

# Gender power as a tool of torture: A gender-competent legal and fact analysis of torture and ill-treatment of Palestinians from Gaza since 7 October 2023

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## Key Points of Interest:

- Israeli Forces systematically exploit gender roles and norms to amplify humiliation and suffering in their torture of Palestinians from Gaza.
- Torture in Gaza operates through cultural and social codes where methods of violence are designed to undermine gendered identities and social standing, producing suffering that is both physical and psychological.
- A gender-competent legal application of torture is essential for capturing the full scope of torturous harms experienced by Palestinians from Gaza.

## Abstract

*Introduction:* This article examines the gendered dimensions of torture and ill-treatment perpetrated by Israeli Forces against Palestinians from Gaza following the escalation of hostilities after 7 October 2023. It investigates whether gender is a secondary feature of the violence or rather a central mechanism through which suffering, intentionality and purpose are inflicted. It probes into whether traditional legal analyses of torture and other ill-treatment often overlook how gender shapes both the method and impact of torture and other ill-treatment, leading to gaps in recognition, documentation, and accountability. *Methods:* The article adopts a legal-analytical methodology grounded in international criminal, human rights, and humanitarian law. It first evaluates the legal framework on torture through a gender-competent lens to surface how the legal elements of torture may be perpetrated and experienced along gendered identities and modes of power. It applies this gender-competent lens to factual findings from United Nations investigative bodies and human rights organisations detailing the types and modes of harm experienced by Palestinians in Gaza post-7 October 2023. This analysis focuses on three domains where gendered torture and ill-treatment have been most evident: arrest and detention, technology-facilitated abuse, and reproductive violence. Each domain is assessed for patterns of torture and ill-treatment that exploit culturally and socially defined gender roles. *Results:* The findings demonstrate that Palestinian men and boys have been systematically emasculated through forced nudity, sexual violence, and digitally broadcast humiliation. Women and girls have been sexualized, exposed, and denied basic reproductive dignity through invasive searches, lack of menstrual hygiene, and the collapse of maternity care. *Discussion:* These practices amount to torture and other ill-treatment under international law, not merely because of their physical or psychological severity, but because they are deliberately gendered in design and effect. A gender-competent application of torture law is essential to capture the full scope of harm experienced by Palestinians in Gaza. The article calls for legal frameworks and accountability mechanisms to incorporate gender not as a modifier, but as a core analytic of torture itself.

**Keywords:** torture and ill-treatment; gender-based torture; arrest and detention; sexual and reproductive violence; technology-facilitated violence

\* The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Journal, the Publisher or the Editors

## Introduction

Torture and ill-treatment of Palestinians by Israeli Forces is neither new nor aberrational, forming one part of a decades-long campaign of domination built on violence, coercion, and impunity (ICJ, 2024, paras. 150-154; UNCHR, 1993). Still, since the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023 and the subsequent escalation of military operations in Gaza and the West Bank, surging reports of torture, ill-treatment, and incommunicado detention are shocking. According to numerous United Nations and civil society investigations and reports, thousands of Palestinians—men and women, boys and girls, young and old—have been detained under degrading conditions, physically and mentally abused, denied medical care, and publicly humiliated (PCATI, 2025, p. 1; PCHR, 2025A, pp. 17-85; UNCOI oPt, 2025, para. 215; B'Tselem, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024B, pp. 233-234; UNOHCHR, 2024, para. 33; UNSRoPt, 2024, para. 22; UNRWA, 2024, p. 1). However, amidst the growing body of documentation and legal analysis, one critical through-line remains largely underexamined: the role of gender in shaping how Israeli Forces' torture and ill-treatment of Palestinians from Gaza is perpetrated and experienced.

Gender structures of power and domination are central mechanisms through which the torture and ill-treatment of Palestinians from Gaza is enacted. That is, gendered norms, roles, and expectations are intentionally exploited by Israeli Forces to maximise pain, amplify humiliation, and fracture social identities. Over the past year and a half, report after report has described how Palestinian men are emasculated and infantilised, while Palestinian women are sexualized and objectified (PCHR, 2025A, p. 92; Amnesty International, 2024A; UNCOI oPt, 2024; UNCOI oPt 2025; UNSRoPt, 2024). These patterns are not random. They reflect the strategic deployment of gendered structures of meaning within Palestinian communities. Israeli Forces know what it means to be considered a "man" or "woman" in Gaza. They deliberately choose methods of violence that call the performance of such socially defined roles into question, and in doing so cause immeasurable suffering.<sup>1</sup>

