

ANALYSIS

Why Won't More Feminists Speak Up For Israeli Victims of Sexual Violence?

Israel's government has promoted misinformation around Oct. 7, but that doesn't mean victims should be ignored.

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By *Eetta Prince-Gibson*

On March 11, Pramila Patten, the United Nations' special representative of the secretary-general on sexual violence in conflict, presented a report to the U.N. Security Council on her fact-finding mission to Israel and the Palestinian territories regarding the events of Oct. 7, 2023. Her mission, she stated, "threw light on the indiscriminate and coordinated attacks by Hamas and other armed groups against multiple military and civilian targets, aimed to kill, to inflict suffering and abduct the maximum number possible of men, women, and children—soldiers and civilians alike—in the minimum possible amount of time."

According to the report, Patten and her team "conducted interviews according to UN standards and methodology, with a total of 34 interviewees, including with survivors and witnesses of the 7 October attacks, released hostages, first responders, health and service providers and others." Further interviews were conducted with the families of hostages still held in captivity. Patten's team also met with civil society organizations, went to a military base where bodies of those killed during the attack were brought for identification and release to families, and examined four locations in the Gaza periphery where attacks took place.

Based on this, Patten said in her remarks to the Security Council that her team had found "clear and convincing information" of "a catalogue of the most extreme and inhumane forms of killing, torture and other horrors" and other violations that had occurred, including "sexual violence, abduction of hostages and corpses, the public display of captives, both dead and alive, the mutilation of corpses, including decapitation and desecration of bodies as well as the looting and destruction of civilian property."

Patten's report joins an earlier statement made by U.N. human rights experts Alice Edwards and Morris Tidball-Binz that was also sent to the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, calling for

full accountability for the multitude of alleged crimes committed against civilians in Israel during the Oct. 7 attacks. It also corroborates other reports, most recently by the [Association for Rape Crisis Centers in Israel](#) as well as by the [New York Times](#), [Washington Post](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), [BBC](#), and others, regarding allegations of rape and ongoing sexual abuse of the hostages held in Gaza.

In late March, the [New York Times](#) [published](#) the first survivor testimony of an alleged sexual assault experienced by an Israeli hostage in Gaza. Amit Soussana, a 40-year-old Israeli lawyer held hostage in Gaza, recalled being chained to a bed and fondled by a guard who constantly inquired about the timing of her period. Two weeks after her abduction, she told the *Times*, she was beaten and groped while naked and held at gunpoint, and the guard, “with the gun pointed at me, forced me to commit a sexual act on him.”

The Israeli government and some Israeli officials, including Israel Defense Forces (IDF) [officers](#) and members of the community volunteer organization [ZAKA](#) (the Hebrew acronym for Disaster Victim Identification, Extraction, and Rescue), have also issued statements and made allegations of sexual abuse by Hamas. However, some of that information has been [proved to be false](#), including reports of alleged atrocities that actually never happened. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [repeated](#) and recirculated these tales, and the veracity of an earlier [New York Times](#) report based on an Israeli soldier’s allegations has since been [called into question](#) by the paper’s own reporters.

However, the fact that the Israeli government has disseminated some disinformation about the events of Oct. 7 or misused the suffering of the victims and the hostages for its own purposes does not render all allegations made by Israeli victims and by other sources false.

Many of the acts described in reports by the U.N., rights groups, and media outlets may constitute war crimes, as [defined](#) in the 1949 Geneva Conventions and subsequent protocols, and crimes against humanity, as [defined](#) by the 1998 Rome Statute. In addition, international law [forbids](#) the taking of hostages during an armed conflict, as [defined](#) by the International Committee of the Red Cross. A war crime is a war crime, and both sides should be held accountable for the crimes and human rights violations they have committed.

