

Israel In Context: Silence!

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Where are the Women's Voices?

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“The UN's disregard and tone deaf response to Hamas's attack is woefully unsatisfactory and consistent with the UN's longstanding bias against Israel.”

Rape and other forms of sexual violence are prohibited under International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in international and non-international armed conflict. Humanitarian law clearly prohibits rape in internal conflicts. Rape committed or tolerated by any party to a non-international conflict is prohibited by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions insofar as it constitutes “violence to life and person”, “cruel treatment”, “torture”, or “outrages upon personal dignity”. In 1993, the UN Commission on Human Rights (replaced in 2006 by the UN Human Rights Council) declared systematic rape and military sexual slavery to be crimes against humanity punishable as violations of women's human rights. In 1995, the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women specified that rape by armed groups during wartime is a war crime. In a landmark case in 1998, the Rwandan tribunal ruled that “rape and sexual violence constitute genocide”. In 2008, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1820, which stated that “rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity, or a constitutive act with respect to genocide”.

Fast forward to 7th October 2023, a date that will remain in the minds and memories of the Jewish people for all time. A day during which unspeakable, horrific, brutal, savage, and monstrous actions against Israeli women and girls were carried out with glee and delight by the members of Hamas, the Palestinian “freedom fighters”, those “resisting the inhumane occupation of Gaza and the West Bank”, those who aim “to free Palestinian prisoners, stop Israeli aggression on al-Aqsa Mosque, and to break the siege on Gaza”.

But that was not enough for them. After massacring hundreds of young Israelis at a music festival, they proceeded to abuse those who were still alive, to violate and torture them. The obscene and repulsive treatment they meted out to the Israeli women, both those barely alive and those already dead, cannot be comprehended by anyone for whom morality is a life value. It cannot. It is too incomprehensible, too unfathomable, too repellent. For the sake of keeping this a family magazine, the details and descriptions of the vile acts carried out on that terrible day will be omitted. The despicable criminals who gleefully perpetrated these horrendous crimes, however, made sure to document and take selfies while carrying out their heinous acts.

Writing in Newsweek, Michal Herzog, wife of President Herzog, described a Hamas video from a kibbutz showing terrorists torturing a pregnant woman and removing her foetus. She went on to prod the world with the findings from forensic scientists on the bodies of the victims. Again, their descriptions are too horrific to publish in a family magazine, but should have been enough to send the world into uproar. She wrote: “Those of us unlucky enough to have seen video evidence broadcast by the terrorists themselves witnessed the body of a naked woman paraded through Gaza, and another, still alive, in bloodied pants, held captive at gunpoint being pulled into a jeep by her hair.” The New York Times, after an in-depth investigation into the sexual violence on 7 October, uncovered distressing, deplorable, and harrowing details which it published in a devastatingly graphic article.^[1] And yetwhere were and are the women's voices across the world? Where was and is the outcry from every international women's organisation? Where were and are the voices of the ANC Women's League? Of UN Women? Of the Global Fund for Women? Where was and is the shock and dismay emanating from the International Alliance of Women, the International Women's Media Foundation, the Women's Aid Federation of England, the European Women's Lobby? It took the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (also known as UN-Women) 50 days – 7 weeks – almost 2 months – to realise and acknowledge the horrors visited upon these women. The first statement it released equated the Hamas brutalities with Israel's self-defence. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) neglected to explicitly condemn Hamas's atrocities.

Remember the international #MeToo movement, started in 2017? A social movement and awareness campaign against sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and rape culture, in which people were encouraged to publicise their experiences of sexual abuse or sexual harassment? After 7 October, a deafening silence radiated from its offices. Unthinkable. So in response, **a group of Israeli women founded the #MeToo_Unless_UR_A_Jew online global campaign. How else to publicise the** depraved and violent, murderous acts of gender-based violence and war crimes committed against Jewish women and children by terrorists? In her article in Women's E-News, author/editor Amy Neustein wrote, “The assault on women and children is opprobrious and execrable ... I am using my public profile as a writer and activist to make an entreaty to the women's movement to respond with indignation and ire over the rape, defilement, and slaughter of our sisters in Israel.”

Addressing the media and decrying the silence of women's bodies, specifically the UN Women group, Gilad Erdan, Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, said, “To these organisations, Israeli women are not women. The rape of Israelis is not an act of rape. Their silence has been deafening.”

In a column on MSNBC, the American television channel, Natalia Mehlman Petrzela, a historian of gender at The New School in New York City, suggested the “minimisation” of acknowledging the violence against Israeli women was “the result of an ideological turn among some feminists and progressives that elevates an ‘antiracist’ agenda above the core feminist commitment to defend the universal right to bodily autonomy for all women”.

A bipartisan group of nearly 90 US House of Representatives (*the lower chamber of the US Congress*) lawmakers sent an open letter to UN Women Director Sima Bahous saying, “UN Women cannot expect to be viewed as an honest advocate for women's rights if it continues to ignore Israeli women and women of other nationalities brutalised by Hamas terrorists on 7 October in an attack that claimed the lives of 1200+ Israelis and injured thousands more ... Your disregard and tone deaf response to Hamas's attack is woefully unsatisfactory and consistent with the UN's longstanding bias against Israel.”

Legal expert Ruth Halperin-Kaddari, a former vice-chair of CEDAW who has been at the forefront of efforts to challenge the silence from global institutions, accused international organisations of failing to mention the sexual violence against women that was used systematically, intentionally, and deliberately. She described it as “weaponising women and using rape” and the women's voices were silent. The silence of such UN entities was “a shameful abuse of their mandate and their

[1] The NY Times has *never* been a friend of Israel, but it wrote this: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-harrowing-detail-nyt-shows-weaponization-of-rape-sexual-violence-during-oct-7/mission>”.

When this article was submitted for publication late December, there had still been no comments from fierce defenders of women's rights like Michelle Obama, Gwyneth Paltrow, Emma Watson, Oprah Winfrey, Meryl Streep, Charlize Theron, Amal Clooney.

The rape of Israeli girls and women was a non-event. It was accepted because of the context in which it occurred. Israeli females? Who cares? Wives and daughters of occupiers, of Zionist devils? Israeli females? They deserved it.

And the women's voices were silent.