



NO PERFECT VICTIM:

Who Gets Believed & Unpacking Wartime Rape Propaganda

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A REPORT FOR





CONTEXT

On December 28 2023, the New York Times (NYT) published an article titled “Screams without Words: How Hamas Weaponized Sexual Violence on October 7.” The article explored the brutal sexual violence used against women on the October 7th attacks against Israel, and featured the story of an Israeli woman who was allegedly sexually assaulted before her death on October 7th. In the days following the publication of the New York Times article, the deceased woman’s family members denied such allegations, and admitted that they had no knowledge that the NYT article would include details of sexual violence. Feminist activists shared their concerns regarding the manipulation of the claims and how this demonstrated a historical pattern of settler colonial powers weaponizing sexual assault. On February 28th, the Intercept took a deep dive into the NYT’s article. They released a story uncovering the biased and false reporting by the New York Times. Specifically, the article revealed that the Times hired a journalist who is a former Israeli Offense Soldier (IOF), has described Palestinians as “animals,” and advocated for turning the Gaza Strip into a “slaughterhouse,” the Intercept validated the concerns with the Times article that activists and pro-Palestinian voices had been raising from the beginning.





The case of the victim was part of a larger claim that Hamas carried out a systematic mass rape of Israeli civilians as a tactic of war. This claim drew on Gendered islamophobic tropes of Palestinian and Muslim men being inherently violent and sexually oppressive towards women. Sensationalized language in the article such as “massacre” and “brutalized” contributed to the Islamophobic imagery of Palestinian men as barbaric and prone to enacting extreme forms of gender based violence on civilian populations - all language which is commonly used by Western governments in times of war to justify the destruction of brown, Black, Arab, and Muslim bodies. Meanwhile, Israel is actively carrying out a Reproductive Genocide, which the Palestinian Feminist Collective defines as “the policies, discourses, and practices that target life-giving and life-sustaining capacities including sexual violence by an occupying force on men, women, and children.”

Not surprisingly, the violence experienced by Palestinian bodies has not received the same mainstream media coverage and outrage.





The outrage about the false coverage has led to conversations about how sexual violence is often weaponized by settler colonial powers to justify retaliation, also known as “war-time rape propaganda.”

To be clear, rape is always unacceptable no matter who perpetrates it and it is typically used as a tool of war despite being considered a war crime from the lens of international law. Additionally, it is also historically true that governments often weaponize the sexual violence their civilians may have experienced as a justification to bomb civilians indiscriminately in acts of collective punishment.

This report will discuss the history of the phenomena known as “wartime rape propaganda,” while examining how and why it is successfully being used right now to justify the ongoing genocide in Palestine. We explore all of this through the lens of the idea of a “perfect victim” and how that impacts the lack of coverage Palestinian survivors are experiencing.



WHAT IS WARTIME RAPE PROPAGANDA?

In interpersonal cases, research overwhelmingly shows that although most survivors don't have eye witnesses to their suffering, the majority of accusations are found to be true. Survivors are often re-victimized by their communities, families, or even media outlets due to not being believed or having a delicate subject treated callously (Lisak et al. 2010). Attempts to look critically at cases such as the one presented in the New York Times article are not rooted in a desire to minimize anyone's experiences with sexual assault; rather, it stems from the historical pattern that governments weaponized sexual violence in times of war and genocide (Garraio, 2012).

Wartime rape propaganda is the use of sensationalized imagery of sexual violence by a patriarchal imperialist force to justify harm done by a military power to civilians.



Wartime Rape Propaganda upholds patriarchal values in line with political agendas. It pulls on toxic values surrounding gender, purity, and sex to both humiliate people who are victims of this assault, as well as manipulate audiences into various emotional states, such as anger and grief. It is often written using inflammatory language, sensationalizing the details, and can often be retraumatizing, triggering, and stigmatizing for survivors of sexual assault to read. It is not intended to uplift survivor voices, but rather it is intended to create harm and justify violence toward the perpetrator and the perpetrator's community. As seen in the December 28 article, the article not only further triggered and harmed the surviving family members; it also reinforced islamophobic tropes about inherently violent Muslim men, encouraging a disproportionate, militarized retaliation against an entire population.