More than six months after Oct. 7, some media organizations and international groups remain unconvinced that any sexual violence actually occurred that day. Others issue general statements without specific reference to Hamas and Israel, or provide a reluctant acknowledgement that minimizes the scope and severity of the sexual abuse; others ignore or give only passing reference to the plight of the estimated [134 hostages](#) still held in Gaza, at

least 19 of whom are women and children, or issue general statements without specific references to Israel and Hamas.

The *Intercept* published a scathing critique of the earlier *New York Times* report, noting that “[r]ape is not uncommon in war.” The *Intercept* article presented the reporting of the *Times* article as flawed, noting that “at every turn, when the New York Times reporters ran into obstacles confirming tips, they turned to anonymous Israeli officials or witnesses who’d already been interviewed repeatedly in the press. Months after setting off on their assignment, the reporters found themselves exactly where they had begun, relying overwhelmingly on the word of Israeli officials, soldiers, and Zaka workers to substantiate their claim that more than 30 bodies of women and girls were discovered with signs of sexual abuse.” The *Intercept* implied that the rapes and abuse perpetrated against Israelis were not a systematic or deliberate act of war.

More recently, articles in both the *Grayzone* and *Mondoweiss* analyze Patten’s report and claim, in the words of the latter, that she actually provided “no evidence of systematic rape.” The *Grayzone* also published a transcript of a discussion between Max Blumenthal and Chris Hedges in which they agree that Israel created a “shock-and-awe campaign of misinformation” in order to create “political space for its brutal assault on Gaza.” Other essays in the *Middle East Eye* and *Zeteo* focus primarily on the plight of women in Gaza, glossing over or failing to mention the plight of the Israeli women held hostage. Responses by certain women’s institutions at the United Nations and other feminist groups have also been muted.

On its website, U.N. Women refers to itself as “the global champion for gender equality,” but it has done little to seek justice for murdered Israeli women or resolve the plight of the hostages. In late November, U.N. Women Executive Director Sima Bahous did indeed brief U.N. Security Council members of the “dire situation of women in Gaza and the hostages.” And on Jan. 19, Bahous issued a statement saying, “I call again for accountability for all those affected by the 7 October attacks.” Bahous also condemned “the unparalleled destruction rained on the people of Gaza” along with a call for the release of the hostages.

But the response of U.N. Women as an organization has been less forthcoming. In late November, U.N. Women posted a condemnation of the “brutal attacks by Hamas on Israel on 7 October,” then replaced it with a statement that dropped the condemnation of the attacks and mention of Hamas, while calling for the release of the hostages. That latter statement was later deleted. Since then, its statements have condemned the deaths of Palestinian women in Gaza without any mention of the Israeli victims or the hostages remaining in Gaza, despite the testimony by released hostage Soussana in the *New York Times* and Israeli media.

Foreign officials and some advocacy organizations have been similarly equivocal. Interviewed on [CNN](#) in January, U.S. House Rep. Pramila Jayapal stated that while rape was “horrific,” it “happens in war situations. Terrorist organizations like Hamas obviously are using these as tools. However, I think we have to be balanced about bringing in the outrages against Palestinians.” (She later issued a [statement](#) unequivocally condemning “Hamas’ use of rape and sexual violence as an act of war.”)

In late March, a group of feminists [wrote](#) an open letter addressing the Israeli and U.S. governments, claiming that the Israeli government has “chosen to weaponize the issue of sexual violence for political outcome” to shield the IDF’s operations in Gaza amid the ongoing Israel-Hamas war.

In the eyes of many Israeli women, these institutions and organizations have failed to advocate for Israeli victims of sexual violence and for the safety of the remaining hostages—an abdication of their responsibility to protect the lives of all women everywhere. Their inability to simultaneously condemn the gender-based crimes committed by Hamas and the rampant death and destruction caused by Israel in Gaza raises disturbing questions about their understanding of, and commitment to, their mission—and their future relevance.

