

Witnessing the Genocide in Gaza: A Collective Outcry of Speech-Language-Hearing Scientists and Language Scholars Around the World

The Linguaging and Human Rights Collective^a

Article Information

Keywords: genocide, Palestinian human rights, communication as a human right, ethics

https://doi.org/10.48516/jcscd_2024vol2iss2.51

Submitted: October 30, 2024
EST

Accepted: November 27, 2024
EST

Published open access by
Adelphi University Libraries.

Abstract

This paper is a collective statement from over 250 scholars and practitioners across the world in the speech-language-hearing sciences and related disciplines, who are responding to the profound suffering and ongoing genocide faced by Palestinians in Gaza. In our shared roles as advocates for communication and human rights, we confront the silence, complicity, and silencing tactics of major professional institutions, whose ostensible neutrality obscures the full scale of this humanitarian crisis. We center the experiences of Palestinians with communication disabilities in order to bear witness to their lives and to awaken our ethical and professional responsibilities. Through the stories of Muhammad, Omar, Moaz, and others, we urge a collective breaking of silence on behalf of all impacted by genocide in Gaza and around the world. We call for a commitment to professional ethics grounded in a moral clarity that aligns with anti-racist, anti-colonial, and disability justice principles. Our stance is both a protest against inaction and a plea for accountability, pressing the global community to recognize and support the humanity, dignity, and rights of Palestinians in Gaza.

We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.

-Audre Lorde

We are 258 speech-language-hearing sciences scholars, speech-language therapists/pathologists, audiologists, and related language practitioners and scholars from fifteen known countries of affiliation¹ who occupy diverse positionalities, but who are united in our outrage and brokenheartedness over the massive scale of human suffering in Gaza (see Appendix for signatories and authoring members of The Linguaging and Human Rights Collective). Among us are those who carry personal memories of witnessing genocide and/or experiences of deep injustice that bring profound existential questions and provocations. What does it mean to be human in a world where we witness such atrocities yet remain part of systems that fail to intervene? How do we reconcile our professional identity with the silence of institutions, both within and beyond our professions, that stand idly by or, worse, offer narratives that dehumanize Palestinians and justify genocidal acts? We state from the outset that naming the situation in Gaza as genocide is well

justified (United Nations, 1948; University Network for Human Rights, 2024), but this is not primarily a political commentary. Although politics is inseparable from any call to action, we offer an appeal to our collective humanity. In an environment where people are punished for speaking up for Palestinian human rights (Blake, 2024; United Nations, 2024), in which support for Palestinian humanity is conflated with antisemitism (Salaita, 2024), we foreground Palestinian stories and voices to urge an end to inaction, complicity, silence, and silencing in the face of historic brutality.

A Palestinian speech-language therapy/pathology colleague states:

I find myself questioning the very fabric of relationships with long-standing friends—people I care about deeply who fail to speak out/remain indifferent/are oblivious to our pain. The harsh realities we face are tearing at the bonds we've shared. What does it mean to maintain these connections, and is it even possible in light of such events?

As a mother of two, I've raised my children to believe in justice, but now I fear for the sacrifices they may make in standing up for what's right. Are these sacrifices justified? What does it mean to be an Arab in this context, particularly when so many Arab nations have remained silent or complicit in the face

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¹ Known countries of affiliation include Australia, Botswana, Canada, England, France, Ireland, Jordan, Lebanon, New Zealand, Scotland, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Tunisia, United States

of genocide? (Anonymous, personal communication, September 20, 2024)

