 18: Savita Pawnday

Thu, Feb 23, 2023 12:07PM 38:27

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

atrocities, atrocity prevention, populations, centre, myanmar, situation, global, important, norm, international, government, people, atrocities, protection, jackie, affected, human rights, champions, mechanisms, actors

## SPEAKERS

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Savita Pawnday

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### J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:12

Welcome to Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. I'm Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Research Director at the Global Centre. This podcast features one-on-one conversations with practitioners from the fields of human rights, conflict prevention, and atrocity prevention. These conversations will give us a glimpse of the personal and professional side of how practitioners approach human rights protection and atrocity prevention, allowing us to explore challenges, identify best practices, and share lessons learned on how we can protect populations more effectively. I'm joined today by Savita Pawnday, Executive Director of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. Thank you for joining us today, Savita.

### S Savita Pawnday 00:58

Thank you for having me, Jackie.

### J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 01:01

By now many of our listeners are likely familiar with the work of our organization. But for those who may not know you personally, can you tell us a little about your background in human rights and atrocity prevention, and how you came to be with us at the Global Centre, and now our Executive Director?

### S Savita Pawnday 01:20

Thank you, Jackie, for having me on the podcast, really glad to be here and to talk about R2P, and all the work that the Global Centre is doing right now and the work that, you know, I myself and the team have been doing over the years. So as you know already, I have been with the

Global Centre really since it was established in 2008 in June. So I joined the Global Centre in June 2008. And since then, I would say that I have grown up with R2P in a particular way. But before the Global Center, the way I came to human rights work and the work on atrocity prevention is definitely you know, through my family. I was fortunate enough to grow up in a family which always talked about politics and protection and justice. And this came a little bit from the fact that, you know, we were displaced during the India-Pakistan Partition. And after that sort of, you know, witnessing the communal riots in India against the Sikhs, we were living in that time with my grandparents and you know, seeing the curfews and sort of the violence committed against the Sikh community. And, you know, I - like many others from I think that my generation and I think maybe also your generation, Jackie - were affected by seeing the images of the Rwandan genocide, seeing the events unfold in Yugoslavia. And also, I think that the 90s was such an important period, in the development of different norms. So, you know, from sort of the peaceful dividends or the peace dividends, which came out of the Cold War, we saw different kinds of intervention, creation of different UN peacekeeping mechanisms, Secretary Generals which were very dynamic and sort of, you know, became kind of celebrities, from Boutros Boutros Ghali to Kofi Annan, this all influenced that is, you know, even me living in India, and I also wanted to do some work in the international sphere. At that time, I did not so much have the language of atrocity prevention or human rights, but the language of sort of justice and protection was very prominent in how I thought about international relations. So when the job came up at the Global Centre, it was very exciting to join this new venture and sort of this newly created space to think about these issues. And R2P itself was also very inspiring, because, you know, as Garreth has always said, this was sort of a new way of thinking about how the international community reacts to what is happening to populations around the world. And that you're you should no longer be a bystander. It's not so much about international intervention, because that was something which did not sit very well with me also, given the sort of the postcolonial background and sort of thought processes that I was coming from, but sort of, you know, pivoting that to a responsibility to protect populations at risk of conscience-shocking crimes like genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

**J** Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 04:50

You've said that you have sort of grown up with the Global Centre, and that's definitely not an exaggeration given that the Centre was formed in February, and you joined in in June of 2008. The Global Centre also, in many ways grew up and evolved with R2P itself. The World Summit Outcome Document was adopted in 2005, just three years before the Global Centre was formed. So being as you've sort of been there almost since the very beginning, how have you seen R2P evolve since the World Summit? And how has the work of the Global Centre sort of come along with that evolution?

