ANNUAL REPORT 2025

Mental health AND HUMAN RIGHTS INFO

Strengthening those who support others

Mental Health and Human Rights in Practice

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Mental Health and Human Rights Info (MHHRI)

By, Nora Sveaass, professor emeritus, Head of Board

Why defending human rights and supporting survivors of human rights violations is more important than ever.

We live in a time where human rights, international law, and what is often termed the rules-based international order are under severe attack. There are more ongoing conflicts, many of them targeting civilians directly, in total violation of international humanitarian law. Democratic rights are threatened, and the number of states worldwide that can be characterised as stable democracies are clearly reduced, and the many brave people working to defend human rights and whose voices advocate respect for human dignity are doing so at great risk. With all this happening around us, it may seem quite problematic to keep working for human rights and support survivors of the ongoing violations, be it as part of a conflict or as part of societies with autocratic regimes.

Yet we must hope and strive for peace and recovery – but hope is not enough. What we hear daily is the destructive narrative, including actions and plans, by those in power. Against this, there must be resistance and action, including claiming that international standards, human rights norms and peace must be in the lead. **We must believe that change is possible** in our global situation, making peace and reconstruction, democracy and diversity and human rights respected and promoted, our top priority in 2026.

What we are presenting in the following is the summary of the work that took place in 2025 by MHHRI. The work that has been undertaken, together with colleagues on a global level, is **human rights-based action and intervention**, first of all, support and mental health-oriented assistance to the many who have experienced that their basic rights have been violated.

We are talking about children exposed to armed conflict, often left alone because parents have been killed or wounded, left without school, food or any form of security, themselves exposed to violations such as sexual abuse and harassment.

We develop ways of assisting women and men who have been exposed to conflict-related sexual violence, and all those who have fled their homes because of war and threat. **Access to help in such situations is often extremely limited**, and this is why we have constantly tried to reach out to first-line helpers with tools and approaches that may represent care and support to the many survivors of different violations. The manuals, the toolboxes, the trainings, the collegial contact and supervision to helpers in the field, are our main ways of reaching out.

Human rights-informed psychosocial assistance is our main objective. But at the same time, we know so well that it takes not only good tools and approaches to provide support to persons who are suffering due to threats and violence. The helpers themselves have needs beyond the professional approaches. And in 2025, a lot of our work focused on awareness raising, but also on direct ways of supporting helpers who are often exposed to the double stresses, the pain of the others and the often painful experience of not having enough time, resources or capacities to assist and help the many who are in dire situations and needing their help, often so badly. This work will continue and will be further developed in 2026. Hopefully, a new manual, built on the experiences and reflections of helpers in several different locations, will be developed and published.

We hope that this annual report provides some insight into the work we are doing, and we are more than interested in receiving comments and input, as well as help to disseminate the training material already developed. We want to express our deepest solidarity with our empathy as well as our admiration for the many who, daily, provide support and care to those whose lives have been changed and often destroyed by conflict and violence.

Board Members

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Anna Fedina
Ukraine Office Coordinator

The MHHRI Resource Group consists of experts on mental health and human rights in war, conflict, and disaster. They support survivors and helpers, foster collaboration, and strengthen MHHRI's work by sharing knowledge and promoting mental health globally.

Resource Group

Helen Christie, Clinical Psychologist
Doris Drews, Specialist in Psychiatry
Wenche Fjeldstad, Clinical Psychologist
Sofia Colorado Valencia, Psychologist and Family Therapist
Elisabeth Ng Langdal, Human Geography and Media and Communication
Nora Sveaass, Clinical Psychologist and Professor Emeritus
Harald Bækkelund, Clinical Psychologist
Sarah Hakim, Psychologist
Ingeborg Svartsund Arntsen, Psychologist
Hanne Netland Simonsen, Clinical Psychologist Specialist
Alba Banoun, Clinical Psychologist
Constance Gaard Storvestre, Psychologist

Working on Making the Processes Visible

Throughout 2025, a central concern has been how to better highlight our work. This is partly because much of MHHRI's work takes place in processes rather than events. Training is followed by supervision. Manuals are revised and adapted. Partnerships are built over time. Knowledge is tested, adjusted and reused in new contexts.

This became particularly visible in long-term collaborations such as the continued follow-up with partners in Ukraine through AHALAR, where regular supervision sessions and ongoing dialogue extended far beyond initial activities.

Similarly, in Palestine, conversations with partners did not end with meetings, but developed into continued exchanges, follow-up sessions and concrete adjustments to support approaches. Follow-up is not something that comes after the work is done, it is an integral part of it. In the same way, revision is not a final step, but an ongoing responsibility that continues as the work develops and is taken into use in different contexts. Relationships are also not something that emerges on the side, they form the basis that makes the work possible and are essential for continued meaningful collaboration.