We must grapple with our roles in these times. Our disciplines, grounded in the belief that communication is a human right (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 1997 - 2024a), have been disturbingly silent when presented with an ongoing genocide. With the notable exception of the New Zealand Speech-Language Therapists' Association (2024), institutions and associations representing us and claiming to fight for social justice (e.g. American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists [RCSLT], Speech Pathology Australia, Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists [IASLT], South African Speech Language Hearing Association) have not asserted a position against the genocide of Palestinians. When pushed for statements, these organizations have delivered declarations that are strategically "neutral" with language that obscures the scope of devastation and human suffering (e.g., "conflict in the Middle East" in contrast to "genocide"). They have also employed silencing tactics such as demanding compliance with communication policies (RCSLT, n.d.) or claiming that events beyond a national border are 'out of scope' (IASLT, n.d.). These tactics of suppression and avoidance are maintained by professional associations even in country contexts in which the public and political rhetoric is decidedly sympathetic to the Palestinian situation - as is the case in Ireland and South Africa. Whether through non-engagement or outright suppression, our professional bodies have failed spectacularly in living up to their moral principles. This inaction on the part of our professional institutions has also been called out by the *Anti-Racism Advocacy Group in Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology (Groupe d'action antiraciste en orthophonie et audiologie - GAAROA)* in Québec (GAAROA, 2024). We stand in unity with our colleagues in GAAROA to call for breaking the silence and speaking out against ethnic cleansing and genocide.

We have become familiar with the types of brutality imposed by institutions like the academy that mask violence with silence. The genocide in Gaza has been both implicitly and explicitly condoned, along with aggressive repression of those who protest it, including through the increased militarization against campus protests decrying the mass murder of Palestinians (e.g., Deeb & Winegar, 2024; Orleck, 2024; Tafari, 2024), systemic suppression of such protests (Walker, 2024), and threats to deport Black and Brown international students (Farfan, 2024; Jones, 2024; Klee, 2024). Departmental leadership, including colleagues in speech, language, and hearing sciences at influential institutions, have also been complicit with their silence and silencing in the dehumanization of Palestinians.

This moment is not for acquiescing or for tolerating what is deemed outside of our control. As we witness extraordinary systemic violence, we are called to acknowledge our professional and ethical responsibility, to speak out, and to engage in action to stop the silence and the silencing. This reflection is a call to critically examine our

ostensible "neutrality" and acknowledge its incompatibility with the foundational principles of our professional mission.

At this time, the lives and stories of Palestinians with communication disabilities matter acutely, but are we attending to them? Are we talking about their plights or amplifying their voices? In an ongoing genocide, disabled individuals are among the most vulnerable (Bro, 2021; Loh, 2024; Pons et al., 2022). Yet we have witnessed as they get rendered into faceless statistics - death tolls, injury counts, and displacement totals. Corpses pile up, and we look away, and in doing so, they become invisible, disposable, and dehumanized. We forget the brutality that is inflicted on the disabled, i.e., the shocking levels of degradation and torture imposed on their bodies to intensify dehumanization, an age-old colonial tactic applied to the marginalized and colonized.

How does our silence and that of our associations square with our disciplinary commitment to ensure access to meaningful communication as a human right (Speech Pathology Australia, 2024)? How is it that we are witnessing the systematic destruction of lives, homes, educational institutions, and hospitals and allowing it to unfold *without* speaking out? Tens of thousands have lost their lives and their loved ones. Their homes have been reduced to rubble. They live in constant fear of violence. Whose communication is outside the boundaries of human rights in this context? How is being silent not a form of pathological ignorance and complicity?

In spite of horrific violence, so many continue to hold on to hope, striving to raise global awareness and refusing to let the light of their humanity be extinguished. Their stories matter. They illuminate the urgent need for us to break our silence, to bear witness, and to account for our own efforts (and failures) to take a stand.

Muhammad Rahle

Muhammad is a young deaf child with a cochlear implant (CI). He was forced to flee from northern Gaza with his mother and sister, leaving behind his father and brother. During their displacement, they encountered Israeli soldiers who separated Muhammad from his family for "investigation." The soldiers removed his CI processor, rendering him unable to hear or understand their questions. Then Muhammad was severely beaten for not responding. Fortunately, he lived to tell his story. At the time of the interview, Muhammad was staying in a school for displaced individuals, sharing his account of the traumatic events he experienced (Al Hadath, 2024):

ضربوني ووقعوا جهازي

They beat me and dropped my device

رحنا على الصناعة بعدين اليهود طلعلونا وضربوني على رجلي

We went to the industrial area, then the

Israeli hit me on my feet

بعدين الجهاز وقعوا الجهاز بعدين وقعوا الجهاز

Then the device, they dropped the device then they dropped the device

بعدين صار خبط مشينا طريق على البحر لقينا قصف

Then bombing started we walked along the sea we found bombing

بعدين أكلوا الناس في ناس ماتوا وأكل الكلاب

Then they ate people, some people died, and dogs ate

.....

