



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED AND REVIEWED BY

Wulf Rössler,
Charité University Medicine Berlin, Germany

*CORRESPONDENCE

Thomas Wenzel
✉ drthomaswenzel@web.de

RECEIVED 29 May 2025

ACCEPTED 02 June 2025

PUBLISHED 26 June 2025

CITATION

Wenzel T, Kizilhan JI and Schulze TG (2025)
Editorial: Sexual violence in times of conflict.
Front. Public Health 13:1637494.
doi: 10.3389/fpubh.2025.1637494

COPYRIGHT

© 2025 Wenzel, Kizilhan and Schulze. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

Editorial: Sexual violence in times of conflict

Thomas Wenzel^{1,2,3*}, Jan Ilhan Kizilhan^{1,4,5} and
Thomas G. Schulze^{2,6}

¹World Psychiatric Association Psychological Aspects of Persecution and Torture, Geneva, Switzerland,

²Department of Psychiatric Phänomik and Genomic (IPPG), Ludwig Maximilians University, Munich, Germany,

³Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, Medical University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria,

⁴Institute for Transcultural Psychotherapy (ITP), Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University (DHBW), Stuttgart, Germany,

⁵Dohuk University, Duhok, Iraq, ⁶World Psychiatric Association, Geneva, Switzerland

KEYWORDS

gender, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), war, torture, FGM

Editorial on the Research Topic Sexual violence in times of conflict

Sexual violence has been demonstrated to be the form of violence probably most strongly associated with severe and long-term suffering, with potentially life-long symptoms, but also with a broader impact on family, community, and members of the next generation (1, 2). Further consequences include rising suicide rates (3), especially when victims get pregnant from rape and face the difficult situation of stigma and of taking care of the resulting offspring in an often hostile environment. Physical injury and infections (4) can also accompany the fate of survivors and should be considered in addition to the psychological, economic, and social impact.

The importance of the issue is reflected, for example, by the inclusion of sexual violence as a special focus and issue of concern in international human rights and humanitarian law standards¹.

The term “sexual violence” can be used regarding different situations, ranging from sexual assault, rape and sexual torture to harassment and other forms of sexual violence, all unfortunately common events in apparently “lawless” conflict- and post-conflict settings and common even in early records of that events, or even as a systematic strategy of terror (5–8). “Virginity testing”, forced marriage, domestic violence, or FGM (9) also should be considered in this context, though they most commonly occur in “everyday” settings, but also with increased frequency in conflict environments.

Sexual violence has become a key question in the context of setting limits in armed conflicts, also considering its increasing global frequency. This rise in frequency can be attributed not only to the growing number of such conflicts and deterioration of human rights standards in some countries, but also to its increased use by state and non-state actors such as ISIS. The last was explored, for example, by Kizilhan et al. (10, 11) in regard to the persecuted Kurdish Yezidi minority of Iraq in the context of the ongoing genocidal environment experienced by this group.

The persistent work of the international courts to prosecute the crime of sexual violence is a good additional indicator of the attention given internationally to the criminal aspects

1 <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g16/000/97/pdf/g1600097.pdf> (Accessed April 20, 2025).

of sexual violence perpetrated in conflicts, together with the establishment of specialized expert teams by the UN.

In this context, it should be considered that collection of data in armed conflict or similar situations can be a major challenge, because of the re-traumatization risk of victims, but also because of the often disorganized or even dangerous research environments. The courage and dedication of researchers, as well as the victims giving testimony in such situations, lend additional importance to the results.

The authors in this special issue, therefore, take up insufficiently covered questions and situations in that important field.

Michael and Demeke report on the recent explosive situation in the Amhara region of Ethiopia using a multicenter-based cross-sectional design.

Green et al. report on the situation of health care workers supporting Rohingya victims of sexual and other violence in the vast refugee camp of Cox's Bazaar, one of the largest global camps, drawing attention to that largely neglected crisis point.

Kidie et al. use a mixed methods approach, probably the best strategy to better understand both the scope and the experience of victimization after sexualized violence, again using a group of survivors in the emerging Ethiopian crisis region.

Baroudi et al. demonstrated the prevalence of sexual violence as a problem to be addressed also in those persons living in exile, usually after escaping the original war and persecution environments.

The editors hope that the results from the research presented in this special volume will further underline the need to fight against any form of sexual violence, especially in conflict regions, but also to offer sustainable immediate as well as long-term and interdisciplinary support and protection to all survivors.

References

- Ackard DM, Eisenberg ME, Neumark-Sztainer D. Long-term impact of adolescent dating violence on the behavioral and psychological health of male and female youth. *J Pediatr.* (2007) 151:476–81. doi: 10.1016/j.jpeds.2007.04.034
- Paul C, Manjunatha S, Lakshmi Pa A, Sharma G. A study on the information transfer and long-term psychological impact of child sexual abuse. *Georgian Med News.* (2024) 348:28–31.
- Lee J, Kwak YS, Kim YJ, Kim EJ, Park EJ, Shin Y, et al. Psychiatric sequelae of former “comfort women,” survivors of the Japanese military sexual slavery during World War II. *Psychiatry Investig.* (2018) 15:336–43. doi: 10.30773/pi.2017.11.08.2
- Murphy SM. Rape, sexually transmitted diseases and human immunodeficiency virus infection. *Int J STD AIDS.* (1990) 1:79–82. doi: 10.1177/095646249000100201
- Geller LN, Rauch SD. DNA testing to identify rapists in the former Yugoslavia. *JAMA.* (1994) 271:745.
- Guinan ME. War crimes of the 90s: rape as a strategy. *J Am Med Womens Assoc.* (1993) 48:59–61.
- Marusic M. More on Bosnian rapes. *J Am Med Womens Assoc.* (1994) 49:2.
- Swiss S, Giller JE. Rape as a crime of war. A medical perspective. *JAMA.* (1993) 270:612–5. doi: 10.1001/jama.1993.03510050078031
- Wenzel T, Kizilhan JI, Alksiri R, Dorfner D, Messerschmidt EJ, Chen AF. FGM and restorative justice—a challenge for developing countries and for refugee women. *Int J Environ Res Public Health.* (2021) 18:17. doi: 10.3390/ijerph18178913
- Kizilhan JI. PTSD of rape after IS (“Islamic State”) captivity. *Arch Womens Ment Health.* (2018) 21:517–24. doi: 10.1007/s00737-018-0824-3
- Kizilhan JI, Berger T, Sennhauser L, Wenzel T. The psychological impact of genocide on the Yazidis. *Front Psychol.* (2023) 14:1074283. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1074283

Author contributions

TW: Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Writing – original draft. JK: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. TS: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

The author(s) declared that they were an editorial board member of *Frontiers*, at the time of submission. This had no impact on the peer review process and the final decision.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.