When Tools Travel: The Life of The Manuals

One of the clearest threads throughout the year has been the continued use and development of MHHRI's manuals. What began as written material has increasingly become a set of tools that move across contexts, are adapted by others and take on new forms in practice.

The three GBV manuals remained central. During the year, they have been applied in trainings, they have been revised, translated and further developed. The women's manual underwent substantial revision and is now close to reprinting. The children's manual in Norwegian was finalised, with support from RVTS Nord, and all three manuals were launched in Norway in June 2025. This launch was strengthened by a series of short educational films, developed to make the material more accessible for practitioners through RVTS` platforms.

Project meeting with partners

FORUT and Normisjon have been essential collaborators in the work to expand the knowledge about and the application of our manuals. Together with local partners in countries like Bangladesh, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Zambia, Sri Lanka, Nepal and India, the manuals have been used in concrete training and support settings. Through FORUT's use alone, more than 800 participants were reached in training processes with continued effects into 2025. These are not only figures of dissemination. They represent situations where practitioners have gained language and tools to address violence, trauma and psychosocial needs. The value of the manuals lies not in their publication, but in their continued use.

Bhagawati and the girls at Balika Peace Home in Nepal, receives training based on the manuals. Photos by Forut

Gender-based Violence Work as Long-term Engagement

Gender-based violence remained one of MHHRI's most consistent and developed fields of work. The material from 2025 shows clearly that this work is no longer limited to individual trainings, but has become embedded in longer processes involving partnerships, revisions, and public engagement.

In May–June, MHHRI conducted a four-day training in Oslo covering all three GBV manuals, bringing together participants from a wide range of professional and cultural backgrounds. The training was built on experience from a five-day course conducted by FORUT with their partners in Malawi and Sri Lanka, where all three manuals had been used together.

Based on this, we wanted to test whether a similar combined format could work in a different setting, in this case in collaboration with psychology students, professors and other practitioners through our partnership with Solidarity Hub. This was carried out with great success.

The aim was both to strengthen practical skills among helpers and to explore how this format could be adapted across contexts. Participants engaged actively, sharing experiences from their own work, and the diversity in backgrounds proved to be a clear strength. Feedback pointed to a strong need for practical tools, real-life cases and role play, as well as more guidance on how to act in complex situations. At the same time, the training highlighted the importance of cultural sensitivity and space for open discussion.

Overall, the experience showed that bringing the manuals together in one format is both possible and useful, particularly when combined with exchange across disciplines and contexts, and when theoretical knowledge is closely linked to practice.

In Nepal, a two-day training on the children's manual gathered 26 participants from civil society, police and local authorities. The training combined theoretical perspectives, such as understanding trauma and stress responses, with practical tools, including grounding techniques and the concept of the "good enough helper".

Students of UiO Solidarity Hub

Despite limited time and resources, participants reported that the training was directly applicable in their work with children exposed to violence.

At the same time, the thematic scope of the work has continued to expand in the sense that newer problem areas are included in the work. Particular attention was given to boys and men exposed to sexual violence. We have had a focus on both of men and boy with immigration backgrounds and also on elderly men in Norway. This was presented through contributions to the Aldringsfestivalen in Bergen, where a masterclass addressed how helpers can better recognise and support both men in general living with such experiences and in particular, how men with immigrant and local background struggle with earlier trauma, and we have focused on earlier sexual abuse, when they reach older age.

Three days of training manuals, students of UiO Solidarity Hub

Our participation in the HUMAN International Documentary Film Festival is a good example of how this field of work moves into public space. MHHRI has been part of the festival as a contributing partner since 2008, and this continued engagement remains an important highlight of the year. It offers a space for sharing knowledge, for meeting other organisations, developing collaborations and reaching audiences we do not normally engage with through our regular channels.

This year, MHHRI contributed to events focusing on feminicide in Latin America and conflict-related sexual violence in Nepal. Through film screenings and panel discussions, these themes were brought into a wider public conversation. This was a place where research, field experience and lived realities could meet. The film festival creates a different kind of meeting point, where complex issues can be shared in ways that are easier to engage with, and where new connections can emerge across sectors and contexts. Both LO and Latin-Amerikagruppen were new partners in this year's collaboration.

Gaza: Making Help Usable Under Extreme Conditions

Some of the most demanding and meaningful work in 2025 took place in relation to Gaza and Palestinian helpers.