مشينا عالبحر كثير كثير

We walked by the sea a lot a lot

والناس ماتوا

And people died

بعدين وصلنا الدير

Then we reached the monastery

اشنقت لابوي كثير كثير

I miss my dad a lot a lot

بحبه

I love him

Are speech-language therapists/pathologists and audiologists aware that individuals with communication disabilities, like Muhammad, become targets during genocide? The very sight of disability (in the form of a cochlear implant in this case) at the intersection of being Palestinian becomes an impetus for grave abuse, torture, and killing. How are we addressing the heightened vulnerabilities faced by Palestinians with communication and sensory disabilities? Have we acknowledged Muhammad's dehumanization as part of broader crimes against humanity and contravention of international law?

Omar

The war and ongoing genocide in the context of decades of occupation have made it almost impossible for deaf Gazans to effectively access their environment and optimally communicate, including for survival purposes (Loh, 2024). For deaf Palestinians whose family use sign language(s), power blackouts make communication gravely difficult at night and bodily injuries can disrupt the ability to communicate altogether (Loh, 2024). For those who use assistive technologies (e.g. hearing aids), maintaining those devices, obtaining batteries, repairing damages sustained have become nearly impossible (Loh, 2024). Omar is a child from northern Gaza whom we understand to be deaf or hard of hearing and who appears to communicate with his mother through spoken language. For four months, he had been unable to use his hearing aids due to a lack of batteries. Organizations providing support for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in northern Gaza, such as the Atfaluna Society for Deaf Children, have been closed, barely operational, displaced, or even bombed (Loh, 2024). In the video link below, we witness Omar and his mother as they discover batteries beneath the rubble of their home. The moment when Omar puts on the batteries and resumes the use of his hearing aids is captured in the transcript below (Quds News Network, 2024).

عمر: ألو ألو

Omar: Alo Alo

عمر: بسمع

Omar: I hear

بالغ: في صوت؟

Adult: Is there a sound?

عمر - اه اه

Omar: Yeah ahhhhhhh

بالغ- سامع؟

Adult: Can you hear?

عمر - اه

Omar: Yeah!

بالغ- قول يا رب تخلص الحرب

Adult: Say, God, let the war end

عمر- يا رب تخلص الحرب

Omar: God, let the war end

Omar's smile and the happiness on his mother's face reflect their relief at this moment. Omar exclaims a long "ahhhh" indicating satisfaction in Arabic, expressing at least a temporary reprieve amidst the horrors of genocide. It is crucial that we keep the experience of individuals like Omar at the center of our practice, especially in these dire times. The narratives that emerge during genocide are complex and they also confront us with the reality of our human experience. We witness the persistence to have communication and environmental access in the most wretched of circumstances, fueling hope and resolve. What Omar shows us is that such hope and resolve can be a form of resistance in a reality of an "unapologetic will to massacre" Palestinians (Sargent & Friedner, 2024, p. 1)

Some stories challenge us with the gruesome reality of death. The story of Muhammad Bhar, below, tears at the heart. But it is crucial to share his account because such narratives resonate across many contexts of genocide.

