Sexual Politics in Israel's Defense Narrative: The Gendered and Digital Militarism of Israeli Self-Representation

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#### Abstract

Israel often presents itself as a beacon for women's rights in the Middle East while presenting Palestinian resistance and Arab culture as purely misogynistic. Based on the analysis of many thousand private social media posts by soldiers of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF), previous research and analysis, the following work of criminology of war suggest that this portrayal is incorrect. Male IDF soldiers post pictures of themselves in the Gaza Strip wearing dresses and lingerie of displaced or killed Palestinian women while committing acts of sexual violence. Female IDF soldiers are usually sexualized for propaganda purposes and are expected to serve their male colleagues rather than engaging in regular military action. Furthermore, Israel's occupation and current genocide in Gaza made Israel the main root cause of the dire situation of Palestinian women. Additionally, different fractions of the Palestinian resistance exhibit a vision of society with a stronger emphasis on the liberation of women than Israel or any other Western country does. This paper bears witness to the distortion of Israel's narrative around women, the failures of Western, neo liberal feminism and their devastating impact on Palestinian women.

### Introduction

War, armed conflicts and other military operations as topics in the field of criminology are a relatively new occurrence. The small, but growing subfield is called *criminology of war* and has its roots in the '90s with research regarding the illegal, US American war against Iraq (McGarry and Walklate, 2016). War is relevant for criminology because its context requires the routinized use of collective and interpersonal violence and victimization (McGarry and Walklate, 2016). War is a highly criminogenic environment in and outside of the battlefield. Criminology of war applies criminological dialectic, reasoning and methods to analyze and comment on discipline typical topics in the context of war like state-sponsored violence and sexual violence, media and social media and how they shape the narratives around war, corporate criminality and human rights in the context of war, war as criminogenic trauma or war as punishment (Neubacher, 2006; Klein, 2012; McGarry and Walklate, 2015; Mullins and Visagaratnam, 2015; Smeulers, 2015; McGarry and Walklate, 2016; Delaforce, 2016; Gambini, 2023; Goldson, 2016; Kirton, 2016, Murry, 2016; Murray, 2016; O'Sullivan, 2016; Ruggiero, 2016; Kuntsman & Stein, 2020; Degenhart, 2024; Weber and Marmo, 2024). Focusing mainly on state actors as perpetrators,

criminology of war should be seen as part of critical criminology. It extends the lens of critical criminology from instate to intrastate and state external fields of observation.

Western imperialist power uses its military to police other states and regions by invading relevant countries in order to preserve Western hegemony and the interests of the capitalist class. In the same way that police violate laws so do states and their military, hence they are criminologically relevant. Police use their influence on the media like news broadcasters or newspapers to obscure and justify their misconduct in similar ways to state actors who use their influence on the media to obscure and justify their misconduct (Shenkman.2021; Degenhart, 2024). The lies of Weapons of Mass Destruction spread by the US government regarding both gulf wars (1990 to 1991 and 2003 to 2011) are the most infamous examples (Kirton, 2016; Abrams, 2023; Degenhart, 2024). Using US foreign activities like the wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Libya and Syria as examples Abrams (2023) establishes how important the control over the media narrative is for governments in times of war and conflict. And this includes the state of Israel.

With the rise of the internet, digital media is now the most important battlefield of public opinion. The increasing importance of digital media for Israel has been repeatedly shown since 2000. In the beginning of the century pro-Israeli hacker groups attacked websites of the political parties and resistance groups Hamas and Hezbollah, different news outlets and TV and radio stations. These attacks in return were all answered by Hamas and Hezbollah with cyber-attacks against Israel (Kuntsman & Stein, 2020). The first steps in militarizing social media, and by this using it as a tool to shape narratives around the occupation, happened during Israel's operation Cast Lead 2008-2009. Hundreds of thousands of ordinary citizens were conscripted to defend Israel's attack on Gaza on various social media sites like Twitter and YouTube, sharing propaganda (Kuntsman & Stein, 2020; Tramontano, 2021). Since then, Israeli social media activity steadily expanded and social media activities of pro-Israel civilians and official state accounts became increasingly important for the spread of the narrative of Israeli victimhood (Kuntsman & Stein, 2020). Israel's social media campaigns during Operation Protective Edge in 2014 in the anglophone sphere, using Americas 9/11 trauma by deploying images of Islamist violence, were important in winning Western support for Israel's war on the Palestinians (Tramontano, 2021).

