

## Victims of gender-based violence on Oct 7 must be given a voice

The mass atrocities in Israel on Oct 7, 2023, brought forth the widely disregarded issue of gender-based violence (GBV). Nov 25 was the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, and, therefore, it is crucial to spotlight the horrifying GBV documented by the Israeli authorities. The further deliberate flaunting of violence against hostages exposes a systematic campaign of GBV by Hamas.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the complex political reality of the conflict between Israel and Hamas, expressing moral outrage regarding reprehensible GBV should not be complicated, because brutal rape should always be condemned and never be contextualised. The deafening silence of organisations tasked with safeguarding women and children from GBV, such as UN Women and UNICEF, regarding the GBV against Israelis, perpetuates a morally depraved context narrative that blames victims.

As medical professionals, we share a universal compassion for the plight of all innocent civilians affected by the horrors of war, regardless of their affiliation. Yet, some forms of suffering demand a distinct perspective for proper acknowledgment, leading to moral action.

Drawing parallels from the Hamas atrocities to the Holocaust reveals eerily similar scenes of GBV enacted by the Nazi Einsatzgruppen.<sup>2</sup> Reproductive degradation, including mutilation of breasts and violence against pregnant women and infants, reflects a systematic assault recognised as a form of genocide by the Rome Statutes.

*The Lancet's* Series on violence against women and girls emphasises the initial imperative: "Demonstrate leadership by publicly condemning violence against women."<sup>3</sup> This

directive resonates with Richard Horton's call to physicians to "struggle to remain human in inhuman times"<sup>4</sup> and refrain from dehumanisation by treating all individuals with dignity. This call was articulated during the launch of the report of *The Lancet's* Commission on Medicine, Nazism, and the Holocaust.<sup>5</sup> The report urges the development of morally courageous health-care professionals who act as agents of change, competent to speak out against genocide and crimes against humanity wherever they occur.

As executive physicians at LeMa'anam Physicians for Holocaust Survivors—a non-profit organisation dedicated to providing free medical aid to Holocaust survivors—we have closely observed the enduring psychological effects of GBV. Our observations highlight the increased prevalence of suffering from sexual violence, especially among women, within the context of their trauma. Recognising this complex relationship is crucial for understanding the lasting effects on all people who endure GBV atrocities.

We call upon medical societies, journals, and governing bodies to take a clear moral stance by vocally condemning the GBV atrocities perpetrated by Hamas on Oct 7, 2023. We must vehemently reject repetition of the legacy of silent bystanders complicit in the Holocaust. The global medical community must issue resolute condemnations, hold perpetrators accountable, and implement decisive actions to release all hostages and eradicate GBV.

MAF is a Commissioner of *The Lancet's* Commission on Medicine, Nazism, and the Holocaust; and serves on the Advisory Council of LeMa'anam Physicians for Holocaust Survivors. TK is the Founder and CEO of LeMa'anam Physicians for Holocaust Survivors.

\**Matthew Ari Fox, Tamara Kowitz*  
fox@post.bgu.ac.il

Jacobovits Center for Jewish Medical Ethics, Faculty of Health Sciences, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beersheba 84105, Israel (MAF); LeMa'anam Physicians for Holocaust Survivors, Tel Aviv, Israel (MAF, TK); Faculty of Medicine, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel (TK); Ichilov-Sourasky Medical Center, Tel Aviv, Israel (TK)

- 1 Maimonides Society, Harvard Medical School, Harvard Dental School. The unspeakable terror—gender-based violence on October 7. Nov 12, 2023. <https://youtu.be/5D7tb4zFKdk?si=4qmFeceyqeKKieRP> (accessed Nov 22, 2023).
- 2 Chalmers B. Sexualized physical brutality. In: Chalmers B, ed. Birth, sex, and abuse: women's voices under Nazi rule. UK: Grosvenor House Publishing, 2015: 233–47.
- 3 García-Moreno C, Zimmerman C, Morris-Gehring A, et al. Addressing violence against women: a call to action. *Lancet* 2015; **385**: 1685–95.
- 4 Horton R. Offline: universal lessons for humanity. *Lancet* 2023; **402**: 1818.
- 5 Czech H, Hildebrandt S, Reis SP, et al. The Lancet Commission on medicine, Nazism, and the Holocaust: historical evidence, implications for today, teaching for tomorrow. *Lancet* 2023; **402**: 1867–940.



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