Global women’s rights groups silent as Israeli women testify about rapes by Hamas

November 23, 2023

By [**Amelie Botbol**](https://www.timesofisrael.com/writers/amelie-botbol/)

The Times of Israel

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/global-womens-rights-groups-silent-as-israeli-women-testify-about-rapes-by-hamas/>

As the United Nations promotes an awareness campaign ahead of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women on November 25, chilling accounts from survivors and first responders who witnessed Hamas’s October 7 massacre of 1,200 Israelis paint a horrifying picture of systemic sexual assaults perpetrated against women and girls of all ages.

One survivor of the Supernova music festival, where about 360 people were slaughtered, described how she witnessed Hamas terrorists rape an Israeli girl: ‘As I am hiding, I see in the corner of my eye that [a terrorist] is raping her,’ the witness recounted. ‘They bent her over and I realized they were raping her and simply passing her on to the next [terrorist].’

Yet many feminist and women’s rights organizations worldwide have remained conspicuously silent — and some are even questioning the veracity of the accusations. These denials of the sexual abuse perpetrated by Hamas have far-reaching consequences, including the deterrence of other sexual abuse victims from seeking help.

Among others, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (also known as UN-Women) released a statement on October 13 equating the Hamas brutalities with Israel’s self-defense. Likewise, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) neglected to explicitly condemn Hamas’s atrocities. And the international #MeToo movement completely failed to mention Hamas — or the Israeli victims.

On Wednesday, Israeli women’s rights experts met with UN-Women for the first time to advocate for official recognition of Hamas crimes against women and children on October 7. It marked the first meeting that the United Nations mission dedicated to upholding the rights of women and children has held with Israeli advocates since the Hamas onslaught.

Following the meeting with Israelis, the UN Security Council met in New York on ‘The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.’ There, UN-Women executive director Sima Bahous said she was ‘alarmed by disturbing reports of gender-based and sexual violence.’ In [her speech,](https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/speech/2023/11/speech-now-more-than-ever-we-must-seek-peace) which focused on the plight of women in Gaza and in the Palestinian Authority, she also condemned Hamas’s crimes inside Israel and promised they would be investigated.

But Bahous’s slim acknowledgment of reports of sexual abuse is unfortunately the exception, not the rule. In one high-profile case of sexual abuse denial, on November 18 [Samantha Pearson](https://www.timesofisrael.com/university-fires-head-of-sex-assault-center-who-signed-letter-denying-oct-7-rapes/), the former director of the University of Alberta’s sexual violence center, was fired for endorsing an open letter that denied Hamas terrorists had committed rape. The letter criticized Canada’s New Democratic Party leader Jagmeet Singh for repeating ‘the unverified accusation that Palestinians were guilty of sexual violence.’

Orit Sulitzeanu, executive director of the Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel, called the failure of groups to condemn Hamas’s abuses against women a betrayal.

‘The very essence of gender equality and women empowerment groups worldwide is to assist victims of such atrocities. A pregnant woman was cut open and her unborn baby was shot. How could anyone stay silent when faced with such horrific acts?’ said Sulitzeanu in a conversation with The Times of Israel.

Referring to Pearson’s signing the open letter, Sulitzeanu added that ‘the denial of October 7 rapes by the head of the Rape Crisis Center at the University of Alberta is unbelievable.’

‘Denying the horrific sexual assaults, gang rapes, the sadistic acts of abuse of children and women is simply incomprehensible,’ Sulitzeanu said. ‘That Pearson chose to take a political stance against the fundamental principles of working with victims — to believe in what happened, understand the difficulty of coming forward and testifying, and acknowledge that the ability to speak up is a time-consuming process — is disheartening.’

On Wednesday, Israeli First Lady Michal Herzog published [an opinion piece in Newsweek](https://www.newsweek.com/silence-international-bodies-over-hamas-mass-rapes-betrayal-all-women-opinion-1845783) expressing outrage and betrayal over the international community’s failure to condemn the gender-based sexual violence perpetrated by Hamas on October 7.

‘A Hamas video from a kibbutz shows terrorists torturing a pregnant woman and removing her fetus. Our forensic scientists have found bodies of women and girls raped with such violence that their pelvic bones were broken,’ wrote Herzog.

‘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. This evidence, along with the explicit recorded confessions of captured terrorists, makes abundantly clear that mass rape was a premeditated part of Hamas’s plan,’ she wrote.

A large number of women and children are among the 240 hostages held by the Hamas terror group in the Gaza Strip, Herzog wrote, adding that ‘only when they are released will we know what they have endured.’

Herzog slammed international bodies for failing to speak out.

Collecting physical evidence of sexual assault has been difficult because the area in which the massacres took place remained an active war zone for days, and rape kits must be collected within a 48-hour window. In addition, many of the rape victims’ dead bodies were too badly disfigured to make the collection of physical evidence possible.