Zionist online activity since October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, bears witness to the relevance of militarized social media as *the* crucial factor of Israeli foreign propaganda. Israel's Ministry for Diaspora Affairs started an operation that uses fake social media accounts to urge US lawmakers to spend more money on Israel's military (Schwartz, 2024). The ministry has a special unit for its social media strategy, called *Hatzinor* or the Influence Unit. The importance of social media for Israel's foreign policy can also be seen by the state's push for a ban of the social media app tiktok after it became the main source for young people in the West and around the world to see footage of the war waged by Israel against Palestinian civilians in Gaza and the West Bank (MiddleEastEye, 2025). Tiktok can still be accessed in the US, however, it strongly censors any Palestine related content.

Social media has been a place where unfiltered and uncensored footage and pictures are shared directly from the battle zone for nearly two decades (Kirton, 2016). Many times, the material is shared without a particular political intention or any contextualizing commentary, however, this *war porn* is used for propaganda purposes too. Stein and Kuntsman (2020) established that the acts of sharing and glorifying war crimes of Israeli soldiers on social media is nothing new. Soldiers have been posting videos and pictures of abuse of their victims and other dehumanizing actions at least since 2008. In 2012 the Israeli military published footage of its illegal assassination of Hamas leader Ahmed Jabari (Mair et al., 2016). At first Israeli officially distanced themselves from publicly displayed misbehavior of Israeli soldiers, but since 2014 Israelis publicly show their solidarity with the perpetrators of military misconduct (Kuntsman & Stein, 2020).

Another prominent and important part of Israel's media strategy are female soldiers: Israel has always emphasized the role young women play in the IDF, long before social media. They are presented as undeniable proof for the ostensibly progressive ideals of the state. Israel, the only country conscripting all genders, is often presented as the only state in the Middle East that does not differentiate between men and women in a military context (Brownfield-Stein, 2010). It has to be kept in mind though, that sexualized, erotic pictures are among the most popular images of IDF women, creating Israel's well-known *erotic militarism*. (Brownfield-Stein, 2010; Tramontano, 2021; Kuntsman & Stein, 2020). Instagram accounts like Hot IDF Girls share images of young, female IDF soldiers in uniform and in underwear in order to cater to a male Western audience (Hot IDF Girls, n.d.). Additionally, and detrimentally, women are often portrayed as something pure that is threatened by Hamas, something that needs to be protected at all costs. While it is true that women suffer more during times of war than men, in the environment of war and genocide, and contrary to widespread belief in our heteronormative patriarchal society, women are equally capable of committing sexual violence, mass murder and genocide as men are as Gabini (2023), Smeulers (2015) and Ellison & Szablewska (2022) show. The Holocaust, Abu Ghraib and the genocide in Rwanda are just some prominent examples of atrocities in which women played a relevant role (Smeulers, 2015; Ellison & Szablewska, 2022). By focusing on the images posted on social media by IDF soldiers active in Gaza, this paper extends the gender lens of research done previously from merely focusing on female (re)presentation in the IDF to include gender differences and similarities in the context of Israeli war crimes.

Since 2014 the social media activity of members of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) increased massively. With the rise of the video-based social media platform TikTok individual IDF soldiers started to post more videos of their activities online. As mentioned above, IDF soldiers have been doing forms of militainment on social media for a long time, but the amount of video posts in 2014 is not comparable to the flood of photos and videos posted in the 2020s. Many of them are classical militainment and focus on things like training and eating with other soldiers, communication with the family at home, TikTok trends and obligatory messages of masculinity and nationalism. (Toler et al., 2024; Russel and Phang Lee, 2021). Since liberal feminists and the G.B. Bush administration started to integrate feminism into the counterterrorist narrative after 9/11 in order to generate brought support for the *war on terror* and the illegal invasion of Iraq, messages of pink washing and 'empowered women' are now typical for the IDF, and necessary to appeal to the uncritical liberal feminist audience in Western countries (Nasiah, 2013; Russel and Phang Lee, 2021)

However, beginning with Hamas' strike against Israel on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023 and continuing during the resulting genocide by Israel against the Palestinians (Jewish Voice for Peace, 2023; Jewish Voice for Peace, 2024; Albanese, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024), IDF soldiers started to post uncensored and unequivocal photos and videos of the war crimes they committed in Gaza and later Lebanon and Syria (Toler et al., 2024, Human Rights Watch, 2024b, Human Rights Watch 2024c). While official

IDF accounts have always been posting videos of militainment that glorify their violence, this type and scale of public demonstration of an army's war crimes by individual soldiers is new. Twitter and TikTok are the most relevant social media websites used in this context.