**S** Savita Pawnday 05:32

That's a fantastic question, Jackie. I think that, you know, when I joined the Global Centre in 2008, we were just on the cusp of the first report of the Secretary General coming out. And, sort of the change also happened between 2008 and 2009 because still 2008 was sort of discussions about R2P, were very much, even though we were talking in terms of Responsibility to Protect, it was very much couched still in the language of international intervention. Because, you know, R2P, and its genesis and the policymakers around it, and sort of the people

who were really involved in thinking about it from the ICISS report with the World Summit Outcome Document were, again, sort of coming from this hangover of Rwanda and Yugoslavia and Kosovo. There, you know, the way we have understood and analyzed those situations, was that if there were just boots on the ground, or if there was no arms embargo in Yugoslavia, you know, if they were, if we were just able to sort of get international forces in at the right time, we would have prevented so much death and destruction. And I think that the 2009, the first report of the Secretary General, written by Ed Luck coming out, he sort of pivoted R2P, a little bit in the context of that, yes, international response, including sort of the sharpest, and in the toolbox is important, but he also sort of gave as much importance to sort of the responsibility of the state, which is very much in paragraphs 138 139, and also responsibility of the international community to assist intervention of atrocity crimes, to assist in prevention of incitement. So I think that, you know, this three pillar approach of Ed Luck, really, really steeped R2P in discussions and sort of made R2P a norm, which is about prevention. So from then to now, what I have seen is that full pre-2008 and even you know, in the early years, the discussions have changed from sort of just looking at R2P as a Western norm, to looking at R2P as international response, a norm which is about international response and international military response to something which is just the purview of Security Council members and the five permanent members to looking at R2P as something which is about the responsibility of state, about taking intentional actions, so that you create resilient societies where commission of atrocity crimes is not a possibility, to thinking about this as that atrocity crimes can happen everywhere. I think that the role of civil society has been pivotal in this because what we have been able to do is to change that narrative and consistently talk about atrocities that have happened in Europe and the so-called developed world or the so-called Global North. And we have sort of talked about the fact that how every society has to consistently work on the consensus on human rights, the consensus on what it means to protect minority rights, a consensus on, you know, curbing hate speech to come up with good legislation, which not only prevents incitement, but actually also, you know, takes punitive actions against those who are trying to incite across identity lines, across race lines, and so forth.

**J** Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 09:31

I think one of the things that's interesting in how R2P has evolved, and you know, how even the Global Centre has evolved along with it in the time since the Centre was formed, is the way that the multilateral system has encountered countless challenges over the past 15-20 years. Challenges that were very different from what we were seeing in the post-Cold War period, as you mentioned earlier, and even in like the early 2000s. And so, I feel like many of the challenges the multilateral system has encountered have threatened its ability to uphold fundamental principles like the protection of human rights, globally. And yet R2P has still evolved as threats to international law, and the norms that sort of are meant to protect populations have increased. So what are your reflections on the global commitment or lack thereof to upholding R2P, international law, and other norms?

**S** Savita Pawnday 10:38

I mean, you're absolutely right, Jackie, that there is this sort of dichotomy, for lack of a better word in terms of that, in a world where we have seen over 100 million people displaced by conflict, atrocities, we have also seen sort of development of various norms, including R2P, protection of civilians, more sort of attention to women peace and security, more attention to

