

UN Special Rapporteur on Torture's most recent report to the General Assembly: 'Investigating, prosecuting and preventing wartime sexual torture, and providing rehabilitation to victims and survivors'

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The latest report by Dr. Alice Jill Edwards, UN Special Rapporteur on Torture (SRT), published on the 18th July 2024.

In this report, the SRT examines the devastating impact of sexual torture in wartime, its underreporting, and the need for stronger legal frameworks to address it. Sexual torture is described as any form of verbal, emotional, psychological or physical aggression that violates intimate areas. It includes forced nudity, rape, genital mutilation, and forced pregnancies, targeting different vulnerable groups like women, children, LGB+ individuals, and men. As such, sexual torture in conflict and war contexts is used as a weapon of war that affects not only the direct victims but also families and communities at large.

The report highlights several key areas for action, arguing that sexual violence in conflict should be framed as torture under international law, providing stronger legal protection and

removing the stigma often faced by survivors. Dr. Edwards emphasizes the need to shift shame from victims to perpetrators, improve evidence-gathering processes, and ensure that survivors receive appropriate rehabilitation, which requires tailored therapeutic approaches. Survivors must also play an active role in shaping the programs designed to help them.

Underreporting of sexual torture remains a major issue, with societal barriers, fear of reprisals, and lack of access to justice contributing to this problem. Confidentiality and proper evidence collection are essential for protecting survivors, and psychological evidence is crucial in documenting the impact of sexual torture. Interviewing survivors requires trained professionals who can elicit sensitive information without causing further harm.

The report also explores the behaviour of perpetrators, noting that social, psychological, and situational factors drive ordinary individuals to commit torture. Understanding these dynamics is essential for preventing future violence. The SRT calls for more research into perpetrator behaviour and better training for military personnel to prevent sexual torture.

Rehabilitation for survivors remains inadequate, with many reparation programs underfunded and difficult to access. Effective rehabilitation must be holistic, addressing physical, psychological, and socio-economic needs, and should involve survivors in its design. States should adopt zero-tolerance policies for torture, ensure accountability for perpetrators, and provide comprehensive support for survivors.

The report concludes with recommendations for improving legal frameworks, increasing survivor-centred services, and holding perpetrators accountable to prevent sexual torture in conflict and promote healing for survivors.

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