Muhammad Bhar

Muhammad was a 24-year-old man from Gaza who had Down syndrome and autism. On June 27, 2024, during a raid by Israeli troops in the Shujaiya neighborhood, his family was forced to hide in their home amidst intense bombardment. When soldiers stormed the house, they unleashed combat dogs, which attacked Muhammad. In a video-recorded interview, his mother, Nabila Ahmed Bhar, recalled the desperate screams of her son as he struggled to free himself from one of the dogs (Al Jazeera, 2024). The last words she heard him utter to the dog biting him were:

خلص يا حبيبي خالص

Enough my dear enough

His mother pleaded for the soldiers to stop the dog from tearing at Muhammad, but instead, they forced the family to leave at gunpoint and did not allow them to take him. Muhammad was taken to another room, still bleeding, and given "special water," thought to be sedatives, by a military doctor (Hussaini, 2024). For seven days, the family waited for the soldiers to leave their home, during which time Muhammad was trapped in a room. The family was forced to leave at gunpoint, and when they finally returned, they were met with the horrifying sight of his decomposing body covered in maggots (Hussaini, 2024;

Keane, 2024). Muhammad shows us that even with blood seeping out of his open wound, he had the capacity to afford dignity to himself and even compassion to the dog brutally attacking him. Autistic² individuals are mischaracterized as lacking theory of mind and empathy, but his words, "Enough my dear enough," show that to be untrue and teach us something deep. It compels us to activate, to heed a higher call for action that comes from compassion and a sense of urgency. The horror of Muhammad's death underscores the cruel impact of genocide, not only on those who lose their lives but also on their families and communities. How can we escape our responsibility of being witnesses not only to the attack on Muhammad, but to the participation of a healthcare professional in killing him instead of saving his life?

The engagement of health professionals in systemic violence is not a new phenomenon (Nuriddin et al., 2020). Historically, we have seen their involvement evident in various contexts, highlighted by the reported participation of psychologists in the interrogation practices at Abu Ghraib (APA, 2014). This troubling legacy prompted the American Psychological Association (APA) to adopt a resolution in 2015 stating that psychologists "shall not conduct, supervise, be in the presence of, or otherwise assist any national security interrogations." (APA, 2015, p. 5). Such a resolution marks a crucial collective acknowledgment of the responsibility that health professionals have to denounce violence and advocate for vulnerable people, including children with disabilities, to advocate for access to safety, and to demand an end to genocide. We must grapple with our accountability when we fail to take a stand. There is a vital role for us to play in fortifying our commitment to the ethical standards of our professions, particularly in the context of genocide and systemic oppression.

The current genocide in Gaza has been ongoing for more than a year and those with disabilities are disproportionately affected (Rahimi & Haq, 2023). The murder of Muhammad is one of the most horrifying stories that has emerged so far in this genocide. Muhammad's mother stated, "we couldn't save him, neither from them nor from the dog" (Keane, 2024). Muhammad's story is undoubtedly one that has reached "new depths of horror" (Islamic Relief UK, 2024). For those in our professions and wider humanity, it raises critical questions of the intersection between disability, genocide, ethics, social justice, international law, dehumanization, and degradation of human dignity.

5-year-old Moaz

In this report, (Yaser, 2023), Maysoun the mother of a five-year-old boy named Moaz, who was diagnosed with autism three years earlier, talks about the toll of these relentless stresses:

طوال الوقت صراخ وبكاء ويسكر أذنيه ويدور حول نفسه، كثير مفزوع من أصوات القصف وضرب الرصاص، ومن يوم ما تركنا الدار ونزحنا لمركز الإيواء في الجنوب، وهو تايه مو معنا، يخاف من كل شي، وإذا غفلت عنه ثانية ممكن يشرد ويضيع لا قدر الله.

"He is screaming and crying all the time, covering his ears and spinning around, very frightened by the sounds of bombings and gunfire. Since we left our home and moved to the shelter in the south, he has been lost, afraid of everything, and if I take my eyes off him for a second, he could run away and get lost, God forbid."

