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Hilo Glazer

The aggregation of evidence collected by Dr. Cochav Elkayam-Levy and her Civil Commission presents a horrifying picture that leaves no room for doubt: On October 7, Hamas terrorists systematically carried out acts of rape and sexual abuse. She has discovered, however, that there is no rush to acknowledge this abroad

[Hilo Glazer](#)

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It was not the viewing of the dozens of graphic videos disseminated by Hamas. Nor was it scrutiny of the pictures of women, the state of whose bodies leave no doubt as to the terrible things that had been done to them before they were murdered. Nor was it even the horrific eyewitness accounts of the Zaka search and rescue organization volunteers and the people at the victim-identification center at the Shura base. What caused Cochav Elkayam-Levy to break down this week was a brief phone conversation with Michal Herzog, the wife of Israel's president.

"Because it's like your mother calling and simply asking how you are doing," explains Dr. Elkayam-Levy, her voice choking up immediately after she hangs up. "I had already become used to delivering the most difficult information there is. People ask me what I know, they ask for details, they ask for numbers. And suddenly someone like her calls me and asks: 'How are you doing?' How am I doing? I am doing terribly. But I am not the story here."

Elkayam-Levy, of the department of international relations at Hebrew University, really does want to reduce interest in her personally, but the truth is that during the past weeks she has been playing a key role in directing attention to one of the especially nightmarish chapters of the nightmare of [October 7](#). The Civil Commission on October 7 Crimes by Hamas against Women and Children, which she founded, is casting a spotlight on the acts of [rape and other sex crimes committed by the terrorists](#) under the "aegis" of the attack on the south.

During these past weeks, the women of the nongovernmental commission have been hard at work gathering testimony and documentary materials related to the day of the massacre, with the aim of putting together a database of crimes against women and children. They are assembling one account after another, one piece of evidence after another, and gradually putting together all the pieces of the puzzle. The aggregation of the evidence presents a horrifying picture that leaves no room for doubt: Under cover of the massacre, Hamas carried

out a campaign of rape and sexual abuse at many of [the communities adjacent to the Gaza Strip](#) that it attacked.

Elkayam-Levy is a lawyer and scholar of international law, gender and human rights – a combination that seems to have prepared her in advance to head such a commission. Nonetheless, she says, “I never thought my work in international law and feminist theory would intersect in such a shocking way,” she says.

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About a week after the disaster, when its outlines were already clear, Elkayam-Levy established a task force she called the “Gender Crimes War Room.” She thought that this “would be a task for one week, concrete and focused – to organize in a clear way all the information we have about violence against women.”

However, as the days went by, the magnitude of the task became clearer and she realized that the ad hoc panel she had set up would have to redefine itself as an organized body with a permanent presence in the field. That is how the civil commission was born. Elkayam-Levy gathered a select team of 15 lawyers, activists, criminologists and researchers from various fields – all of them women, all volunteers. Her main partner is law professor Yifat Bitton, president of the Achva Academic College, who is leading the commission’s interactions with people in the Israel Police and the State Prosecutor’s Office, in order to draw their attention to the unique characteristics of gender violence of such dimensions.

In the police, the commission is working together with International Crimes Unit 433, which is gathering evidence on the issue. “We are working in accordance with a protocol we have put together,” Elkayam-Levy says. “The type of information, how many times we have received it, from what sources, in what language. In this way, we are cross-referencing evidence, stories and locations.”

In the immediate term, the materials gathered by the commission could help the victims and their families in investigative and legal matters. In the long term, the intention is to establish an archive on the subject at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. (Because of the sensitivity of the material, access to the archive will be determined on the basis of strict criteria.)

Material is being gathered from a large number of sources. “We are collecting materials of every sort – pictures, audio files, videos, testimonies and newspaper reports,” says Dr. Sarai Aharoni, head of the Gender Studies Program at Ben-Gurion University, who heads the commission’s documentation team. “The aim is to establish a factual infrastructure and also to better understand circumstances of the venues where specific crimes occurred.”

