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Sexual violence against Palestinians

Reports across multiple settings show patterns of conflict related sexual violence against Palestinian people

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Content warning: This article contains descriptions of sexual violence and abuse that readers may find distressing.

Conflict related sexual violence (CRSV) occurs across conflict and coercive settings and can be perpetrated by state and non-state actors. Strong accountability for CRSV is required, regardless of who the victims or perpetrators are. In 2024, a UN mission found “reasonable grounds to believe” that CRSV, including rape, occurred during the Hamas led 7 October attacks and “clear and convincing information” that some hostages taken to Gaza experienced sexual violence.¹ A UN Commission later concluded that acts committed during the attacks amounted to war crimes.²

Ill treatment of Palestinians, including sexualised violence, has been documented over decades.³⁻⁹ However, evidence of CRSV against Palestinians is dispersed across accounts of detention, gendered abuse, humiliation, displacement, and harms to children. We bring this evidence together to show why efforts to secure accountability must tackle sexual violence, regardless of setting.

In 2025, a UN Commission of Inquiry also found that specific forms of sexual and gender based violence “de facto form part of” Israeli security forces’ “standard operating procedures” towards Palestinians.¹⁰ It further concluded that sexualised torture, including rape and genital violence, was “committed with either explicit orders or an implicit encouragement by the top civilian and military leadership”; it also documented a broader pattern of sexual violence, torture, and other inhumane acts amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity.¹⁰ In its 2026 report, the UN listed Israeli armed and security forces for suspected patterns of CRSV, providing a basis for more focused UN engagement on prevention and accountability.^{11 12}

Understanding CRSV requires attention to forms and patterns of violence, not only incident counts.¹³⁻¹⁷ It includes rape, sexual torture, sexualised humiliation, and reproductive harm directly or indirectly linked to conflict.^{13 14 16} CRSV often arises in coercive settings shaped by occupation, detention, displacement, obstructed access, and command tolerance or complicity.^{10 13-18} These conditions may impede disclosure, investigation, and accountability, thus fostering impunity.^{10 13-18} CRSV is underreported; evidence often comes from survivor testimony and human rights, medical, and international sources.^{13-17 19}

Detention and extreme power asymmetry

People in detention are at high risk of experiencing CRSV because extreme power asymmetry, dependency, and restricted oversight facilitate coercive control, dehumanisation, and sexual humiliation.^{3 10 13-18} In February 2026, the Committee to Protect Journalists reported interviews with 59 Palestinian journalists released from Israeli detention; 17 (29%) described sexual violence, including two who described rape.²⁰

Israeli human rights organisations B’Tselem and Physicians for Human Rights Israel, alongside UN and medical sources, describe recurring abuse, including forced nudity, sexual humiliation, rape threats, and allegations of rape and anal assault with various objects.^{3 10 11 20-25} Sexualised torture involving batons and electric shocks to the genitals and anus has also been reported.^{3 10 21-23} Sources describe severe genital and anorectal trauma, including penile and rectal bleeding and haematuria.^{10 11 20 22} One documented case involved rectal rupture requiring surgery and stoma formation,¹⁰ and several accounts describe loss of one or both testicles following beatings to the genitals.^{22 26}

Given underreporting among men¹⁹ and children,^{15 27 28} and limited scrutiny,^{3 10} the convergence of accounts across settings and sources warrants consideration as a pattern rather than isolated incidents.^{11 13-18}

Gendered abuse, humiliation, and displacement

Gendered abuse and humiliation against Palestinian women and girls have been reported at checkpoints, during raids, in detention, and at displacement sites.^{10 21 22 28 29} Across these settings, women and girls face control over movement and bodily searches alongside barriers to education, work, healthcare, and protection.^{10 21 22 28-31}

Sources describe forced undressing, sometimes in public or while travelling with children, sexual touching during searches, and sexualised humiliation.^{3 10 21 22 28} Women reported beatings after refusing to undress, sexual insults, rape threats including in front of their children, threats to disseminate degrading footage online, and denial of sanitary pads while menstruating in detention.^{3 10 21 22} Allegations of rape were also reported.¹⁰