As the family fled from northern Gaza to a shelter in the south, the mother shared:

روتينه كله تغير، ترك مركز التأهيل اللي فيه معلمينه ورفقاته، وانقصت دارنا، وصار لنا شهر بمدرسة إيواء مع النازحين، ما في خصوصية واتخربطت كل حياته، هو كثير خايف، شوي يرفرف وشوي يصرخ أو يبكي والأصوات المزجة طول الوقت يصدرها وقطع الكلام نهائي ما عاد يحكي ولا يتواصل، ما يبطلع بعينونا

"His entire routine has changed; he left the rehabilitation center where he had his teachers and friends, and our home was bombed. We have been in a shelter at a school with other displaced people for a month; there is no privacy, and his whole life has been disrupted. He is very scared, flapping a little, then screaming or crying. He constantly makes annoying sounds and has completely stopped talking; he no longer communicates and doesn't look us in the eyes."

Maysoun reveals that Moaz is also in need of medication for his seizures, and since there is no access to medication, his seizures are not managed.

Missing Children

Moaz's mother expressed a constant fear of losing her child. Her fear is well-founded, as there have been multiple reports of missing children who have disabilities. One heart-wrenching example is from a father interviewed on television, desperately searching for his son. During the report, the father holds up a picture of his child on his phone and pleads for help (Aljazeera Mubasher, 2023):

أنا ابني عنده توحد، عمره ثلاث عشر سنة ونص، اللي فاتت فجر بعد القصف الشديد شرد من البيت وأنا بدور عليه. وفش اتصالات ولا إنترنت ولا تواصل مع حدا. بلغت كل الناس ومش موجود وما فش عنه أي خبر. الولد غير مدرك وما يعرف الخطر، يعني احتمال يكون بأي مكان. ما عناش ولا أي معلومه عنه. الولد هاي صورته وأنا بناشد الجميع إنه اللي لاقاه يعطينا أي معلومه عنده. أنا هيني موجود "بمستشفى الشفاء وأنا مش حروح وهاي أول ليله نفقده"

"My son has autism; he is thirteen and a half years old. After the intense bombing at night, he ran away from home at dawn, and I've been searching for him ever since. There is no communication—no internet, no phone connections. I informed everyone, but there is no sign of him, no information at all. My son is unaware of the danger; he could be anywhere. We have no idea where he is. This is his picture, and I'm pleading with everyone, if anyone finds him or has any information, please let us know. I'm here at Al-Shifa Hospital, and I won't leave. This is our first night without him."

This tragic case highlights the unique and devastating impact of genocide on disabled children and their fam-

2 Terms such as *autistic* & *disabled* are used in consistency with the preferences of many disability and neurodivergent advocates for identity-first language (Brown, 2011).

ilies. People with communication disabilities, especially youth, are under great risk as the occupying army can perceive them as being non-cooperative or threatening. Such stories emphasize the dire need for us to advocate for their protection and their right to safe living and communication access.

We center these stories to show the brutality of tyrannical times on disabled bodies facing genocide. In a field that demands person-centered and evidence-based practice, we need to make it possible for more marginalized voices, those overlooked, unseen, and unheard, to share their accounts. They hold the key to our collective humanity. We also need to protect intellectual communities that fall under attack. Palestinian scholars and academic gatherings are often targeted, significantly stifling research advancement (UN Media Center, 2024). For example, Shellah (2024) recounts that on the eve of a scientific event, *Palestinian Women in Science*, on March 8, 2023, Israeli soldiers raided Jenin, resulting in deaths and forcing the cancellation of the event. Since October 2023, Gaza has experienced the deliberate and systematic destruction of schools, universities, and research institutions (Desai, 2024a, 2024b; United Nations, 2024), leading to the loss of professors, teachers, and students and the disruption of intellectual life in Palestinian society. As of September, 625,000 children in Gaza are without schools (UNRWA, 2024). All universities in Gaza have been wholly or partially destroyed. (Desai, 2024b). At least 10,490 school-aged and university students have been killed, and 16,700 more have been injured (Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, 2024). Ongoing violence and movement restrictions have severely damaged the educational infrastructure.

