

Sexual Violence As A Weapon Of War

Wartime sexual violence

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Wartime sexual violence is rape or other forms of sexual violence committed by combatants during an armed conflict, war, or military occupation often as spoils of war, but sometimes, particularly in ethnic conflict, the phenomenon has broader sociological motives. Wartime sexual violence may also include gang rape and rape with objects. It is distinguished from sexual harassment, sexual assaults and rape committed amongst troops in military service.

During war and armed conflict, rape is frequently used as a means of psychological warfare in order to humiliate and terrorize the enemy. Wartime sexual violence may occur in a variety of situations, including institutionalized sexual slavery, wartime sexual violence associated with specific battles or massacres, as well as individual or isolated acts of sexual violence.

Rape can also be recognized as genocide when it is committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a targeted group. International legal instruments for prosecuting perpetrators of genocide were developed in the 1990s, and the Akayesu case of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, between the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia and itself, which themselves were "pivotal judicial bodies [in] the larger framework of transitional justice", was "widely lauded for its historical precedent in successfully prosecuting rape as an instrument of genocide".

Sexual violence in the Russian invasion of Ukraine

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Sexual violence in the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been committed by Armed Forces of Russia, including the use of mass rape as a weapon of war. According to the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, the victims of sexual assault by Russian soldiers ranged from 4 years old to over 80 years old.

The United Nations Human Rights High Commissioner issued a report on human rights violations and war crimes in October 2022; in the opening summary section, it stated, "Furthermore, the Commission documented patterns of summary executions, unlawful confinement, torture, ill-treatment, and rape and other sexual violence committed in areas occupied by Russian armed forces across the four provinces on which it focused. People have been detained, some have been unlawfully deported to the Russian Federation, and many are still reported missing. Sexual violence has affected victims of all ages. Victims, including children, were sometimes forced to witness the crimes. Children have become the victims of the full spectrum of violations investigated by the Commission, including indiscriminate attacks, torture and rape, and have suffered the predictable psychological consequences."

Sexual violence

Sexual violence is any harmful or unwanted sexual act, an attempt to obtain a sexual act through violence or coercion, or an act directed against a person's sexuality

Sexual violence is any harmful or unwanted sexual act, an attempt to obtain a sexual act through violence or coercion, or an act directed against a person's sexuality without their consent, by any individual regardless of

their relationship to the victim. This includes forced engagement in sexual acts, attempted or completed, and may be physical, psychological, or verbal. It occurs in times of peace and armed conflict situations, is widespread, and is considered to be one of the most traumatic, pervasive, and most common human rights violations.

Sexual violence is a serious public health problem and has profound short- and long-term physical and mental health impacts such as increased risks of sexual and reproductive health problems, suicide, and HIV infection. Murder occurring either during a sexual assault or as a result of an honor killing in response to a sexual assault is also a factor of sexual violence. Though women and girls suffer disproportionately from these aspects, sexual violence can occur to anybody at any age; it is an act of violence that can be perpetrated by parents, caregivers, acquaintances and strangers, as well as intimate partners. It is rarely a crime of passion, and is rather an aggressive act that frequently aims to express power and dominance over the victim.

Sexual violence remains highly stigmatized in all settings, oftentimes dismissed as a women's issue, thus levels of disclosure of the assault vary between regions. In general, it is a widely underreported phenomenon, thus available data tend to underestimate the true scale of the problem. In addition, sexual violence is also a neglected area of research, thus deeper understanding of the issue is imperative in order to promote a coordinated movement against it. Domestic sexual violence is distinguished from conflict-related sexual violence. Often, people who coerce their spouses into sexual acts believe their actions are legitimate because they are married. In times of conflict, sexual violence tends to be an inevitable repercussion of warfare trapped in an ongoing cycle of impunity. Rape of women and of men is often used as a method of warfare (war rape), as a form of attack on the enemy, typifying the conquest and degradation of its women or men or captured male or female fighters. Even if strongly prohibited by international human rights law, customary law and international humanitarian law, enforcement mechanisms are still fragile or even non-existent in many corners of the world.

From a historical perspective, sexual violence was considered as only being perpetrated by men against women and as being commonplace and "normal" during both war and peace times from the Ancient Greeks to the 20th century. This led to the negligence of any indications of what the methods, aims and magnitude of such violence was. It took until the end of the 20th century for sexual violence to no longer be considered a minor issue and to gradually become criminalized. Sexual violence is still used in modern warfare as recently as in the Rwandan genocide and in the Gaza war, targeting both Israelis and Palestinians.