Despite these challenges, Israel Police is in the process of investigating and [building several sexual assault cases](https://www.timesofisrael.com/police-start-building-oct-7-rape-cases-focusing-on-footage-and-testimonies/) against Hamas terrorists with the intent of prosecuting them. Authorities confirmed they had retrieved video evidence, photographs of victims’ bodies and testimony from terrorists confirming witness accounts of sexual assault.

Israel recently [posted on its official X account](https://twitter.com/Israel/status/1723759157960953981) (formerly Twitter): ‘On Nov. 2, an Arabic-Hebrew transliteration glossary belonging to Hamas was discovered in Israel with sexual terminology, including ‘take your pants off.’ This evidence suggests that Hamas terrorists planned to systematically rape Israeli women.’

**A deliberate choice not to stand with Israeli women**

The UN-Women’s [campaign](https://twitter.com/UN_Women/status/1724759213287563733) for November 25 urges governments worldwide to share how they are acting to end gender-based violence. But that organization’s October 13 statement didn’t name Hamas or its crimes against humanity, and read simply: ‘UN-Women condemns the attacks on civilians in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.’

Until Wednesday, Bahous — previously a Jordanian diplomat before becoming UN-Women’s executive director — similarly made no mention of the massacre or targeting of Israeli women, including in an October 8 [tweet](https://twitter.com/unwomenchief/status/1710833472095269002), but had repeatedly attacked Israel for its campaign to remove Hamas from power, including with a November 3 [tweet](https://twitter.com/UN_Women/status/1720206701654065328) reading: ‘We condemn the strikes on #Jabalia refugee camp, all refugee camps and civilian infrastructure. The continuous bombardment has caused devastating destruction and loss of lives, leaving nowhere safe for the people of #Gaza, including women & children.’

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) also failed to explicitly condemn Hamas’s atrocities, despite having previously denounced Islamic State’s systematic attacks and sexual violence against Yazidi women in Iraq, Boko Haram’s violence against Nigerian women and the targeting of Rohingya women and girls in Myanmar.

When contacted by The Times of Israel, CEDAW confirmed that it ‘did not as such adopt a statement on the terrorist attacks of 7 October 2023.’

But while CEDAW didn’t have a statement condemning the Hamas rapes, it did have a list of obligations for Israel’s continued participation in the CEDAW Convention — including that it come up with a comprehensive strategy to deal with those rapes.

Countries that have ratified the CEDAW Convention are required to submit a report every four years on progress made in removing obstacles to equality. This year, Israel is required to submit one of these reports, its seventh since ratifying the Convention.

Prof. Ruth Halperin-Kaddari, a former vice president of CEDAW, told The Times of Israel that she submitted a request to the group to add as an item for discussion Hamas’s massacre during an already scheduled meeting on October 9.

CEDAW ignored the request for three weeks before releasing a statement in which the committee condemned ‘the escalating violence in the Middle East that has killed thousands of civilians, including women and children.’

Said Halperin-Kaddari: ‘CEDAW is the most important women’s rights international body that signals the direction in which women’s rights should be developed. It sets standards for the whole world in terms of international women’s rights.

‘It doesn’t matter that Hamas is a non-state actor, it is obligated to abide by international human rights law.

‘ Regardless, CEDAW has condemned non-state actors in the past,’ she said.

**The #MeToo movement turns its back on Israelis**

When initially asked by The Times of Israel about the group’s position on the October 7 atrocities, a development associate with the #MeToo movement said a statement would be forthcoming.

The statement, released November 13, makes no mention of Israel, Israeli women or Hamas.

‘What we have been witnessing in Gaza is a humanitarian crisis. Thousands of people have been killed, injured, displaced, or deprived of basic human necessities like water, food, and medical care,’ reads the statement.

It continues: ‘As a global movement rooted in Black feminism, and driven by principles of anti-violence and anti-patriarchy, me too. International recognizes that sexual violence often functions as a weapon of war and imperialism. Sexual violence has been used in many periods of war, as a tactic to intimidate and punish innocent civilians, and as a tool of genocide and ethnic cleansing, aimed at destroying communities. Conflict-related sexual violence is acknowledged as a war crime under international law but accountability and justice for survivors under the law remains difficult to enforce.’

The group issued [a follow-up statement](https://metoomvmt.org/stay-informed/press/me-too-international-calls-for-a-ceasefire/) on November 15 clarifying that it stands by Israeli women, as well.

Other NGOs have similarly singled Israel out for censure or avoided condemning Hamas’s war crimes.

Women Deliver, a global group advocating for gender equality and women’s rights, also failed to condemn the October 7 massacre, but [tweeted](https://twitter.com/MalihaKhanWD/status/1716924127955845587) about ‘the risk of genocide against the Palestinian people’ and issued a single statement ‘condemning the ongoing war crimes in Gaza.’

Additionally, the group Equality Now refrained from mentioning Hamas by name, referring The Times of Israel to an October 23 statement in which the organization expressed a commitment to ‘identify violations of international and humanitarian law, drawing attention to the specific impact on all women and children,’ and to provide ‘recommendations for action to governments and international human rights bodies to hold perpetrators of violence to account.’