1 The performance of dominance expressed by gender-based violence, or more generally in the ways gender manifests in any violence, is multifaceted. Under misogynist and patriarchal logics, it is both a highly efficient means by which to inflict pain or suffering, degrade and humiliate a victim, while at the same time masculinising, empowering, and invigorating a perpetrator. In other words, Israeli Forces' resort to gender-based violence can be read through the effects on the victim, as this report does, through the impact on the perpetrator. Along these lines, the UNCOI for the Occupied Palestinian Territories stated: "Women's bodies and sexuality are often perceived as

This article offers a gender-competent legal and factual analysis of torture and other ill-treatment perpetrated against Palestinians in Gaza in three interrelated contexts: (1) arrest and detention, (2) technology-facilitated gender-based violence, and (3) reproductive violence. In each, it demonstrates how gender is instrumental to the Israeli Forces' intentional infliction of severe suffering for prohibited purposes. Drawing on documentation from UN bodies and human rights organisations, this article highlights how a gender analysis is necessary to properly understand both the methods and the consequences of torture and other ill-treatment against Palestinians in Gaza.

In doing so, the article contributes to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to expand the doctrinal understanding of torture beyond physical pain and male-centric paradigms, and toward a more accurate reflection of how power, identity, and violence are brought to bear on socially, historically, and politically situated victims. (See Kakal, 2025; Pérez-Sales & Zrally, 2018; Shubin, 2025).

## Legal Framework: A Gender-Competent Approach to Torture and Other Ill-Treatment

Whereas torture is expressly prohibited by numerous international treaties applicable to the situation in Gaza, it is defined by very few. (Geneva Conventions, 1949, common Article 3; Rome Statute, 1998, 7(1)(f), 8(2)(a)(ii)-1, 8(2)(c)(i)-4; UNCAT, 1984, art. 1; UNICCPR, 1976, art. 7). In this absence, the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) provides benchmark elements. (See: ECHR, 2015, para. 94; Human Rights Committee, 2011, para. 7.5; IACHR, 2003, para. 90; ICTY, 1998, para. 459). Namely: severity, intentionality, purpose, official involvement, and exception for lawful sanctions.

An early target for feminist scholars attuned to the ways International Human Rights Law obscured and/or ignored violence and harms against women, CAT's legal elements have been critiqued for conceptualizing torture along highly male-centric lines, including by requiring that torture be: (1) in public settings (like prisons); (2) at the hands of state actors, (3) for politically intelligible purposes (like extracting a

linked with the dignity of the nation and other negative gender stereotyping, such as the collective's honour and emasculation. Several experts have noted that allegations of sexual violence against Israeli women on 7 October 2023 have resulted in attempts to rebuild Israeli national masculinity through aggression and in retaliation for the attacks carried out by the military wing of Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups." (UNCOI, 2025, para. 78).

confession or punishing dissent).<sup>2</sup> This legal architecture was critiqued for excluding or marginalising torturous harms typically experienced by women—especially in private spaces or at the hands of non-state actors (for example: intimate partner violence, marital rape).

Nevertheless, while the definition was scorned, it was not abandoned. Feminist jurists, scholars, and advocates worked diligently and incrementally for years to establish that rape and other forms of sexual violence constitute torture<sup>3</sup> (Davis, 2017; Edwards, 2006). No longer overlooked, sexual violence is now widely accepted as a mode of torture.

Indeed, in her 2024 thematic report to the UN Human Rights Council, Special Rapporteur against Torture Alice Edwards dedicated an entire report to sexual torture in conflict. Among many progressive findings, the Rapporteur noted: “Through sexualized forms of torture perpetrators aim to cause harm to victims directly, to attack the victim’s family, to threaten other members of the same ethnicity, religion or community, and to break the will of their ‘enemy.’” (UNSRT, 2024, para. 17). While no doubt true, it is critical to highlight that the reason sexualized torture has this reach is because of the gender norms that are attached to it. In many places, the purity of a daughter, prospective wife or sister is associated with the honour (or shame) of her family, making sexualised attacks even more potent.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, the strength, virility and/or independence of a son, husband or father are associated with his ability to occupy the head of a household or polity. Sexualized attacks challenge or destroy these socially constructed roles and responsibilities. It is not merely the sexualized act that extends beyond the victim, but the social fabric to which such violence tugs.

2 For an history and summary of these critiques, see Davis, L. (2017). The gendered dimensions of torture: rape and other forms of gender-based violence as torture under international law. In Başoğlu (ed.) *Torture and Its Definition in International Law: An Inter-Disciplinary Approach* (pp. 315-374). Oxford Univ. Press.

3 Of particular note is the work by the Committee against Torture in demonstrating that violence against women fell under the ambit of the Convention against Torture (see Sveaass, N. & Gaer, F. (2022). The Committee Against Torture tackles violence against women: A conceptual and political journey. *Torture Journal*, 32(1-2) 177-192. <https://doi.org/10.7146/torture.v32i1-2.132081>) and the Prosecutor offices and judges chambers at the International Criminal Tribunals for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and Rwanda (ICTR) (see UN ICTY, Landmark Cases, <https://www.icty.org/en/features/crimes-sexual-violence/landmark-cases>).