sort of how gender impacts all of these different protection agendas. So that's definitely true. And what we've also seen is, around the world, from states to non-state actors, you know, deliberately flouting international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and, you know, committing even more atrocities. But at the same time, what we've seen is sort of the development of different international norms. And in the sort of context of R2P, I think that what has happened is that there has been a consciousness around prevention of atrocity crimes that has come about. So I mean, you have, sort of the case of Libya, which is much talked about, but, you know, post Libya, we saw the creation of two international peacekeeping missions, one in CAR and one in Mali, which were very much prompted by the commission of atrocity crimes that were ongoing in both these situations, and also sort of, you know, towards the prevention of these atrocity crimes. So even though the Security Council or the members who were very much involved in the creation of these mechanisms did not necessarily fly the R2P flag, the consciousness was there. I would say the same thing about I mean, we have seen the deadlock of the UN Security Council in the case of Syria, as well as Myanmar. But then, you know, you see the General Assembly acting in a way where we have created the IIMM on Syria and the IIMM, which are both mechanisms which are about preserving and collecting evidence so that we can, you know, one day take punitive action or hold those who have perpetrated atrocity crimes in both Syria and Myanmar. We have, again, seen the Human Rights Council in Geneva, take really deliberate action towards justice and accountability in establishing the facts of a particular situation. I think that the fact finding mission in Myanmar was instrumental in sort of outlining how a genocide against the Rohingya was committed. We have seen the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan doing excellent work, preserving evidence, sort of looking at root causes of atrocity crimes, but also, sort of, coming out with recommendations on how can the government and other actors within South Sudan can prevent further atrocities. And, you know, I mean, in Venezuela, the Fact Finding Mission has served a deterrent effect that just by the fact that there is international scrutiny on a particular situation, we have seen perpetrators, you know, perpetrators not taking as, you know, strong actions as they would have otherwise. So, in the face of all that, we have also seen sort of, you know, more strides made towards how we think about different kinds of populations, how they're affected. But what still remains a problem and which you articulated in the question that you asked is the fact that atrocity crimes or R2P still remains very much a boutique issue within governments, within UN and within the international system. And because of the exceptional nature of atrocity crimes, most of the policymakers, the entrenched sort of narratives, beliefs and practices of how you look at a conflict situation still exist. So even though atrocity crimes happen in non-conflict situations, the tendency always is to sort of, you know, look at the language, look at sort of policies which are about conflict prevention or resolution, or look at democracy promotion or counterterrorism. You know, the way forward always, for many of these policymakers is to look at political solutions or military solutions, which are many times divorced from, you know, human rights and atrocity prevention, which which are divorced from conversations around transformation and inclusivity and justice. So that remains a issue. The other big sort of issue, which remains with R2P very much is the fact that, I mean, you know, both of us have been working in this field for a very long time, and both of us have been very instrumental in developing and nurturing the R2P focal points at work, and also the Group of Friends, you know, Group of Friends in both New York as well as in Geneva. But what we see also consistently is that although there are many champions, individual champions, governments who are championing, the institutionalization of atrocity prevention still remains widely varied. So, you know, if somebody gets rotated out, or suddenly, if it's a new foreign minister, or a new government, all the sort of, you know, progress that you have made towards institutionalizing R2P sometimes just gets lost. And we are, again, in the process of reeducation and capacity building. And as you very much said, in the question that you asked, that, you know, failures to uphold R2P, the destruction and sort of the results are so catastrophic that we

really do not have sort of the capacity to, or the time to constantly build capacity to constantly sort of, you know, talk about what the norm is all about, and the conceptual conceptual sort of beginnings of the norm, we want action. So there are other norms, I would say, like WPS or Children and Armed Conflict, not that there is no urgency about them, there is, of course, urgency about it. But when we fail to protect populations from atrocities, the failure is so stark, that there is no space for forgiveness. And as a result of which, we constantly sort of hear this discourse about R2P has failed, or R2P is, you know, no longer something which people support. But that's not true, you know, when you see what happened after the coup in Myanmar, the populations, you know, demanding the Responsibility to Protect, or, you know, what you see in South Sudan, or Iran, that these populations are really fighting for democracy, fighting for their rights, that these kinds of discussions have no space. But, you know, we consistently are always caught up between these these discussions. And sort of the final point on this is that, again, you know, norms like R2P do not have any individual agency, they rely on responsible actors to uphold them. And sort of that, you know, goes, sort of, is the ebb and flow of history, and is the ebb and flow within the international system. Some years, we have good and great champions, we're able to sort of act and think about innovative solutions, and you know, in some years, we do not see that.