Sometimes, as Elkayam-Levy says, the collection of the material has the characteristics of a detective operation. “The other day, for example, I was at the Knesset and during the hearing [of the committee on women and gender equality, about October 7], a woman handed me a note with very concrete information about one of the cases we are looking at,” she relates. “Some of the pieces of information are also emerging from our dialogue with the media. One of the journalists who called to ask about a specific incident succeeded in completing the picture for us with regard to that particular case.”

Thus far, the commission has not taken testimony directly, but it will begin to do so soon. “We have waited for relevant witnesses to give official evidence to the police, with the intention to then carry out in-depth interviews with them ourselves,” she says.

Separate attention is being devoted to content analysis of videos and texts in Arabic, among other things, in order to establish the directives received by the Hamas terrorists to carry out sex crimes. This task is being led by a volunteer who holds a degree in Arabic language and literature.

Protesters outside the UN. "What meaning does international law have if it disconnects itself from universal values?"Credit: Roy Boshi

Indeed, during the weeks of gathering materials, the evidence of rape and brutal harm have been accumulating. Last month, when Elkayam-Levy was invited to speak on a panel organized by several different Jewish student groups at Harvard University, she felt that the time was right to present some of the evidence to the world.

When her turn to speak came, she delivered a detailed warning about the difficult things she was about to describe, took a deep breath and began a horrifying survey. She recounted a long list of evidence about acts of rape, including gang rape, disfigurement and other acts of abuse. She described a number of videos that Hamas distributed in which naked women are seen, with signs on them that leave little room for doubt. In one case, the victim was taken to Gaza with no clothes on and unconscious, and displayed before a cheering crowd. Pictures that had come into her hands showed other victims of sex crimes. She also read out several chilling descriptions by eyewitnesses of acts of rape.

In addition to videos and pictures, Elkayam-Levy said she based her claims on testimony collected by the police, forensic evidence gathered at the crime scenes, information given by paramedics and Zaka volunteers, reports from volunteers at the forensic medicine institute, and [testimony from Hamas terrorists](#) captured by Israel and interrogated. After eight minutes of stomach-churning monologue, she asked to stop. “Never in my life had I imagined I would face my colleagues to talk about gender-based war crimes and crimes against humanity carried out against Israeli women and children on such a large scale,” she says, “and we are assuming that many more cases will surface in the future.”

“We connected one testimony to the next,” Elkayam-Levy says. “Suddenly seeing the big picture, how systematic it was, the extent of the violence – it was a punch in the stomach.”

According to the information you have in hand, were sex crimes committed throughout the entire region under attack?

“Yes.

“The torture of women was weaponized in the destruction of communities, in sowing general horror and in breaking the spirit of the Israelis,” she continues. She reached this conclusion in part from what has been said by the terrorists who were arrested by Israel, and who have testified to their interrogators that the mission assigned to them included rape. And indeed, the Shin Bet security service has released recordings of at least two investigations of Nukhba

terrorists who were asked whether they had been given specific orders to abuse women and children. Referring to the sex crimes, one of them said that the aim was “to soil them, to rape them.” A second terrorist related that “the commander said: You have to step on their heads. Cut off their heads. Do everything to them.” A military source cited by the daily Yedioth Ahronoth noted that “the terrorists related that the aim of cutting off heads and rape was to sow fear and alarm in the Israeli public.”

Moreover, in an interview with CNN, President Isaac Herzog revealed a pamphlet that was found on the body of a terrorist that included a detailed checklist for the kidnapping of hostages. “This booklet is a set of instructions on how to go into people’s yards, into a kibbutz, a city, a moshav, how to break in. And first thing, what do you do when you find the citizens? You torture them. This is the booklet. It says exactly how to torture them, how to abduct them, how to kidnap them.”