The downplaying of sexual violence by Hamas is all the more perplexing given the amount of disturbing material already in the public domain. Some of what is known about the gender-based crimes on Oct. 7 comes from testimonies of survivors, the desperate text messages that the victims sent to their families, and recovered cellphones and cameras. And some was provided by journalists or by the [attackers themselves](#), some of whom broadcast their gruesome acts to entire world in real time.

These images include the picture of [Naama Levy](#), bloodied and bruised, as she was loaded onto a Hamas vehicle; the image of terrified [Noa Argamani](#) as she was kidnapped to be brought to Gaza; and the photo of [Shani Louk](#), whose mostly naked, splayed body was driven around Gaza on the back of a pickup truck. It is unknown if Louk was dead or alive in the photo; she was reported dead nearly a month later when IDF troops operating in Gaza identified parts of her body. That photo was the [first featured](#) in the winning gallery of the team category of Pictures of the Year competition run by the Missouri School of Journalism.

“This has been one of the most documented atrocities in history,” said Ruth Halperin-Kaddari of Bar Ilan University, an expert in international women’s law who served three terms on the U.N. [Committee](#) on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. The denial of the crimes against women constitutes, she said, “a betrayal of everything that these

feminist organizations claim to stand for.”

There are several explanations for why previously respected women’s rights organizations might refuse to publicly admit that Hamas is capable of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity, or gloss over these crimes.

Some observers, such the ad hoc group Me Too Unless You’re a Jew, insist that antisemitism is at the heart of the anti-Israel bias. Some academics, such as prominent Israeli sociologist Eva Illouz of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and historian Aviad Kleinberg of Tel Aviv University, argue that academics and human rights organizations—including the U.N.—have been and part of a far broader alliance between religious Islam and what Illouz refers to as the “‘post-colonial’ left” that has divided the world into victims and perpetrators, leading to a simplistic and distorted view of morality, according to which Palestinians can do no wrong—a view that Hamas has aggressively promoted.

One source—who previously held a high-ranking position at U.N. Women and is still employed by the United Nations, and therefore spoke to *Foreign Policy* on the condition of anonymity—pointed to bureaucratic and logistical issues as the cause of this disparity, rather than antisemitism or politicization. This source said that unlike the West Bank and Gaza, Israel, the United States, and other developed Western countries are not considered “program areas for U.N. Women. ... As a result, the U.N., a cumbersome, bureaucratic organization bound by all sorts of regulations and limitations, finds it difficult to even to really consider that Israel, or even any Israeli, might ever be a victim of the Palestinians.”

Furthermore, the source added, Israel has often positioned itself as distant or even aloof from the U.N. and other international organizations. Indeed, Israel has long denigrated the U.N. and maintained that it is inherently hostile to Israel; as early as 1955, then-Prime Minister David Ben Gurion derisively used a made-up Hebrew rhyme, “Um-Shmum” to deny that the U.N. has any importance.

“This plays into an already-existing bias against Israel as an occupying country, and as a result, Israel may receive less understanding, compassion, or even attention from the U.N. and its affiliates,” the U.N. source said.

Based on her familiarity with the United Nations, Halperin-Kaddari—the international women’s law expert—also pointed to procedures and other limitations as a difficulty. But she noted that in comparison with other situations, such as the sexual violence in Foca, Bosnia, in 1992—during which large numbers of Muslims and Croats were tortured, disappeared, raped, or executed, and women were transferred to so-called rape camps—the responses of by U.N. Women and similar organizations has been “appalling slow and terribly inadequate.”

Daphna Hacker, a professor at Tel Aviv University’s faculties of law and gender studies and Israel’s current member of the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, acknowledged that the evidence from Oct. 7 may not meet the “usual criterion” of U.N. and other international investigations.

“The intensity and manner in which these crimes were perpetrated is unprecedented,” Hacker said. “ Hamas murdered or kidnapped most of their victims; the hostages have not been released and, as feminist researchers, we know that if there are surviving eyewitnesses or survivors, they may not come forward for many years, if ever. But the testimony that we do have is horrific.”