**J** Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 18:16

You know, a sign of people who have been working together for over a decade and who are on the same mental wavelength I wrote down in my notebook here, the exceptional nature of crimes, and then the words exceptional nature of crimes came right out of your mouth 30 seconds later. But I think it's important to highlight that, because I think that people take for granted how exceptional atrocity crimes are and how exceptional R2P and the responses generated through R2P were originally meant to be. You know, I remember being in the office, when Libya happened and when the resolution was adopted. And, you know, it was one of those moments where you're almost all crowded around a computer watching the vote, which is not something people really do anymore. And I think in that moment a lot of folks who aren't policymakers who aren't kind of within this space, sort of thought, well, okay, here's R2P's moment. A decision has been made in response to atrocity crimes, and now that has been done once it's going to be done again and again and again and again, without really appreciating that that was unique. The kind of lack of response we see now is more the norm from the Security Council, that kind of exceptional moment in Libya and CAR in Mali are what we're striving for, but you really have to strive for it. And, you know, as you correctly pointed out, in the absence of a Security Council-level response, we've really seen some impressive creativity by member states, within the general assembly, within the Human Rights Council over the past, you know, 10-15 years. And a lot of that creativity has also been formed by civil society and, you know, what civil society and affected populations understand about what is needed in these situations. In terms of the sort of challenges that you've highlighted and the enduring issues with responding to atrocity crimes, how does our work at the Global Centre aim to address many of these issues?

**S** Savita Pawnday 20:45

So I think that our, the way we address many of these situations is to think about them holistically. I think that, again, the impulse in the international system is to think in terms of narrow responses, to think in terms of sort of the political resolution, or sort of thinking about it

in a technical way. But, you know, for lasting peace, we need transformation. And that transformation can only happen if the peace is a just peace, is a peace, which is inclusive, which builds trust and leaves no one behind. So for our work, I think that, you know, there are a few things that we do well, and we have consistently done them. Is that first of all, I mean, as I said in my previous answer, the sort of knee jerk reaction is to look at situations from, you know, entrenched frameworks. And our work very much sort of tries to break these entrenched frameworks. We try to change the narrative on situations. So from, you know, and I remember, I think that Jackie you remember that how, you know, CAR was sort of, very much characterized as a situation which was a security sector problem issue, it was a law and order issue. And nobody was sort of characterizing it in the context of what it was, that it was a developing situation where atrocity crimes are already occurring, and more were likely. And this was sort of a conflict which had rose out of, you know, I mean, extreme deprivation, but also, sort of, manipulation of different kinds of identities. The same thing with Myanmar where, you know, when the expulsion of the Rohingya happened, again, sort of the narrative was counterterrorism, that it is, you know, these Rohingya, non state armed group, ARSA, which had sort of attacked the the Myanmar police stations, I mean, Myanmar government's police station, as a result of it, you know, over 700,000 people were expelled from Myanmar. So our job essentially, was to change the narrative and make it about, that atrocities are happening and make it, you know, centric to the people who were actually affected by this, you know, amplify the voices and the narratives of people who are actually facing these atrocities. So that's sort of one part of the work that we do. The other part of the work that we do very well is to sort of constantly break silos. And that has been something you know, which my work at the Global Centre has been very strong on, is sort of breaking the silo between New York and Geneva. You know, the reason why the Global Centre went ahead and established an office in Geneva was because we felt that there was this sort of that, like, there was this kind of a curtain between, not even a curtain a wall between sort of these two different bubbles, because they are still bubbles. But sort of the work and the information collected by Geneva mechanisms had no way to be amplified in New York and was divorced from any of the work that the Security Council does. So, you know, our consistent effort is to bridge this gap to make sure that the early warning, because I think that this is a constant refrain that we have always heard in the work that both of us have done over the last decade and a half is that oh, well, if you just had early warning. And in the case of Myanmar to Ethiopia, to Sudan, to South Sudan, to DRC, to CAR to Mali, the early warning exists, you know, different UN mechanisms from Special Rapporteur to special mechanisms. And even the fact finding and CUIs provide enough early warning of what is ongoing and what is coming. But the fact is that the system doesn't, you know, pay attention to it. So our job, essentially is to amplify it to break that silo. So that's one part of breaking the silo. But the other part of breaking the silo is to also look at protection holistically. I think there are so many different protection agendas within the UN and multilateral systems and many times they, you know, not that they work against each other, but they just work, you know, very individually. And I think that for us, it's so important to bring together WPS, which is, you know, women peace and security to think, very systematically and very consciously and intentionally about gender to think about, you know, children in armed conflict, to think about how protection of civilians within armed conflict and within peacekeeping missions actually interacts with the prevention of atrocity crimes. And again, something that, you know, both of us have always talked about is the sort of the different distinctions around terminology that the international system is very good at creating is that, you know, how protection of civilians is different from protection of populations, and what does it all mean, in the end in terms of implementation. So I mean, you know, again, sort of, from there, I would just like to also say that how we sort of look at affected communities. So the work of the Global Centre, as I was saying, so one is sort of, you know, changing the narrative and making it, you know, atrocity centric focus. And then sort of the other part is breaking silos.