The organization was not able to expand on how or when it planned to spearhead such an effort in relation to Hamas’s attacks.

Meanwhile, Time’s Up, which supports and promotes awareness of victims of sexual harassment, did not respond to repeated requests for comment, and SOS Children’s Villages, Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt’s foundation, which supports families and children affected by conflicts, referred The Times of Israel to four statements on the Israel-Hamas war.

Three of them focused on the humanitarian situation in Gaza and called for an immediate ceasefire, whereas the other called for the ‘immediate protection of children and their rights in the Gaza Strip and Israel,’ without making mention of Hamas’s crimes.

**Breaking the silence**

Some groups have bucked the trend that appears to be dominating human rights organizations.

Belkis Wille, an associate director with the Crisis and Conflict division at Human Rights Watch, said the group sent a team to Israel to conduct an in-depth investigation into sexual crimes and abuses by Hamas terrorists on October 7.

‘My colleague and I arrived a few days after the [Hamas] attacks. We’ve spoken to dozens of witnesses and survivors and are analyzing hundreds of videos and photos of the events,’ said Wille, who took part in the field investigation.

Wille told The Times of Israel that it would take several weeks for the report to be compiled and published, and even longer to conduct an internal review and analysis of photo and video evidence. Investigators are also planning to use forensics to match evidence to testimonies.

European Parliament President Roberta Metsola also condemned the attacks at the European Council, saying that on October 7, ‘the world awoke to the worst terrorist attack on families in Israel in generations.’

Hamas’s ‘mass murder, kidnappings, rapes, torture, mutilations and desecration of the dead’ cannot be ignored, she added.

Metsola spokesperson Jüri Laas told The Times of Israel that ‘the president wanted EU institutions and all political groups to express our solidarity following the very disturbing events. She wanted to show our strong and united stand against terrorism.’

And in response to the international #MeToo movement’s failure to condemn the sexual abuse perpetrated by Hamas, the grassroots awareness campaign #MeToo\_UNless\_UR\_a\_Jew was created by Danielle Ofek, co-founder and CEO of P51, a social impact venture that advocates for equal opportunities for women in the workplace, and Nataly Livski, senior marketing and business development marketer at Deloitte.

The website and corresponding Instagram account include a petition to denounce UN-Women’s repeated failure ‘to address the current situation impartially while actively and knowingly working to create a false and insidious narrative.’

**Far-reaching consequences**

Sulitzeanu said that she knew of October 7 survivors who were raped but were not yet ready to talk. If the outside world remained silent, she said, these victims would be less likely to do so and therefore continue suffering alone.

Sulitzeanu also invoked Shani Louk, whose lifeless and naked body was paraded around and desecrated in the streets of Gaza, as well as other young women who were raped and mutilated.

‘There was a desire to shame the nation and contaminate Israeli women,’ she said.

Dr. Cochav Elkayam, chair of the Civil Commission on the October 7 Crimes by Hamas Against Women and Children, described a harrowing incident in which ‘two teenage girls shot in the head were found with their pants pulled down, vaginal bleeding and sperm specimen all over them.’

Elkayam, an international law expert who founded Reichman University’s Dvora Institute for Gender and Sustainability, also related the testimony of a 94-year-old who witnessed her granddaughter being sexually abused and then brutally killed.

Maytal Kuperard, the spokesperson for Jewish Women’s Aid, a UK-based group that supports Jewish women and children affected by domestic abuse and sexual violence, told The Times of Israel that victims have been deterred from seeking help.

‘The public silence from many UK domestic/sexual abuse sector organisations further impacts the isolation and the fear our clients are experiencing,’ read an October 25 statement from the group. Kuperard added that since October 7, women in abusive relationships in the UK were choosing to stay in their toxic environments.

To combat this, Tal Hochman,  government relations officer at the Israel Women’s Network, which promotes gender equality in Israel, started a petition supported by over 140 organizations demanding condemnation by all UN bodies of the crimes committed against women on October 7.

Hochman told The Times of Israel that UN organizations’ inertia could encourage Hamas to perpetrate further sexual crimes against the roughly 240 hostages being held in Gaza.

‘UN Resolution 1325 specifies that women and children should receive special protection in times of conflict or in captivity. We need our feminist and human rights allies to condemn those crimes and push for the release of women and children held in Gaza,’ said Hochman.

She explained that clear condemnation might have prompted the UN to send task forces to Israel to help document the gender-based violence, collect evidence and help treat the victims.

Elkayam, of the Civil Commission gathering evidence of Hamas’s sexual abuse, reiterated the betrayal she says all women felt from UN bodies’ failure to condemn Hamas’s crimes against women and young girls.

‘Their silence is deafening,’ Elyakam said. ‘History will judge their inability to express solidarity with victims of these despicable crimes in a country that suffered its worst attack since the Holocaust.’