



gender action for peace and security

GAPS Secretariat Statement

“More than a human can bear”: Israel's systematic use of sexual, reproductive and other forms of gender-based violence since 7 October 2023

The recent [UN Commission of Inquiry \(COI\) report](#) has once again highlighted the harrowing reality faced by Palestinian women and girls under Israeli occupation. It documents the systematic use of sexual, reproductive, and gender-based violence, the intentional destruction of women's healthcare facilities, and the continued targeting of reproductive health infrastructure in Gaza. These actions amount to crimes against humanity and form part of a broader pattern of oppression and extermination. The COI report explicitly states that Israel has committed "*genocidal acts*" against Palestinians in Gaza by "*deliberately inflicting on the Palestinian population conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction, in whole or in part.*" The UK has committed to preventing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) through its Women, Peace and Security (WPS) National Action Plan and Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI). However, its failure to act decisively on Palestine undermines these commitments and exposes an unacceptable double standard in comparison with UK responses to other conflict contexts. This double standard weakens the UK's international standing and harms the international rule-based order.

Over the years, Palestinians have consistently documented and shared testimonies, revealing that this is a systematic and intentional strategy that feeds into the religious and cultural sensitivities of Palestinian society. The COI report confirms that sexual and gender-based violence is increasingly used as a method of war by Israel to destabilise, dominate, oppress, and destroy the Palestinian people. These long-standing and well-documented practices have increased significantly in severity and frequency since 7 October 2023. The Commission documented a "*pattern of sexual violence, including cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence, torture, and other inhumane acts that amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity*". This violence is not limited to women and girls—Palestinian men and boys have also been subjected to sexualised torture, forced nudity, rape, and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence, particularly in detention centres, demonstrating the widespread and systematic nature of these crimes.

The COI report details widespread and systematic sexual violence by Israeli forces, including forced nudity, sexualised torture, rape, and other acts of sexual violence used as a means of punishment and humiliation against Palestinians. These violations have been committed in detention centres, during home raids, and at checkpoints across the West Bank and Gaza. The COI further establishes that Israeli officials have actively legitimised and encouraged these crimes, fostering a culture of impunity. The targeting of hospitals, maternal clinics, and reproductive health services, alongside the systematic withholding of humanitarian aid and destruction of wider infrastructure has resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe, with miscarriages increasing by 300% and pregnant detainees being denied medical care. As the COI concludes—these actions "*constitute crimes against humanity, including extermination*".

The UK Government must take urgent action in response to the findings of the COI report and should formally recognise sexual and gender-based violence against Palestinians as a systematic and deliberate war crime and hold Israel accountable. Firstly, it must demand a permanent ceasefire to prevent further harm to Palestinian women and girls. The blockade of humanitarian aid, including life-saving medical supplies, must be lifted to allow the repair and functioning of hospitals, maternal health clinics, and shelters. The UK must support the full

restoration of UNRWA services, ensuring access to healthcare, sanitation, and protection for displaced Palestinian women and girls.

Justice and accountability must be a priority. The UK must support and cooperate with the International Criminal Court (ICC) to ensure those responsible for SGBV against Palestinians are held accountable. This does not divest the UK from its concurrent obligation to prosecute and punish those implicated in such crimes who are within the jurisdiction of the UK. As set forth in the UK's PSVI strategy, steps must be taken to introduce targeted sanctions on Israeli officials and military personnel implicated in the commission of SGB crimes.

The UK must also take immediate steps to support the documentation and investigation of these crimes. This includes ensuring that social media companies document all evidence uploaded by perpetrators prior to its removal. The PSVI Team of Experts must be deployed to document cases of conflict-related sexual violence in Palestine, just as it has done in other conflict zones. Direct support should be provided to Palestinian women's rights organisations, Civil Society Organisations and Palestinian NGOs in collecting evidence and offering survivor-centred support services. An independent UN monitoring mechanism should be established to ensure that gender-based crimes are investigated and perpetrators are held accountable.

The UK government must publicly condemn Israel's use of sexual gender-based violence as a weapon of war and ensure that Palestinian voices and experiences are central to discussions on what justice and peace looks like. A two-way embargo must be enforced, meaning that all arms sales to Israel must be suspended in accordance with the UK's obligations under the Arms Trade Treaty, given the overwhelming amount of evidence that these weapons are being used to commit 'serious human rights violations, including serious acts of gender-based violence and serious acts of violence against women and children'. The UK should demand that Israel ends its systematic targeting of women and girls and upholds its obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law.

Sexual, reproductive, and gender-based violence are critical components of the broader oppression of Palestinians. These acts are used as tools to further entrench the subjugation of the Palestinian people, maintain Israel's system of oppression, and deny Palestinians their right to self-determination. These crimes must be addressed by tackling their root causes—ending the unlawful occupation, dismantling settlements, ensuring the right to return, restoring property and land, and providing transformative reparations to all Palestinians, especially those whose property cannot be restored. These steps must be taken to fully comply with the ICJ's Advisory Opinion of July 2024.

For far too long, Palestinian women and girls have borne the heaviest toll of Israel's apartheid regime, enduring sexual violence, reproductive health crises, repeated displacement and systemic oppression. The UK's failure to act decisively contradicts its own commitments to ending sexual violence in conflict and to the WPS agenda. We call on the UK and the international community to uphold international law, ensure accountability, and take immediate action to protect the rights and dignity of Palestinians.

GAPS Secretariat, 18th March 2025