TOOL OF EMPIRE

The Wartime Rape Propaganda has been always been a tool of empire throughout history. During World War II, graphic photos of dead German women who had been allegedly assaulted by Soviet soldiers (who were framed as barbaric rapists) were used to encourage the German army to resist defeat until their deaths (Garraio, 2012). During the Cold War, similar language was used, describing communists as “hordes of rapists,” highlighting acts of sexual violence by perceived enemies, and neglecting any meaningful reporting of sexual violence committed by American military or allied forces (Garraio, 2012).



TOOL OF WHITE SUPREMACY

Within the USA, racist stereotypes against Black men as “sexual predators” have long since been used as a tool to further oppression and justify extreme measures of violence against Black communities. In 1955 14-year-old Emmett Till was lynched for allegedly whistling at a white woman. In 1931, nine Black teenage boys in Scottsboro, Alabama were wrongfully imprisoned for years due to false accusations of sexual assault against a white woman (Grevatt, 2024). In fact, during slavery in the USA, rape was uniquely defined as a crime against White women (Genovese, 1976). To elaborate, it was impossible to “rape” a Black woman and there were no criminal charges for it because Black women had no bodily autonomy. This point is illustrated by the case of Commonwealth of Virginia v. Jerry Mann, where a Black man convicted of rape had his sentence revoked because the prosecutor failed to mention whether or not the race of the victim was White. Even more important that a White woman getting justice for rape by a Black man was the insurance that Black women did not have a court rule that rape against them was criminal behavior (Commonwealth of Virginia v. Jerry Mann, 1820; Genovese, 1976). Who “counts” as a survivor and who is a presupposed perpetrator of violence has always been racialized.



Whether it be Nazi Germany or Jim Crow, marginalized people have always been painted as violent, and those in power have always been seen as victims. This form of gendered violence dehumanizes men, erases the violence innocent victims experience, and enforces violent stereotypes about marginalized people.

From history, we can see that a.) who is believed has always been political and b.) empire has always used rape allegations to justify state violence.

For the ongoing genocide in Palestine, Israel's current use of rape war propaganda has negative implications for survivors worldwide, and current victims in Palestine.



WARTIME RAPE PROPAGANDA AND PALESTINE

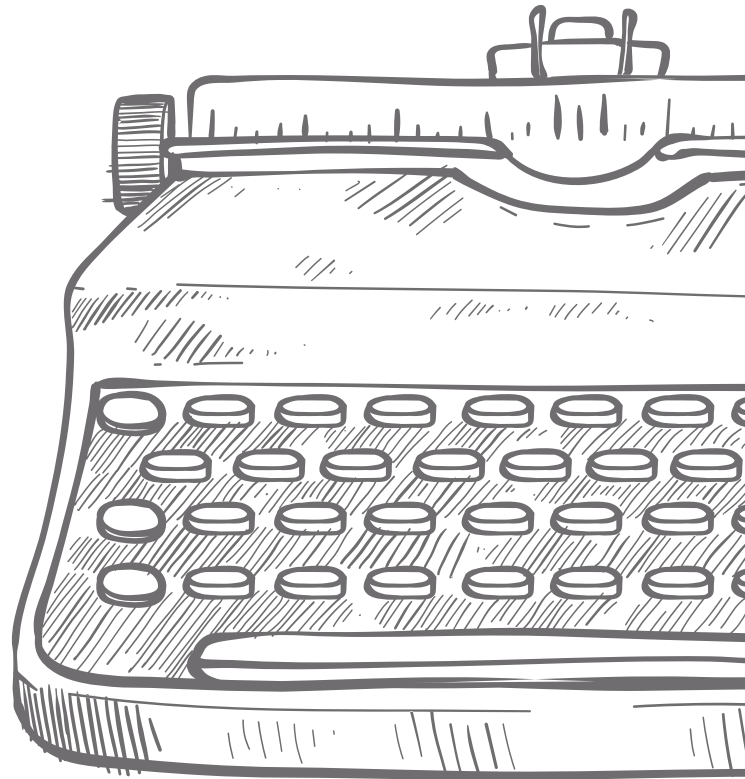
Despite the emphasis on these acts of sexual violence, there has not been any independent confirmation of evidence outside of the Israeli government and IOF reports (Martin, 2023). Efforts for outside reporting have been blocked and diverted by Israeli officials, and even within their own reports of sexual violence, providing tangible evidence has been consistently avoided (Institute for Middle East Understanding fact sheet, 2023). Over the last few years, public attitudes towards survivors has shifted towards believing survivors. Israel is currently building on the work done by gender

