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# Ambivalent sexism predicts Israelis' gendered preferences in the Gaza hostage crisis

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Orly Bareket <sup>1</sup>✉, Michal Reifen-Tagar <sup>2</sup> & Tamar Saguy <sup>2</sup>

Gender-based prioritization in life-or-death decisions has long shaped crisis responses, from natural disasters to wartime evacuations. This study examined psychological predictors of public support for such prioritization, using the case of Israeli hostages abducted by Hamas terrorist organization on October 7, 2023. Across two hostage release deals—one in November 2023 and another in January 2025—women were systematically prioritized, leaving abducted men in captivity. Analyses of a representative Jewish Israeli sample ( $N = 1171$ ) regarding the November 2023 deal, reveal that hostile sexism, marked by resentment toward women, predicts opposition to prioritizing women's release. Conversely, benevolent sexism, casting women as needing protection, predicts support for women's prioritization (particularly for mothers). Even after accounting for demographics and broader ideologies, sexist attitudes emerge as key predictors of gender-based preferences in public opinion. Hostile and benevolent sexism operate here largely independently, with no credible evidence for an interaction, suggesting distinct psychological pathways. Respondent's gender plays a minor role, though benevolent sexism predicts a stronger protective bias toward women hostages among men than among women. These findings underscore how hostile sexism can disadvantage women, while benevolent sexism can reinforce women's vulnerability but demands men's sacrifice. Although decisions about hostage release may appear purely pragmatic on the surface, divergent public views on the matter may reflect gendered biases that emerge in high-stakes, life-or-death contexts—potentially more than impartial, need-based considerations.

In conflict and disasters, the prioritization of women (alongside children) in rescue efforts reflects deep-rooted cultural norms that have historically shaped public opinion and policy<sup>1–3</sup>. Framed as protective, these norms raise fundamental questions: Do group-based rescue priorities genuinely address need, or are they driven by gender biases that emerge in high-stakes, life-or-death decision-making?

The ongoing negotiations regarding the Gaza hostage crisis (from October 2023 through April 2025 and continuing) have reignited this long-standing debate over the ethical and social implications of prioritizing rescue based on gender<sup>4,5</sup>. Efforts to secure the release of 251 hostages (as of November 2023) abducted by Hamas<sup>6</sup> from Israel to Gaza during its large-scale terrorist attack on October 7, 2023<sup>7</sup>, have followed a systematic pattern of prioritizing the release of women over men.

The present research examined how different types of worldviews about gender<sup>8,9</sup>—both protective and discriminatory—predict Israeli public

attitudes toward rescue prioritization in the current crisis. Although such decisions may appear purely pragmatic, public opinion may also reflect underlying biases, potentially more than objective assessments of vulnerability or need.

The Gaza hostage crisis has brought gendered rescue norms into Israeli public debate<sup>4,5</sup>. Because both men and women civilians have been—and some still are—held captive, this crisis offers insights into how public opinion reflects these norms. To provide context, during a large-scale terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, that included the murder of over 1000 civilians<sup>7,10</sup> and acts of systematic sexual violence<sup>11,12</sup>, Hamas abducted 251 hostages (159 men and 92 women; as of October 2023), among them children and older adults. Most hostages were, and are, Israeli civilians, with a minority of IDF soldiers and foreign workers. This count (and going forward) does not include four Israeli hostages (two living and two deceased) who had already been held by Hamas in Gaza prior to October 7.

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Be'er Sheva, Israel. <sup>2</sup>Baruch Ivcher School of Psychology, Reichman University (IDC), Hertzliya, Israel. ✉e-mail: [orlybareket@bgu.ac.il](mailto:orlybareket@bgu.ac.il)

In the early stages<sup>13</sup>, four women were released through international mediation (October 21 and 23, 2023). A temporary ceasefire agreement in November 2023 secured the release of 42 women and 38 children, alongside 25 foreign nationals freed outside the agreement. Subsequent military operations (from October 2023 to January 2025) recovered 48 hostages; of whom only eight were still alive. As March 2024<sup>14</sup>, when the current study was conducted, 99 hostages remained in captivity, with 31 confirmed dead.

Roughly ten months later, in January 2025, renewed negotiations resulted in another ceasefire accompanied by a new hostage release agreement<sup>15–17</sup>. In the first phase of the deal, a six-week exchange, began on January 19, 2025, Hamas released hostages in exchange for Palestinian prisoners. Over the course of the first three exchanges, nine women (including five women soldiers), one older man, and five Thai nationals were freed after 15 months of captivity. By that point (January 30, 2025), all surviving women hostages had been released. By the end of the first phase (February 27, 2025), subsequent exchanges included 13 men and eight bodies (five men, two children, and one woman).

As of April 29, 2025, 58 hostages abducted on October 7, 2023, remain in Hamas captivity; 24 of whom are confirmed to be alive—all of them men<sup>10</sup> (see time-stamped screenshots in Supplementary Note #1 in the Supplementary Information). The timeline for the second phase, intended to secure the release of the remaining men hostages, remains uncertain (as of April, 2025)<sup>18</sup>.

Throughout the series of hostage release agreements, adult women were consistently prioritized for release over adult men (gender did not factor in for children, with children released first)<sup>7,10</sup>. Public debate on hostage releases<sup>4,5</sup> echoes a broader historical dilemma: Should rescue efforts prioritize women over men? The ‘women and children first’ norm has been a long-standing tradition, dating back to maritime disasters such as the Titanic<sup>19</sup> and persisting in modern-day disasters, such as the 2012 Costa Concordia<sup>19</sup> and 2005 Hurricane Katrina<sup>20</sup>. In wartime, similar prioritization practices emerge during evacuations, as seen during the Balkan wars<sup>3</sup> and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine<sup>21</sup>. These examples reflect precedence for prioritizing women’s safety over men’s.

Yet the ethical rationale for gender-based prioritization remains controversial. Although women face heightened risks of sexual violence during wartime<sup>22</sup> and physical disadvantages<sup>23</sup>, men also endure severe abuse in captivity, including beatings, torture, and sexual violence<sup>24–26</sup>. In fact, men are often subjected to harsher treatment, as social norms label men as combatants rather than vulnerable individuals<sup>25</sup>. Historical patterns of wartime violence show that sexual violence is a strategic and systematic weapon of war used against both men and women<sup>27</sup>. The October 7 Massacre is a stark example of this, as evidence document sexual assaults against both Israeli women and men, with reports of gang rapes, mutilations, and public executions meant to instill terror and exert dominance<sup>11</sup>. Testimonies from released hostages<sup>12,28,29</sup> and the State of Israel Ministry of Justice report<sup>30</sup> confirm systematic abuse against both genders in Gaza captivity. Beyond sexual violence, some evidence suggests that men hostages released in January 2025 were treated worse than women hostages<sup>31</sup>, including deliberate starvation (with some of them losing 40% of their weight<sup>32</sup>), and physical and psychological torture<sup>33</sup>.

We propose that in high-uncertainty situations<sup>34</sup>, where both genders face considerable risks, support for prioritizing women varies and reflects underlying sexist beliefs. Stated differently, differing worldviews about men, women, and their relationships may shape how people view life-or-death decisions. Rather than prescribing a definitive moral stance, we highlight how gendered worldviews can guide decisions during moments of extreme crisis, and hinder objective analysis. The next section situates this argument within relevant gender theories and empirical findings, and outlines the study’s hypotheses within this theoretical framework.

Ambivalent sexism theory<sup>9</sup> provides a framework for understanding the gendered dynamics in rescue prioritization, distinguishing two worldviews regarding gender. Hostile sexism reflects antagonism toward women, viewing them as manipulative and using sexuality or feminism to gain power over men. Benevolent sexism, by contrast, casts women as morally

superior yet inherently weaker, deserving of men’s protection and admiration. Together, these ideologies reinforce male-dominated hierarchies by rewarding women conforming to traditional roles and punishing those who defy them<sup>8</sup>. This duality—patronizing protection alongside overt hostility—illuminates why true gender equality remains elusive<sup>35</sup>.

Although ambivalent sexism is well-studied in everyday contexts such as workplaces and relationships<sup>8</sup>, its role in high-stakes situations remains underexplored. Existing research links hostile sexism to opposition to women enrolling in military combat<sup>36–39</sup>. However, research is needed to investigate how ambivalent sexism shapes moral judgments, even in basic, everyday contexts—and especially in extraordinary circumstances such as wartime captivity and rescue efforts. The current study addresses this gap in the literature by examining whether worldviews about gender, reflected in hostile and benevolent sexism, predict public views of whose lives are worth saving in a real, ongoing crisis. We hypothesized that each form of sexism would pull views in opposite directions on life-or-death judgments, as we describe below.