4 See e.g. Submission from the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 2024.

Accordingly, a gender-competent legal analysis interprets and applies torture’s elements in ways that account for how gender functions as a structure of power, shaping both the infliction and experience of suffering. With respect to the situation in Gaza, such an approach sheds light on three core legal elements of torture—severity of suffering, intent, and purpose.

### *Severity of Suffering*

To constitute torture, a victim’s pain or suffering<sup>5</sup> must be *severe*. Stated in the negative, if a victim’s pain or suffering is *not* severe, they did *not* experience torture. Notwithstanding the centrality of the severity of suffering in popular and legal conceptions of torture,<sup>6</sup> neither CAT nor any other international legal instrument provide a definition of “severe”. As such this element, neither rooted in scholarship on pain nor availing itself to precise measure, has confounded scholars, lawyers, judges, and advocates (Cakal, 2022).

Nevertheless, courts and human rights bodies continually affirm that a certain level of pain or suffering must be reached in order for an act to constitute torture—often times doing so by carving out different phyla for the ways victims may experience pain or suffering (ICC, 2009, para. 193).

For example, courts and human rights bodies have found that “severe” pain or suffering: can be cumulative (rather than emanating from one act), wholly physical or wholly mental, does not have to result in lasting injury, or be “equivalent in intensity to the pain accompanying serious physical injury, such as organ failure, impairment of bodily function, or even death.” (ECHR, 2001, para. 46; ICTY, 2004, para. 247; ICTY, 2002B, para. 150).

Notwithstanding the clarity that such definitional whitening may offer, jurisprudence and decisions from human rights bodies make it clear that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to determining severity. Instead, the determination of whether an act or series of acts inflicts pain or suffering that crosses into torture’s threshold of “severe” is decided on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration objective and subjective features of the infliction of pain or suffering (Amnesty International, 2016, p. 68; ECHR, 2016, para. 160; IACHR, 2011, para. 73; ICTY, 2002A, para. 282; UNSRT, 2017, para. 28; Zach,

5 Physical or mental. See CAT, art. 1; Rome Statute Elements of Crimes, Arts. 7(1)(f), 8(2)(a)(ii)-1, 8(2)(c)(i)-4.

6 Notably, the Inter-American system’s definition of torture does *not* require pain or suffering to be “severe”—only that there be “physical or mental pain or suffering”. See Inter-American Convention to Prevent and Punish Torture, Art. 2. Nevertheless every other international legal definition includes the severity requirement.

2019, para. 89). Objective factors include the nature, purpose, duration, and consistency of the act/s committed (IACHR, 2011, para. 73; ICRC, 2016, para. 634; ICTY, 2004, para. 484). Subjective factors are the physical and mental condition of the victim, the effect of the acts or treatment on the victim, and the victim's age, sex, state of health, and position of inferiority (IACHR, 2011, para. 73; ICRC, 2016, para. 634; ICTY, 2004, para. 484; ICTY, 2002A, para. 282).

Conceptually, this multivariate approach offers fertile ground for adjudicators to consider the full context and occurrence of acts of torture. However, as a practical matter, courts and human rights bodies often fail to clearly indicate when they draw from or apply these factors (CAT, 2015; Edwards, 2010, p. 218). Rather than carry out an applied analysis of the ways acts of violence materialise into pain<sup>7</sup> in or on the victim's body or psyche, adjudicating bodies generally describe the acts<sup>8</sup> perpetrated while also making overtures towards the severity requirement (e.g. rape as "per se" torture).

While, on the one hand, such an approach gives adjudicators unstructured space to look afresh at each case, on the other hand, being unmoored from an analytical framework that structures conceptions of severity risks both arbitrariness and the erasure of gendered and other harms or conduct that were central to the victim's experience.<sup>9</sup>

A gender-competent approach requires courts and fact-finders to assess the severity of both the act itself and the social, cultural, and psychological context in which it occurs.

As will be seen below, for Palestinian women and men subjected to torturous acts, the suffering is not merely physical or abstract — it is intimately tied to religious norms, social expectations, and community shame. It is the pairing of the mode of violence with the victim's and perpetrator's identity that fully colours the full scope of suffering attending acts of torture.

### Intent

A victim's pain or suffering must be *intentionally* inflicted to qualify as torture (UNCAT, 1984, art. 1). Given the inherently subjective nature of pain and suffering, courts and human rights bodies have determined that the intention must be directed at

the conduct of inflicting the pain or suffering (CAT, 2008, para. 18; ICC, 2009, para. 194). That is, it is not necessary to demonstrate that perpetrators know that the harm inflicted is severe. Instead, it is sufficient that a perpetrator intended the conduct which consequently inflicted severe pain or suffering.