Tal Hochman, the director-general of the [Israel Women’s Network](#), Israel’s foremost feminist advocacy organization, also acknowledged that there are numerous difficulties surrounding the evidence. She said that ZAKA, the nongovernmental rescue and recovery organization tasked by the government to recover the bodies after the Oct. 7 attacks, did not prioritize forensic examinations.

“ZAKA gave priority to identifying the bodies and bringing them to rapid burial, which is a holy commandment in Judaism,” Hochman said. “We do not have all of the evidence that we could have had, but I also understand the families’ pain and need for burial and closure.”

In the days following the attack, Hochman added, she volunteered at the [Shura](#) military base, the forensic collection center and morgue to which bodies from the Oct. 7 attack were brought. “We did not have enough refrigerators to perform complete forensic examinations of all of the bodies,” she said.

“To honor these women, the U.N. and other organizations cannot hide behind protocols and logistics,” Hacker said. “The organizations must adapt to the reality that the victims suffered, and the hostages continue to suffer, in order to bring them the justice they deserve.”

Orit Sulitzeanu, the director of the Association for Rape Crisis Centers in Israel—which published the first comprehensive [report](#) regarding the attacks—said that the report produced by her organization “meets the highest standards of reporting. It is offensive that are findings are dismissed because of misuse by some Israeli individuals or officials. We are a nongovernmental agency—our report should be judged on its merits as an investigative report.”

Furthermore, she commented on the recent U.N. report: “What about the report by Patten? It is ludicrous to dismiss her report as if she were part of Israeli *hasbara*.”

Weaponizing the abuse of women and conflict-related sexual crimes to promote other agendas—whether the Israeli government’s or its opponents’—is a deliberate victimization of women and a betrayal of all women, everywhere.

Accusations of sexual-based war crimes must be investigated, no matter who the victim and the alleged perpetrator are. Sexual violence is abhorrent, no matter on which side of the border between Israel and Gaza the victims are and no matter if the victims are Israeli or Palestinian. Justifying or excusing the crimes of Oct. 7 as if they were acts of liberation and resistance implies that Israeli women are in some way complicit in their victimization, or perhaps deserved their fate, because they are citizens of an occupying power.

A position paper published in early December by a coalition of six Arab women’s organizations in Israel takes a more morally upstanding position. The coalition members clearly state that they do not question the reports of sexual assaults against Israeli women and “call upon the women [and] feminist activists ... to boldly condemn all violations, including killings, demolitions, and displacements occurring in the relentless war against the Palestinian people, particularly affecting women and children in Gaza. ... Our feminist values dictate that we cannot accept any excuses for violating human rights.”

In some future, we in this region will struggle to rebuild and create new societies predicated on freedom, security, and opportunity for all. To do so, we must learn to hold multiple, even contradictory, truths—and to feel pain for ourselves and our enemies simultaneously.

That means recognizing the anguish of the many thousands of women and children in Gaza who have been traumatized by the appalling deprivation, chaos, violence, and death at the hands of the IDF and the Israeli government and—at the same time—demanding justice for all of Hamas’s victims.

Justice is meant to be universal and indivisible. By minimizing the dehumanization of Israeli women and the hostages still in Gaza, many publications and organizations have undermined this crucial, seemingly self-evident axiom. And by denying the universalism of war crimes and crimes against humanity, they have abdicated their basic responsibility.

Instead of assuming positions of moral selectivity, U.N. institutions and all organizations and publications dedicated to human rights can and must apply their prestige, influence, and extensive funding to advocate for all women, investigate all credible allegations, bring all perpetrators to justice before an international court, and provide support for all victims.

Correction, May 3, 2024: The original version of this article stated that Owen Jones claimed there was "no evidence" of war crimes. In fact, he stated that he has seen video that confirms that Hamas committed war crimes. *Foreign Policy* has removed the reference to Owen Jones and apologizes to him for this inaccurate characterization of his views.

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