Subscribers to old fashioned hostile sexism are expected to resist prioritizing women in rescue efforts, favoring men by opposing any preference for women’s welfare. This stance aligns with findings that people who endorse hostile sexism view men as more deserving of attention and resources<sup>40–42</sup>, likely extending to life-threatening situations.

Benevolent sexism introduces a subtler perspective, framing women as vulnerable and deserving of rescue, simplifying the ethical complexity of hostage negotiations. Supporters of this view prioritize saving women as a moral imperative. Yet, this perspective also renders men’s lives expendable under ideals of duty and sacrifice.

This notion aligns well with recent theorizing and research on the costs of traditional gender roles for men<sup>43,44</sup> and broader societal norms that place men at greater risk in harm-related contexts<sup>45</sup>. In wartime, men are expected to face combat risks<sup>46,47</sup> and endure lasting physical<sup>48</sup> and psychological<sup>49</sup> harm. This extends to emergencies, where men are presumed responsible for rescuing others first<sup>1,3</sup>. Studies also show that men receive less recognition as victims of domestic violence<sup>50</sup> or sexual assault<sup>51</sup> and are more frequently sacrificed in moral dilemmas<sup>52,53</sup>.

Thus, in crises like the current hostage situation, benevolent sexism—while typically affording men social status and power within the gender hierarchy<sup>8</sup>—can backfire, ultimately placing men’s freedom and lives at greater risk.

In summary, people with hostile sexist views are expected to oppose prioritizing women, viewing it as unfair and favoring men’s release over women’s, while people with benevolent sexist views are likely to support prioritizing women due to perceived vulnerability. Those low in both forms of sexism are expected to adopt a neutral stance, excluding gender from their decision-making.

## Methods

This study received ethical approval (#P\_2024023) from the Ethics Committee of the Baruch Ivcher School of Psychology at Reichman University (IDC, Herzliya). Informed consent was obtained from all respondents. This study was not preregistered due to the urgency of capturing public attitudes amidst the ongoing war (see Supplementary Note #2 in the Supplementary Information for details).

## Study design and data collection

The survey was part of a broader project tracking endorsement of gender-related ideologies in Israel over time. The first wave of data collection, conducted in August 2023 (pre-October 7), did not include measures of ambivalent sexism or war-related attitudes, as it was completed before the Israel–Hamas war. The second wave, conducted in February–March, 2024 (post-October 7), specifically incorporated measures of ambivalent sexism and attitudes related to the war. Thus, the current study focused exclusively on the second wave, as it contains the relevant variables needed to test the research question, making it a cross-sectional rather than longitudinal.

## Respondents

Respondents were recruited through Panel4All, an online survey platform in Israel. The initial phase, conducted in August, 2023, included 1746 respondents (with a target of 2000). The second phase, completed in February–March, 2024, added a measure of ambivalent sexism and questions relevant to the Israel–Hamas war. Respondents who completed the first survey and agreed to participate in the follow-up formed a cohort of 1285 individuals. As noted above, only data from the second phase were analyzed, as it included the measures necessary to test the research hypothesis. Respondents received a compensation of 7.28 NIS (New Israeli Shekels) for their participation.

The recruitment criteria aimed for a diverse and balanced sample across demographic categories. Specifically, a representative sample of Jewish Israeli adults was sought across gender, religiosity, and geographic regions. Recruitment specified an equal gender distribution (50% men, 50% women), with religious affiliation targeted at 60% secular, 20% religious, and 20% Haredi (ultra-Orthodox), allowing for a 10–15% deviation to accommodate recruitment challenges. Geographic representation required 30% of respondents from the northern region, 50% from the central region, and 20% from the southern region. These measures aimed to create a balanced sample that would allow generalizability across diverse population segments. The data used for targeting respondents on Panel4All were based on demographic characteristics recorded during registration and updated periodically (about once a year).

Exclusions from the dataset involved 55 respondents who consented but did not answer any survey items, two non-binary respondents whose numbers were too small for meaningful analysis, and 12 respondents who did not identify as Jewish. Also, two underage respondents (ages 14 and 16) were removed to comply with ethical guidelines, resulting in an adult-only sample.

For the remaining dataset, the proportion of missing data did not exceed 1.65% for any key column, with an overall missing data rate of 0.48%. Given the low level of missing data, listwise deletion was considered appropriate, as it has a negligible effect on statistical power and generalizability. This led to the exclusion of 43 respondents with incomplete responses.

The final sample thus comprised a representative sample of Jewish Israeli adults ( $N = 1171$ ) from diverse age ( $M = 39.83$ ,  $SD = 14.18$ , range = 18–88), gender ( $N_{\text{women}} = 598$ ,  $N_{\text{men}} = 573$ ), religious, educational, and geographic backgrounds (see Table 1 for a detailed demographic breakdown).

Sensitivity analysis confirmed the sample's statistical power to detect the associations observed, with a minimum detectable effect size ( $f^2$ ) of 0.01. The observed change in  $R^2$  was 0.11, corresponding to an observed  $f^2$  of 0.13. This indicates sufficient power (90%) at the 0.05 significance level, ensuring robust sensitivity for testing the main model.

## Procedure and measures

Respondents were informed that the survey aimed to assess views on current issues in Israeli society, including events related to October 7th and the ongoing war. It was designed to take approximately ten minutes, with instructions highlighting the value of honest responses. Participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time. The survey was conducted anonymously, assuring respondents that no identifying information would be collected. Respondents consented before proceeding.

Survey items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree/not at all/does not reflect my opinion at all*, 7 = *strongly agree/very much/reflects my opinion to a very great extent*). Average scores were calculated, with higher scores indicating stronger agreement. The measures were presented in a fixed order to maintain consistency and minimize priming effects, starting with general attitudes and progressing to more specific and sensitive topics to avoid influencing later responses.

The main measures were as follows:

**Ambivalent sexism inventory (ASI).** A 12-item version of the ASI<sup>9</sup>, consisting of two 6-item scales, measured hostile sexism ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ) and benevolent

**Table 1 | Demographic characteristics of the sample**

Variable	M (SD) / N (%)	Range
Continuous variables		
Age	39.83 (14.18)	18–88
Religiosity level	3.47 (2.07)	1–7
Categorical variables		
Gender		
Men	573 (49%)	
Women	598 (51%)	
Religious affiliation		
Secular	570 (48%)	
Traditional	220 (19%)	
Religious-Zionist	211 (18%)	
Ultra-Orthodox-Zionist	136 (12%)	
Ultra-Orthodox	34 (3%)	
Income		
Well below average	247 (21%)	
Slightly below average	228 (20%)	
Average	412 (35%)	
Slightly above average	214 (18%)	
Well above average	70 (6%)	
Education		
Lower education	31 (3%)	
High school	145 (12%)	
High school + Vocational	253 (22%)	
BA (no degree yet)	137 (12%)	
BA	369 (31%)	
Higher education	236 (20%)	
Relatives Hurt in War		
No	990 (85%)	
Yes	181 (15%)	

$N = 1171$ . All variables were treated as continuous in the analysis, including education and income, which have an inherent ordinal structure. Due to low representation in some categories, education levels were consolidated into broader groups: higher education (MA, PhD; 20%) and lower education (Yeshiva, Elementary; 3%), resulting in a total of six categories. Treating education as a categorical factor in the analysis did not alter the results or conclusions. Gender and whether a relative was hurt in the war were treated as binary variables and effect-coded. For gender, respondents could select “women” (coded as -1), “men” (coded as 1), or “other/prefer not to answer.” Two respondents chose the latter option and were excluded from the analysis due to the insufficient sample size to allow for meaningful analysis of this group. The war-related variable was recoded as follows: responses of 1 (“someone hurt”), 3 (“hard to answer”), and 4 (“prefer not to answer”) were recoded to 1, indicating “Yes,” while response 2 (“No”) was recoded to -1. Income was assessed with the question: “The average family income in Israel is approximately 21,063 NIS gross per month. How does your household income compare?” For respondents who chose “prefer not to answer” (114 respondents, 10%), a value of 3 (representing “average income”) was imputed to avoid excluding a substantial number of respondents, which would have reduced statistical power and representativeness. Due to the high overlap between religiosity level and religious affiliation ( $\rho = 0.82$ ,  $p < .001$ ), only religiosity level was included as a demographic control in the analyses. The dataset includes additional information on respondents' voting behavior in the last elections and their city of residence (which showed high variability). This data is not presented in this table for brevity but is available in the dataset at [OSF](#).

sexism ( $\alpha = 0.77$ ). Hostile sexism captures overtly negative views toward women (e.g., “Women seek to gain power by gaining control over men”), translated into Hebrew by Shnabel et al.<sup>54</sup>. Benevolent sexism encompasses three types of beliefs: protective paternalism (e.g., “Women should be cherished and protected by men”), complementary gender differentiation (e.g., “Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess”), and heterosexual intimacy (e.g., “Men are incomplete without women”). The ASI's factor structure has shown stability across cultures, and its dimensions correlate with

measures of structural inequality<sup>55</sup>. Although originally 22 items, shorter versions maintain comparable predictive validity<sup>56</sup>.