2018 Nobel Peace Prize

Nadia Murad (b. 1993) "for their efforts to end the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and armed conflict," according to the Norwegian Nobel Committee

The 2018 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Denis Mukwege (b. 1955) and Nadia Murad (b. 1993) "for their efforts to end the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and armed conflict," according to the Norwegian Nobel Committee announcement on 5 October 2018 in Oslo, Norway. "Both laureates have made a crucial contribution to focusing attention on, and combating, such war crimes," according to the award citation. After reading the citation, Committee Chair Berit Reiss-Andersen told reporters that the impact of this year's award is to highlight sexual abuse with the goal that every level of governance take responsibility to end such crimes and impunities.

The citation also highlighted the historic context of the 2018 award: "This year marks a decade since the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1820 (2008), which determined that the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and armed conflict constitutes both a war crime and a threat to international peace and security. This is also set out in the Rome Statute of 1998, which governs the work of the International Criminal Court. The Statute establishes that sexual violence in war and armed conflict is a grave violation of international law. A more peaceful world can only be achieved if women and their fundamental rights and security are recognised and protected in war."

Mukwege is the first Congolese and Murad the seventeenth woman and first Iraqi to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. Each delivered a Nobel lecture on December 10 at Oslo City Hall as part of the Nobel Peace Prize Award ceremony, which took place among main events scheduled during the December 9–11 "Nobel days in Oslo".

Sexual and gender-based violence against Palestinians during the Gaza war

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During the ongoing Gaza war, Israeli male and female soldiers, guards and medical staff have reportedly committed wartime sexual violence against Palestinian women, children and men including rape, gang-rape, sexualized torture and genital mutilation. In February 2024, UN experts cited at least two cases of Palestinian women being raped by male Israeli soldiers. Palestinian boys and men have also been raped and subjected to torture, and in some cases, the impact of rape and torture has led to death of the victim.

In its June 2024 investigative report, the UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory (CoI) concluded: "The frequency, prevalence and severity of sexual and gender-based crimes perpetrated against Palestinians since 7 October across the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) indicate that specific forms of Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) are part of Israeli Security Forces (ISF) operating procedures."

In August 2024, Israeli human rights organization, B'Tselem, released a report on systematic Israeli abuse, torture, sexual violence and rape of Palestinian detainees, calling the Israeli prison system a "network of torture camps". The report includes extensive testimonies from Palestinians. The Guardian also interviewed Palestinian detainees, and reported they "back up [the] report by rights group B'Tselem, which says jails should now be labelled 'torture camps'."

In March 2025, the UN Human Rights Commission published a report on sexual and gender-based abuses perpetrated by Israel against the Palestinian people, which concluded that sexual abuse of Palestinians is "committed either under explicit orders or with implicit encouragement by Israel's top civilian and military leadership." Acts of sexual violence such as compulsory nudity, rape threats and sexual assault "comprise part of the Israeli Security Forces' standard operating procedures toward Palestinians", says the report, with Commission member Chris Sidoti adding that, "Sexual violence is now so widespread that it can only be considered systematic. It's got beyond the level of random acts by rogue individuals."

In addition to concluding that Israel uses sexual violence to "dominate and destroy the Palestinian people", the report also lists several measures taken by Israel during the Gaza War, such as the bombing of Gaza's reproductive clinics and restrictions on the arrival of medical supplies, as genocidal acts aimed at destroying the reproductive rights of Palestinian women and preventing the birth of Palestinian babies.

Sexual and gender-based violence in the October 7 attacks

reportedly subjected to sexual violence, including rape and sexual assault by Hamas or other Gazan militants. The extent of sexual violence perpetrated by militants

During the October 7 attacks, Israeli women, girls and men were reportedly subjected to sexual violence, including rape and sexual assault by Hamas or other Gazan militants.

The extent of sexual violence perpetrated by militants, and whether it was planned and weaponised by the attackers, has been the subject of intense debate and controversy. Initially said to be "dozens" by Israeli authorities, they later clarified they could not provide a number. The militants involved in the attack are accused of having committed acts of gender-based violence, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. Hamas has denied that its fighters committed any sexual assaults, and has called for an impartial international

investigation into the accusations.