Through collaboration with Solidarity Hub, the University of Oslo, the Children and War Foundation and key individuals, Teaching Recovery Techniques (TRT) continued under extremely difficult conditions. Safwat Diab conducted three in-person trainings in Cairo for Palestinian helpers, as well as two online trainings for participants in Gaza. These took place under severe constraints, including war conditions and significant emotional strain.

Feedback indicated that the material was experienced as concrete and applicable in practice. Many helpers, some of whom were themselves affected by trauma, highlighted that the tools were particularly useful in supporting children struggling with trauma-related symptoms such as sleep disturbances, anxiety and difficulties with concentration. The work also led to new initiatives.

A small booklet for parents and caregivers in Gaza was developed, based on local experience and written by Safwat Diab in collaboration with MHHRI colleagues. The booklet provides practical guidance on how to support children living under conditions of war, addressing fear, withdrawal and distress. When it proved impossible to distribute through conventional channels, the approach shifted towards local printing inside Gaza. It is also available on our website.

This adjustment illustrates a central aspect of MHHRI's approach: knowledge must be adaptable to remain usable. The work is not only about delivering training, but about ensuring that support can be understood, trusted and applied under changing and often extreme conditions.

Ukraine: Long-term Accompaniment and Veteran Work

The work related to Ukraine remained substantial throughout the year and is part of an engagement that goes back several years, before the full-scale invasion in 2022. This has allowed the work to grow over time, through continued contact, collaboration and support to partners in a situation that keeps changing.

The collaboration with AHALAR continued to develop, with increasing **focus on veterans**, families and communities. A key milestone was the webinar held on the 29th of April on veteran mental health and reintegration. The webinar was organised in collaboration with Ukrainian partners and the Department of Psychology at the University of Oslo. The event gathered more than 200 participants, most of them from Ukraine. It included contributions from therapists, NGOs and public actors, supported by simultaneous interpretation.

In addition, MHHRI contributed to a ten-day online festival organised with AHALAR as a part of a "house-to-house project" through the Human Rights House Foundation. The festival combines lectures, reflection sessions and exchanges **on psychosocial support and resilience.** Despite challenges such as electricity shortages and unstable conditions, the programme was completed. Regular supervision provided to the AHALAR team over time further strengthened this collaboration.

At the same time, the work on Ukraine also continues in Norway, both through raising awareness of the ongoing war and through more practical support initiatives. Our project coordinator Anna Fedina has played an important role in this, maintaining regular contact with partners, including the Norwegian Refugee Council in Ukraine, and contributing to making mental health-related information accessible to a Ukrainian-speaking audience. Her language skills and contextual understanding have been central in ensuring that communication and materials are relevant and usable.

This also connects to ongoing collaboration with Bufdir and ICDP, where Anna Fedina and close colleague Helen Christie have contributed to the development of a trauma-informed booklet for parents. The booklet draws on tools and approaches from our GBV manuals and focuses on helping parents understand their own reactions and stress responses as a basis for supporting their children. It builds on a simple but important insight, to help children regulate and feel safe, adults must first be able to recognise and stabilise themselves.

In the same way, Anna has completed the Ukrainian translation of our manual for boys and men who have survived gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual trauma during disasters, wars, and conflicts. This topic is extremely sensitive for Ukrainian society. The materials in this manual are especially valuable for helpers in Ukraine because they provide practical, evidence-based approaches for supporting boys and men who have survived gender-based violence. The guide helps professionals better understand the complex psychological effects of trauma and recognise signs of severe stress in survivors.

MHHRI also took part in broader Ukraine-related initiatives, including collaboration with Amnesty and the Nobel Peace Center. Through this, we contributed to the exhibition Stemmer bak murene with our founder, Nora Sveaass, on the panel. We also had the opportunity to meet Ukrainian human rights defenders such as Oleksandra Romantsova and Oksana Lebedeva. These encounters gave a more direct understanding of **the realities faced by children**, families and communities affected by war, also reflected in screenings such as Stolen Childhood.

This kind of work is not always easy to measure or make visible, but it is an important part of how trust is built and how collaboration is sustained over time.

AHALAR team, our partner organization in Ukraine

Caring for the Helper: From Experience to Framework

Across different contexts, a common theme has been the need to support those who support others. This led to the beginning of a manual on **Caring for helpers**, which has become a clear priority during the year and for the time to come. The manual will build on experience from training and collaboration in settings such as Palestine, Ukraine and Norway. It aims to offer a practical and rights-based framework for understanding how **prolonged exposure to others' suffering affects helpers,** and what is needed to make this work sustainable.