**Attitudes toward gender-based prioritization.** Respondents were reminded about the November 2023 hostage release deal, which prioritized the release of children, mothers, and older women. They were further told that public reactions to prioritizing women/mothers over men/fathers varied, with some supporting this approach and others advocating for equal priority. Respondents then rated several statements reflecting these views, with the prompt emphasizing that there were no right or wrong answers, only sincere opinions on this sensitive topic. The scale consisted of six items measuring attitudes toward gender-based prioritization in the current hostage situation (e.g., “It makes a lot of sense to me that mothers were released prior to fathers in the deal,” and “I don’t see the logic in women being released from captivity before the men” [reverse-coded];  $\alpha = 0.86$ ). Higher scores indicated stronger support for prioritizing the release of women over men in the hostage deal.

Respondents were also given the option to provide a written response to elaborate on their views, recognizing the sensitive nature of the topic. This open-ended question enabled them to express their understanding of the measure as intended, serving as a form of quality control. By allowing respondents to articulate their perspectives, this approach acknowledges the charged context and encourages meaningful expression of their thoughts.

Broader ideological measures included the following:

**Biological gender essentialism.** Two items from the Gender Essentialism Scale<sup>57</sup> assessed beliefs about inherent differences between genders: “Differences between boys and girls are fixed at birth” and “Male and female brains probably work in very different ways.” The two items were significantly correlated,  $r = 0.46$ ,  $t(1169) = 17.51$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI [0.41, 0.50].

**Support for traditional gender roles.** Two items assessed support for traditional gender roles. The first, from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), measured agreement with the statement “All in all, family life suffers when the women have a full-time job”<sup>58</sup>. The second, from the Intergenerational Panel Study of Parents and Children<sup>59</sup>, measured agreement with the statement “There is some work that is men’s and some that is women’s, and they should not be doing each other’s.” The items were significantly correlated,  $r = 0.30$ ,  $t(1169) = 10.78$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI [0.25, 0.35]. For a review of these measures, see Davis and Greenstein<sup>60</sup>.

**Social dominance orientation (SDO).** An 8-item scale assessed respondents’ preference for social dominance and hierarchical structures (e.g., “Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups”;  $\alpha = 0.86$ ). The original scale<sup>61</sup>, translated to Hebrew by Levin and Sidanius<sup>62</sup>, has demonstrated strong predictive and discriminant validity in prior studies, effectively predicting prejudice beyond other attitudinal measures<sup>63,64</sup>.

**Government support.** Two items assessed opinions on current government policies (e.g., “The current government represents my views on matters of religion and state”). The items were strongly correlated,  $r = 0.62$ ,  $t(1169) = 26.94$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI [0.58, 0.65].

**Support for gender equality.** One item assessed attitudes toward gender equality (“I support the fight for promoting equality between women and men”).

Demographic-related questions were as follows:

**War impact.** The survey included three items to assess the personal impact of events since October 7th. The main analysis used one of those questions, which asked whether a close relative had been harmed, injured, or killed during the war (see Table 1 for details). Another question addressed changes in employment status, with response options for no employment before the war (204; 17%), continued employment (777;

67%), or employment changes (190; 16%). Respondents also reported whether they had been called up for military reserve duty, with response options of yes (115; 10%), no (1034; 88%), or partially (22; 2%).

**Basic demographic questions.** Demographic questions covered age, gender, residence, political affiliation, religion, religiosity level, religious affiliation, education, and income. A detailed demographic breakdown appears in Table 1.

Peripheral measures included:

**Attitudes toward women’s participation in combat roles within the IDF.** Public discourse during the war also brought attention to the role of women in military and leadership positions. In addition to gauging attitudes toward hostage release, we measured support for including women in combat roles to explore whether gendered worldviews predict life-and-death decisions in wartime—not only in terms of who is rescued but also who is exposed to risk. This measure used a 7-item scale to evaluate attitudes toward women’s participation in combat roles within the IDF (e.g., “It is not right to open all combat roles to women,” “Women are capable today of performing any role in the military, whether in combat or not” [reverse-coded];  $\alpha = 0.87$ ). Higher scores indicated stronger bias against women serving in the military. As this issue was peripheral to the main research question, the findings pertaining to this measure appear in the Supplementary Information (see Supplementary Note #3 and Table S1). Briefly, hostile sexism strongly predicted opposition to women in combat, replicating prior findings<sup>8</sup>.

**Additional measures not included in analysis.** Two measures from the survey were not analyzed in this study: attitudes toward gender segregation in educational settings, and an item on support for promoting equality between Jews and Arabs. These items were part of a broader project tracking endorsement of social ideological in Israeli society (see the Study Design and Data Collection section above), and were not relevant to the current research focus. The full study protocol, including these additional measures, is available at OSF<sup>65</sup>.

After completing the survey, respondents received a debriefing message explaining the study’s focus on social attitudes, especially in the war’s context. The message thanked respondents for their contributions, reassured them of anonymity, and provided the lead researcher’s contact information for further inquiries. Respondents could also share feedback in a provided text box.

## Analytical approach

All frequentist statistical tests were two-sided, with a significance threshold set at  $p < 0.05$ . Hierarchical regression tested the main hypothesis. Alternative models relied on hierarchical regression, multivariate regression, and confirmatory factor analysis. A Bayesian analysis tested a null hypothesis about the (lack of) interaction between hostile and benevolent sexism.

Tests of assumptions for the main model (linearity, homoscedasticity, normality, multicollinearity) are included in the analysis output available at OSF<sup>65</sup>. For hierarchical regression analyses, only the final block is tabulated, but the full models are available in the analysis output<sup>65</sup>.

Confidence intervals for effect sizes appear in the tables or, when not tabulated, reported in the text. For regression models, confidence intervals refer to unstandardized coefficients. Supplementary Information (Supplementary Note #4) provides additional details related to the data presented in the tables and figures.

## Reporting summary

Further information on research design is available in the Nature Portfolio Reporting Summary linked to this article.

## Results

### Descriptive statistics for key variables

Respondents endorsed moderate levels of ambivalent sexism: hostile sexism ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ , range = 1–7) and benevolent sexism ( $M = 4.26$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ,

range = 1–7). Men scored higher than women on both hostile sexism ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ;  $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ , respectively),  $t(1168.5) = -8.86$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = -0.52$ , 95% CI  $[-0.63, -0.40]$ , and benevolent sexism ( $M = 4.36$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ;  $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ),  $t(1160.5) = -2.69$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ,  $d = -0.16$ , 95% CI  $[-0.27, -0.04]$ . Hostile and benevolent sexism were moderately correlated,  $r = 0.47$ ,  $t(1169) = 18.00$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI  $[0.42, 0.51]$ . These patterns are overall consistent with prior findings from Western, gender-egalitarian countries<sup>8,55,66</sup>.

For gender-based hostage prioritization, the mean response was 4.96 ( $SD = 1.32$ , range = 1–7), with 76.69% of respondents scoring above the scale midpoint (4)—indicating a strong general preference for prioritizing women over men in this crisis.

Full descriptive statistics for all key variables are provided in Table S2 in the Supplementary Information; a correlation matrix for key study variables appears in Fig. 1.

### Hostile and benevolent sexism predict opposing views on hostage release

A hierarchical regression analysis tested the hypothesis, with attitudes toward prioritizing women over men as the outcome. The first block included demographic control variables: gender, age, education, religiosity, income, and whether a close contact was harmed in the war. The second

block added the sexism variables—hostile and benevolent. The models are described by the following equations.