In determining whether such intention exists, courts make objective determinations of the circumstances, rather than subjective inquiries into a perpetrator's calculations. This approach has tended to focus on *what and how* acts were perpetrated. A gender-competent lens takes up these questions, considering the broader historical, cultural, and political context, to ask further *why* dynamics of power, domination and control are being communicated by means of *this* perpetrator committing *this* act of violence against *this* victim.

As will be described in more detail below, perpetrators often exploit gender norms precisely because they know it will maximise psychological torment, and it is an efficient means to achieve their torturous purpose. From forced and public displays of male nudity to livestreaming women's undergarments, the specific modes and forms of violence carried out against Palestinians in Gaza are not random—it is deliberate and calibrated, considering prevailing gender norms and relations to affect individual and communal humiliation.

Complementing jurists' historical and one-dimensional assessment of intention, a gender-competent lens sees the selection of methods and modes of violence in their full contexts, taking account of how social and political power is intentionally brought to bear on victims' bodies and psyches.

### Purpose

To constitute torture, the acts must be carried out for a purpose—to achieve a specific result, including, among other things, obtaining information or a confession, intimidation or coercion, punishment, or discrimination of any kind (CAT, 1984, art. 1; Rome Statute, 2011, arts. 8(2)(a)(ii)-1, 8(2)(c)(i)-4).

In situations of armed conflict, such as in Gaza (ICC, 2024), there is no requirement that the conduct be *solely* perpetrated for an enumerated purpose. Instead, "if one prohibited purpose is fulfilled by the conduct, the fact that such conduct was also intended to achieve a non-listed purpose (even one of a sexual nature) is immaterial." (ICTY, 2008, para. 128; ICTY, 2007A, para. 77; ICTY, 2007B, 515; ICTY, 2004, para. 484; ICTY, 2002A, para. 184; ICTY, 2002B, para. 155; ICTY, 2001, para. 153; ICTY, 1998, para. 471).

In many instances, acts of violence can fulfil multiple purposes simultaneously. This is particularly true with sexual and gender-based violence, where violent acts are often steeped in

7 Or suffering.

8 Or omissions.

9 It is exactly this type of erasure that has historically led to gender-discriminatory and patriarchal conceptions of the perpetration of genocide. (See Ashraph S., 2018). Like with genocide, men, women, non-binary, non-conforming and trans people are all affected by torture differently, and the suffering they are subjected to is frequently perpetrated in overt or implicit reference to the inherent status associated with their gender identity or sexual orientation.



misogynistic and homophobic logics of power and discrimination.

Take, for example, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights' analysis in *Women Victims of Sexual Torture in Atenco v. Mexico*. In Atenco, Mexican authorities sent 3,000 federal and state police officers to suppress protests supporting unlicensed flower vendors in a local market. The federal and state police perpetrated widespread sexual violence against the women protesters. In determining the Mexican state's responsibility, the Court recognised that sexual violence was a tool serving multivariate purposes:

The sexual violence in the present case was used by state agents as a tactic or strategy of control, domination and imposition of power...[It] was aimed at humiliating [11 women victims] and those they assumed to be their group mates; to frighten them, intimidate them and inhibit them from participating again in political life or expressing their disagreement in the public sphere, since it was not their place to leave their homes, the only place where they supposedly belonged according to their imaginary and stereotypical vision of social roles...[B]ut it also had the distinct purpose of punishing them for daring to question their authority, as well as in retaliation for the alleged injuries suffered by their police colleagues. (IACHR, 2018, paras. 200-204.)

Taking the care to situate the acts of sexual violence in their full context, the Court in *Atenco* was able to unpack the kaleidoscopic nature of sexualized and gender-based violence to shed light on all its social, political, cultural, overt and covert meanings and assertions.

However, in her 2024 for annual thematic report to the UN Human Rights Council, UN Special Rapporteur against Torture Alice Edwards took a slightly different tack in asserting, "Why torture becomes sexualized can be understood as being rooted in ideologies of male sexual entitlement." (UNSRT, 2024, para. 71). But rather than relating to the perpetrator's desire, proclivities, or sexuality generally, sexual violence—mainly when perpetrated by law enforcement or the military—is much more about exerting power, enforcing gender norms, and/or exploiting social or power dynamics.