* * *

Among other things, the commission is aiming to obtain recognition in the international arena that the acts committed by Hamas against women and children come under the definition of crimes against humanity. To achieve this, they hoped to awaken from their torpor the women’s organizations associated with the United Nations, but the results have been disappointing. Most of their disappointment is directed at the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and UN Women. “These are organizations that have an important declarative role,” Elkayam-Levy says. “They are supposed to be the first pipeline from which information flows concerning human rights violations against women and children.”

These bodies were slow, however, to relate to the events in the western Negev, and the statements they ultimately published are frustrating to Elkayam-Levy, to say the least. “All kinds of vague statements are beginning to come out,” she notes, “calling upon both sides to ‘show restraint,’ and simply making October 7 vanish from the timeline. A parallel universe. The terrible betrayal we have felt has developed into a feeling that we are now the victims of wild incitement directed at us. At very early stages of the war, those organizations began running campaigns about the genocide Israel is carrying out in Gaza. I am very uncomfortable saying this, but those organizations have shown themselves to be antisemitic bodies.

“The moment [those organizations keep silent](#), or do not report the truth, we have a problem,” she continues. “It is untenable that experts who are supposed to be responsive to women’s distress everywhere are subordinating themselves to political considerations, and are not reporting what happened in a disaster of this magnitude. It is incomprehensible that agencies of the UN that are responsible for [promoting and safeguarding] women’s rights are ignoring the Israeli women who were taken hostage, or were murdered and raped by Hamas.”

In Elkayam-Levy’s view, this is a replication of those same denial mechanisms often applied concerning individual cases of rape. “When a woman is raped, the discourse immediately revolves around evidentiary questions – is there or is there not evidence of rape? Doubt is cast on the woman, her reliability is questioned, and a question mark is posed as to whether it did or did not happen. This casting of doubt is now directed against us at the collective level.

“Questions are asked like: Is there or isn’t there semen? Was there or wasn’t there a rape kit? Those same female jurists with international reputations who are conducting this discussion apparently do not have a basic understanding of international law. International law does not talk the language of the individual case. My call to them is to look beyond those denial mechanisms. You are facing a bunch of respected women and telling them that shocking crimes were committed here. Am I the one who needs to provide the evidence for the terrorists’ deeds? What kind of travesty is it that they are imposing the burden of proof on me?”

“In the case of October 7, we will never know the extent of the damage,” she continues. “We know that the vast majority of those who were harmed were also murdered. If there are survivors among those who were harmed, decades could go by before they gather the courage to talk about it. In the few cases in which someone else witnessed their suffering, I assume that then too questions will arise as to exactly what he saw and whether he is a reliable witness. I don’t intend to participate in that game.”

Nevertheless, your group is collecting evidence, cross-referencing details.

“True. But not because we’re looking at the individual instance and considering whether or not it conforms to the minimal criminal threshold. The very fact that this discussion is taking place drives me crazy. The question we want to deal with is not whether something happened, but rather what type of crimes were committed, the systematic way they were committed and the orders to commit them. The question of the evidence that has been collected by the police, or not, is completely secondary. We aren’t at all in a discussion of whether there were horrors here, or not. It is clear that any international body that will investigate them will get heaps of material that supports this. The aim is to reveal to humanity the depth of the suffering. The critical mass is the heart of the matter, and not this or that cross-section of an individual case.”

But in the meantime, when the other side takes a specific, extreme case and manages to refute it, it serves that side to undermine the overall narrative and causes cracks in the big picture. Perhaps the very fact of engaging with a single case is falling into a trap.

“The danger always exists. Therefore, for example, we do not publish an email address, out of concern that hostile elements will try to plant false information with us to undermine our credibility. I’ll tell you more than that: Just the other day someone claimed that a certain detail I had passed along was mistaken. When I present what I know, I present the most reliable information I have at that point in time. Possibly over time some of the things we thought we had found will turn out to have been incorrect. To the same extent, I am convinced that the opposite will also happen – a shard of information we hadn’t known about will develop into dimensions we cannot imagine at the moment. Therefore, we see importance in documenting those small fragments of information. We are not an investigative or prosecutorial body. Our task is historical.”