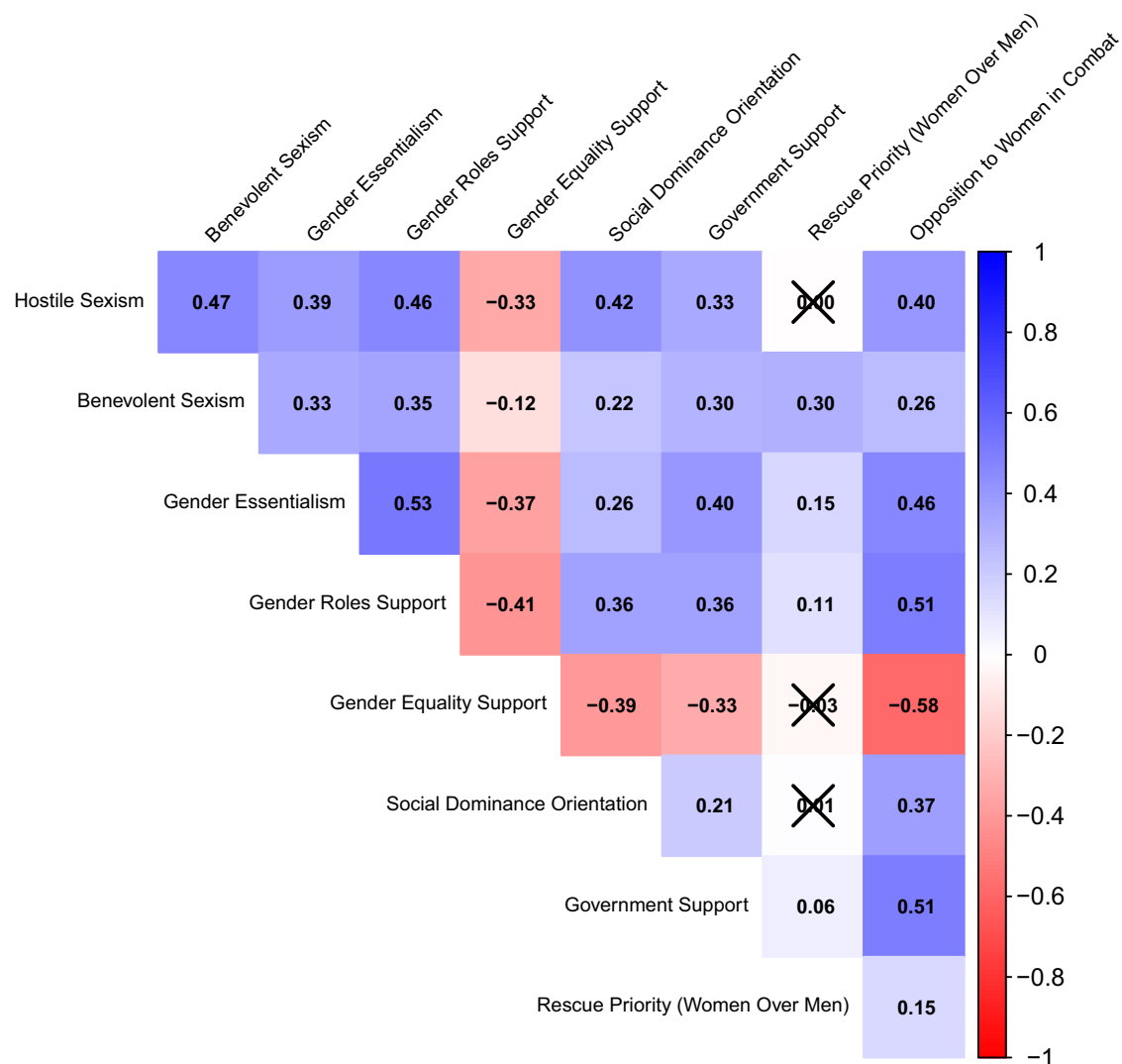
Baseline model:

$$\text{RescuePriority} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Gender}) + \beta_2(\text{Age}_z) + \beta_3(\text{Income}_z) + \beta_4(\text{Education}_z) + \beta_5(\text{Religiosity}_z) + \beta_6(\text{RelativeHurt}_z) + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

Full model:

$$\text{RescuePriority} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Gender}) + \beta_2(\text{Age}_z) + \beta_3(\text{Income}_z) + \beta_4(\text{Education}_z) + \beta_5(\text{Religiosity}_z) + \beta_6(\text{RelativeHurt}_z) + \beta_7(\text{HostileSexism}_z) + \beta_8(\text{BenevolentSexism}_z) + \varepsilon \quad (2)$$

The second-block model significantly improved prediction,  $F(2, 1162) = 73.82$ ,  $p < 0.001$  (Table 2), explaining an additional 11% of variance in prioritization attitudes ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.11$ ). As illustrated in Fig. 2, benevolent



**Fig. 1 | Correlation matrix of key study variables.** The correlation matrix presents the coefficients of the pairwise correlations among the key study variables. The color intensity indicates the strength of the correlations, with darker shades representing stronger relationships. Positive correlations are depicted in shades of blue, while

negative correlations appear in shades of red. White or very light colors signify correlations close to zero. Both significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) and non-significant correlations are included, with non-significant correlations marked by an “X”.  $N = 1171$ .

sexism strongly predicted support for prioritizing women,  $\beta = 0.39$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , while hostile sexism predicted opposition,  $\beta = -0.17$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

Beyond the sexism constructs, age was the only significant demographic predictor,  $\beta = 0.10$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , with older respondents more inclined to prioritize women. Although age showed a slight negative correlation with benevolent sexism ( $r = -0.08$ ,  $t(1169) = -2.56$ ,  $p = .011$ , 95% CI  $[-0.13, -0.02]$ ), consistent with previous studies<sup>8,67</sup>, this did not account for the positive association between benevolent sexism and prioritization, as the

age-related association with prioritization runs counter to its association with benevolent sexism. In addition, those with a relative affected by the war were less likely to prioritize women,  $\beta = -0.06$ ,  $p = 0.036$ .

### Alternative models

Five additional regression analyses further delineate the effects from the main regression model and offer insights into potential underlying mechanisms.

**Distinct contributions of benevolent sexism components to hostage prioritization.** The first analysis examined whether protective paternalism within benevolent sexism might conceptually overlap with prioritizing women. However, the framework suggests all three components—protective paternalism, complementary gender differentiation, and heterosexual intimacy—should contribute<sup>8,9</sup>. Benevolent sexism promotes not only protecting women but also valuing their caregiving roles and emphasizing male-female interdependence. Together, these beliefs idealize women as nurturing figures, essential to men and deserving of protection, thereby supporting their prioritization in crises.

To test this, each benevolent sexism component was entered separately into the hierarchical regression (see Table S3 in the Supplementary Information). Protective paternalism emerged as the strongest predictor ( $\beta = 0.32$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI  $[0.34, 0.50]$ ), with complementary gender differentiation ( $\beta = 0.08$ ,  $p = 0.019$ , 95% CI  $[0.02, 0.19]$ ) and heterosexual intimacy ( $\beta = 0.10$ ,  $p = 0.001$ , 95% CI  $[0.06, 0.22]$ ) also making unique contributions.

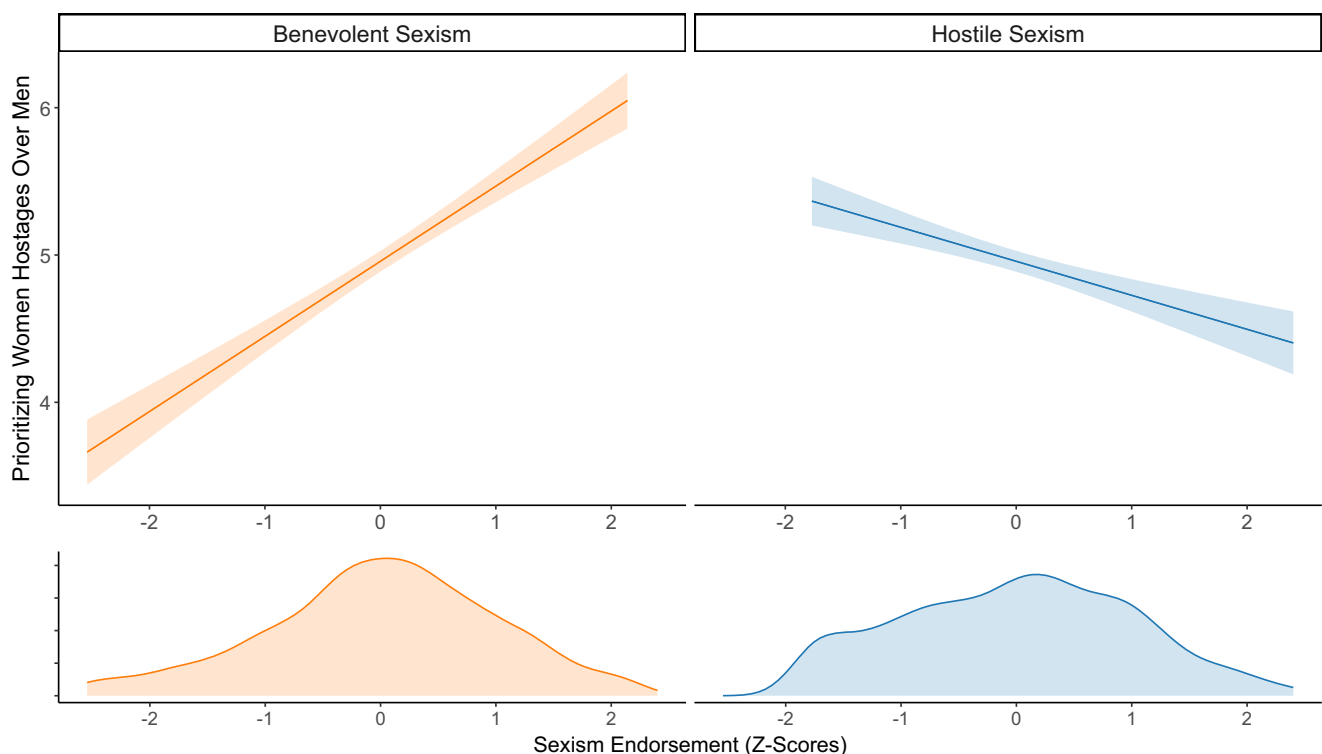
Therefore, benevolent sexism's association with support for prioritizing women extends beyond protective paternalism to a broader belief system that values women's purity, caregiving roles, and interdependence with men—all of which support prioritizing women in the current hostage crisis.