Indeed, many instances of sexualized torture do not relate at all to the perpetrator's sexual entitlement or desire. For example, in *Prosecutor v. Tadic*, the Trial Chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) described how five male detainees were forced to perform oral sex on each other in a degrading and humiliating manner, with one detainee forced to bite the testicle off another, under in-

timidation and threat of violence. (ICTY, 1997, para. 206). Likewise, in the landmark International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda trial judgment *Prosecutor v. Akayesu*, where rape and sexual violence were equated with torture and ill-treatment for the first time, one victim testified: "She said her mother begged the men, who were armed with bludgeons and machetes, to kill her daughters rather than rape them in front of her, and the man replied that the 'principle was to make them suffer' and the girls were then raped." (ICTR, 1998, para. 597). In both these cases, the sexualization of the torturous act was not about the perpetrators' sexual entitlement, but instead the violence was sexualized as a potent form of maximising suffering while also performing domination and control. Situating the sexualization of torture in ideologies of sexual entitlement brings with it logics of sexual gratification or desire, which obscure the social and power dynamics being invoked and exploited. Indeed, tugging at these undercurrents of sociality, dominance, and discrimination, former UN Special Rapporteur against Torture Manfred Nowak stated that regarding violence against women, "the purpose element is always fulfilled if the acts can be shown to be gender-specific." (UNSRT, 2008, para. 30).

A gender-competent analysis recognises that gender is itself a site of purpose: violence is inflicted because the victim is performing a gendered role (as mother, wife, husband, protector), or failing to conform to one, or symbolising one (e.g. the nation embodied in women's bodies). These motives are often implicit, but they are not invisible, and assessments of torture cannot afford to ignore them.

### **Torture and other ill-treatment of Palestinians from Gaza in arrest and detention**

In the Israeli Forces' ground operations in Gaza, the patterns of violence perpetrated against Palestinians during arrest and in detention are distinctly gendered. More specifically, the Israeli Forces' intentional infliction of severe suffering is executed through methods that deliberately target culturally defined gendered roles and identities, particularly masculinity and femininity, and their attendant social expectations within Palestinian society.

#### *Targeting Palestinian men and boys: Emasculation and the erasure of protective authority*

Since its earliest footholds, Israel Forces' invasion of Gaza has been paired with a campaign of mass arrest and detention of Palestinian men and boys (PCHR, 2025A, p. 15; UNOHCHR, 2024, para. 12; UNSRToPt, 2024, para. 27; UNRWA, 2024, p. 1). In carrying out this campaign, Israeli authorities perpetrated forms of torture and other ill-treatment aimed at stripping Pal-

estinian men and boys of social and symbolic markers of masculinity, authority, and dignity—in particular by targeting their social role as protectors, leaders, and heads of family.

Men have been arrested *en masse*, blindfolded, bound, forcibly stripped of their clothing, and forced to kneel before being loaded onto large people-moving vehicles and taken off to unknown detention centres—all performed as a spectacle in front of their families and/or communities (PCHR, 2025A, p. 92; Amnesty International, 2024A; Amnesty International, 2024B, pp. 233-234; UNOHCHR, 2024, para. 38-44; UNRWA, 2024, p. 2; UNOHCHR, 2023, p. 1). One victim described intense humiliation upon being arrested in public and forced to undress in front of his wife and children (UNCOI, 2025, para. 95). According to his testimony, he and some 50 other men were forced to walk barefoot in their underwear through their neighbourhood before being forced to kneel with about 250 other men and boys wearing only underwear (UNCOI, 2025, para. 95). The victim described eventually being transported on a military truck to an unknown location, where he was photographed (UNCOI, 2025, para. 95). In short, the whole process of arrest is a coordinated display of enforced physical vulnerability and public humiliation (PCHR, 2025A; Amnesty International, 2024A; UNOHCHR, 2023, p. 1).

Upon arriving at the detention centres and while undergoing interrogation, men reported being kicked in the genitals,<sup>10</sup> sodomized with metal rods, or subjected to oral and anal penetrations with objects including broomsticks and batons<sup>11</sup> (Adalah, 2024, p. 7; Amnesty International, 2024A; UNCOI, 2025, paras. 118-119, 194). During the subsequent period of detention, Palestinian men and boys remained restrained at their wrists, were forced to kneel on their knees whilst naked or nearly naked for up to 16 hours a day (Amnesty International, 2024A; UNCOI, 2024, paras. 51-52, 60; UNRWA, 2024, p. 2). They were not permitted to move, had to ask permission to speak, had extremely limited access to toilets or were forced to soil themselves in military-issued diapers (Amnesty International, 2024A; UNCOI, 2024, paras. 51, 53; UNRWA, 2024, pp. 1-2). Male detainees were urinated on, called “animals,” and were told the soldiers guarding them would rape their wives

and daughters (Adalah, 2024, p. 7; UNCOI, 2025, para. 107; UNRWA, 2024, p. 2).