justice advocates to manipulate people's well intended desires in order to justify genocide against Palestinian people (Solmaz, 2023). Is it possible that an Israeli woman (or multiple) were sexually assaulted on October 7? Yes, and sexual assault is unacceptable and a war crime no matter who does it and survivors of sexual assault should be believed and connected to services. That being said, it is important to interrogate the motivation behind sensationalizing the alleged sexual violence and whether it is being manipulated and



weaponized to justify the ongoing massacre and indiscriminate human rights violations currently being experienced by the Palestinian people. Additionally, it is notable that there have been a number of times in which Israel has made unsubstantiated claims only to be redacted later. These claims, which are then broadcast on mainstream media, stir emotions to rally support for Israel, spread misinformation, and ultimately can result in additional violence by those who are angry about the claims. For example, 6 year old Wadea al-Fayoume in Chicago was stabbed to death by his landlord because he was activated by Fox News reporting of the Oct 7 attacks (McHardy, 2023).

This wartime rape propaganda hurts Palestinians of all genders and it hurts survivors worldwide. The wartime propaganda teaches people to be skeptical around stories of survivorship. Instead of amplifying any movement surrounding survivor justice, it is teaching people not to believe survivors.



PALESTINIAN SURVIVORS OF ISRAELI GENDERED VIOLENCE



It is also critical to shed light on the ongoing erasure of Palestinian survivors in these conversations about the sexual violence they are experiencing by the Israeli army. There is a long history of sexual violence used or threatened against Palestinian prisoners in Israel as a method of torture, interrogation, and humiliation. There are countless documented incidents of Palestinian women being abused or tortured in front of male prisoners or even their own family members to further a sense of helplessness and humiliation, as elaborated by the sources below.

TESTIMONIES

Specifically, there are many stories of Palestinians surviving acts of sexual violence from Israeli's while detained as prisoners, Ahed Tamimi, author of "They Called me a Lioness" describes ongoing incidents of sexual harassment during her imprisonment as a 16-year-old (Tamimi, 2022). In 2002, the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) issued a statement against Israel for inappropriately forcing Palestinian female prisoners to strip in front of male guards during searches, even if the prisoners were legal minors. In fact, UN Human Rights regulations stipulated that should prisoners need to remove clothing during searches, prisoners should only be examined by persons of the same sex (OMCT, 2002).



In Steven Lubets book “The Trials of Rasmea Odeh,” Odeh, who was a prisoner allegedly involved with the PFLP, while describing her sexual torture during imprisonment noted that “Israel tried to get through my womb with a stick.” Odeh also reported that during her torture by Israel, she was stripped in front of her own father and pressured to have sex with him—which she notes as the moment she decided to confess to the crimes she was being accused of (Wadi, 2012).



CENSORSHIP AND SILENCING

When Palestinian women have attempted to speak out against perpetrators of their own sexual assaults, there are documented reports of rape victims being pressured to withdraw their complaints and being threatened with violence by the IOF until withdrawing their statements (Breiner and Shezaf, 2021). Consequently, Palestinian women have resorted to self-censorship because they have been erased from the conversation of sexual assault survivorship (Madar, 2023). They have been barred from any safe avenues to receive justice, and it has led to severe underreporting of their own assaults due to fear of Israeli military and police backlash.

