

The women's movement has abandoned Israeli victims of rape from Oct. 7

DECEMBER 14, 2023



Secretary of State Antony Blinken told CNN's Jake Tapper on Dec. 10 that the "sexual violence that we saw on Oct. 7 is beyond anything I've seen." When asked why the United Nations and the international community have been so slow to show support for the victims, Blinken responded, "I think it is a question that these organizations ... need to ask themselves."

During a special panel hosted by Israel on Dec. 4 at the U.N. headquarters in New York, we learned more details about the brutalities meted out on Israeli women and girls during the Hamas rampage on kibbutzim and towns along the Gaza border. These are the very brutalities that have been met with dismissiveness from U.N. Women, a human rights group, and the women's movement writ large.

Those who spoke on the panel pointed out that Israeli police investigators, rape crisis centers and forensic medical examiners have been abundantly clear in describing the horrors of sexual violence perpetrated against Israeli women and girls on Oct. 7.

There are 1,500 eyewitness statements, detailed pathology reports and ample video recordings. The findings are unsparingly gruesome. Women were shot in the face while being gang-raped. Pregnant women were raped and disemboweled, and their fetuses dismembered. Nails and other rusty metal objects were found inside the genitals of women who were mutilated and murdered.

Sadly, this litany of horror has still not been enough to elicit rage from the women's movement that has prided itself as defenders of the #MeToo campaign, which is supposed to show unconditional support for all victims of sexual violence.

The lack of response has made it perfectly clear to Jewish girls and women just how alone they truly are. Jewish men, enraged over the brutal assaults, have likewise felt the betrayal of the global community. Many Jews, aside from the collective support of one another, know that they stand alone in their pain, anguish and grief, as they have for thousands of years.

At this critical time, we sorely need the support of the women's movement to validate our outrage and to publicly decry the violation of Jewish women and girls. Such inhumane sexual acts have resonated profoundly in our community. Every girl assaulted by Hamas was or is potentially a future Jewish mother. Every woman who was profanely violated was or is a mother, grandmother, sister or aunt. The defilement and debasement represents a "churban" – massive destruction and desecration – of Jewish women, who are the fulcrum of community life.

Desecration resonates so deeply in our religion that our calendars are marked with holy days and fast days to commemorate those events in our history. We use dates of desecration as markers to delineate our inextinguishable flame of survival against all odds. Jews understand this intrinsically. However, others do not. They have neither endured the cycles of persecution, murder and annihilation nor have they been repeatedly scorned by cadres of enemies.

Our disappointment in the failure of the women's movement and the international community to denounce our attackers may stem from giving too much credit to our "assimilation" into today's modern world. On one hand, at no other time in Jewish history have we so seamlessly integrated with non-Jewish populations. The modern Jew today exists in a world of all nationalities and faiths – a stark contrast to those close-knit shtetls. On the other hand, assimilation is often deceptive because it offers a false sense of integration with other ethnic groups and faiths. The reality belies this myth. We have seen this play out in the wake of the Oct. 7 massacre with the reluctance of women's groups to support their Jewish sisters.

Alas, our sisters in solidarity, with whom we've labored to support reproductive freedom, the Equal Rights Amendment, LGBTQ+ rights and other important women's issues, have woefully disappointed us. They have been slow to respond, if at all, to our searing pain. We expected "rachmones" – sympathy, empathy, understanding – to flow from human kindness. Instead, reminders of the Shoah have hit us in the face. Once again we are alone, forced to navigate our fate sans champions to take up our cause.

All in all, the ruse of modern times may have led most of us to think we have successfully assimilated. When in truth, we stand very much alone. Perhaps this is a wakeup call. If so, we need to reevaluate, recalibrate and reconsider our role in the women's movement.

Our tradition teaches us to be strong and to never give up. It also teaches us to stand up for what's right. This includes demanding accountability from the women's movement and the international community for their shameful silence about Oct. 7.



Amy Neustein

Amy Neustein is a sociologist who has authored or edited 16 academic books. She is the editor of "Tempest in the Temple: Jewish Communities and Child-Sex Scandals" and is working on a sequel.