And also public diplomacy – hasbara (in Hebrew)?

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Dr. Cochav Elkayam-Levy

“No, I am not carrying the task of Israeli hasbara around on my shoulders. True, foreign correspondents have been calling us ever since the first week and asking for information, and I reply in cases where I feel there is critical importance in giving an immediate response. But we are a civil-society organization – not an official state organization – and we perceive our work as something that will become known over many years.”

But you do see importance in sharing accounts of horrors with the media even now.

“There are journalists who contact me and ask: Did it [a particular rape] really happen? It’s like, what are we even talking about? This is about the most documented set of horrors humanity has known. There are [innumerable videos](#) that have already been released – just go into the Hamas Telegram groups. You are journalists, do your work. Don’t ask me what happened and how it happened. It is hard enough that I need to go through those groups myself to extract information from them.”

Have you found yourself becoming a relay station for the horror stories?

“No, I do not allow myself to go there. Even with requests for numbers, I don’t cooperate. They ask me: How many? How many? How many? There was one journalist here, a woman from a foreign news network, who drove me crazy. ‘Are we talking about tens? Hundreds? Thousands?’ I’m sorry. No. It would be irresponsible of me to cite a number.”

Why is a numerical estimation irresponsible, in your view?

“First of all, because there are cases that we will never know about, considering that most victims were murdered. Secondly, I am not willing to make the distinction between torture, gang rape, rape and a ‘sex crime.’ A woman who was executed, women and girls who were targeted for being girls – each story is a world of its own and an unimaginable tragedy. Gender violence is a much broader term than sexual violence. It means tearing a baby away from his mother, mutilating a woman or degrading her body. The demand for a number goes against everything I stand for.”

Open gallery view



The site of the Nova music festival, which was one of the centers of the October 7 attack by Hamas. "There are cases that we will never know about, considering that most victims were murdered," Elkayam-Levy says.Credit: ILAN ROSENBERG/Reuters

Dr. Sarai Aharoni, who leads the documentation team at the Civil Commission, also believes that any discussion of numbers is “sick. We’re trying to find out the truth. To bear witness. From my familiarity with the materials, I can tell you that many things happened. Many, very difficult things.”

The difficulty in estimating the number of victims also emerges from the fact that the Israeli army approached the Hamas attack as a war event and didn’t treat the victims as one would at a crime scene. The guidelines for bodies focused on identification, protection of the dignity of the bodies, and immediate burial – and not on collecting evidence. The goal was to evacuate, not investigate. Zaka and United Hatzalah (rescue groups) were seen as auxiliary forces, and not as direct witnesses of the crimes that were committed by Hamas.

Nevertheless, as time passed, some of those volunteers gave statements to the police, saying that in some of the cases, victims’ intimate organs were mutilated. According to a report in the daily Israel Hayom, based on Zaka volunteers’ testimonies, some of the male victims’ bodies also showed signs of sexual torture. Elkayam-Levy notes that the commission has also received information about a few cases of sexual torture of men, backed by photos.

Israeli diplomat Sarah Weiss Maudi, who has served as the vice chair of the UN Legal Committee, has also said that Israel has submitted to the UN unequivocal evidence of rape incidents, including gang rape and traces of semen found in bodies of young Israeli women who were murdered.

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Dr. Cochav Elkayam-Levy

Elkayam-Levy is closely familiar with both the individuals involved in and the procedures that characterize international women’s organizations. This is why, in the first days after the attack, she still tried to rationalize their thundering silence. The explanations included the constraints forcing the groups to strive toward a consensus; processes that have severed their relations with Israeli women’s organizations; and the effects of the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement.

“We sat down with all the rational tools at our disposal and tried to break it down,” she says. “We really racked our brains to figure out where they’re at and why. At some point I decided to stop making excuses for them. They abandoned us in an immoral and terrible way. From the moment it dawned on me how much time and energy we were wasting trying to convince

them – just to listen to us, just to believe us – the realization sunk in that these groups are not the ‘address’ where we can turn.”

