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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[26 May 2025]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Systematic Torture of Palestinian Female Prisoners in Israeli Jails, Including Sexual Violations

Israeli occupation authorities continue to target Palestinian women through systematic arrest campaigns, which have escalated to an unprecedented level since October 7. According to the Palestinian Prisoners' Club, 525 cases of women's arrests have been documented since the beginning of the events of October 7. As of May 15, 2025, Israel continues to detain 37 female prisoners, including two who are five months pregnant: Reema Balawi from Tulkarm and Zahraa Al-Kawazbeh from Bethlehem.(1)

The two detainees, Balawi and Al-Kawazbeh, are held under harsh and degrading conditions in Damon Prison, where they are subjected to organized and systematic violations, including deliberate starvation. This was reflected in their testimonies during a recent visit to Damon Prison. In addition, they are subjected to a range of systematic policies of deprivation, which have extended even to their most basic needs.

The prisoner Reema Balawi (31 years old), a mother of two, was arrested by Israeli forces from her home in Tulkarm in February 2025, on charges of so-called "incitement." Zahraa Al-Kawazbeh (37 years old), a mother of three, was arrested at a military checkpoint set up by Israeli forces upon her return with her family from Jericho, at the beginning of April 2025.

The suffering of the two pregnant detainees illustrates the extent of Israeli crimes against Palestinian women in Israeli prisons. Reema Balawi suffers from thalassemia and is experiencing severe health deterioration without any medical care. Zahraa Al-Kawazbeh (37 years old), from Bethlehem, suffers from neurological disorders and chronic pain in her back and abdomen. She is held in inhumane conditions.

In September 2024, 31 international human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch and Save the Children, issued a joint statement expressing deep concern over "the sharp increase in the number of Palestinians detained since October 7," noting that "credible reports of torture and ill-treatment, including sexual violence, point to a pattern of systematic abuse."

In the context of monitoring the outcomes and consequences of the ongoing genocide in the Gaza Strip, the Independent Commission for Human Rights (ICHR) – "Diwan Al-Madhalem" – issued a research paper titled "Violations Against Female and Male Prisoners During the Genocidal War on Gaza." Prepared by researcher Khalida Jarrar, the paper presents detailed documentation based on testimonies from released prisoners through recent exchange deals, as well as reports by lawyers who managed to visit some detainees. It focuses on the new conditions of detention, especially after October 7, 2023, and the grave violations suffered.(2)

The report highlights specific violations against female prisoners, including threats of rape, degrading strip searches, group strip searches conducted to humiliate, verbal sexual harassment, and the use of menstruation as a means of physical and psychological pressure—by denying access to sanitary pads, clean clothes, or bathrooms. Other abuses include violation of privacy, forced photography without hijab, and the circulation of such images among soldiers and interrogators. Religious abuse was also reported, such as the forcible removal of hijabs, insulting language, denial of basic needs, lack of hygiene supplies, and severe overcrowding in cells.

These practices, rooted in policies dating back to the 1967 occupation, are now being implemented by Israeli authorities with renewed intensity and brutality.

The researcher employed a methodology based on direct interviews with nine female prisoners who were released in recent exchange deals, as well as interviews with lawyers who managed to meet with ten female detainees inside Damon Prison, and thirty male prisoners held in Ofer, Negev, Megiddo, and Gilboa prisons. The selection took into account diversity in gender, age, and geographical region. In addition, a number of relevant academic sources and writings by prisoners themselves describing current conditions were reviewed.

The Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC) revealed that it had sent a letter to Ms. Pramila Patten, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, regarding the violations suffered by Palestinian female prisoners and women at Israeli military checkpoints. The letter called for the inclusion of Israel's violations—particularly those related to sexual violence and reproductive rights—in the upcoming report on the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

The center also urged cooperation with the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry, which has a mandate to investigate such violations. This cooperation would provide the Commission with access to information relevant to its investigations into cases of sexual violence against Palestinian women, and allow it to incorporate findings into its next report.