Public humiliation included the publication by Israel’s national security minister of photographs of detained Palestinian women in Israel and the West Bank in coercive and degrading circumstances.¹⁰ Israeli soldiers posted images and videos online

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displaying Palestinian women's underwear from homes in Gaza; many were later removed, and the soldiers' accounts were closed or made private.¹⁰

Sexual violence in conflict is recognised as a means of terrorisation and forced displacement.^{13-18 32} In the West Bank, sexual violence and threats perpetrated by Israeli settlers have been described as part of wider intimidation of Palestinian communities,^{28 33 34} while UN experts warn that sexual and gender based violence is being used as a tool of occupation driving displacement.³⁵

Reported acts by Israeli settlers included rape threats, genital exposure, attempts to touch women's bodies, and stalking women on their way to latrines.²⁸ Fear of such violence was reported to deter women from work and girls from education; some families resorted to early marriage for their children.^{28 36} Among 39 displaced households interviewed in Area C of the occupied West Bank, more than 70% identified threats to women and children, particularly sexualised violence, as a decisive reason for leaving.²⁸ (N Banks, personal communication, 8 September 2026). These acts are reported to contribute to a coercive environment driving forcible transfer, prohibited under international humanitarian law.²⁸

Children's vulnerability and long term harm

Children are at particular risk of CRSV because conflict, displacement, family separation, and detention compound their developmental vulnerability to abuse.^{27 37-39}

Save the Children reports from 2020, 2023, and 2025 documented recurring patterns of abuse in Israeli military detention, including solitary confinement, denial of family contact and healthcare, beatings, strip searches, and genital violence.³⁷⁻³⁹ A 2026 UN Commission report documented sexual and gender based violence against children during arrest and detention, including forced public nudity and sexualised humiliation. It also recorded allegations of rape threats, genital violence, and rape.³³

In 2025, more than half of 165 children aged 12-17 at the time of their detention reported witnessing or experiencing sexual violence in detention, including rape threats, forced stripping, and genital assault.³⁹

The 2020 report found that 85% of children described being changed by detention, including a fractured sense of self and compromised relationships.³⁷ The 2025 report documented lasting symptoms, including anxiety, panic attacks, nightmares, feelings of depression, emotional numbness, and social withdrawal; 20% reported intentional self-harm, and 45% of children did not return to school after release.³⁹

Beyond detention, humanitarian and UN reports describe Israeli settlers perpetrating sexual violence and harassment against Palestinian children in the West Bank, including forced stripping and other degrading treatment; one boy was reportedly urinated on after being stripped.^{28 33 36} Schoolgirls were afraid to pass through military checkpoints on their way to school, including one in Hebron where Israeli soldiers had reportedly exposed their genitals to women and girls.³³

Wider evidence indicates that children exposed to detention related abuse and sexual violence in conflict face long term psychological, developmental, educational, and social consequences.^{27 40-42}

Accountability across all settings

The 2025 UN Commission concluded that sexual and gender based violence was used to "further accentuate the subordination of the occupied people" and "maintain the Israeli system of oppression."¹⁰

It found that Israeli civilian and military justice systems were failing to ensure accountability for sexual crimes against Palestinians.^{10 43} More broadly, of 1260 cases of alleged offences by Israeli soldiers against Palestinians known to the military law enforcement system in 2017-21, only 11 (0.87%) resulted in indictments.⁴⁴

Since October 2023, the commission has lacked access to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory,^{33 45} while the International Committee of the Red Cross has been unable to visit Palestinians in Israeli custody.^{46 47} Although Israel's Supreme Court ruled in June 2026 that the prohibition must be revoked, visits have yet to resume.^{47 48} Full and unrestricted access for independent investigators and medical and humanitarian organisations must be guaranteed.

Sexual violence in conflict is a grave violation of human dignity that can inflict profound physical and psychological harm; its consequences can fracture communities and endure across generations.^{18 49} All credible patterns of sexual violence must be subject to accountability, regardless of who the victims or perpetrators are or where the violence occurs.

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