These methods perpetrated against these victims are not incidental. Public restraining and arrest, forced nudity, sexualized abuse, controlled basic bodily functions, dehumanisation and threats of rape against female family members—all these practices carry specific gendered messages: you have no power, no autonomy, no independence, no authority—you are no longer a “man.”

In Palestinian society, masculinity is deeply intertwined with roles of protection, honour, and resistance. Emasculation, forced nudity, and infantilisation strike directly at these pillars. By shaming Palestinian men in highly public and gendered ways, Israeli forces are attacking the bodies and identities of individual Palestinian men and boys, as well as a collective masculine identity. That is, the very idea of Palestinian men as capable defenders of their families, communities, and nation.

In short, in Gaza, the targeting of Palestinian men and boys’ gendered social standing is designed to resonate far beyond the detention centre—to send a message of defeat, weakness, and subjugation to the broader community.

#### *Targeting Palestinian women and girls: sexualization, violation, and assault on modesty*

Women and girls detained by Israeli forces face different, but equally calibrated and strategic, forms of genderised torture and other ill-treatment during arrest and in detention. Their treatment relies on the sexualization and objectification of their bodies, aimed at both individual humiliation and collective shaming.

Upon arrest and in detention centres, Palestinian women and girls are forced to undergo intimate and invasive body and strip searches (PCHR, 2025A, pp. 59-64; UNCOI, 2025, para. 193). Women report being groped on their breasts, genitals, neck, and waist, often by male soldiers, with requests for a female officer denied or met with slaps and insults (UNCOI, 2025, paras. 108, 112-113; UNRWA, 2024, p. 2). Another woman described being strip-searched every three hours during her detention, even while menstruating, with guards laughing and making degrading comments about her body and stained clothing (UNCOI, 2025, para. 125). Verbal degradation was commonly reported, with soldiers referring to detainees as “whores,” “bitches,” and “ugly” during interrogations and searches (PCHRA, 2025, p. 59; UNCOI, 2025, para. 125). In one documented instance, a woman was threatened with rape in front of her husband while soldiers made obscene gestures and comments about her breasts. (UNCOI, 2025, para. 124). Another woman reported a soldier threat-

10 This pattern of genital-focused violence is intentional as it weaponizes the symbolic site of masculine power and bodily autonomy.

11 Notably, sexual violence has been a long-term and widespread feature of Israel’s systematic torture of Palestinian men and boys in detention. See Weishut, D. J. N. (2015). Sexual torture of Palestinian men by Israeli authorities. *Reproductive Health Matters*, 23(46), 71–84. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rhm.2015.11.019>.

ening to “check if she was still a virgin” while forcing her to undress in front of her children (UNCOI, 2025, para. 111). Women and girls reported that their veils were stripped away, and their bodies exposed in full view—acts which, in the Palestinian sociocultural context, represent profound violations of dignity, modesty, and religious identity (PCHR, 2025A, pp. 43, 59-61, 94; UNCOI, 2025, paras. 108-111; UNRWA, 2024, p. 2). These threats and actions are not merely physical invasions; they carry deep cultural significance tied to modesty, chastity, and communal honour.

These methods of torture and ill-treatment rely on the cultural weight of feminine shame and honour—targeting women as individuals and as symbols of family and community respectability. The misogynistic and patriarchally defined goal is not just to harm the detainee, but to designate her—and by extension, her family and community—as vulnerable, violated, and disgraced.

*The interplay of genderised torture/ill-treatment and broader political and colonial objectives*

What emerges from these patterns is a coherent strategy: the Israeli Forces’ means of torture and ill-treatment is not random violence, nor merely disciplinary brutality. It is a gendered spectacle meant to assert dominance, induce shame, and fracture the social and moral order within Palestinian communities. In both male and female cases, the body becomes a theatre for state control. The violence is stylised to send messages: men are impotent and broken; women are violated and exposed.

Understanding torture and ill-treatment in Gaza through this lens underscores the urgent need for gender-competent analyses of torture that attend to how violence is calibrated not just against bodies, but against the identities, roles, and social structures those bodies embody.

**Technology-facilitated gender-based violence against Palestinians in Gaza**

The Israeli Forces’ pattern of using gendered power dynamics to intentionally inflict severe suffering to punish, humiliate, and coerce Palestinians from Gaza extends beyond detention centres and sites of arrest, and indeed beyond the physical world entirely. Such efforts towards emasculation and sexualization are also captured, disseminated, and amplified through digital and technological means.