TORTURE OF PALESTINIAN MALE PRISONERS



In addition to the types of violence highlighted above, Israel has a well-documented history of illegally using sexual torture on Palestinian male prisoners as well. Clinical psychologist Daniel Weishut describes the range of sexual violence against Palestinian male prisoners as ranging from “verbal sexual harassment, forced nudity, to severe forms of genital violence, such as squeezing the scrotum, rape, genital mutilation, and castration” in a study that included thousands of testimonies, where 93% were directly from Palestinians who had been imprisoned (Weishut, 2015). In these studies it was found that over 60% of these Palestinian prisoners, who were boys and men, experienced multiple forms of sexual assault and sexual torture while in Israeli detention. Despite this, Palestinian boys and men are also subject to harmful stereotypes from the west labeling them as sexually repressed aggressors. As a result, unsubstantiated claims are perceived as believable by westerners who have bought into these harmful stereotypes. These attitudes are rooted in similar sources of racism and power imbalance that lead to cases like Emmitt Till's untimely death, or the unfair imprisonment of the Scottsboro Boys. People are groomed to believe that some people are more inherently (or even biologically) capable of violence against privileged women, and then are discouraged from asking any questions or asking for evidence around those claims.



PINKWASHING



Unsurprisingly, LGBTQIA+ Palestinians also experience gendered violence. While Israel claims to be a beacon for queer rights in the Middle East, it is actively targeting and harming queer and trans Palestinians. As Queers in Palestine have named explicitly, “rape and death are what Zionists wish upon queers and women who stand in solidarity with Palestine. Zionist fantasies of brutalized bodies do not surprise us, for we have experienced the reality of their manifestation on our skin and spirit.” Because of Israeli Pinkwashing propaganda (defined as a strategy of highlighting LGBTQIA+ rights as a form to justify violence against other communities, in this case, another tactic of justifying genocide against Palestinians), queer Palestinians are often left with few options to seek their own comfort and safety. Queer Palestinians suffer from safe avenues to report their experiences, so many stories are individualized and anecdotal, rather than having access to large groups of quantitative data. Despite those barriers to documentation, self-reported stories from queer Palestinians dissolve any beliefs that Israel is a safe space for queer people. Stories of having their sexuality used as blackmail, suffering from extortion, sanctions, and forcing them to join other Palestinians in the informancy of their own people (Weiss, 2023). Once again, from the voice of queer Palestinians themselves, “Israel and its allies dangerously decontextualize the violence queers suffer from its historical colonial roots, and dissociate it from the impacts of current settler-colonial violence. This is an attempt to portray Palestinian society as unsafe for queers to legitimize the annihilation of our people, and in turn our annihilation as queers.”



UNPACKING “THE PERFECT SURVIVOR:” WHY PALESTINIAN SURVIVORS ARE ERASED

Research shows survivors with more privilege - with respect to race, ethnicity, class, and other demographic factors - are more likely to be believed. Less privileged victims are generally more likely to be silenced by media and court systems, questioned more aggressively, and blamed for their own abuse compared to more privileged victims who are viewed as helpless, innocent, vulnerable, and deserving of compassion (Taha, 2021).

A “**perfect victim**” was defined by Nils Christie in 1986 as “someone capable of garnering the most support and sympathy from society,” and in our current sociopolitical context, are typically those who identify as white, cisgender, and feminine (Machray, 2023).

Using this understanding, we can see why Palestinians are “imperfect victims” and often do not elicit the same support when they share their stories of survivorship. Dominant messaging has influenced society’s biases and attitudes to view brown men as inherently violent. Consequently, when white Israeli women are positioned as victims, the world is conditioned to believe it without question, while simultaneously learning to believe that brown bodies are culpable for their traumatic experiences (Donovan, 2007).