But sort of the fourth part of the Global Centre, which we want to do more and more, is to, sort of, center the voices of affected communities, survivors, human rights defenders, and civil society organizations, based at a national level and a regional level to sort of unpack the or, you know, open the black box of the United Nations to sort of, you know, help them navigate the system, which is a complicated system for anybody who is outside of it. And again, I mean, and that is so important, because if we are really talking about transformation, we have to take into account the people who are most affected by it. And unfortunately, the one thing I would like to bring in this discussion is the fact that how international community still, I mean, of course, it's a state centric system. So the international community, when we are talking about prevention of atrocity crimes, or conflict resolution, or peace processes, we are still very much in the model of looking at political elites. And what we are seeing in most situations around the world right now from DRC, to South Sudan, even in Myanmar, that what is actually needed is consistent, substantive, and really, you know, really, like in-depth participation of the affected communities of the human rights defenders, and of the voices of the people of that particular country. So our work is, you know, around those kinds of sort of broad themes, and I hope that it can transform the way the international system responds to atrocities.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 27:55

I think that's such an important point. You know, and especially as you're bringing these voices in, you're really getting the full nuance of a society, of a country, the full breadth of populations that are affected by atrocities, because to go to, you know, what you were saying about terminology semantics about populations versus civilians, is that when you kind of solidify a definition of these terms, it helps in creating a catch-all, right, there's no member of society who's left out of the protection narrative, but it also means that to some degree, everyone is, their individuality is because they're just part of this unified homogenous population, as opposed to, you know, understanding the nuance of different identities, whether it be children, women, LGBTQ, men, particular ethnic groups, and so forth. So I think this work on inclusion of affected communities is really important.

S Savita Pawnday 29:08

No, absolutely, Jackie. And that's such a important point, as you know, in the journey of us understanding how we make atrocity prevention even more effective. Because I mean, even with gender, I mean, there's such a conflation within the United Nations with sort of using gender and women as interchangeably. But, you know, gender is many, many different kinds of genders, 34 genders, 37 genders. So I think that it's so important for us to think about populations not as a monolith. You know, I mean, early in the work of the Global Centre, and early in the work that I've done, the advocacy that I've done for the Global Centre, it was very obvious to me that governments are not monoliths, either. That you know, when you're trying to get international response ongoing or when we are trying to sort of, you know, get a particular mechanism adopted or getting a resolution through, you talk to different parts of the government because you might find champions elsewhere who might push the system in a particular way. In the same way, as you said, populations is a catch all phrase, and at the time of the conception of R2P, that was an important, that was an important conceptualization. Because you're not talking about civilians, you're not talking about citizens, you're talking about populations, everybody who's in within your borders so that also included combatants. But I think that the problem with those catch-all phrases is that then it takes away the

