

Trauma-Responsive Resources for International Accountability Processes

This handout brings together key terminology and practical resources on trauma-responsive approaches in international accountability processes.

International accountability processes address some of the most serious crimes known to humanity: **war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, and the crime of aggression**. Victims and survivors involved in these processes have often experienced extreme violence, including torture, sexual violence, loss of family members, and displacement. The resources below support the move from **recognition to implementation** of trauma-responsive approaches.

Distinguishing features that embed and intensify the presence of trauma in this field include:

- **Investigations in conflict and post-conflict settings**, often under conditions of ongoing instability
- **Limited meaningful participation and agency** for victims and survivors in proceedings
- **Sustained and repeated exposure** to graphic and distressing material
- **Secondary traumatisation of practitioners**, including staff and civil society partners
- **Long timelines and complex procedures** which can prolong uncertainty for victims
- **Tension between legal objectives and psychosocial needs**, where well-being may be subordinated to procedural requirements
- **Geographical and cultural distance** between institutions and affected communities
- **Power imbalances** between institutions, local actors, and affected communities
- **Language and interpretation barriers**, which can distort testimony and limit understanding of proceedings

These dynamics mean that trauma affects not only victims and survivors, who may experience re-traumatisation or revictimisation through justice processes themselves, but also practitioners, and can shape how justice processes function in practice.

Key Terminology

Atrocity crimes: include [war crimes](#), [crimes against humanity](#), [genocide](#), and the [crime of aggression](#), and are considered the [most serious crimes](#) of concern to the international community as a whole. They are grave crimes, typically committed on a large scale or in a systematic manner, and are also referred to as “core international crimes”.

Documentation: international and domestic accountability processes for core international crimes normally rely on community-based and international civil society organisations to gather crucial information on the ground when no other actors are present at the crime scene. Through [documentation](#), preservation efforts, and direct interactions with victims, witnesses, and affected communities, civil society makes vital evidentiary contributions to judicial and fact-finding mechanisms, including International Criminal Court ([ICC](#)) proceedings, which often involve exposure to traumatic material.

Extraterritorial jurisdiction: a state’s ability to exercise jurisdiction over crimes committed outside its territory, based on **active personality** (nationality of the suspect), **passive personality** (nationality of the victim), or **universal jurisdiction** (UJ), where nationality is not required. In practice, many cases in Europe and Canada rely on nationality or the presence of the suspect, while some jurisdictions, including Argentina, have developed broader UJ practice. [UJAR 2025](#) compiles developments in 95 extraterritorial (including UJ) cases prosecuted in 16 countries.

Gender-based crimes (GBC): ICC [Rome Statute](#) crimes involving (1) sexual violence; (2) reproductive violence; and/or (3) other forms of [gender-based violence](#). While sexual violence and reproductive violence are often closely related (e.g. rape resulting in pregnancy), they are not completely coterminous. For example, forced nudity may constitute sexual violence without necessarily entailing reproductive violence. Further, GBC may involve gender-based violence that is neither sexual nor reproductive in nature, such as denying girls’ education.

International accountability mechanisms: courts, tribunals, and other bodies that collect evidence, investigate, and/or prosecute atrocity crimes, such as the [ICC](#), the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria ([IIIM](#)), and the Kosovo Specialist Chambers ([KSC](#)), as well as national authorities, including specialised units and courts in countries such as [Argentina](#), [Australia](#), [Canada](#), [Central African Republic](#), [Colombia](#), [Democratic Republic of the Congo](#), [France](#), [Germany](#), and the [Netherlands](#), exercising territorial or extraterritorial jurisdiction.

Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS): a range of supports, interventions, and organisational measures in international accountability processes that aim to protect and promote psychosocial well-being and prevent and minimise harm for victims, witnesses, and practitioners. It includes community-based and social support (e.g. *peer support*, *community networks*), workplace measures (e.g. *debriefings*, *workload management*, *training*, *access to counselling*), and specialised psychological or clinical care.

Re-traumatisation and revictimisation: while **re-traumatisation** refers to reliving or re-triggering the emotional and psychological distress of a past trauma, for example when testifying on the stand, **revictimisation** refers to being subjected to new harm, mistreatment, or injustice after the initial victimisation, for example through dismissive treatment, lack of protection, or harmful procedures.

Secondary and vicarious trauma: forms of trauma resulting from exposure to the traumatic experiences of others. **Secondary trauma** can arise quickly following exposure (e.g. *intrusive thoughts, hypervigilance*), while **vicarious trauma** develops more gradually and reflects deeper, cumulative changes in how individuals perceive themselves, others, and the world (e.g. *changes in worldview, trust, sense of safety*), particularly in professions that repeatedly engage with victims and traumatic material, including graphic imagery and testimony, such as investigators, lawyers, interpreters, analysts, and civil society actors.

Transitional justice: refers to how societies respond to the legacies of mass atrocities and serious human rights violations. It encompasses both judicial and non-judicial measures, including criminal prosecutions, truth-seeking processes, reparations programmes, and institutional reforms. These processes seek to address the harms suffered by victims and survivors, including physical, material, and psychological harms, although trauma per se is not always explicitly recognised or consistently addressed in practice.