**Lack of interaction between hostile and benevolent sexism in predicting hostage prioritization.** The second analysis tested whether

**Table 2 | Results of regression analysis on hostage prioritization outcome**

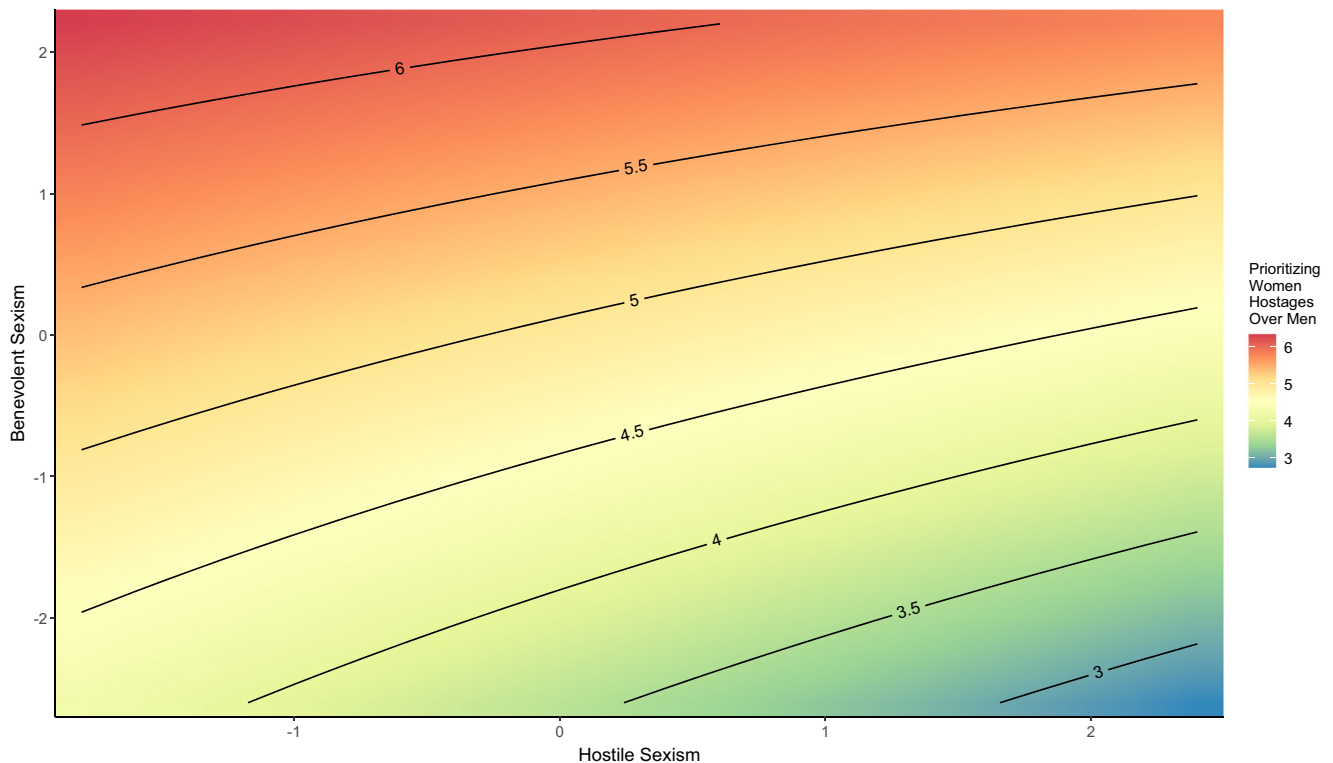
Predictors	$\beta$	B	SE	LLCI	ULCI	t	p
Intercept	--	4.84	0.06	4.72	4.97	77.00	<0.001***
Gender	0.03	0.08	0.08	-0.07	0.24	1.05	0.293
Age	0.1	0.13	0.04	0.06	0.21	3.53	<0.001***
Income	0.03	0.04	0.04	-0.04	0.11	1.01	0.312
Education	0.05	0.06	0.04	-0.01	0.14	1.64	0.102
Religiosity level	0.06	0.08	0.04	0	0.15	1.88	0.060
Relatives hurt in war	-0.06	-0.11	0.05	-0.2	-0.01	-2.10	0.036*
Hostile sexism	-0.17	-0.23	0.04	-0.32	-0.15	-5.38	<0.001***
Benevolent sexism	0.39	0.51	0.04	0.43	0.59	12.14	<0.001***

*N* = 1171. The effects reported are from Block 2 of a hierarchical multiple regression analysis, with  $R^2 = 0.14$ ,  $R^2_{adj} = 0.13$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.11$ . Gender (Women = -1, Men = 1) and Relatives Hurt in War (No = -1, Yes = 1) were effect-coded, and all other variables were continuous and standardized for the regression. The theoretical and actual ranges for benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, and hostage prioritization were from 1 to 7. CI confidence interval for unstandardized coefficients, LL lower bound of CI, UL upper bound of CI. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .



**Fig. 2 | Association of benevolent and hostile sexism with gender-based prioritization.** Regression slopes with 95% confidence intervals illustrate the relationship between sexism endorsement (z-scores) and prioritization attitudes, with separate

lines for each sexism type and density plots indicating endorsement distribution across the sample. *N* = 1171.



**Fig. 3 | Additive associations of hostile and benevolent sexism with hostage prioritization.** The surface plot illustrates the combined associations of hostile and benevolent sexism with prioritizing women over men. Warmer colors represent

higher prioritization levels, cooler colors indicate lower levels, and contours highlight predicted prioritization across the sexism spectrum.  $N = 1171$ .

hostile and benevolent sexism interact in predicting attitudes toward prioritizing women. Despite their opposing associations with prioritization, hostile and benevolent sexism are positively correlated ( $r = 0.47$ ,  $t(1169) = 18.00$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI [0.42, 0.51]), suggesting some individuals endorse both<sup>66,68</sup>, potentially leading their associations with prioritization to offset each other.

Adding an interaction term did not improve model fit beyond the independent effects of hostile and benevolent sexism,  $F(1, 1161) = 2.08$ ,  $p = 0.150$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.002$  (interaction term:  $\beta = 0.05$ , 95% CI [-0.02, 0.11]; see Table S4 in the Supplementary Information). A comparison between a model including the interaction and a nested model without it tested the null effect of the interaction between hostile and benevolent sexism. A Bayes Factor of 12.02, approximated by contrasting the BICs of both models<sup>69</sup>, further supported the model without the interaction, indicating a better fit.

Thus, as illustrated in Fig. 3 (see also Fig. S1 in the Supplementary Information for a more standard visualization of the additive effects), individuals high in benevolent sexism prioritize women, while those high in hostile sexism oppose it. Those endorsing both types exhibit moderate prioritization, likely driven by a mix of protective and discriminatory motives, while individuals low in both forms show more neutral, egalitarian responses.