As Rosenberg (2012) points out, “genocide is a process, not an event” (p. 1). There are countless more stories stretching back decades. They include the lasting trauma from previous bombings and attacks on Gaza, which have profoundly affected many people with communication disabilities and have been the cause of many disabilities (Jaffee, 2016; Shehadeh, 2015; Thabet et al., 2013; Unicef, 2023). There are also stories we have not shared: stories of newborns in the NICU who starved (El-Bursh, 2024), children with disabilities without access to modified foods appropriate to their needs (Human Rights Watch, 2024), deaths caused by the inhalation of toxic fumes from bombings (Human Rights Watch, 2024), and much more. Our collective protest can play a vital role in solidarity with the struggle of those with disabilities for human rights. We keep in mind the words of Gazan writer, professor, and activist Dr. Refaat Alareer, who urged those around him, “If I must die, you must live to tell my story” (Alareer, 2023).

Our silence may be driven by fear, and indeed, these are fearsome times. A press release by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2023) expressed alarm at the worldwide rise of both antisemitic and islamophobic hate and a surge of reprisals against people who call out human rights violations and demand justice. In particular, they note that in Western

countries, “calls for an end to the violence and attacks in Gaza, or for a humanitarian ceasefire, or criticism of Israeli government’s policies and actions, have in too many contexts been misleadingly equated with support for terrorism or antisemitism” (United Nations, 2023). A poll of Middle East scholars in the United States found that eight-two percent of all respondents (and nearly all assistant professors) reported self-censoring (Lynch & Telhami, 2023). In academia and beyond, people who express support for Palestinians have been censored, harassed, fired from their jobs, forced to resign, black-listed, and threatened with violence (Antczak & Watson, 2024; Gabbatt, 2023; Goldstein, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2023; Kersten et al., 2024; Sainath, 2023; Sainato, 2024).

The threats are real for those who take a public stand against the genocide in Gaza, and we, the authors and signatories of this statement, are not exempt from those risks. Some contributors and supporters of this statement remain anonymous because of a lack of safety at their institutions, threat to their visas and freedom to travel, and/or because they already occupy vulnerable positions as students, untenured faculty, and/or marginalized scholars and professionals. But anonymity as a strategy of collective care and mutual protection is not the same as silence. Whether named or unnamed, every one of us who speaks up, especially when united in coalition as we are now, helps to create a less dangerous environment for others to do the same. The risk is worth taking and necessary. We must not look away from the atrocities that are unfolding every day in Gaza, the horrors that are inflicted on humans and other living beings, the devastation to the land, air, water, and the destruction of culture and history. As clinicians, scholars, and thinkers who critically reflect on and write about disability and advocate for justice, we need to ask:

- What kind of anti-racist and anti-colonial disability justice praxis shall we propose in the context of an ongoing genocide?
- What type of disability justice shall we envision when the unspeakable and unthinkable is inflicted upon bodies after bodies?
- Could we ever write about the constructions of disability without understanding the colonization of Palestine and the genocide of Palestinians?
- Could we ever discuss decolonization, social justice, and disability without holding Palestine and other contexts of genocide at the center?
- How do we actively engage with disability justice in solidarity with disabled Palestinians, Palestinian stories, and Palestinian imaginations of social justice?
- How can we think about communication and joy without remembering Omar or the many voices of others like him?
- What does Muhammad teach us about extending dignity to all living beings – something that was not afforded to him even in his death?

We view the above questions not as a set of prescriptive queries nor mere reflections but as a point of deep inquiry for our professions to grapple with and confront. Our call to action is to hold ourselves and others accountable for actions that silence dissent and reinforce imperialism and colonialism, to reject the supposed political neutrality of our professional organizations and their flouting of the ethics they claim to espouse. We need to abide by a code of ethics that is based on moral clarity and social justice. It is at the core of who we are as pro-

fessionals and as humans. In writing this paper, we consciously bypass calls for actions from our professional organizations because we do not believe the solutions will come from "above." Our hope lies in the rising collective expressions of individuals and coalitions, a communal matrix of interdependent resistance, willing to assert human rights, to fight for disability justice, and to honor Palestinian lives, languaging, and stories.



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Appendix

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