While topics like social media and war, glorification of war crimes, and gender roles and war have been studied in the context of Israel's occupation, an analysis of the spreading and glorification of Israeli war crimes on social media accounts of single IDF soldiers in the current war on Gaza applying feminist tools by critical criminologists has previously not occurred. This study closes that specific gap and aims to understand femininity and women hood as presented in Israel's public and on IDF soldier's social media accounts.

A common issue that usually occurs when people discuss the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is to frame Hamas as the only Palestinian resistance group, conflating all Palestinians with Hamas. Effectively, Western discourse and media portray Palestinian resistance as being *Islamist* and driven by violent and religious values and not by a demand for autonomy and an end to Israeli violence and occupation. The concept of *Islamism* as a violent and aggressive form of Islamic religious extremism is commonly invoked in Western media and discourse despite its actual and less agitating meaning of Islam-inspired politics. The degree of peacefulness or aggression of a group cannot be derived merely from its quality of being Islamic. As Tramontano (2021) points out, conflating Hamas with other Islamic groups like Al Qaeda is done in order to gain sympathy in the West, especially the USA.

This being said, Palestinian resistance consists of religious groups and parties like Hamas or Islamic Jihad but also of secular forces like the Mujahedeen Brigades, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) or the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) (Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, n.d.; European Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.; Peoples Dispatch, 2024). These groups are often depicted as merely military organizations, however, the armed wings of these groups, like the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades of Hamas and the Abu Ali Mustafa Brigade of the PFLP, are only one side of these organizations. These movements also consist of political and civilian wings and offer a variety of services such as political organizing, advocacy, social services, public mobilization, media presence and cultural activities (Baconi, 2018; Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, 1969). Furthermore, Palestinian resistance against Israel consists also of NGOs like Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) or Within Our Lifetime (WOL). With the aim to provide a proper analysis and to represent the diversity of the Palestinian people, in the following discussion the term *Palestinian resistance* refers to **all** groups who are resisting Israel, its military, and Zionism and their devastating impact on Palestine, this includes the armed wings of groups like Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the PFLP or the Mujahedeen Brigades but also their unarmed, civilian wings as wells as national and international groups like BDS, WOL or Students for justice in Palestine (SJP). This approach is highly recommended to all future research and discourse on the contemporary situation in the Middle East to provide a correct representation of reality.

# Method

This study analyses the content of social media posts by IDF soldiers who have been active in Gaza between October 7th 2023 and December 31 2024 regarding the presentation of gender. Relevant posts have been collected from the social media platform Twitter by the author of this paper and gathered in a data set in order to generate inside of the culture of IDF soldiers. Since the publication of certain content on TikTok and Twitter caused damage to the image of the IDF, many soldiers do not post public anymore. Thus, the original post is often not publicly accessible anymore or has been deleted. In order to circumvent this issue, the data set contains posts that share images and screenshots by journalists and civil rights activist groups. Nevertheless, all media used in this analysis has originally been created by individual IDF soldiers in Gaza and was posted on their private Twitter accounts. This being said, since journalists and NGOs usually do not aim to create an exhaustive data base but to draw attention to an issue by providing examples, we have to expect that the data set is missing a tremendous number of posts. Adding on to this is the fact that many posts are private or deleted.