Did the women’s organizations’ initial response surprise you?

“It was a shock. Maybe I was naïve. You need to understand that since the ‘90s, there’s been a significant leap in people’s ability to conceptualize injustices that are directed toward women during war. In part this is due to what happened in Rwanda [in 1994] and to Bosnian women during the Yugoslavian war. International jurists have managed to fundamentally change the terminology in a way that recognizes crimes against women [as distinct]. This is why what’s happening now with regard to October 7 is so much worse. I’m really asking myself now, how do I go into a classroom and teach international law?”

Because it has become obsolete? Lost its validity?

“Because it has become illegitimate. What meaning does international law have if it disconnects itself from universal values? If it doesn’t even make space for an outcry over such a horror, let alone recognize it? After all, international law is a collection of procedures that are meant to prevent human suffering. In the absence of statements that recognize suffering, there’s a moral distortion and a huge failure.”

In addition to ripping the mask off of women’s organizations associated with the UN, the commission has also taken a personal approach toward activists and international figures whose reaction to the October 7 events was outrageous. For example, [Samantha Pearson](#), the head of the University of Alberta’s sexual assault center, who claimed there was no proof that Hamas terrorists raped women during the terror attack. Following a determined public effort, in which Elkayam-Levy and her colleagues took part, the university president announced Pearson’s dismissal from her job.

The next target is Reem Alsalem, a special rapporteur at the UN Human Rights Council, whose role is to monitor whether member states meet the international standards for protecting women against violence. “I received an email in which she demanded to see ‘proof’ for our accusations,” Elkayam-Levy says. “She is a rapporteur of Jordanian-Palestinian background who recently released a statement describing October 7 as the day Israel launched a genocide. Meaning, this isn’t just silence, it’s the appropriation of the events of October 7 to Palestinian suffering. It’s a totally insane move in my view. I don’t love the word ‘campaign,’ but our intention is to expose the world to a figure who is just abusing – I have no other word for it – global public funds.”

Open gallery view

Protesters outside the UN lamenting that "Believe All Women" doesn't seem to apply to Jews.Credit: Dana Gat

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Elkayam-Levy is orchestrating the commission’s operation from her home in Modi’in, her cell phone glued to her ear as she paces back and forth from the living room to the kitchen, her heels piercing the wood floor. This week she decided to move the commission’s activity

to nearby offices that have been made available as a donation. “I felt that I needed to get out of the house, to protect the kids against this strong wind and give the family some quiet,” she says.

The fallout of October 7, she says, has critically undermined her own value system, both professionally and personally. “As feminist scholars, we’re consistently fighting against the arming of civilians, for obvious reasons,” she says. “And now, one of the first things I told my husband after the attack was that he has to get a gun to protect our home. That goes against everything I believe in. I never thought I would have a gun in my home. I teach the exact opposite, I act against it. The entire internal belief system is undermined.”

Elkayam-Levy is 39, a married mother of four. She grew up in a religious family in the [“mixed” city of Lod](#), a middle child with four siblings. Her parents are retired educators. “It took me a while to realize how uncommon this life experience is,” she says. “That Arabs studied in the same classroom as me, that our neighbors were Arab, that our surroundings were so heterogeneous.”

She served in the IDF Spokesperson’s Unit and went on to study law and political science at Bar-Ilan University. She interned at the State Prosecutor’s Office, in the department that handles High Court petitions. After the birth of her first child, she transferred to the international law department. Among other things, she dealt with cases and treaties related to human trafficking, children’s rights and prisoner rights.

“The department is like an NGO within the state, advising the state on how to meet its commitments when it comes to human rights,” she explains. “I saw the power that international law has, how it can change a state’s priorities.”

After two years on the job, she traveled to the United States to get a master’s degree in law at the University of Pennsylvania. There she received a scholarship and the title of human rights scholar, which allowed her to lead pro-bono legal-aid programs for undocumented immigrants, including asylum seekers and Mexican children who have crossed the border into the United States.

