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The story will still be told. But until then, we must not remain silent

The extent of the sexual violence perpetrated by Hamas on 7 October is unbearable. So is the silence surrounding it

The horrors of Hamas' attack on 7 October continue to haunt us. The sight of the unfathomable atrocities committed in so many places by Hamas terrorists has been burned into our souls and constitutes a personal, community and national trauma that will never be forgotten. While, at the beginning, we only heard fragments of information about sexual violence, over time, the extent of those horrific acts came to light as a shocking picture emerged of systematic cruel sexual violence against women and girls.

The information comes from numerous and varied sources: from soldiers who arrived at the area where the massacre took place and were then confronted with horrific images; from volunteers from the rescue and recovery organisation ZAKA and the Red Star of David who went to the kibbutzim and the site of the party and saw dozens of corpses with signs of abuse, women without underwear, with injuries to their sexual organs and some whose genitalia were missing; from survivors of the massacre of party participants who had pretended to be dead and witnessed rapes committed before their very eyes; and from the professionals who took care of the bodies, preparing them for burial, and who saw dozens of corpses in a horrifying condition, which clearly proved that these people had undergone abominable acts of torture and rape.

A weapon of war

The information from the various domains, including the confessions of Hamas terrorists given during their interrogations, indicate a deliberate and planned course of action — they were sent out by their commanders to rape, torture and abuse in the most severe ways. For Hamas, the mistreatment of women became a means of humiliation, spreading terror, feelings of loss and despair in Israeli society. In addition to Hamas' use of systematic sexual violence as a weapon, there also occurred sadistic rape and violence perpetrated by Gazan men who entered Israel in the hours

following Hamas' organised attack.

In the attack on 7 October, sexual violence as an act of war was expressed in a particularly extreme way. First, rape was *just one step in an act of murder*. The crimes were committed by armed soldiers against unarmed civilian women, and the sexual violence was accompanied by an immediate threat to the lives of the women, most of whom were in fact cruelly murdered following the rape. Second, rape was *part of the combat doctrine*. The number of victims was high because rape was an element of Hamas' operational concept. Third, *gang rape was widespread*. The absolute majority of attacks by Hamas people (similar to other wartime rapes) were gang rapes with the participation, encouragement and in the presence of other people. Fourth, the rapes were carried out using sadistic torture practices with *unprecedented cruelty*.

Fifth, the murder of the women and their deaths as a result of injuries they suffered, as well as the widespread killing of witnesses to these acts, led to *underreporting* of the terrorists' actions. Furthermore, the lack of reporting was a result of shame and fear of being stigmatised, as well as self-blame on the part of the survivors. Lastly, *rape as a horror show*; in addition to the attacks with the participation and presence of other Hamas fighters, the abuse was carried out in front of other victims with the aim of spreading horror and fear, oppression and humiliation. The rape of a partner or family member serves to extend the torture to helpless witnesses and to those who are being tortured because they are trying to stop the torture of others.

Denial and silence

From the World Wars to the Balkan Wars, women's bodies have always been instruments in the service of the enemy on the battlefield, both physically and mentally-symbolically. The damage caused by this terrible use of force is always unbearable. However, in the context of the 7 October attack, there is the added crime of widespread denial and silence, while individuals, organisations and states stand by and do nothing.

The unwillingness of those individuals and organisations to look reality in the eye and acknowledge it, despite its inconvenience, is utterly unacceptable. In this context, it must be stated that the international women's and human rights organisations such as UN Women are responsible for a huge moral failure. Their shamefully long silence in connection with the massacre of 7 October and the framing thereof as 'conflict-related sexual violence' in the UN Women statement on 1 December deprives their work of all credibility and renders it irrelevant. These are organisations that have always carried the torch on behalf of all

of us, the torch whose basic motto has been, 'we believe you unconditionally.' They themselves have now extinguished this torch.

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Despite all of the testimonies and information coming to light, we must accept the possibility that we will never know all the details, including the exact number of women, men and children who were victims of the sexual violence committed on 7 October. The surviving women and men are not obliged to meet any expectations or demands of the state and society in connection with the trauma they experienced. They need only to think of themselves – their souls and their bodies – and regain the control they have lost. They will make their voices heard at the time and in the manner that they see fit. Over 50 years passed before evidence of sexual violence during the Holocaust began to reach the public. In the case of 7 October too, time will prevail.

The risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of rape is extremely high. Even in normal circumstances, the consequences for the mental and physical health and quality of life of those affected can be extremely severe. Sexual violence in war or while being held hostage entails numerous and deep layers of trauma.

The Israeli government has an obligation to care for women who are trying to bring some stability back to the chaotic reality which has broken them. Many of the survivors have been evacuated from their homes, are not working and in need of mental and physical care, economic assistance, restoration of a home environment and assistance in finding employment. Talking about trauma requires a modicum of stability and the regaining of a sense of basic control over life. For those affected by the 7 October atrocities, this is still a long way off.

The world's women's organisations, especially UN Women, can still do something by finally condemning these horrific war crimes in a harsh and uncompromising way and without contextualising them. Such a condemnation would have an enormous impact on the women affected by 7 October, who would then see that they are not alone, because women worldwide are sharing their pain with them.



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