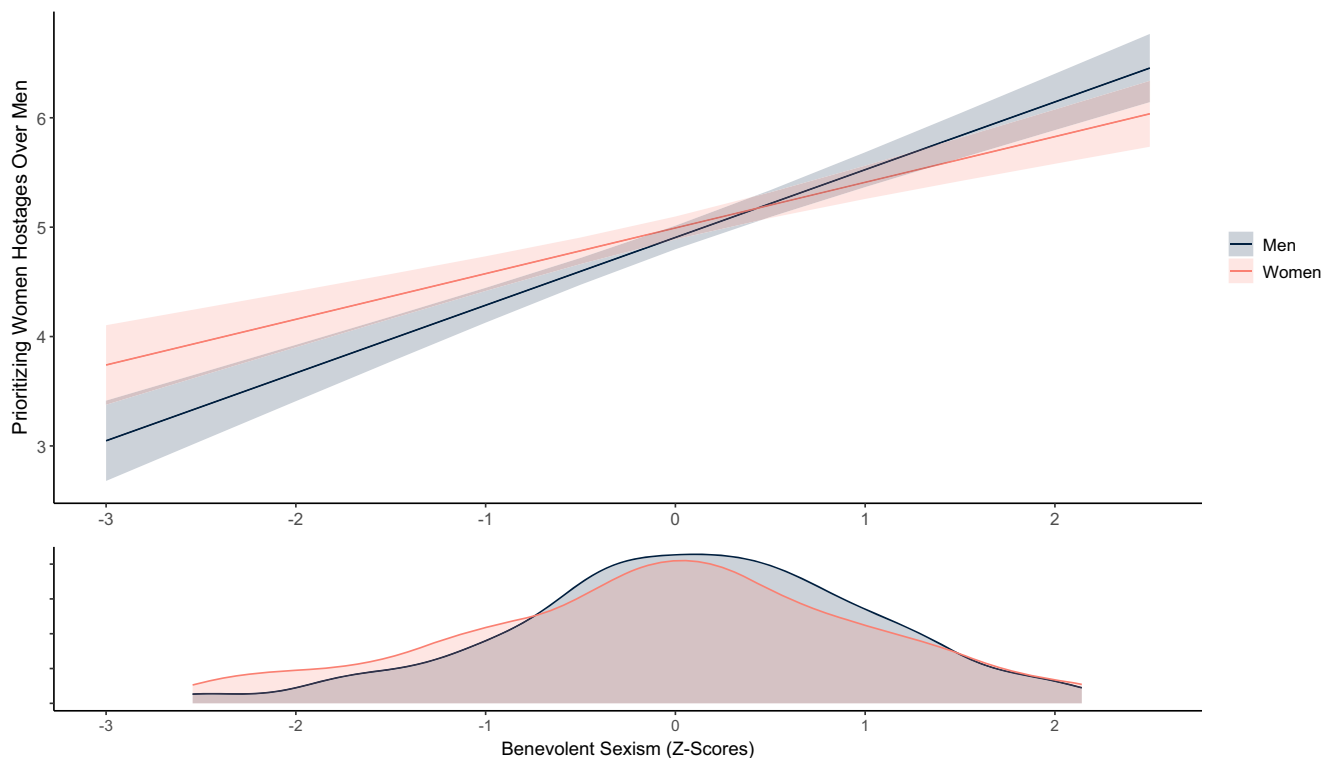
**Interactions between gender and sexist attitudes in predicting rescue prioritization.** The third analysis explored potential gender-sexism interactions. A hierarchical regression adding interaction terms in the third block revealed a significant interaction between gender and benevolent sexism,  $\beta = -0.12$ ,  $p = 0.014$  (Fig. 4; Table 3). Simple slopes analysis showed a stronger link between benevolent sexism and prioritizing women among men,  $B = 0.62$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t(1160) = 10.34$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI [0.50, 0.74], than among women,  $B = 0.42$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t(1160) = 7.15$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI [0.30, 0.53]. The interaction between gender and hostile sexism was not significant ( $\beta = -0.001$ ,  $p = 0.992$ ).

These results suggest that men endorsing benevolent sexism may feel a stronger obligation to adopt traditional protector roles, strengthening their prioritization of women. This sense of duty aligns with societal expectations of masculinity<sup>70</sup>. Although women with similar beliefs also prioritize women, they experience less pressure to act as protectors, instead occupying the role of those needing protection.

**Hostile and benevolent sexism as independent predictors beyond broader ideological factors.** The fourth analysis showed that hostile and benevolent sexism uniquely predict prioritization, independent of broader ideologies related to intergroup relations or gender. After controlling for demographics, the model added five ideological predictors: social dominance orientation, biological gender essentialism, endorsement of traditional gender roles, support for gender equality, and government support (Table 4). The sexism model significantly outperformed the ideological model,  $F(2, 1157) = 69.51$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.10$ . Even with these factors accounted for, benevolent sexism ( $\beta = 0.37$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and hostile sexism ( $\beta = -0.22$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) remained the most robust predictors of prioritization.

Among the broader ideological variables, only biological gender essentialism significantly predicted prioritization ( $\beta = 0.10$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ), though its association with prioritization was weaker than that of both forms of sexism.

**Idealization of motherhood as a mechanism underlying benevolent sexism in hostage prioritization.** The fifth model examined whether benevolent sexism's prioritization of women extends specifically to mothers. In the November 2023 hostage deal, 53% of released women were mothers of the rescued children<sup>71</sup>, raising the question of whether motherhood itself, idealized in benevolent sexism<sup>8</sup>, is associated with women's prioritization beyond general vulnerability. This perception of mothers as essential figures for children could explain why mothers were prioritized, sidelining the fathers who remained in captivity.



**Fig. 4 | Gender differences in the association between benevolent sexism and prioritizing women hostages.** Regression lines with 95% confidence intervals depict the relationship between benevolent sexism and prioritizing women, separately for

men (blue) and women (red). Density plots display the distribution of benevolent sexism scores across genders.  $N = 1171$ .

**Table 3 | Results of hierarchical regression analysis with respondents' gender and sexist attitudes as interactions predicting rescue prioritization (women over men)**

Predictors	$\beta$	B	SE	LLCI	ULCI	t	p
Intercept	--	4.83	0.06	4.71	4.96	75.88	<0.001***
Gender	0.03	0.09	0.08	-0.07	0.24	1.11	0.269
Age	0.1	0.13	0.04	0.06	0.21	3.53	<0.001***
Income	0.03	0.03	0.04	-0.04	0.11	0.91	0.365
Education	0.05	0.06	0.04	-0.01	0.14	1.66	0.098
Religiosity Level	0.06	0.08	0.04	0	0.16	2.04	0.042*
Relatives Hurt in War	-0.06	-0.11	0.05	-0.21	-0.01	-2.14	0.033*
Hostile Sexism	-0.17	-0.22	0.06	-0.34	-0.1	-3.71	<0.001***
Benevolent Sexism	0.47	0.62	0.06	0.5	0.74	10.39	<0.001***
Gender $\times$ Hostile Sexism	-0.0005	-0.0009	0.08	-0.17	0.16	-0.01	0.992
Gender $\times$ Benevolent Sexism	-0.12	-0.2	0.08	-0.36	-0.04	-2.45	0.014*

$N = 1171$ . The effects reported are from Block 2 of a hierarchical multiple regression analysis,  $F(10, 1160) = 19, p < 0.001, \Delta R^2 = 0.01$ . Gender (Women = -1, Men = 1) and Relatives Hurt in War (No = -1, Yes = 1) were effect-coded, and all other variables were continuous and standardized for the regression. The theoretical and actual ranges for benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, and hostage prioritization were from 1 to 7. CI confidence interval for unstandardized coefficients, LL lower bound of CI, UL upper bound of CI. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

To test this, the outcome measure was split into two subscales: prioritizing mothers over fathers and prioritizing women over men in general. Confirmatory factor analysis supported this distinction, showing good model fit indicators (see Table S5 in the Supplementary Information). Multivariate regression yielded significant models for both subscales as outcomes (see Table S6 in the Supplementary Information). For general prioritization of women, the model was significant,  $F(8, 1162) = 18.26, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.11$ , with both benevolent sexism ( $\beta = 0.34, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.37, 0.54]$ ) and hostile sexism ( $\beta = -0.20, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.36, -0.18]$ ) as predictors. For mother-specific prioritization, the model was also significant,  $F(8, 1162) = 24.83,$

$p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.15$ , with benevolent sexism ( $\beta = 0.39, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.52, 0.71], p < 0.001$ ) and hostile sexism ( $\beta = -0.10, p = 0.003, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.25, -0.05]$ ) as predictors.

Marginal trends revealed a stronger association between benevolent sexism and the prioritization of mothers over fathers than for women over men in general (contrast between standardized slopes),  $\Delta \text{Slope} = -0.16, SE = 0.04, t(1162) = -4.32, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.23, -0.09]$ , indicating that idealized motherhood prescribed by benevolent sexism is associated with stronger protective motives. Though more pronounced for mothers, benevolent sexism still predicts prioritization of women overall, beyond the frame of motherhood alone.