The two most relevant Twitter accounts for this data set are the human rights group Israel Genocide Tracker and the journalist Younis Tirawi (Israel Genocide Tracker, 2024; Younis Tirawi, 2024). Other posts are from accounts of other journalists like Jehad Abusalim, Reuters or Samira Mohyeddin. Most of the images that have not been retrieved from the accounts of Tirawi's and Israel Genocide Tracker nevertheless bear Tirawi's watermark indicating that they have been previously shared on his account and most likely been deleted or censored by Twitter. The images, videos and a registry of all collected data of the data set are available online (Griese, 2024):

# https://drive.google.com/drive/u/3/folders/1qxgoKQt8F9Na9CsCr\_oBRmMDKt sCYkP4

### Findings

All of the images in the data set show then mocking of Palestinian femininity. Some images show male IDF soldiers posing in front of underwear of displaced or killed Palestinian women. This underwear is often pinned to a wall or hanging over barbed wire. Other posts featured male soldiers wearing female underwear. The positioning and wearing of lingerie are very frequent and accompanied by toxic masculine pride over the fact that these men invaded and captured the most intimate category of female clothing. In some images, other male IDF soldiers mockingly groped the soldiers who wore the underwear. The soldiers also wear Palestinian dresses over their uniforms and other images show Israeli soldiers without their uniforms, still wielding their guns, only wearing the dresses of displaced or killed Palestinian women. Some images feature IDF soldiers posing in groups, or alone or recreate everyday activities of civilians like getting a haircut. One video showed the torso and head of a female display dummy. The soldiers put a bra on it. Planning to detonate it later on. The only instances in which male IDF soldiers wore male. Palestinian clothes was when those were clerical clothes.

Furthermore, despite Israel's claim that women and men are treated equally, even in the military sector, none of the images or videos in the data set feature female IDF soldiers. Nor did any of the more than a thousand images and videos of IDF soldier's private social media accounts that were analyzed during the dataset show many women in combat zones. The data set finds only seven different female IDF soldiers in combat zones. Many of these images show at least a small group of soldiers, thus, despite Israel's policy of all-gender conscription, out of thousands of different IDF soldiers on images from the combat zone in the Gaza Strip only a small minority is actually female. This stands in stark contrast to the image of women as fighters that is an essential part of Israeli propaganda. Most female IDF soldiers, with some exceptions, are primarily assigned to medical or technical units and supply jobs far away from the actual frontline. In comparison, according to the Department of Defense (2022) in 2021, female soldiers made up 17.3% (231,741 in total) of the active-duty force of the US military.

#### Discussion

The situation of women in Palestine and other regions of the Middle East is complex and influenced by cultural sexism and the impact of imperialist influence in the region. Palestinian women have always lived under the constant threat of violence through Israel's occupation but are also victims of femicide by Palestinian men. For example, women who have been sexually assaulted are often murdered in order to preserve the families honor in so called honor *killings*. Thus, sexual violence reconstructs women as a potential threat to family honor. Generally, women in Palestine have no way to speak about this issue other than in the given masculine patriarchal language of discourse. As a result, many victims of sexual assault describe their situation as being in *living death*. (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2002). Putting this into context, women in Western countries like the US are also experiencing high levels of lethal domestic violence. In 2023, nearly 4.000 women were murdered in the US, 72% were shot dead by their spouse, showing that deadly violence against women is not a problem typical to Arab or Muslim population but a threat to female life's around the globe (Statista Research Department, 2023; Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, 2024). Despite the universal occurrence of discrimination of women, the Western world used sexism in the Middle East as justification for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan while completely ignoring sexual violence and misogyny in the home countries (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Most of the honor crimes committed against Palestinian women are committed in communities that suffer "lack of economic means, ignorance of other options for dealing with abuse, shortage of helping organizations, lack of social support, lack of protective reforms", a situation that has been brought upon the Palestinians by Western imperialism and Israel for more than a hundred years (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2002; Khalidi, 2020). This economically dire situation is the result of Israel's occupation and Western imperialism. It is important to be aware of the problem of femicide against Palestinian women by Palestinian men when we speak about the situation of women in Palestine, but it does not make sense to see this decontextualized in a way that supports racist and Islamophobic interpretations.

As mentioned above, Israeli propaganda gives women a special place in the narrative of its conflict with the Arab world. Israeli women are presented as threatened by the Palestinian resistance, especially by Hamas. This is emphasized by the claim that Hamas weaponized sexual violence and engaged in acts of mass rape during its strike against Israel on October 7<sup>th</sup>. While some cases of sexual violence occurred that day, the story of weaponized mass rape has later been proven wrong (Greenwald, 2024). On the other hand, Israel blocks investigations by the United Nations special representative on conflict-related sexual violence in order to prevent investigations of large-scale sexual abuse of Palestinians by the Israeli army, suggesting that Israel does not care about the prevention of sexual violence but is merely using it for its war propaganda (Amnesty International, 2023; United Nations, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024d; Rozovsky, 2025).