The harm and alienation experienced by marginalized communities when sharing stories of abuse and oppression as compared to more privileged victims echoes the ways in which stories confirming dominant narratives receive less scrutiny. A poorly researched article published by writers at the New York Times who had no relevant qualifications was given a platform because the burden of proof for privileged sources is disproportionately lower than black and brown voices. The same way an “imperfect victim” in Palestine might be blamed for their experience, silenced, or forced to justify every element of their statement, writers and outlets with marginalized backgrounds and identities are forced to painstakingly prove every detail of their reporting. Hence, the lengthy citation list on this report as compared to a Times article published with no fact-checking.

What is happening now with allegations of Israeli survivors of sexual violence by Hamas is hypocrisy, bias, a dehumanization of Palestinian men, and an intentional erasure of Palestinian experiences. These stories are being framed as one-sided acts of barbarism, and in such a way that insinuates that Israel would never treat Palestinian victims this way, despite all the well documented horror stories of Israel using torture on Palestinian prisoners, as well as actively committing genocide where women and children are also suffering. Rape is unfairly used as a weapon of war by most military powers, and it is never okay. The one-sided emphasis of Israeli victims furthers the narrative that Palestinians are unworthy of compassion and justice.



CONCLUSION

As a reproductive justice organization, we believe these unsubstantiated and sensationalized accounts of sexual violence do extra harm to survivors around the world by influencing global attitudes about survivors, their perpetrators, and what accountability should look like. Such claims undermine the credibility of legitimate cases of sexual assault. It also poses “women’s rights” as a separate issue from liberation and fails to acknowledge that sexism, oppression, and imperialism all go hand in hand. Everyone suffers under oppressive systems, and we can never talk about sexual violence or oppression without acknowledging our most vulnerable members of society, who in this case are the countless Palestinians who are currently victims of the ongoing genocide in Gaza.

The impact of this genocide should allow us to ask broader questions about how we conceptualize violence. The west has a long history of expecting violence and suffering in the “global south,” as if violence happens in a vacuum, without being directly impacted and influenced by the surrounding world. In Palestine, we see pictures of destroyed homes, deceased children, large masses of refugees fleeing as if it is normal and to be expected. We see pictures and videos of Zionists and IOF soldiers cheering as buildings in Gaza collapse, and the narrative that Palestinians are violent and are to blame for their suffering still remains the dominant narrative. Stereotypes have always been used to



perpetuate systems of violence against the oppressed, and now the media has even resorted to calling Middle Easterners parasitic insects that need to be eradicated (Friedman, 2024).

How can we talk about survivor advocacy without untangling these curated narratives of imperfect victims? Without thinking about who these destroyed homes belonged to? The very act of unlearning harmful stereotypes we've been taught, and grieving for the many dead and injured Palestinians, is a direct act of resistance against the very intentional propaganda designed to dehumanize and belittle Palestinians. Allowing yourself to look at the broader picture with more objectivity and compassion, is a crucial step in shifting the narrative that Palestinians are less than human, and taking a step towards an end to genocide.



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TAKE ACTION

- Sign on to the “[Open Letter to the Israeli and U.S. Governments and Others Weaponizing the Issue of Rape](#)”
- Sign on to the “[Liberatory Demands from Queers in Palestine](#)”
- Sign on to the Queer Crescent letter “[LGBTQI+ Organizations in the U.S. Call for Ceasefire! Palestine is a queer issue](#)”
- Sign the [Reproductive Justice Includes Palestinian Liberation](#) statement by ARC Southeast
- Sign the Feminist Front and Palestinian Feminist Collective Sign on letter “[Palestine is a Feminist Struggle: U.S. Feminist Organizations Call for Ceasefire Now](#)”
- Read the statements from Palestinian Feminist Collective and support the “[Shut Down Colonial Feminism on International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women](#)” campaign
- Donate to all of these organizations above and to the [HEART Inaya Care Fund](#)