**Table 4 | Hierarchical regression analysis results of hostile and benevolent sexism as independent predictors of hostage prioritization (women over men), controlling for broader ideological factors**

Predictors	$\beta$	B	SE	LLCI	ULCI	t	p
Intercept	--	4.86	0.06	4.74	4.98	77.29	<0.001***
Gender	0.02	0.06	0.08	-0.09	0.22	0.8	0.426
Age	0.11	0.15	0.04	0.07	0.23	3.83	<0.001***
Income	0.03	0.04	0.04	-0.03	0.12	1.15	0.252
Education	0.05	0.06	0.04	-0.01	0.14	1.58	0.115
Religiosity Level	0.03	0.04	0.05	-0.06	0.13	0.74	0.457
Relatives Hurt in War	-0.05	-0.1	0.05	-0.19	0	-1.92	0.055
Biological Gender Essentialism	0.1	0.13	0.05	0.04	0.22	2.78	0.006**
Support for Traditional Gender Roles	0.06	0.07	0.05	-0.02	0.17	1.56	0.119
Support for Gender Equality	-0.04	-0.05	0.04	-0.14	0.04	-1.07	0.283
Social Dominance Orientation	-0.02	-0.03	0.04	-0.11	0.06	-0.61	0.542
Government Support	-0.03	-0.05	0.05	-0.14	0.04	-1.01	0.315
Hostile Sexism	-0.22	-0.29	0.05	-0.38	-0.2	-6.02	<0.001***
Benevolent Sexism	0.37	0.49	0.04	0.41	0.58	11.50	<0.001***

*N* = 1171. The effects reported are from Block 2 of a hierarchical multiple regression analysis,  $F(13, 1157) = 15.54, p < 0.001, \Delta R^2 = 0.10$ . VIF values below 2 (range 1.01–1.79) indicated no multicollinearity. Gender (Women = -1, Men = 1) and Relatives Hurt in War (No = -1, Yes = 1) were effect-coded, and all other variables were continuous and standardized for the regression. *CI* confidence interval for unstandardized coefficients, *LL* lower bound of CI, *UL* upper bound of CI. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

A smaller contrast appeared for hostile sexism,  $\Delta Slope = -0.12, SE = 0.04, t(1162) = -3.20, p = 0.001, 95\% CI [-0.19, -0.05]$ , with a weaker negative association with resisting prioritization of mothers over fathers than of women over men, suggesting that motherhood may slightly temper the opposition within hostile sexism.

In sum, the idealization of motherhood in benevolent sexism<sup>8</sup> aligns with heightened prioritization of mothers in crises, framing them as vital to family and child welfare and thus more deserving of rescue.

## Discussion

These results reveal how gendered worldviews—both benevolent and hostile sexism—predict Israeli public opinion on life-or-death decisions. The current hostage crisis exemplifies how gender biases unfold in critical moments: benevolent sexism favors prioritizing the rescue of women, particularly mothers, while hostile sexism opposes it. These forms of sexism act independently, with no credible evidence for an interaction, and respondent's gender plays a minor role—men endorsing benevolent sexism show a stronger protective bias than women. Even when accounting for relevant demographics and broader social ideologies (e.g., social dominance orientation), sexist attitudes remain potent predictors of gender-based opinions.

### Ambivalent sexism in moral and high-stakes decision-making

These findings extend the ambivalent sexism literature<sup>8</sup> by demonstrating its association with moral judgments and decision-making in high-stakes situations. They challenge the assumption that people universally protect women in crises under a 'women and children first' norm<sup>3,19</sup>; instead, responses diverge based on ideological commitments, potentially shaping moral decision-making in moments of extreme consequence.

This pattern aligns with research linking hostile sexism to biases against women in workplaces<sup>40,72</sup>, politics<sup>73,74</sup>, and legal arenas<sup>75,76</sup>, whereas benevolent sexism is associated with (conditional) support to women adhering to traditional roles<sup>77,78</sup>. Ultimately, these results reinforce the dual nature of ambivalent sexism: hostile sexism is linked to greater explicit discrimination against women, while benevolent sexism correlates with selective protection, offering some advantage to women who fulfill traditional roles (e.g., mothers).

### Cognitive biases and gendered crisis decision-making

This paradox reflects broader decision-making mechanisms, where cognitive biases<sup>34,79</sup> and ideological motivations<sup>80–82</sup> shape judgments in

consequential contexts<sup>83</sup>. Heuristic-based reasoning<sup>84</sup> suggests that people rely on cognitive shortcuts in high-stakes decisions, especially those involving gender<sup>85,86</sup>. Similarly, motivated social cognition explains how sexist attitudes fulfill psychological needs<sup>87–89</sup>, reinforcing system-justifying beliefs despite contradictory evidence<sup>81</sup>. These biases manifest across domains; for example, judges show more sympathy to mothers in child mobility cases<sup>90</sup>, yet women receive diminished sensitivity in medical pain management<sup>91</sup>. Applying these insights to crisis decision-making<sup>92–94</sup>, the present findings illustrate how, even in the midst of an urgent and ongoing crisis, women are viewed as more deserving of rescue (predicted by benevolent sexism) yet remain subject to biases that downplay their suffering (predicted by hostile sexism).

### Men's burden of protection and sacrifice

The implications extend beyond women. Although benevolent sexism reinforces men's privilege<sup>8</sup>, it can backfire by compelling men to sacrifice for women<sup>43</sup>—devaluing men's lives, well-being, and role as fathers. This aligns with recent theorizing and research on the harms of traditional gender roles for men<sup>43,44</sup>. A recent review<sup>45</sup> finds that harm to women is perceived as more severe and unacceptable than identical harm to men, leading to protective responses toward women and harsher judgments toward men, particularly in contexts of victimization and perpetration. War further amplifies this disparity, disproportionately victimizing men through conscription, combat deaths, and societal expectations of sacrifice<sup>47</sup>.

In the current hostage crisis, the findings reveal how sexism may harm men too, threatening their freedom and survival. In fact, from the launch of the IDF ground operation in Gaza on October 26, 2023, up to the present date of April 29, 2025, 518 men soldiers have died compared to four women soldiers<sup>95</sup>, despite women comprising 20% of IDF combat forces<sup>96</sup> and demonstrating bravery and skill during the October 7 Hamas terror attack<sup>97</sup>.

Relatedly, in the January 2025 deal, four women soldiers were released before any men citizens or soldiers<sup>98</sup>, despite the norm that combat personnel should be the last to leave captivity<sup>99</sup>. This disparity reflects how women are less often placed in the most dangerous roles, leaving men to bear the heaviest combat sacrifices.

At the same time, keeping men soldiers and young civilian men in captivity until the final negotiation stages may also imply that they are valued more. This raises the question of whether this order of release prioritizes perceived vulnerability or reflects an implicit honor system<sup>100,101</sup>,

where the most valued individuals are held for last because they are considered worth more. Importantly, the factors driving these policy decisions remain unknown.

### Evolving gender norms in crisis response

Ultimately, the findings highlight that sexism is not solely a women's concern but a societal challenge that may affect everyone. Historical trends and the current crisis suggest that benevolent sexism outweighs hostile sexism in formal rescue decisions, prioritizing women over men in declared policy and practice—likely because it aligns more readily with morally justifiable norms<sup>102</sup>. Yet, these decisions are far from ethically straightforward. Our findings show that ambivalent sexism introduces biases that can favor either gender, depending on the endorsed ideology.

These biases, however, do not exist in a vacuum. Shifting social norms point to an evolution in traditional gendered expectations<sup>103</sup>. The historical dominance of benevolent sexism in rescue decisions<sup>1,3</sup> may be fading as crisis and warfare settings continue to change. Crises often reinforce rigid cultural norms and practices<sup>104,105</sup>, particularly in exposure to terrorism<sup>106,107</sup>. Yet, traditional protective impulses may be waning amid substantial global progress toward gender equality<sup>35</sup> and growing support for egalitarian values<sup>108</sup>. Longitudinal data<sup>67</sup> show that although ambivalent sexism (both hostile and benevolent) remains stable at the individual level, its overall societal prevalence is declining. Notably, the visibility of U.S. women's combat fatalities has not reduced public support for military action—instead, it has helped reframe public perception of women's roles in war<sup>109</sup>. Thus, rescue decisions may mirror changing cultural norms, emphasizing that no rescue decision is inherently right—only reflective of the values and biases that pervade society, which continue to evolve.

### Implications for policy and public discourse

The gender bias in rescue decisions observed in this study may extend beyond public opinion to shape government policy and hostage negotiations. Although we did not study decision-makers directly, the systematic prioritization of women in both declared governmental policy and actual hostage deals suggests a possible alignment between public sentiment and practice. Research shows public opinion can drive policy<sup>110</sup>, especially in high-stakes crises<sup>111</sup>. Moreover, ambivalent sexism predicts political preferences and gender-related policy support or opposition, suggesting these biases may extend beyond survey responses.