Palestinian resistance is portrayed as having a focus on violating Israeli women, striving them of their perceived purity. As a patriarchal society, Israel sees women as mothers, thus as pure and relevant for the future of Israel's existence. This is amplified by Israel's character as a settler colonial state. Because Israelis are not native to the Middle East they need to generate a kind of sovereignty of the state of Israel by extension of its citizen body. This is done by birth and immigration to Israel from other countries. Thus, Israeli women need to be protected for their role in Zionist reproduction. They are important to secure the existence of the Jewish people and a future for Israel's children. In this sense, the future of the Zionist homeland depends on the safety of Israeli women.

Keeping this in mind the symbolic interactionism foundational to the mockery posts by male IDF soldiers interacting with lingerie of displaced or killed Palestinian women of the Gaza Strip becomes clear. The male soldiers of the Israeli Defense Force are violating Palestinian women in their absence, symbolically engaging in the very behavior they fear Palestinians, especially Hamas, want to engage in against Israeli women. Violating the privacy and dignity of Palestinian women by posing with and wearing their dresses and especially underwear symbolizes a strike against the most precious purity of Palestinian womanhood.

This is also relevant in the context of masculinity and combat. We see that the IDF soldiers mock the absent male Palestinian soldiers for not being able to protect the femininity and purity of their women and Palestinian womanhood. This is exacerbated by a perception of Arabs and Muslims as being prude. Publicly displaying the underwear of Muslim women functions as an attack on the perceived religious and moral foundations of the Arab and Muslim society and stands detrimentally to claims that Israel would be interested in protecting women's rights.

Furthermore, Israel's emphasis on women serving in the IDF functions as a justification to be seen as a progressive state and to further its status as the "only democracy in the Middle East." This status is important for Israel's self-image and to secure support from Western countries. By November 13 2024 and since its establishment in 1948, the Israel received about \$310 billion (adjusted for inflation) from the United States alone (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). It is also an important status for Western countries in order to provide a narrative that justifies the ongoing support of Israel in the eyes of their own populations. It is an important part of the ongoing politicide of the Palestinians. Yet, the lack of female soldiers in the images and videos posted from the combat zones in Gaza on the private social media accounts of male active duty IDF soldiers suggests that women are usually not fighting. This undermines Israel's presentation of being a state that does not discriminate by gender, distorting its claimed moral advantage over Arab and Palestinian society. This is not unusual for nationalist movements like Zionism. As Deniz Kandiyoti remarks "women's stake in nationalism has been both complex and contradictory. On the one hand nationalist movements invite women to participate more fully in collective life by interpolating them as 'national' actors: mothers, educators, workers, and even fighters. On the other hand, they reaffirm the boundaries of culturally acceptable feminine conduct and exert pressure on women to articulate their gender interests within the terms set by nationalist discourse. In that sense, feminisms are never autonomous but bound to the signifying networks of the contexts which produce them" (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2002).

Additionally, the function Israeli women play in the IDF have been researched for decades and are widely known in Israel itself. Instead of engaging in warfare as soldiers usually do, the role of female personal in the IDF is to serve the men of the IDF. This is especially amplified by the well-known saying in Israeli militarism 'Men to the Air Force, women to the pilots' (Levy, 2000; Brownfield-Stein, 2010). In her article about the role of women in Israel's military, Edna Levy states that "[o]ne of women's key functions in the IDF is to be accessories, in both meanings of the word -women are support staff as well as

ornaments of male soldiers. Most of the jobs women perform in the Israeli army, such as teacher, clerk, social worker, involve nurturing or supporting male soldiers. And women – specifically women's physical appearance – also serve as status symbols of male soldiers' prestige" (2000). Again, Israel emphasizes on extending its citizenry through reproduction since it needs to create sovereignty by a large citizen body. By having female IDF soldiers predominantly serve the needs of male soldiers, the IDF makes sure that it doesn't only functions as a military organization for the Zionist cause but also as a reproductive one. The military officially encourages implicit sexual relations. This dehumanization of women by reducing them to mere uterus and sex symbol is one of the most foundational narratives feminism fights against, thus this representation of women in the military forces contradicts Israel's feminist messaging.