*Forced nudity and the digital emasculation of Palestinian men and boys*

Technology-facilitated violence against Palestinian men and boys frequently takes the form of the documentation and sub-

sequent posting online of their arrest and forced acts of subjugation. In at least ten incidents documented by the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel (“UN Commission of Inquiry”), hundreds of Palestinian men and boys were reportedly filmed by Israeli soldiers during mass arrests, stripped to their underwear or fully naked, paraded before cameras, and forced into subordinate positions (e.g., kneeling, lying face down, or tied to chairs) (UNCOI, 2025, para. 93). These images were then posted online, including on soldiers’ private social media accounts and public Telegram groups (UNCOI, 2024, paras. 386, 388). In at least one instance, two teenage boys were ordered by a female Israeli soldier to dance together in their underwear, whilst she filmed them and laughed. (UNCOI, 2024, para. 366). The UN Commission of Inquiry determined that these incidents were not isolated but showed a “rapidly spreading practice” intended to feminise, humiliate, and dominate Palestinian men (UNCOI, 2025, para. 202).

The dissemination of these images serves multiple purposes: it publicly emasculates Palestinian men and boys by stripping away cultural markers of dignity and authority; it reduces them to objects of ridicule; and it creates permanent digital artefacts of their subjugation. As was the case with the spectacular nature of their arrest and detention, the digital and permanent imagery of their humiliation resonates deeply, intentionally so, within a society where masculinity is tied to protection, honour, and leadership.

*Sexualisation and public humiliation of Palestinian women and girls through digital platforms*

Likewise, consistent with their broader treatment during arrest and interrogation, Palestinian women and girls in Gaza have been digitally sexualized and humiliated.

In several instances documented by the UN Commission of Inquiry, Israeli soldiers filmed themselves ransacking Palestinian women’s homes, mocking and sexualizing their private belongings, particularly underwear and lingerie. In one such video, a soldier posted footage of himself going through women’s lingerie drawers during a home raid, making sexualized insults: “I’ve always said Arabs [female pronouns used] are the biggest sluts out there...There you go, here are the sets [of lingerie] here, inside, another new one in the package, they haven’t opened it yet, look at these sets, who wants elastic bodysuits?” (UNCOI, 2025, para. 83). In a second video, an Israeli soldier is filming himself describing how, when searching the premises for weapons, the soldiers had found money and lingerie: “Two or three drawers stuffed with the most exotic lingerie that you can imagine, just piles, loads

of it, in every single house. Unbelievable. These naughty[,] naughty Gazans.” (UNCOI, 2025, para. 84).

According to the UN Commission of Inquiry, the soldiers’ behaviour exhibited “clear gender and racial bias,” intentionally humiliating and degrading Palestinian women in ways that were calculated to cause lasting social stigma (UNCOI, 2025, para. 85). From a Palestinian cultural perspective, the exposure and sexualization of women’s private belongings—and the implied sexual shaming—carry severe social consequences, including damage to women’s reputations, familial shame, and communal dishonour.

#### *Gendered intent, digital spectacle, and torture/ill-treatment*

The documenting of detained and naked men’s or women’s underwear from home raids suggests an effort to not only inflict harm but to display it. The subsequent online posting of these offences provides a digital stage where images and stories of Palestinian men and boys stripped of authority and Palestinian women and girls reduced to objects of sexual spectacle are recycled for public consumption and humiliation.

As such, these recordings extend and multiply the individual acts of violence, giving them momentum to ripple outward across communities. Unlike physical wounds, digital humiliation is searchable and often permanent. Victims lose not only control over their bodies but over their social identities, which are dragged into the global public sphere as sites of shame.

Accordingly, technology-facilitated violence must be recognised as an integral part of the torture and other ill-treatment perpetrated against Palestinians in Gaza: a deliberate and gendered tool to mark the Palestinian body—male and female—as permanently vulnerable and degraded.

#### **Reproductive violence: turning reproduction into a site of suffering**

In Gaza, reproduction itself has become a site of gendered suffering. Palestinian women, girls, and those with the capacity for pregnancy are being made to endure conditions that transform menstruation, giving birth, breastfeeding, and caring for children into painful, prolonged, degrading, and sometimes life-threatening experiences.

#### *The collapse of reproductive care and its impact on those giving birth*

Israeli Forces’ attacks have decimated Gaza’s reproductive health infrastructure. Maternity wards at major hospitals like al-Shifa and al-Nasser have been rendered inoperable, and specialised facilities like the al-Emirati Maternity Hospital and Gaza’s largest IVF clinic — al-Basma — have been destroyed (UNCOI,

2025, para. 40; UNFPA, 2025A; UN News, 2024). As a result, emergency obstetric care and assisted reproduction have been decimated.<sup>12</sup>

The absence of medical care reportedly forced women to give birth and health care providers to navigate labour, without anaesthesia, sutures, or antibiotics, often on hospital floors or in overcrowded shelters (UNCOI, 2025, para. 47; Save the Children, 2024). The UN Commission of Inquiry found that some women delayed caesarean births due to a lack of surgical supplies. In contrast, others had to walk for hours through rubble to reach healthcare facilities where the dressing of their caesarean section wounds could be changed (UNCOI, 2025, para. 55). Women recovering from childbirth have been discharged within a day due to bed shortages (Knell & Tulley, 2025). Postpartum haemorrhages, infections, and untreated pain have become routine.

