

Prisoners of War and Gender Perspectives

Legal framework governing the protection, handling and release of prisoners of war

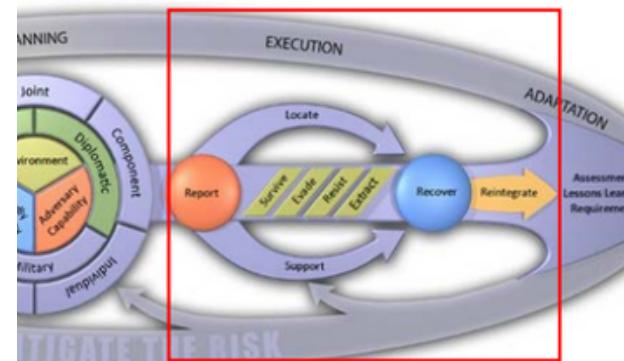
Prisoners of War (PoWs) are protected under the Third Geneva Convention (GCIII). The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is currently updating its original commentaries to the GC and its Additional Protocols in order to reflect changes in law and practice, including the increasing number of women in combat roles which increases a higher rate of capture. The principle of equal treatment outlined in GCIII means that gender mainstreaming is a legal requirement in handling PoWs, recognising the different needs of men and women to ensure that they receive adequate rations, clothing and medical care.

Case study: Ukraine

Since the start of Russia's full-scale war, over 5,000 prisoners have been returned to Ukraine. A further 2,577 personnel have been confirmed as remaining in Russian captivity by the OSCE. Additionally, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has documented 484 cases of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) by Russian forces, 72% of which were committed against men and boys. The UN notes that the vast majority of these cases occurred in detention settings.

Male PoWs and detainees have been more likely to experience sexual torture such as threats of rape to self or others, forced nudity, forced witnessing of sexual violence, and genital mutilation.

Once regarded as an unlikely circumstance for NATO members' National Armed Forces, there is now recognition that the current security environment highlights the heightened risk of soldiers being taken prisoner in the event of a conflict. This has an evident effect on force strength, felt both during detention and as soldiers are reintegrated back into their units. This also affects societal resilience; acts of sexual violence and sexual torture perpetrated against Ukrainian soldiers have been recorded and distributed via Telegram channels, or sent directly to contacts (Technology Facilitated Gender Based Violence - TFGBV). Sexual torture often rests upon gendered societal ideas of honor, such as men being unable to protect family members. Gendered perspectives enable us to understand how men and women may experience being PoWs differently, and have different needs, vulnerabilities and requirements.



SERE within the NATO personnel recovery framework

Gender perspectives in training and reintegration

Training without the integration of gender perspectives means that soldiers may not be adequately prepared for experiences of capture and detention - crucial to mental resilience. Additionally, a lack of gender perspectives during debriefings may mean that experiences of sexual violence in detention are not specifically addressed, and a lack of choice between male or female debriefers may make survivors less likely to disclose their experiences.

Having violence be appropriately recognised means that survivors have access to appropriate care and can reintegrate into their units and society. The Ukrainian reparations system, for example, provides access to psychological support, healthcare and housing.



Integrating gendered perspectives into the protection, handling, and release and reintegration of Prisoners of War is a legal imperative and improves reintegration of soldiers to their units and in society. NATO Allies and partner militaries should ensure that this is implemented during SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Extraction) training, and that mixed-gender debriefing teams are also trained to address such issues.