Another stain on Israel's claim of gender justice is the rampant abuse of young women serving in the IDF. A 2022 special report on safety of female conscripts by the Israeli state comptroller suggest that at least one third of women serving in the IDF has been sexually harassed at least once. According to the same report, the situation in other security branches like the police, the border police, the intelligence service Shin Bet or the prison system looks as or even more dire: 38% of women serving in the prison system, 27% of female conscripts serving in the border police and 22% of female conscripts in the police declared to have been victims of sexual harassment while serving. The majority of these incidents was perpetrated by a standing serviceman or commander (State Comptroller, 2022). 70% of the respondents to the questionnaire stated that they filed a report, but the report was either not handled properly or ignored completely (ibidem).

In his book *Necropolitics* Achille Mbembe observes that '[t]he manipulation of questions of gender for racist ends, by illustrating the Other's masculine domination, is [...] aimed at concealing the reality of phallocracy at home' (Mbembe, 2019). This is nowhere as true as it is in Israel. While criticizing and demonizing Arab countries, Hamas and Islam for being sexist and misogynist, the highest status an Israeli woman can aspire to is being showcased in explicit imagery created to appeal to a male, Western audience as a form of propaganda, and as a breeding machine, reducing herself to nothing but her physical, sexualized features. For the IDF there are two types of women: Type 1, Israeli women, are women who can be used for reproduction and for erotic militarism on the one hand and are instrumentalized as having their

feminine purity threatened by Palestinians on the other hand. Type 2, Arab/Palestinian women, are the women of the enemy whose value is defined by the humiliation caused to the opponent by violating their dignity as women. Both types are sexist and dehumanizing in their own ways. The data set for this study and accounts by victims and journalists of the actions of Israel's army in occupied Palestinian territory show the disregard for women's rights by the IDF and the state of Israel.

Additionally, it is not true that Israel is the only entity in the conflict with Palestine who has their ranks of their military personal filled with women. Palestinian resistance has historically not been limited to male actors, the ranks of the PFLP for example include a significant number of women (Lavalette, 2024). Their involvement is crucial in the broader context of the Palestinian struggle. Most prominent among the women of Palestinian resistance is Leila Khaled. As a resistance fighter of the PFLP, Khaled took part in two plane hijackings in 1960 and 1970. Both ended with empty airplanes being blown up to generate attention for the struggle of the Palestinians (Hinze, 2024). Even today, five decades later, women play an important role in the armed struggle of the PFLP in Gaza (Palestine Chronicle, 2021). Additionally, the current war in Gaza is also fought by female fighters of the DFLP (Newsflaire, 2024). The current narrative that portrays the Palestinian resistance as only consisting of Hamas related fighters ignores the voices of the women of the above-mentioned organizations and others, creating a false impression of the situation of women in the Palestinian territories, resulting in ignorance towards Palestinian demands and more support for Israel by Western countries, thus increasing Palestinian suffering.

While it is correct that Hamas' vision of the role of women is a traditional and more restrictive vision than the average Israeli vision of a women's role in society, groups like the PFLP and the DFLP emphasize gender equality and the emancipation of women in significantly more progressive terms than Israel or most other Western countries do. Thus, to suggest that Palestinian resistance being sexist and misogynist per se is not supported by factual reality. It only functions to create a false narrative in the advantage of Israel's reputation. (In order to gain an in-depths understanding of the issue of women's rights in Palestine and the Middle East I recommend the reader to engage with the research and academic works of women like Lisa Taraki, Lila Abu-Lughold and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevortkian).

