

Experiences and perspectives of victims and survivors of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment

Evidence to the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture

September 2025

The Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF) is a specialist clinical and human rights charity that works with survivors of trafficking, torture and other forms of extreme human cruelty. Our multidisciplinary and clinical team provides a bespoke Model of Integrated Care for survivors which includes medico-legal documentation of physical and psychological injuries; specialist therapeutic care; a medical advisory service; a counter-trafficking programme; housing and welfare advice; legal protection advice; and community integration activities and services. HBF's Ambassadors for Change is a group of survivors with experience of the UK asylum system who campaign to ensure London is welcoming and fair for other people seeking safety.

We, the Ambassadors for Change, are survivors of torture, trafficking and persecution who have come to the UK in search of safety. Each of us carries scars — physical, emotional and psychological — from the violence we endured and from the long, punishing asylum process. Some of us are still waiting for decisions, some of us have refugee status, but we are united by survival and by the determination to speak out.

We refuse to stay silent. We are not only victims of torture and trafficking — we are leaders, advocates and community organisers. Together we use our voices and experiences to fight for justice, dignity and protection for all people seeking asylum. We know what it means to be dehumanised and silenced, and we stand in solidarity with others still trapped in danger or waiting to be reunited with their families. We will not stop until survivors everywhere can rebuild their lives in safety and without fear.

Impact on survivors, their families, communities and beyond

“Don’t judge a book by its cover, I might seem happy outside but dead inside.”

“It’s done, it’s over, your life depends on system.”

Torture fundamentally changes everything to survivors: *“you are not the same person after you experience torture.”* Externally, some of us carry lasting injuries and disabilities, we have to move and leave behind everything familiar to us. Internally, we experience trauma, anxiety, depression, brain fog, difficulty concentrating, avoidance and a sense of hopelessness. These effects limit our ability to study, work, learn new skills, and to participate in everyday social life. Living day-to-day *“but not alive,”* with a loss of trust in others and in institutions. For us, *“there is never an ‘I’ but always ‘WE’”*: when one member is harmed, the whole family is affected. We fear for the safety of our families and carry this burden with us for many years.

traumatise
alone
afraid
fear
insecure
haunting
distrust
unsafe
hopeless
destroyed

Seeking justice and reparation

Ultimately for survivors, justice is being believed and acknowledged. The upmost important demonstration of reparations is providing safety. Whilst we value the accountability of perpetrators, justice must include rebuilding safety and dignity. Rehabilitation as an aspect of reparation is explicitly recognised by the UN Convention against Torture (CAT)¹ which says that states must ensure that a victim of torture obtains redress, including *the means for as full rehabilitation as possible*.² This should include all the processes and services needed for them to rebuild their lives and reduce, as far as possible, the harm that has been suffered. This should include at least physical and psychological services, and social, legal and financial support.³

In addition, upholding the rights of survivors of torture can only be achieved if states take a broad, holistic approach that aims to address *all* factors that worsen mental health. This would include looking at ways to improve the treatment of people seeking asylum and survivors of torture through, for example, better housing and financial support; a more

¹ UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984)

² REDRESS, [Rehabilitation as a form of reparation under international law](#), 2009, p12-13.

³ REDRESS, [Rehabilitation as a form of reparation under international law](#), 2009, p10

responsive and trauma-informed asylum system that makes quick but fair decisions and an approach that prioritises welcome, integration and the ability to work.

Main challenges:

- Systemic disbelief: We experience disbelief from immigration authorities (especially the Home Office in UK), courts, and at times even medical professionals. Repeated rejections are experienced as further torture: *“When you get rejection, it means no one believes you — it breaks your heart into a million pieces.”*
- Retraumatizing procedures: Interviews and evidence demands that are not trauma-informed cause re-traumatisation. Courts ask for documentary evidence that cannot be produced.
- Lack of access and capacity: There is little guidance on how to access legal representation, funds, or knowledge to navigate complex judicial systems. Mental health conditions and post-traumatic symptoms reduce capacity to engage with lengthy processes.

Successful strategies for seeking legal justice:

- Holistic legal and psychosocial support: Combined legal representation with mental health support helps us to present our cases more effectively. Where state mechanisms fail, charities and community organisations have provided mental health care, housing support, and financial assistance that function as practical reparations.
- Peer support and community advocacy: Survivor-led support networks reduce isolation, provide practical assistance, and help gather corroborative evidence. Survivors who are empowered to mentor others can transform personal trauma into collective strength.

How to strengthen the implementation of survivor rights and participation

What states should do

1. States should recognise the right to rehabilitation for survivors of torture and trafficking with the processes and services in place to address their individual rights and need and ensure their long-term well-being and recovery.
2. Ensure trauma-informed processes for interviews and evidence gathering; limit repeated retraumatising questioning.
3. Guarantee access to justice:

- Ensure timely, fair consideration of claims affecting survivors' safety and provide routes to secure legal status.
 - Fund and expand legal aid targeted to torture survivors and ensure solicitors are paid promptly so specialist representation remains viable.
- 4. Ring-fence funding for specialist NGOs providing legal and psychosocial services, with administrative processes that ensure timely payment to solicitors/organisations.
- 5. Fund holistic reparations and services: commit public funding to models of support that combine specialist psychosocial care and socio-economic reintegration.
- 6. Ensure impartial, independent investigations for alleged torture and avoid political interference in adjudication of survivors' claims.

What civil society and non-state actors should do

1. Provide holistic legal and psychosocial services and ensure sustainable funding for frontline organisations.
2. Facilitate survivor-led networks for peer support, mentoring, and co-produced advocacy.
3. Develop community awareness campaigns to reduce stigma and social exclusion of survivors' families.

What international human rights mechanisms should do:

1. Facilitate meaningful survivor participation: Fund travel, interpretation, digital access and provide remuneration so survivors can attend and meaningfully participate in international spaces (UN conferences, hearings).
2. Create accessible submission channels: Offer translation, plain-language guidance, and safe digital spaces where survivors can share experiences anonymously if needed.
3. Promote good practice guidance on trauma-informed procedures and push for the adoption of survivor-centred reparations frameworks across states.
4. Actively monitor and report on systemic barriers survivors face (e.g., in asylum processes) and recommend remedial measures.

“The UN should be impartial and not political, to handle crisis without being manipulated.”