uniqueness of the risks, which different parts of the populations face, within, you know, in the context of atrocity crimes. And as you said, I mean, you know, your experience of atrocity crimes is different if you're of a certain gender and atrocity crimes committed against you are also different based on your gender, based on your identity, based on, you know, all the intersectionality that creates an individual. I think that here I also want to sort of bring in the fact that, you know, I mean, R2P and international system, I think has also shied away from inclusion of indigenous populations in the discourses around atrocity prevention. I mean, you know, the first known, sort of, or documented genocides were created, essentially, against indigenous populations from around the world. But the way the system or the way the terminology around atrocity prevention has been developed, is that we ignore the experiences of indigenous populations. And, you know, as we have learned within atrocity prevention, that unless and until you acknowledge the crimes of the past, the experiences of the past, you cannot sort of course-correct or embrace transformation. So I think that, that's also something that, you know, the R2P community, the atrocity community must be thinking about. I think the move towards intersectionality, the move towards talking about these questions holistically is so important and holistically, but at the same time, you know, in a disaggregated way, so that we understand the unique needs of different parts of populations in a particular situation.

**J** Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 32:30

Absolutely. And, you know, I think one thing that the Global Centre has done through the years, which I think largely has been central to your work is, kind of, working across various different levels of actors. To institutionalize, to build champions, to really kind of reinforce what we're learning as an organization with actors who can actually put it into motion somewhere. You know, you mentioned how, earlier, about how a lot of champions get sort of rotated out, we'll have a really strong champion within one government, and then there'll become Ambassador somewhere else and you feel like you need to start over again. And so one thing the Global Centre has done, to try and overcome this, and you have been central to that, is really working on harnessing communities of commitment and building institutions within governments through really trying to engender a government-wide commitment to R2P and atrocity prevention. And I think the clearest example of that is the Global Network of R2P Focal Points, which you have been a strong champion of, since it was formed in 2011. But we have many other examples from the Global Centre, working with the group of friends of R2P and the international coalition for R2P. So I'm wondering, what are some of your main lessons learned from working across such a huge diversity of actors and different groups, as we kind of foster R2P and foster response to atrocity situations?

**S** Savita Pawnday 34:31

So the lesson that I have learned, I think that as you just very rightly said, working with different kinds of stakeholders from governments to civil society, is that individuals matter and individuals can change the world. And I've seen this with governments where you know, one ambassador or an expert at a UN mission, either in New York or Geneva or an expert in capital or, you know, a director for UN affairs, I mean, or women's rights or human rights can really change the way a government can respond to a particular situation, can frame a particular situation, can really provide the most important thing needed in terms of the response from the international community. And in the context of sort of working with civil society actors, it's always been inspirational. And, it's always been inspirational because I think that for me, you



know, I work at the Global Centre, of course, this work is not just a career, it's a calling for many of us. But it's still a career in the sense that, you know, you're able to do your work able to go home. We live in, you know, nice, in cities where we have all our services, in terms of healthcare and everything. But the people oftentimes we work with are really sort of at the front lines of any of the situation, they are the people who are fighting for their own future, fighting for the future of their loved ones, many times advocating to get their loved ones free from you know, horrible, you know, situations, they're in jail, they have disappeared. So it's so important to sort of constantly the lesson that I've learned from working with these populations is to really sort of listen to them and to really take into account the way they outline a particular situation in any kind of policy response that we're advocating for. Because if you're not taking what they're saying into account, anything that we craft or that we advocate for, will not really transform the situation, will not really affect that situation, will not be as effective. So those are sort of, you know, some of the lessons that I've learned that, you know, one thing is that individuals are important. And the second thing is that, really listen to people who are the most important stakeholders in this entire endeavor, which is the the people who are affected by these situations. And if you're not taking that into account, you're not really doing your work well. And some of the final thoughts on this is that, you know, our job within the international system because you know, we do sit in this international bubble is to again, amplify these voices, and to never be extractive, to be always very mindful that this is about people's lives, really, this is this is something which is, you know, at the core of what many people live through, on a day to day level.



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 37:52

Thank you for joining us for this episode of Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention. If you enjoyed this episode, we encourage you to subscribe to the podcast on Apple podcasts, SoundCloud or Spotify, and we'd be grateful if you left us a review. For more information on the Global Centre's work on R2P, mass atrocity prevention and populations at risk of mass atrocities, visit our website at [www.globalr2p.org](http://www.globalr2p.org) and connect with us on Twitter and Facebook at GCR2P