#### *Menstruation and breastfeeding as unlivable conditions*

Basic biological processes like menstruation have likewise become sources of significant physical and mental suffering. Women and girls in Gaza report being unable to access menstrual products and having to use diapers, sponges, scraps of cloth, old rags, or nothing at all (UN News, 2025; UNCOI, 2025, paras. 76-77). Speaking to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), a young girl recalled getting her period while sheltering in a crowded displacement camp “I only had one pad, so I wrapped it in toilet paper to make it last. I couldn’t wash, and the pain was horrible. I sat in silence crying until the end of the day.” (UNFPA, 2025B). The inability to manage menstrual hygiene has also reportedly forced some women to restrict food and water intake, risking further health decline to avoid urination or bleeding in public (UNCOI, 2025, paras. 69-70). These coping methods are not only painful and unsanitary, they can also cause infections, long-term reproductive health issues, and mental suffering—even more so considering the demolished state of Gaza’s health infrastructure (UNFPA, 2025B). Under such conditions, menstruating in Gaza has become a source of indignity, anxiety, isolation, and shame. (UNFPA, 2025B) According to one girl interviewed by UNFPA, “[e]very time my period comes, I wish I weren’t a girl.” (UNFPA, 2025B).

Similarly, new and lactating mothers have faced conditions and treatment causing physical and mental suffering. According to the World Health Organization, “extreme fear and stress,

12 According to the UN Commission of Inquiry, as of January 2025, emergency obstetric and newborn care was available at seven out of 18 partially functional hospitals across Gaza according to OCHA, as well as four out of 11 field hospitals, and a community health center. (UNCOI, 2025, para. 40).



malnutrition, and complex living conditions...have resulted in mothers being unable to breastfeed their newborn babies.” (WHO, 2024, p. 14). Many are either unable to produce milk due to starvation or trauma, or unable to acquire infant formula, which is scarce, unaffordable, or unmakeable because of a lack of clean drinking water (UNCOI, 2025, paras. 67-68). Pregnant and lactating women require 7.5 litres of water per day to maintain their health and hydration, which is five times the amount available in Gaza in April 2024 (UN Women, 2024, p. 7). As of June 2025, 9 in 10 households faced severe water shortages (UNFPA, 2025B). Shortages of water not only preclude lactation but also adequate formula feeding, as water scarcity forces households to reduce the amount of formula given to babies in each bottle feed, decrease the number of feeds, or switch to other means of feeding their infants (GNC, 2024, pp. 9-10). Even where lactation is present, some mothers are unable to breastfeed because of the lack of privacy inherent in their displacement (PCHR, 2025B, p. 9).

These experiences reflect how reproductive functions have become sites of trauma marked by vulnerability, degradation, panic, and helplessness.

#### *The reproductive role as a target of intentional and coercive suffering*

What links these patterns is the deliberate creation of an environment where performing basic reproductive (and gendered) roles — menstruating, giving birth, nursing/feeding, and parenting — becomes an unbearable source of suffering. The loss of dignity in childbirth, the shame of unmanaged menstruation, and the grief of watching a baby starve are specific, gendered modes of suffering with long-term consequences for mental and physical health.

These conditions amount to more than collateral suffering. They reflect a form of coercive violence in which gendered bodily functions become pathways to psychological and physical torment. Women’s and girls’ reproductive lives have been made into sites of pain, shame, and unrelenting distress. The denial of safe pregnancy, childbirth, and parenthood thus functions as a targeted form of coercion attacking the body politic through the bodies of women. Women are made to suffer not only for what they are, but for what they might create.

#### **Conclusion**

In sum, the patterns of violence inflicted on Palestinians from Gaza since 7 October 2023 cannot be fully understood, nor effectively addressed, without accounting for the role of gender in how torture and other ill-treatment are perpetrated. The Israeli Forces’ methods of inflicting severe suffering are not only phys-

ical and psychological, but also deeply gendered. Men and boys are emasculated and dominated in ways that challenge their social roles; women and girls are sexualized, exposed, and shamed through their bodies and reproductive capacities. Across all sites— arrest, detention, digital platforms, and collapsed reproductive care systems—gender is instrumental in shaping how torturous violence is perpetrated and experienced in Gaza.

Torture, as defined under international law, must be understood in its full context, including how identity and inequality shape both the infliction and the experience of suffering. A gender-competent reading of the ways in which torture has been brought to bear against Palestinians is a necessary ingredient for a complete comprehension of the harms perpetrated and suffered.

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