

Q&A | July 2025

DOCUMENTING REPRODUCTIVE VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT AND CRISIS



**Global
Justice Center**
Human Rights Through Rule of Law

UN Photo / K. M. Asad

In September 2024, UN Women and Global Justice Center issued a [report](#) detailing challenges and offering legal guidance to improve the documentation of reproductive violence in crisis and conflict by UN international investigations. These investigations play a key role in guiding international responses, so omitting documentation of reproductive violence can have devastating ripple effects.

Reproductive violence is a type of gender-based violence that targets reproductive autonomy – the ability to make independent decisions about if, how, and when to reproduce or engage in activities related to reproduction.

This Q&A draws from the report to provide information on what reproductive violence is, why its documentation in conflict and crisis situations matters, and how this documentation can be done more effectively.

Q. What is reproductive violence?

Reproductive violence is a type of gender-based violence that targets reproductive autonomy – the ability to make independent decisions about if, how, and when to reproduce or engage in activities related to reproduction – which is a protected right under international law.

Reproductive violence involves intentional acts or omissions that cause harm by interfering with reproductive autonomy, or violence directed at people because of their actual or perceived reproductive capacity.

Forced pregnancy and enforced sterilization are the most well-recognized forms of reproductive violence because they are expressly prohibited in the statute of the International Criminal Court. But there are a myriad of other forms of reproductive violence, including:

- preventing births
- forced abortion and contraception
- interference with breastfeeding
- destruction of reproductive healthcare or infrastructure
- destruction of healthcare or infrastructure with reproductive consequences
- torture or other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment that targets reproductive capacity

Reproductive violence may go hand in hand with sexual violence, such as forcing a victim to carry a pregnancy resulting from rape to term. But not all reproductive violence involves sexual violence: for instance, forcefully administering oral or injectable contraceptive.

Q. What are some examples of reproductive violence in conflict and crisis?

In Colombia, armed groups mandated the use of contraception by women and girls in their ranks to maintain their availability as soldiers; where contraception failed, these groups often imposed forced abortions.

In North Korea, forcibly repatriated pregnant women have been subjected to forced abortions. In Myanmar, a campaign of rape against the Rohingya resulted in unwanted pregnancies, a spiking birth rate, and unsafe abortion practices as

abortion services were not readily available. In Gaza, the destruction of water and healthcare infrastructure has forced women and girls to resort to makeshift alternatives to manage menstrual and reproductive health, while starvation has led to widespread disruption of lactation.

These examples show the complex ways reproductive rights and violence can intersect in conflict and crisis.

Q. Why does it matter that reproductive violence in conflict and crisis is documented expressly?

The impacts of reproductive violence can be unique, profound, damaging, and long-lasting. For example, a person's ability to have children may be foreclosed or coerced, and permanent kin relationships may be created or destroyed.

Historically, reproductive violence in conflict and crisis has been ignored or treated as an inevitable side effect of other forms of violence, including sexual violence. As a result, victims have gone un- or under-recognized, which limits their access to redress and rehabilitation. Vital reproductive services may be under-resourced in humanitarian responses, with impacts on maternal mortality, morbidity, and gender equality that last decades. Without adequate documentation, prevention efforts may also fail to address the risks and inflammatory impacts of reproductive violence. Moreover, lack of recognition of the harms leads to incomplete justice for victims, with perpetrators escaping accountability.

In addition, systematically overlooking harms like reproductive violence that differentially and disproportionately impact women, girls, and others who can become pregnant constitutes gender discrimination.

The aim of enumerating the reproductive consequences and intentions of violence is not to suggest that they hold more weight than other consequences and motives. Rather, it is to open the door to a fuller understanding of all kinds of harms, including those that, in part through their ubiquity, have been forgotten. Only when these harms are understood can cycles of violence and discrimination be broken.

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Q. What has impeded the documentation of reproductive violence in conflict and crisis to date?

UN investigative mechanisms regularly conduct investigations into alleged violations of international law in conflict and crisis situations. The record generated by these mechanisms often serves as the basis for international justice and accountability, humanitarian response, reparation, transitional justice, and prevention efforts. These mechanisms have made great strides in documenting gender-based violence, but have largely failed to capture the extent of reproductive violence. Some of the reasons include:

Stigmatization

Efforts to document reproductive violence are often hindered by perceptions that issues of reproduction, sex, and sexuality are uniquely subject to culturally-relative standards that insulate them from analysis and documentation. In some cases, this can lead to self-censorship by documenters, who avoid the topics altogether out of fear of sensitivity. In addition, stigma and shame around reproductive violence can make it difficult for victims and survivors to discuss their experiences with investigators.

Structure and Resources

While nearly all UN investigative mechanisms currently include at least one sexual and gender-based violence investigator and/or gender advisor, other roles within mechanisms do not sufficiently require gender expertise,

despite requiring some gender competence. This can lead to the priorities and analysis of gender advisors being overruled or deprioritized.

Analytical Gaps

The lack of extensive case law on different forms of reproductive violence can lead investigators to hesitate to characterize and document particular conduct as a violation, even though the conduct is prohibited under law.

In addition, some mechanisms have tended to focus their investigations on international criminal law (ICL) violations as opposed to international human rights law (IHRL) violations that also fall within their mandate. This can leave reproductive harms systematically under-documented because a relatively limited subset of reproductive violence is explicitly criminalized under ICL.

Q. What will help to ensure adequate documentation of reproductive violence?

While documentation of reproductive violence by UN mechanisms has been limited, it is far from impossible. Research identified an array of techniques and choices that can contribute to more robust documentation of these harms going forward.

These include mandates for investigative mechanisms that:

- Specify the investigation and documentation of all gender-based violations, including reproductive violence, and documentation of gendered aspects of all violations, not only sexual violence.
- Allow for sufficient time to build trust with victims and analyze complex reproductive impacts. Wherever possible, mandates should be for more than one year, and should be renewed readily as conditions require.

These also include training and support for all mechanism staff to:

- Conduct gender analysis, including documentation of reproductive violence.
- Avoid preemptive self-censorship or pressure not to document reproductive violence.
- Ask follow-up questions related to reproduction in any cases of sexual violence, including in cases of sexual violence committed against men and boys.
- Analyze how local laws (such as those prohibiting or restricting abortion) may contribute to violations of sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- Interview healthcare professionals and other relevant witnesses about sexual and reproductive health issues and sexual and gender-based violence.
- Consider the impact of other human rights violations on reproductive rights, such as hindering access to information or services (including to medical professionals and hospitals) through male guardianship.
- Use precise terminology when referring to sexual and gender-based violence, including abortion and reproductive violence, to encapsulate the distinct harm suffered.
- Engage with civil society in collecting and corroborating information on reproductive violence.

Lastly, increased general awareness and understanding of reproductive violence as a distinct harm among policymakers, practitioners, civil society and the public will help foster attention and support for effective documentation.