Additionally, the statement called for pressure on Israel to cooperate with the Commission and to allow for an impartial and independent investigation into the reported incidents of sexual assault near Gaza, ensuring transparency and accountability for these violations.

Further reinforcing the above is a recent report published on 12 March 2025 by the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel.⁽³⁾ The report, titled "Beyond What the Human Body Can Endure: Israel's Systematic Use of Sexual and Reproductive Violence and Other Forms of Gender-Based Violence Since 7 October 2023," accuses Israel of using sexual violence as a weapon of war against Palestinians.

It notes that Israeli forces have employed sexual violence as a tool of control and destruction, including forced nudity, sexual harassment, rape, and sexual torture. These findings require your urgent attention and follow-up to ensure international justice and the protection of human rights.

On 12 March 2025, attorney Kifaya Khuraim, who works with the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling, delivered a powerful testimony before the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry in Geneva. In her statement, she revealed horrifying accounts of sexual and physical abuse suffered by Palestinian female prisoners in Israeli detention centers since 7 October 2023.

Khuraim reported that one woman was transferred to the Sde Teiman detention center, where she was repeatedly strip-searched, photographed, and then raped twice by two Israeli soldiers while being filmed. She further stated that many women had been forcibly disappeared and transferred to detention facilities such as Zikim and Naqab, where they were "forced to undress completely and sit naked in large halls, alongside both men and women."

Khuraim also disclosed that "Israeli civilians were allowed to enter the detention centers, where they mocked the detainees, took photos of them, and watched them as if they were in a zoo."⁽⁴⁾ She emphasized that Israeli soldiers were instructed on how to treat Palestinian women, and that sexual violence had become a recurring pattern across various locations and military units.

Conclusion

The documented testimonies, legal reports, and international findings presented in this report reveal a systematic and escalating pattern of abuse against Palestinian female detainees in Israeli custody since 7 October 2023. These include widespread sexual violence, forced nudity, threats of rape, and denial of basic health and hygiene needs, in violation of international humanitarian law and international human rights standards.

The alarming recurrence of these violations, as reported by survivors, human rights lawyers, and UN bodies, points to a deliberate and coordinated policy that uses the female body as a tool of domination, humiliation, and control. The intentional use of sexual violence, particularly in the context of armed conflict and mass incarceration, may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity under international law.

These acts are not isolated incidents. Rather, they represent a continuation and intensification of longstanding policies dating back to 1967, now carried out with greater brutality and impunity. The absence of accountability and Israel's refusal to cooperate with international investigations only deepens the suffering of victims and emboldens perpetrators.

Recommendations to the UN Human Rights Council

1. Establish an independent and gender-sensitive international investigation into the allegations of sexual and gender-based violence committed against Palestinian women in Israeli detention since 7 October 2023.
2. Ensure full cooperation from Israel with the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry and allow access to detention sites, including interviews with current and former detainees.
3. Call for immediate protection measures for all Palestinian women in Israeli custody, including access to medical care, legal assistance, and independent monitoring.
4. Recognize sexual violence as a weapon of war and demand accountability for those responsible, including military and political officials, in accordance with international law.
5. Urge UN Member States to suspend all military and security cooperation with Israel until it complies with international obligations regarding the treatment of detainees and prevention of gender-based violence.
6. Support survivor-centered justice mechanisms, including reparations, psychosocial support, and public acknowledgment of harm, in line with the UN's guidance on victims' rights and transitional justice.

(1) <https://www.ppsmo.ps/home/studies/17419?culture=ar-SA>

(2) <https://www.ichr.ps/en/category-1/8663.html>

(3) <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session58/a-hrc-58-crp-6.pdf>

(4) https://www.newarab.com/news/israel-civilians-took-part-abuse-palestinian-detainees-un?utm_source=chatgpt.com