

Tortured as a Child: Torture, Forced Migration and the Right to Rehabilitation¹

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This is not an easy book to read. Not because its arguments are difficult to follow or its language is inaccessible, but because it compels readers to confront a reality that remains largely invisible: children are subjected to torture. Precisely for that reason, *Tortured as a Child: Torture, Forced Migration and the Right to Rehabilitation* (Johansson Metso, 2026) is such an important and timely publication. The anthology represents a significant contribution to the struggle against torture and against the silence that too often prevents children who have experienced torture and ill-treatment from being recognised as victims of crime and rights-holders entitled to care, rehabilitation, and redress.

Human rights, and particularly children's human rights, run as a red thread throughout the volume. Across its seven chapters, the authors repeatedly return to states' obligations to identify, protect, and rehabilitate children who have been subjected to torture. These discussions are especially urgent in light of the implementation of the EU Migration and Asylum Pact. Faster asylum procedures, reduced access to legal counsel and public representation, and the use of so-called safe-country concepts risk making it even more difficult for children exposed to torture to be identified and referred to appropriate medical expertise. Against this backdrop, the anthology's focus on screening procedures, documentation, and early identification becomes particularly relevant.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its interdisciplinary approach. Psychologists, lawyers, paediatricians, neuropsychologists, and social scientists contribute perspectives that together provide a comprehensive understanding of child torture and its consequences. This breadth makes the anthology relevant not only for specialists working directly with torture survivors but also for clinicians, social workers, teachers, legal professionals, policymakers, and researchers. Such a wide audience is essential, as responsibility for identifying and support-

ing children subjected to torture cannot rest with any single profession.

The volume results from a three-year research project initiated after the 2022 revision of the United Nations Istanbul Protocol, which expanded the standard for medical documentation of torture to better include children. The anthology is available in Swedish and English and will soon be released in Arabic. The anthology builds on a systematic literature review conducted within the same project (Nahlén Bose & Tamdjidi, 2024), in which 4,795 titles and abstracts were screened, and 80 scientific articles and six guidelines or care programmes were included. Building on a systematic literature review, the project revealed substantial gaps in existing knowledge. As such, the anthology represents an important step toward identifying what needs to be done next.

Chapter 1 (Niklas Möller, psychologist) introduces the project and discusses torture from a psychological perspective. Chapter 3 (Julia Jennstål, psychologist) explores how practitioners can approach conversations with children about torture, reporting on ongoing work to develop a structured conversational tool. Chapter 5 (Catarina Nahlén Bose, researcher) challenges the prevalent assumption that trauma treatment requires residential stability – an assumption that risks delaying care for young refugees with precarious legal status. Chapter 6 (Fanny Laurén, neuropsychologist) addresses the difficulty for school staff in distinguishing trauma responses from neurodevelopmental symptoms, a distinction that, when missed, withholds support and compounds the long-term consequences of torture.

Chapter 2, by human rights lawyer Madelaine Seidlitz, examines the legal definition of torture as applied to children under international law, drawing on case law and legal practice to distinguish between torture and ill-treatment. It offers a clear and pedagogical account of the UN Convention Against Torture and its relevance to children. The chapter highlights a troubling gap in jurisprudence: international case law on child torture remains extremely limited. The UN Committee Against Torture has never ruled on a complaint involving a child, and the European Court of Human Rights has done so only in *Aydın v. Turkey*. The chapter also draws attention to Sweden's failure to criminalise torture as a distinct offence. Despite being a State Party to the UN Convention Against Torture, Sweden has not incorporated a specific torture provision into its criminal code, meaning it does not fully meet its obligations under the Convention. The chapter thus functions not only as legal analysis but also as a call for legislative reform.

Chapter 4, by paediatrician Henry Ascher and psychologist Viktor Mauritz, addresses how torture injuries in children

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can be investigated and documented. Drawing on clinical experience and an interview study conducted within the IRCT network, the authors identify key challenges: children may have difficulty understanding the purpose of a torture injury assessment; developmental factors can influence their ability to report time, sequence, and events; and neurological injuries in children often result in diffuse, generalised impairments, unlike the focal deficits typically observed in adults. The authors note that the assessment process is often inseparable from therapeutic care, and that adequate time and organisational resources are prerequisites for high-quality work.

Despite the gravity of its subject matter, the anthology ultimately offers grounds for hope. Chapter 7 (Ferdinand Garoff and Ronak Tamdjidi) presents an intensive treatment model suggesting that five days of concentrated therapy may produce outcomes comparable to a year of conventional treatment. This is a promising finding, but the authors are candid that the evidence base is limited and that relatively few children have yet received this form of treatment. This is an honest account of where the field stands, and it should be read as a reason to invest further in research and implementation rather than as grounds for scepticism.

Tortured as a Child makes a unique and valuable contribution to a systematically underserved area of research and practice. Its central argument – that the concept of torture is too rarely applied to children, which contributes to making their

vulnerability invisible – is both well-evidenced and consequential. By combining legal, psychological, medical, and social perspectives, it illuminates a profoundly neglected area of research and practice while outlining concrete steps toward better identification, documentation, treatment, and protection of children subjected to torture. The book fills critical knowledge gaps, identifies priorities for future action, and demonstrates why greater investment in this field is urgently needed. For anyone working at the intersection of child protection, forced migration, healthcare, education, law, or human rights, this is an essential and highly recommended volume.

References

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