Much of the existing knowledge in this field comes from post-conflict settings, where there is space for recovery. However, many of the helpers we work with are operating in ongoing crises, in places such as Gaza, the West Bank, Sudan and Ukraine. Here, helpers are not outside the situation, but part of it. This creates a different kind of strain, shaped by continuous exposure, uncertainty and blurred boundaries between helper and survivor.

The manual seeks to normalise these reactions and provide concrete support. It combines a simple framework for understanding stress and trauma over time with practical strategies at three levels, individual, peer-based and organisational. The aim is to help prevent harm, strengthen support structures and make it possible to continue the work in a sustainable way.

Helpers in Gaza

Spaces Where Knowledge Meets the Public

Public events formed an important part of the organisation's work in 2025. These were not separate from the core activities, but extensions of them.
Participation in arenas such as **HUMAN** International Documentary Film Festival and **Arendalsuka** created spaces where complex issues could be explored across professional and societal boundaries. At Arendalsuka, MHHRI contributed to discussions on global mental health in the context of shrinking humanitarian funding, as well as to conversations on how Femicide is named and understood in Norway.

Other events, including the December pre-launch of the **Thinking of You exhibition**, further show how artistic and public platforms can be used to address sexual violence in conflict. The event was organised in collaboration with the Norwegian Women's Lobby and the Embassy of Kosovo. It brought together participants from different fields. Contributions included a presentation by the artist Alketa Xhafa Mripa, remarks from the Ambassador of Kosovo, inputs from Katharina Pracon (medical doctor), Nora Sveaass, Khansa Ali from the Mira Centre and activist Betsy Kawamura. Bringing together voices from different professional and personal backgrounds helped open the topic in a way that was accessible and grounded in experience.

The work will continue with the objective of organising a larger outdoor exhibition in front of the Nobel Peace Center in June 2026.

Nora Sveaass at Arendalsuka 2025, Global Mental Health Network

Talk on Femicides in Latin America, with LAG members

Networks, Resource Group, Students and Shared Knowledge

MHHRI's work continues to be closely linked to a wide network of partners, institutions and individuals. In 2025, these connections were further strengthened, both through formal collaboration and ongoing exchange across different fields.

Collaboration with the University of Oslo and Solidarity Hub contributed both to teaching and project development. Students and interns played a meaningful role in ongoing work. Lisa Bryne Mathiassen contributed to GBV-related work, revision processes and communication outputs. While intern Eisha Mehtab participated in a Council of Europe-supported programme for young human rights defenders, invited by the Human Rights House Foundation.

In October, we contributed to a three-day Student at Risk gathering in Asker, organised by **SAIH, HK-dir and the University of Bergen.** Around 45 students with backgrounds from different conflict-affected contexts participated. Nora Sveaass gave an introduction, while students connected to the Solidarity Hub facilitated small-group conversations.

Many of the participants shared personal experiences of war, displacement and violence. Our role was to support the creation of a space where these experiences could be discussed,

and to introduce simple ways to **understand stress and trauma**, including tools drawn from our GBV work. The gathering showed how important it is to meet students not only as students, but as people carrying complex experiences.

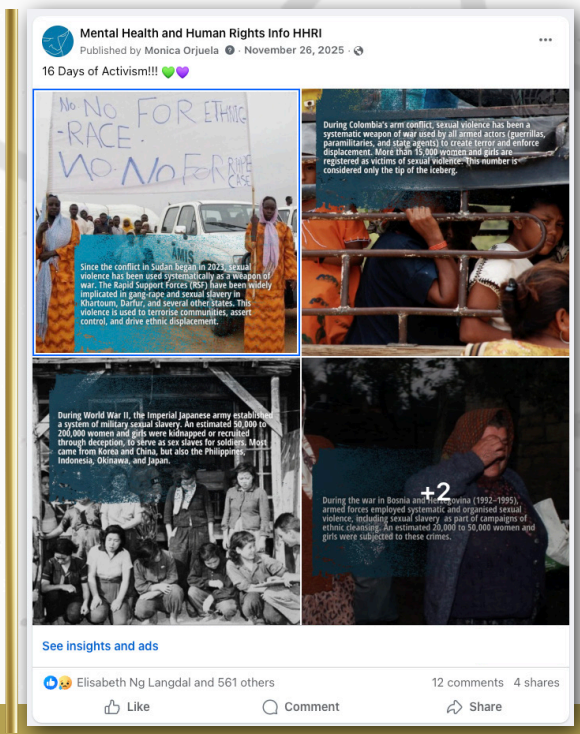
MHHRI continues to contribute to several key networks. The network on men and **boys exposed to sexual violence** remains an important part of our work, with regular meetings throughout the year that provide a space for professional exchange, development of knowledge and continued attention to a field that is often overlooked. We also take part in the Forum 1325 network, where we contribute to raising awareness of sexual and gender-based violence within the broader women, peace and security agenda. In addition, our engagement in the Norwegian Network for Global Mental Health extends beyond individual events.

