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Ukraine: “I Just Wanted Them to Shoot Me” | Institute for War and Peace Reporting

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Male survivors of conflict-related sexual violence often struggle to access legal redress and psychological help.

For two agonising months, Kherson resident Oleksii Sivak was held in a temporary detention centre where – alongside other detainees – he was relentlessly beaten and subjected to torture.

"Painful is an understatement. I just wanted them to shoot me," the 41-year-old told IWPR, recalling the most excruciating abuse: the so-called "lie detector" or "field telephone" when electric wires were attached to ears, toes and genitals.

"We lived on hope, helping and supporting each other as best as we could," he said.

Sivak, a former sailor, had thrown himself into activism after Russian troops seized control of Kherson in February 2022 – an occupation that would last for nine months.

Together with friends, he organised a field kitchen for elderly and frail residents, as well as hanging Ukrainian flags around the city, painting manhole covers blue and yellow, and attaching ribbons to Russian vehicles.

"I understood that if we didn't show that we were here, they would think that their power was established," Sivak said.

But one day, four Russians armed with assault rifles came to arrest him and Sivak was charged with separatism and terrorism. He was only released a few days before the Russian retreat because there was no room left in the vehicle transporting prisoners to the still-occupied left bank of the Dnipro river.

"It felt strange to see bright light after so many days in the semi-darkness," he said. "The air felt so rich, almost sweet."

After being released from captivity, many men struggle to access legal redress and psychological help, especially those who have experienced conflict-related sexual violence. Survivors are often reluctant to testify due to fear of stigma.

There is a wide lack of understanding amongst survivors as well as legal and health professionals of what constitutes this form of abuse. Electric shock torture administered to the genitals, for instance, is classified as conflict-related sexual violence.

There is a lack of specialised lawyers or prosecutors working specifically with male survivors, which exacerbates the issue.

It took Sivak him nine months to access physical and psychological support after his release and almost a year to have his captivity officially recognised, a common challenge for civilian detainees who are often held without undergoing any formal process or documentation.

"There were cases when documenters asked for our stories dozens of times, wrote down our needs, and then disappeared," Sivak continued. "I'll say something harsh - most of us break here, not there in captivity. Only a few break in captivity. We break when we return and see all this absurdity - when the state refuses to acknowledge you, when you have to fight to prove your rights. That breaks you far more."

After his release, and after receiving medical treatment for the physical injuries he suffered in detention, Oleksii found work as a delivery driver. He also began trying to find out the fate of many of those with whom he had spent time in detention.

"I wanted to pass on information about them to law enforcement. And also to tell my story - to speak out about my suffering. I understood that a war crime had been committed against me, and it had to be investigated."

According to the Kherson Regional Prosecutor's Office, during the pre-trial investigation into his case, Russian military personnel and police officers involved in the illegal detention and torture of civilians were identified. They have been notified of suspicion in absentia, and indictments sent to court for trial under the in absentia procedure.

As well as seeking legal redress, Sivak wanted to help other men who had been through similar experiences.

In the summer of 2024 launched an organisation called Alumni, a network of former civilian detainees focusing on providing and sharing legal and psychological support.

"I initiated monthly meetings. Now, more than 30 of us gather," he said.

The network includes men from Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, Luhansk and Kharkiv regions who, working on the principle of peer-to-peer support, meet in cafés, help each other with paperwork, share advice and simply talk.

"This is part of my work - I don't just listen to these men; I truly understand them," Sivak said.

Veronika Plotnikova, head of the Victim and Witness Support Coordination Centre, said that such simple conversations with survivors often provided more impactful than specialised psychological help.

"We learn about their urgent needs. Organisations like Alumni are essential because they help survivors recover from their trauma, feel part of a community of peers, and find a safe environment. This support allows them to regain strength and then decide for themselves whether they are ready and willing to testify about the crime committed against them."

State support mechanisms are only beginning to take shape. Plotnikova's department, established at the Prosecutor General's Office, informs citizens about their rights, provides courtroom support and offers psychological and legal assistance. However, it works solely with those already involved in criminal proceedings.

In addition, noted Plotnikova, "Court processes are long and can last for decades. We must speak to victims about what they can expect from these processes. Investigators might call them again in five or even ten years to repeat their testimony."

Oleksii Butenko, head of the department for Combating Crimes Committed in Armed Conflict at the Kherson Regional Prosecutor's Office, said that amongst both male and female survivors, psychological trauma often led to their refusal to testify. Further challenges remained the lack of access to crime scenes due to the ongoing occupation – and in Kherson, the high risk of drone attacks - as well as the destruction of evidence of torture and ill-treatment.

"One of the main difficulties in investigating such crimes is the identification of individuals who acted with their identity hidden," he

added.

Nonetheless, once victims become part of criminal proceedings, they are not only involved in the case but also become more visible to the state - they can expect psychological and legal support as well as assistance in obtaining financial compensation.

According to Kateryna Levchenko, Ukraine's Government Commissioner for Gender Policy, more men appear willing to report sexual violence when financial compensation is involved. She noted that two-thirds of sexual violence reparations claims during the war have been submitted by men. Under the interim project that allots 3,000 euro per person, 1,119 applications have been submitted, 750 of which came from men.

Plotnikova said that this was just the tip of the iceberg.

"Currently, there are 115 men whose cases have open criminal proceedings; 72 men are working with our centre," Plotnikova said, adding that there were far more male victims of conflict-related sexual violence who were yet to come forward. "In my opinion, we are talking about thousands."

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