Her research focused on the intersection between international law and gender. Her 2019 doctorate, also at Penn, dealt with women’s right to freedom of religion and faith, and the regularization of these rights under the umbrella of international law. After five years, she returned with her family to Israel, and began teaching a course on feminist theory in international law at Reichman University, in Herzliya. In the current academic year (which has yet to open, because of the war), she plans to offer the same course at the Hebrew University as well. Three years ago she founded the Deborah Institute, which acts to protect the rights of women in Israel and minimize gender gaps in strategic outlooks. Over the past year, she has been a prominent activist in the Women Building an Alternative protest movement.

The disaster that we went through emerged from many system breakdowns, but the mistrust of women is one of the most painful ones.

Dr. Cochav Elkayam-Levy

On behalf of the latter group, Elkayam-Levy took part in an online panel held by CEDAW, the UN committee on discrimination against women, on the day it was confirmed that [Shani Louk had died](#). Louk, 22, was kidnapped by Hamas from the outdoor music festival at Kibbutz Re'im and was filmed by her cheering captors as she was driven, wounded, in the back of a Gaza-bound pickup truck. "Shani's story is not unique," Elkayam-Levy said in her talk. "... The weak response, if there is any at all, by the international community provides fertile grounds for the weaponization of women's and girls' bodies in warfare."

* * *

Sitting with Elkayam for an hour-long talk, without any interruptions, is practically a mission impossible. Her phone vibrates constantly, and her schedule is overflowing. Over the course of a few days, she goes to the President's Residence as part of a young leadership delegation that will be heading to New York later in the week under the auspices of the World Zionist Organization; attends an administrative meeting over Zoom with her partners at the commission; meets with foreign leaders and diplomats; takes part in a foreign press briefing with the police commissioner; and gives interviews to The Washington Post and other media. She says that since October 7, she has gotten used to a routine of sleepless nights.

"There are hundreds of requests, everyone wants to know [what we have learned], and within all that, I need to remind myself what the big mission is," she says. Urged by people close to her, she started seeing a therapist last week. "She's doing with me the work that helps me preserve my well-being," she explains. "She doesn't speak with me about what happened, but rather about me. I realized that in order to stay strong I need help. And that I'm allowed to fall apart."

Are there moments when you do break down?

"A few days ago I saw a story on TV about male and female fighters killed in Gaza. Tears started streaming down. Just out of heartache over those young faces that are gone. It's pain than anyone can identify with; it tugs at the heart strings of us all. And then suddenly I realized that we're used to this type of grief in Israel. But how do you deal with an image of a baby who's been shot? Of a pregnant woman who was slaughtered? It's grief that can't be understood."

Last Thursday, early in the morning, Elkayam-Levy found herself in an unusual situation, at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. Two European prime ministers were visiting Israel, Pedro Sánchez from Spain and Alexander De Croo from Belgium. They gathered with their entourages in the hotel's conference room to receive a briefing from the head of the Israeli Civil Commission.

Elkayam-Levy decided to put aside the "horror speech" – the gut-wrenching descriptions of crimes that she listed at the Harvard conference – and focused on the effort to recruit the foreign leaders to constructive cooperation. It wasn't a debate, but an event in which Elkayam-Levy was the primary speaker, with the prime ministers listening. Sánchez was mostly interested in her positions on national security and terrorism; De Croo wanted to know if she believes in peace and asked her if she also sees the suffering of Gaza residents. Elkayam-Levy noted that she's a longtime peace activist. The next day at Rafah Crossing, the two leaders would make pro-Palestinian speeches that would set off [a diplomatic crisis with](#)

[Israel](#). But Elkayam-Levy didn't concern herself with that. "Even if they expressed a position that was critical toward Israel, at no point did they deny the acts that targeted Israeli women, or stayed silent."