In January 2024, it was reported that several victims of sexual violence from 7 October and captivity in Gaza had come forward. A number of initial testimonies of sexual violence were later discredited, while Israel has accused international human rights groups of downplaying assault reports. As of January 2025, the former head of the security cases division in Israel's Southern District prosecutor's office said that no case was being filed due to a lack of evidence and complainants, which she said could be due to victims being dead or unwilling to come forward.

The UN's Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Pramila Patten reported in March 2024, with the "full cooperation" of the Israeli government, that there was "clear and convincing information" that Israeli hostages in Gaza had experienced sexual violence, and that there was "reasonable grounds to believe that conflict-related sexual violence occurred during the 7 October attacks". The report was not a full investigation, but designed to "collect and verify allegations", and the team stated that their conclusions fell below the legal threshold of being 'beyond a reasonable doubt'. The UN Commission of Inquiry (CoI) subsequently published a legally mandated report in June 2024 that stated there was "a pattern indicative of sexual violence by Palestinian forces during the attack", but that it was unable to independently verify allegations of rape due to Israel's obstruction of its investigation. It also found some of the allegations to be false and "no credible evidence" that Palestinian militants received orders to commit sexual violence.

On 12 April 2024, the European Union sanctioned military and special forces wings of Hamas and the armed wing of Palestinian Islamic Jihad due to their responsibility for the alleged sexual violence on 7 October. The EU said the two groups' fighters "committed widespread sexual and gender-based violence in a systematic manner, using it as a weapon of war." On 23 April 2024 the annual UN Secretary-General's report included Patten's findings, but excluded Hamas from the "black list" of state and non-state parties guilty of sexual violence in 2023 due to the lack of what it deemed to be credible evidence, and called on the Israeli government to allow access to "relevant UN bodies to carry out a fully-fledged investigation into all alleged violations." In August 2025, UN General-Secretary António Guterres announced his intentions to add Hamas to the UN blacklist of organizations and countries that had committed sexual violence. However, he had warned Israel could also be similarly blacklisted the following year unless it takes "necessary measures to ensure immediate cessation of all acts of sexual violence."

Sexual violence in the Algerian War

by the FLN. As such, rape was not simply sexual violence, but also a weapon of war. The raped women were considered enemies or women of the enemy by

Sexual violence in the Algerian War was committed by the French army against both FLN/ALN members and Algerian civilians. Victims included men, women, and even children. In contrast to torture, which has been extensively documented and studied by historians, sexual violence has remained for a long time a taboo subject, for both Algerian and French sides. It was not until the early 2000s that the subject was approached by historians and journalists. This effort has been limited by the scarcity of archives related to sexual violence, as well as the lack of testimonials of either the victims or the authors of crimes.

The Dinah Project

published A Quest for Justice: October 7 and Beyond in July 2025. The report "establishes that Hamas used sexual violence as a tactical weapon, as part of a genocidal

The Dinah Project (Hebrew: תוכנית דינה) is an organization dedicated to recognition and justice for victims of sexual violence in war, emphasizing the victims of sexual violence in the October 7 attacks.

Causes of sexual violence

Sexual violence refers to a range of completed or attempted sexual acts in which the affected party does not or is unable to consent. Theories on the causes

Sexual violence refers to a range of completed or attempted sexual acts in which the affected party does not or is unable to consent. Theories on the causes of sexual violence are numerous and have come out of many different disciplines, such as women's studies, public health, and criminal justice. Proposed causes include military conquest, socioeconomics, anger, power, sadism, traits, ethical standards, laws, and evolutionary pressures. Most of the research on the causes of sexual violence has focused on male offenders.

Sexual violence in the Tigray war

Yikono, a Tigrayan women's rights group, viewed the sexual violence during the Tigray War as a deliberate pattern of rape as a weapon of war, stating

Sexual violence in the Tigray War included, according to the United Nations Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Pramila Patten, people forced to rape family members, "sex in exchange for basic commodities", and "increases in the demand for emergency contraception and testing for sexually transmitted infections".

As of August 2021, the number of rape victims ranged from a minimum estimate of 512–516 rapes registered with hospitals in early 2021 to 10,000 rapes, according to British parliamentarian Helen Hayes, and 26,000 women needing sexual and gender-based violence services, according to the United Nations Population Fund. Several claims have been made implicating both sides of the conflict in the systematic use of rape as a weapon of war against the civilian population.

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