Moreover, reports from different organizations, among them the UN organization UN Women, suggest that women are the main sufferer of Israel's genocide in Gaza. More than half of the fatalities are women and children, over 6.000 mothers died, leaving 16.000 children orphaned. Women in Gaza are more likely to suffer rates of medical conditions needing immediate responses than men. They are at greater risk for non-communicable diseases (UN Women, 2024). Furthermore, the report states that ' [...] today, more than 162,000 women have or are at risk of developing such diseases, including over 30,841 at risk of diabetes, 107,443 at risk of hypertension, 18,583 at risk of cardiovascular diseases and 5,201 women diagnosed with cancer' (UN Women, 2024). Due to Israel's occupation, the situation of women in Gaza has already been dire before October 7th and has only been exacerbated since. These numbers stand detrimental to the self-portrayal of Israel as a progressive country that values women more than Hamas does. Generally, Israel's actions in Palestine created a situation far more devastating for women than what Hamas has ever been accused of.

This reminds us of the narratives and twisted logic during the high times of colonialism. The white colonizers claimed the Other, the savages and animals would engage in acts of cannibalism, would in ravenous acts devour other human beings, thus making it impossible to render these 'animals' human. In reality, however, cannibalism among native American tribes was nearly unheard of. There were exceedingly rare exceptions which were usually acts of cannibalistic funerals. These tribes ate the flesh of the deceased to keep them in their tribe (Snugg, 2015). Burring them in the soil would have caused the them repulsion in them white Westerners feel when they hear that these tribes ate their dead members. Yet, white Europeans used to devour masses of human flesh during this time of colonization, and not in a figurative sense but quite literally. For example, the surprising reason why there are only a few mummies left is not decay or other natural circumstance but the consumptions of mummies by the colonial, European upper class. Mummy has been a part of medical consumption and has been turned into a variety of different tinctures, band aids, ointments and orally consumed preparations (Snugg, 2015). In the same way the savage tribes of Europe devoured figuratively and quite literally the humans of the colonized world while claiming them to be man-eating animals, Israel claims that it is a beacon of feminism in the Middle East while at the same time, as suggested by the data set and UN reports, acting as the most severe threat to women's wellbeing and lives in the Middle East.

### Conclusion

As the data set shows, Israel's reputation as being a beacon of women's rights in the Middle East is incorrect. Israeli state actors like the Israeli Defense Forces sexualize and objectify female IDF soldiers in order to generate an image of liberated women. As suggested by the data set, male IDF soldiers commonly violate the dignity of Palestinian womanhood and displaced or killed Palestinian women. At the same time, their actions in the greater contexts of Israel's attack occupation of Palestinian territories create a devastating situation for Palestinian women to live in. Israel is by far the most significant threat to the well-being and liberation of Palestinian women despite its claims of Hamas or conservative Islamism being the biggest oppressor. While a feminist position that can be taken seriously needs to criticize groups like Hamas it can under no circumstances support Israel. Also, criticism of the situation of women in the Middle East needs to consider cultural and religious needs of women in that region. Not all women define liberation as self-sexualization for propaganda purposes. Religious and cultural expression, the partaking in cultural and religious activities and community as well as religious education are also part of relevant needs of Palestinian women that demand fulfilment in order for Palestinian women to truly be liberated.

A feminist vision for the women of Palestine has to entail secured access to food and clean water. Access to high quality health care, including general health care services and women specific health care services like gynecology, reproductive health, breast cancer screening, and hormonal health. It needs to demand access to higher education and political participation. It also has to entail the possibility for women to embrace Palestinian culture and tradition as well as religious participation. But most importantly, a feminist vison for Palestine needs to be defined by Palestinian women. The voices of the women of Palestine, demands and needs have to be taken seriously. None of this can be realized through indiscriminate destruction and killing of Gaza and the Palestinians and even less by ethnic cleaning, expulsion or genocide.

Finally, this paper does not only show Israel-specific problems regarding the perception of gender, womanhood and the image of women but amplifies the broader issue of what needs to be called colonial Feminism. Ignoring the cultural and historical differences of Western women and women in the Middle East or Africa, thus imposing a Western position on the struggle of

the women in countries outside of Western cultures, means to simply impose another female gender role, another way how women have to be, ignorant of their personal needs and interests. In the colonial Feminist narrative, women are only seen as liberated when they can live under Western cultural standards. However, a movement cannot be truly feminist if it does not support a woman's personal choice to wear a hijab or when it applies a reductionist definition of woman's rights and female liberation as the ability to wear a bikini at the beach. In the end, however, the women in Palestine cannot be free when Palestine itself is not free.

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