Open gallery view

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, left, and Belgian Prime Minister Alexander de Croo speak at Rafah crossing. "At no point did they deny the acts that targeted Israeli women, or stayed silent," Elkayam-Levy says.Credit: Stringer / AP

Following an hour-long discussion, Elkayam-Levy continued to another meeting at the hotel, this time with the Canadian ambassador to Israel, Lisa Stadelbauer. Elkayam-Levy quickly stepped into her element and laid out the objectives of her new commission. When disgust and shock over the Hamas crimes became evident in the ambassador's face and voice, Elkayam-Levy extended a comforting hand.

"I knew too much too soon," she said, choking up, after going over some of the accounts collected by her team. "I'm sorry you had to go through this," Stadelbauer replied, and asked: "How can Canada help?"

"To be honest," Elkayam-Levy said, "I don't know yet what I'm asking for. It's a long-distance run. We're focusing now on creating partnerships and getting as many international and state bodies to recognize the horrors."

"I believe you," the ambassador said, noting that the crimes are undeniable. The next day, the Canadian Embassy released a statement of staunch support for Israeli women.

Elkayam-Levy ends her meetings with foreign leaders and diplomats with an unusual request: To pressure Israel's government to integrate more women into leadership positions. "If we don't do it now, we're lost on the most fundamental level," she explains. "The fact that 50 percent of the population isn't represented creates foundational failures in Israel's national resilience. We're hobbling our ability to deal with crises, lead long-term processes, and move the country forward. Beyond the fact that it's a democratic failure."

Elkayam-Levy notes that the representation of women in official leadership positions is dismal across all branches of government – in the cabinet, around the table of government and within the ranks of ministry directors. "There are no mechanisms in place to ensure representation. Those that were in place were trampled by this government. We will need all the support, including international backing, to embed systems that won't give in to the dictates of one sectorial party or another."

Elkayam-Levy's observations may seem intuitive, but they're actually based on in-depth research. Two years ago, Israel's National Security Council tapped her to head a team that would examine how crises and extreme national events affect women. The report they ended up writing laid the groundwork for national policy that would minimize possible adverse effects on women during normal times and during emergencies (for example, a rise in domestic violence), and ensure the representation of women in agencies that deal with

Israel's defense policy, including representation of 33 percent in the diplomatic-defense cabinet.

The report's recommendations were adopted by a government decision when Yair Lapid was prime minister, but now they are unlikely to be fulfilled. When the war broke out, Elkayam-Levy put together a team of 50 talented women from different fields who were willing to take on positions in emergency and rehabilitation agencies. "It wasn't a vague list," she stresses. "We made sure with everyone that they were ready to show up tomorrow, and we have submitted the names in a letter to the head of the National Security Council."

Did the letter get attention?

"Unfortunately, I don't think so."

Many [stories of heroism by female soldiers](#) have come to light recently. What effect will that have, in your estimation, on the debate surrounding the integration of women in combat units?

"I'm observing a clash of two opposing processes. On the one hand, you have these tales of heroism, and Israeli society's recognition of those who managed to save a great many, and those who unfortunately have fallen. On the other hand, society is undergoing a process of radicalization. And the more we head toward the extremes, and give power to groups that used to be on the margins of the political map, the more the danger grows that we'll go backward."

In recent days, we've heard about [the army spotters who warned over and over about suspicious activity on the Gaza border](#) and were met with derision by their superiors, and about [the senior Military Intelligence NCO who cautioned in detail about Hamas' preparations](#) for the attack, and no one heeded her warnings. It looks like the failure had gender aspects.

"Absolutely, and hearing those things is like a punch in the gut. In the courses I teach, I talk about the inherent mistrust of women. Women raised countless red flags, cried out, and no one listened. The disaster that we went through emerged from many system breakdowns, but the mistrust of women is one of the most painful ones. The simple, concrete truth was viewed as unreliable. You realize this, and your whole body tenses up. You find yourself feeling helpless for a moment. And then it becomes clear that we have to take action so that next time, it will be different."