Through this network, we contribute to ongoing efforts to strengthen attention to **mental health in humanitarian emergencies and development contexts**, including advocacy work and participation in joint initiatives.

Students from the University of Oslo

This work is made possible through the sustained contribution of the MHHRI Resource Group, which brings together experts in mental health and human rights in contexts of war, conflict, and disaster. The group plays a central role in supporting both survivors and helpers, while also strengthening the organisation's professional foundation through the exchange of knowledge and experience.
These different forms of collaboration are not separate from the core work. They extend the organisation's capacity, strengthen its professional grounding, and create links between practice, education and framework.

Communication in a More Restricted Space



Communication is integrated into every aspect of our operations, from the initial development of specialised knowledge to its dissemination and practical application across diverse global contexts.

A central part of this work has been carried out by our Communication Adviser, Monica Orjuela. Through her efforts, we have strengthened our reach in diverse regional contexts, making materials accessible and relevant to partners who would otherwise have limited access to this knowledge. This has been important for visibility and for inclusion and continued collaboration

Some of the publications to raise awareness about gender-based violence globally

One of the newsletters focused on journalists in conflict

Content creation and editorial work: We produced consistent newsletters in both English and Spanish, alongside the publication of specialised articles and chronicles that document our impact and methodology.

Web management and digital presence: Continuous administration and optimisation of the MHHRI website, ensuring all resources remain accessible to our global audience.

Visual and multimedia production: Development of graphic documentation, short films, and high-impact webinar materials to support our training programs.

Marketing and outreach: Design and management of digital advertising campaigns, social media content, and strategic outreach connected to key events.

Data-driven insights: Regular statistical analysis of our platforms to refine our communication efforts and maximise our reach within the international community.

Between Independence and Collaboration: Norwegian People's Aid

A central strategic process during the year was the ongoing **dialogue with Norsk Folkehjelp.** The discussions reflected opportunity and uncertainty. There is a clear recognition in the Norwegian People's Aid that MHHRI's expertise in mental health, human rights and GBV is relevant and needed. At the same time, the process unfolded within a larger institutional context characterised by restructuring and changing priorities, reflecting the global situation.

By mid-year, a memorandum of understanding was signed, and further work has focused on clarifying possible forms of collaboration, including joint applications and programme development. This process raises broader questions about how smaller and specialised organisations can engage more closely with larger actors without losing what seems characteristic and what constitutes the special resources. The process continues in a constructive way.

The year brought increased awareness of the challenges linked to digital visibility. Board discussions pointed to concerns about filtering, **changing algorithms and reduced accessibility of certain topics**, particularly those related to human rights and LGBTQI+ issues. In this landscape, communication is not only about sharing information. It is also about maintaining access to knowledge, ensuring that important perspectives remain available, and preserving space for nuanced and rights-based work.

In this sense, communication is intrinsic to MHHRI's mandate. It allows us to adapt to changing conditions and maintain vital links with our partners, ensuring access remains accessible at a time when reliable resources are increasingly scarce.

Looking Ahead: Continuity in Uncertain Times

What stands out from 2025 is not only the level of activity but the coherence across different areas of work. Whether through GBV manuals, veteran support, helper-focused work, academic collaboration or public engagement, the organisation continues to emphasise the connection between mental health and human rights.

The year also underlined that knowledge does not move on its own. It depends on people who revise, translate, teach, follow up, and remain present over time. In a context where both attention and resources are under pressure, this type of work can be difficult to sustain. At the same time, it remains necessary. MHHRI's work in 2025 reflects an ongoing effort to hold open a space for careful, practice-based and rights-informed engagement in a changing world.

Arendalsuka, cooperation with Krisesentersekretariatet, event about femicides in Norway

As We Look Back on 2025

We are grateful for the many people and organisations we have had the pleasure to work with throughout the year. Much of what MHHRI does is only possible because others generously share their time, knowledge, experiences and trust with us.

In a world where human rights are increasingly challenged, these collaborations remind us of the importance of continuing to learn from one another and stand together.

We are especially grateful to our partners and colleagues who carry out their work under difficult circumstances, often while facing many of the same challenges as those they support. Their commitment, reflections and willingness to share their experiences have shaped much of our work this year. On behalf of MHHRI, thank you to everyone who has contributed, collaborated and worked with us during 2025.