The observed gender bias in this crisis can also shape how hostages are perceived post-release. Women are often framed as vulnerable victims deserving sympathy<sup>112</sup>, while men face higher expectations of resilience<sup>113</sup>, potentially receiving less public support and greater scrutiny. Ironically, a meta-analysis<sup>114</sup> found that masculinity ideologies—especially those promoting emotional restraint—are linked to posttraumatic stress. This suggests that men may, in some cases, be even more vulnerable than women after their release.

Although these spillover effects are plausible, they remain speculative. The findings establish a strong link between sexist beliefs and hostage prioritization (see limitations on causality in the Limitations section below), yet further research is needed to determine whether these biases extend into real-world policy and crisis management.

### A note on parallel dynamics in Palestinian society

The implications of this study likely extend beyond the Israeli context. However, the role of ambivalent sexism in Palestinian society remains largely unexplored. Although direct examinations are lacking, related research has investigated patriarchal ideologies and attitudes toward domestic violence among Palestinian women in Israel<sup>115</sup>, Arab Israeli men<sup>116</sup>, and Palestinian men from the West Bank and Gaza<sup>117</sup>.

In Palestinian society (and similar Muslim contexts), hostile sexism may differ from Western forms. Rather than arising from fears of feminism or sexual manipulation by women<sup>9</sup>, it often reflects expectations of women's subordination, marital obedience, and the preservation of family honor<sup>118,119</sup>. As for benevolent sexism, the November 2023<sup>120</sup> and January

2025<sup>121</sup> hostage deals included Palestinian women prisoners released before men. Although this may reflect protective gender norms, it was also confounded by the greater severity of charges against the men prisoners<sup>122</sup>.

In terms of self-sacrifice—particularly within Hamas terror organization—acts of violence against Israel are tied to honor, identity, and masculine ideals<sup>123–125</sup>. This narrative exerts considerable pressure on men to join Hamas and participate in violent acts. This was evident on October 7th, when only men perpetrators crossed into Israel<sup>126</sup>, risking their lives to commit violent acts of terror. Although Palestinian women have carried out suicide terror attacks<sup>127</sup>, their rarity suggests gender norms place greater pressure on men to assume such roles. Future research should examine Palestinian men's acceptance of self-sacrificial violence within this cultural and religious framework, and how these dynamics intersect with broader patterns of ambivalent sexism.

### Limitations

**Cross-sectional nature, timing constraints, and alternative psychological mechanisms.** As part of a broader longitudinal study tracking social ideologies in Israeli society, this analysis focused on a single wave relevant to our hypotheses, making it cross-sectional—as explained in the Methods section. Sexism and war-related outcomes were measured only in this wave. Although the findings provide key insights into gendered rescue preferences at a critical moment, they capture attitudes at only one stage of an ongoing crisis. Given the urgency and policy relevance of the topic, we prioritized timely dissemination over delaying the study for longitudinal data collection. Follow-up research should track how public opinion on hostage prioritization evolves, particularly in response to the conflict's progression and the January 2025 hostage release deal. Such studies can also examine whether attitudes shift as individuals gain temporal distance from the crisis<sup>128</sup> and process traumatic events over time<sup>129</sup>, facilitating deeper cognitive and emotional reflection.

Although this study provides initial evidence that motherhood may partly explain the link between sexism and hostage gender prioritization in the November 2023 deal, further research is needed to unpack the psychological mechanisms involved—particularly in light of the January 2025 deal, where women were prioritized regardless of maternal status. Comparative analyses with alternative explanations<sup>130–133</sup>—such as concerns about sexual violence, pregnancy risk, perceived physical vulnerability, and other contextual factors—could yield a more comprehensive understanding of the forces shaping these decisions.

**Correlational design and causality limitations.** The correlational design limits causal inference. Although sexist beliefs likely shape public opinion, government decisions to prioritize women may have also reinforced benevolent sexism, possibly creating a feedback loop. When policies consistently favor the rescue of women, the public may perceive this as natural or morally justified, thereby further entrenching benevolent sexist beliefs. Conversely, a more gender-neutral policy approach might weaken this association. This dynamic may explain why benevolent sexism showed a stronger link to gender-based hostage prioritization than hostile sexism.

That said, this interpretation does not preclude the reverse causal path. Prior research more strongly supports the direction from sexist beliefs to public opinion, rather than from policy to ideology. Numerous studies suggest that sexist attitudes predict policy support: hostile sexism consistently opposes gender equality policies<sup>134–136</sup>, whereas benevolent sexism selectively supports policies aligned with traditional gender roles<sup>8,41,77</sup>. In contrast, there is limited evidence that policy decisions drive changes in sexist attitudes. Although some election studies suggest that policy shifts can reinforce or challenge gender ideologies<sup>137</sup>, most research finds that ambivalent sexism predicts voting behavior, with less focus on whether the reverse is true<sup>8</sup>. Thus, whether policy decisions can produce long-term changes in gender beliefs remains an open question for future research.

**War exposure and trauma as contextual factors.** War exposure permeated the entire Israeli population, though its security implications varied by geography<sup>138,139</sup>. In the current work, the closest measured proxy was whether a close contact had been harmed, which was controlled for in the models. Those with an affected relative were less likely to prioritize women, possibly indicating reduced gender bias due to witnessing suffering across genders or having a man relative or friend in Hamas captivity. Reserve duty recruitment was also measured but applied to only 12% of the sample. Prior research connects war exposure to social attitudes through psychological and physiological mechanisms such as anger emotions<sup>140</sup>, threat perceptions<sup>141</sup>, stress<sup>142</sup>, trauma<sup>142,143</sup>, and inflammation markers<sup>144</sup>. However, this study treated war exposure as a contextual factor rather than analyzing these mechanisms directly.

War trauma may have also shaped survey responses. Even civilians<sup>145–148</sup> and those not directly affected—whether through media exposure<sup>149,150</sup> or impacted loved ones<sup>151,152</sup>—can experience stress and PTSD. Moreover, conflict-affected individuals tend to exhibit heightened sensitivity to social norms<sup>153</sup> and rigidity in policy preferences<sup>154,155</sup>. Future research should incorporate direct measures of war exposure and its psychological effects to better understand their role in shaping gendered attitudes, particularly in high-stakes, life-or-death decisions.

**Generalizability and universal relevance.** Situated within a specific geopolitical event of the Israel-Hamas war, the findings are not directly generalized to other war or hostage scenarios. However, they illuminate universal patterns of ethical decision-making and gender bias that are likely to recur in similar crises worldwide. The universality of ambivalent sexism, evidenced by its consistent patterns<sup>8</sup> and widespread endorsement across diverse countries<sup>66</sup>, underscores its global relevance, transcending any single localized phenomenon.

## Conclusion

This study reveals how sexist worldviews about gender predict public opinion about life-or-death decisions in the Gaza hostage crisis. Benevolent sexism predicts support for women's prioritized release, while hostile sexism predicts opposition. These patterns reflect historical trends where gender norms shape moral judgments and policy decisions, yet they also indicate that the 'women and children first' norm is not static but shifts based on ideological beliefs. Even in extreme circumstances, assumptions about vulnerability and protection persist, reinforcing societal assumptions about whose lives are valued most. Leveraging a timely sample, the findings expand our understanding of how gender biases unfold in conflict zones and provide critical insights for scholars and policymakers navigating humanitarian crises.

## Data availability

The dataset includes a CSV file containing raw data and a tidy data file in RDS format. Both data files are accessible via the Open Science Framework (OSF) at [https://osf.io/ysxjc/?view\\_only=d4f984953d204d04a13fa7b15bb7544b65](https://osf.io/ysxjc/?view_only=d4f984953d204d04a13fa7b15bb7544b65).

## Code availability

All analyses were conducted using R version 4.4.2. The complete code, analysis output, and the full study protocol necessary to reproduce the findings are available through the Open Science Framework (OSF) at [https://osf.io/ysxjc/?view\\_only=d4f984953d204d04a13fa7b15bb7544b65](https://osf.io/ysxjc/?view_only=d4f984953d204d04a13fa7b15bb7544b65).

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## Author contributions

O.B., M.R.T., and T.S. jointly developed the conceptualization and methodology and conducted data collection. O.B. performed the data analysis and prepared the materials, code, and analysis outputs for

publication. O.B. drafted the initial manuscript, and M.R.T. and T.S. contributed to thorough revisions. All authors have reviewed the final manuscript and approved it for submission.

## Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

## Additional information

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**Correspondence** and requests for materials should be addressed to Orly Bareket.

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