Trauma-informed / trauma-responsive: approaches that recognise the prevalence and impact of trauma on victims, survivors, and practitioners. **Trauma-informed** approaches seek to understand and account for trauma, while **trauma-responsive** approaches go further by adapting practices, procedures, and institutional responses to minimise harm, avoid re-traumatisation, and support safety, dignity, agency, and pathways to healing.

Victims and survivors: at the ICC, [victims](#) are persons who have suffered harm as a result of crimes within the jurisdiction of the Court and may, once recognised in proceedings, exercise legal rights relating to participation, protection, information, and reparations. While there is still no legal definition of [survivor](#) under international law, it is increasingly used to recognise agency, lived experience, and resilience. These terms are not interchangeable, and it is important to respect how individuals choose to identify themselves.

Victim-centred: means creating an environment in which victims are treated with dignity and respect and their rights are upheld. It includes establishing relationships that promote emotional and physical safety, build trust, and support agency and a sense of control. The term is widely used in international justice policy and practice, but is often not meaningfully implemented.

Resources



Documentation

- **Murad Code**: a voluntary code of conduct, named after Nadia Murad, a Yazidi human rights activist and survivor of ISIS captivity, which sets out minimum standards for the safe, effective, ethical, and trauma-informed gathering and use of information about systematic and conflict-related sexual violence ([ENG](#) | [FR](#) | [ES](#) | [ARA](#) | [BOS](#) | [NE](#) | [SW](#) | [UKR](#)).
- **Open-Source Practitioner's Guide to the Murad Code** developed by the Institute for International Criminal Investigations (IICI) and the Human Rights Center at the Berkeley School of Law, to help practitioners recognise and consider critical legal, ethical, human rights and practical issues related to open-source information – and take thoughtful, pre-emptive preparatory actions – in order to avoid harming survivors.
- **In Our Own Words: Survivor Perspectives Resource** developed by IICI with survivors captures how they have experienced documentation and investigation processes, and what survivor-centred practice looks like in action. Their words have urgent implications for practitioners seeking to gather and use information in a survivor-centred manner. Read the [Resource](#). Visit the [Microsite](#).
- **Murad Code Rights Tool for Survivors** setting out 10 important things for survivors to remember before, during, and after taking part in in-person interviews ([ENG](#) | [FR](#) | [ES](#) | [ARA](#) | [BOS](#) | [FI](#) | [NE](#) | [SW](#) | [UKR](#)).
- **Trauma-Informed Investigations Field Guide** (parts 3-6) published by the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh (UNITAD) and the Human Rights in Trauma Mental Health Program at Stanford University that discusses trauma-informed interviews and interview techniques, UNITAD's witness protection and support unit, and psychological assessment and care.



Institutional reforms

- **Integration of MHPSS Approaches in Accountability Mechanisms for Atrocity Crimes**: study led by An Michels, ICC psychologist and a trauma expert, which examines and disseminates effective practices for integrating MHPSS in accountability mechanisms and seeks to foster a community of practice among mental health and legal practitioners. See also the practical [Guidance on Implementing the MHPSS Principles of the Murad Code](#).

- [Survivor Engagement Protocol](#) and [Interactive Checklist](#): developed by Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice in partnership with Grace Agenda, Synergy for Justice, Tallawah Justice for Women. Practical tools for survivor-centred engagement in non-judicial justice and advocacy, covering consent, risk, logistics, compensation, psychosocial support, follow-up, and accountability.
- [Murad Code Competency Framework & Assessment Tools](#) and [Murad Code Audit Tool for Organisations](#): tools for recruitment and competency assessment, and for reviewing how Murad Code standards are embedded in organisational policies and practice.
- [Transitional Justice, MHPSS: Renewing the UN Approach to Transitional Justice](#) provides an overview of the relevance of MHPSS to transitional justice, outlines key linkages and challenges, and offers recommendations to support the United Nations in better integrating mental health and psychosocial support into transitional justice processes.

Secondary & Vicarious Trauma

- [Trauma-Informed Investigations Field Guide](#) (part 7) published by UNITAD and the Human Rights in Trauma Mental Health Program at Stanford University, discusses self-care and ways to address vicarious trauma.
- [Genocide Prosecution Network's](#)/Eurojust forthcoming (first of its kind) guidelines on secondary trauma, aimed at national authorities (investigators and prosecutors) and CSOs documenting, investigating, and prosecuting core international crimes.
- [Dealing with Secondary Trauma, Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#) - Asymmetrical Haircuts: International Justice Podcast with guests including Myrna McCallum and Danya Chaikel.
- [How to Prevent, Identify and Address Vicarious Trauma: While Conducting Open Source Investigations in the Middle East](#), by Hannah Ellis, Bellingcat.
- [How to Maintain Mental Hygiene as an Open Source Researcher](#), by Giancarlo Fiorella, Bellingcat.
- [The Emotional Labour of International Criminal Lawyers](#), in *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, by Alex Batesmith and Chalen Westaby.

The **International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)** is an international NGO federating 188 member organisations in 117 countries working to protect, support, and raise the voices of human rights defenders, victims, and survivors through investigations, prosecutions, and advocacy.

FIDH leads the **Global Initiative Against Impunity (GIAI)**: Making Justice Work, a consortium of eight international NGOs and the Coalition for the ICC promoting comprehensive justice and accountability for core international crimes and serious human rights violations.