

Agents of change: The role of Palestine's women-led organisations in crisis

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Executive Summary

Agents of change: The role of Palestine's women-led organisations in crisis delves into the severe and gender-specific impacts of the ongoing war on Gaza on Palestinian women and girls. Against the backdrop of the war on Gaza and escalation in the Occupied West Bank, Palestinian women have borne the brunt of violence, forced displacement, and systemic discrimination, yet have shown remarkable resilience and leadership in the face of these overwhelming challenges.

Key findings

- **Gender-Specific Violence and Forced Displacement:** Palestinian women face intensified risks of gender-based violence, including sexual abuse, domestic violence and forced marriage, exacerbated by forced displacement into overcrowded and unsafe environments. These conditions have eroded the social fabric, heightening women's vulnerability and stripping them of safety, dignity, and agency.
- **Mental Health and Well-being Crisis:** The psychological impact of the war on both men and women is devastating, with many experiencing severe stress, anxiety, and trauma. Women, however, report feeling the most affected, citing instability, repeated displacement, and loss of privacy as key stressors. One 16-year-old girl said, "We don't know where to go to find security." The crowded living conditions exacerbate tensions, with another girl expressing, "No one can tolerate the other."
- **Additional workload and responsibilities:** Women are primarily responsible for the physically demanding and time-consuming work of running a household in a war zone, from carrying heavy buckets of water to their tents to cooking over open fires, while also taking on additional caring responsibilities, such as tending to injured relatives. Amid severe food shortages, women are eating last and the least to ensure others in the family are fed, with Hala, a staff member at Alianza por la Solidaridad, commenting: "The worst thing women do, they put themselves in the bottom of everything, the last on the list, deprioritising herself and taking care of others"
- **Obstetric Care in Crisis:** Obstetric care in Gaza has been severely compromised, with only two of the twelve functioning hospitals able to provide maternity services. Pregnant women face high-risk conditions, including inadequate prenatal care and unsterilized medical equipment, leading to higher rates of complications and mortality. UNICEF described the dire conditions as babies being "delivered into hell." Doctor Adnan Radi, a Consultant and Head of the Obstetrics and Gynaecology Department at Al-Awda Hospital, noted: "The mortality rate among women giving birth and their newborns is higher due to inadequate medical care."
- **Loss of safe spaces and gender-specific support:** Access to safe spaces and support for women experiencing gender-based violence has hugely diminished. Repeated forced displacements and communications challenges have left many women without consistent information about what help is available, while organisations providing protection services for women have been put under immense operational stress due to funding shortages and fears for their own safety. The complete collapse of Gaza's legal system has left a legal vacuum, with women unable to obtain justice nor secure their legal rights.
- **Exclusion from humanitarian assistance:** With aid often accessed through registration by men, households led by divorced or separated women disproportionately face challenges obtaining it. Women can face harassment and blackmail when accessing aid, with one NGO staff member commenting: "Women face blackmailing from service providers to help them access faster by paying higher fees or commissions."
- **Leadership Amid Crisis:** Despite severe hardships, Palestinian women have emerged as leaders in their communities, managing displacement camps, providing critical services, and advocating for resources. Samira Khalil, who manages Al-Istiqama Camp, turned her pain into motivation to help others: "After losing my children and home, I sought refuge in Al-Istiqama camp, lived in tents, and suffered like the rest of the people. I took it upon myself to strive to help displaced people."

Key Recommendations

The report urges local and international stakeholders to recognize and support Palestinian women not just as victims but as essential agents of change in Gaza's recovery.

Women's perspectives and leadership are essential to achieving a gender-just recovery, yet they remain under-funded and under-engaged in decision-making forums. Women-led organisations (WLOs) and women's rights organisations (WROs) are often sidelined, leading to missed opportunities for meaningful collaboration and sustainable impact. Buthaina, director of the Wafaq Association for women and childcare, said: **“Comprehensive actions are always more effective than working individually. [During the 2014 war] We were partners with large NGOs, yet no one returned to work with us as experts. We pointed this out in the 2014 lessons learned, but the same mistakes have been repeated. The next phase will be even more challenging than what we have already faced.”**

Going forward, Palestinian women must be actively involved in all peace negotiations and political dialogues related to the region's future. Setting quotas for women's participation and providing financial and technical support to women's peacebuilding organisations can help achieve this and ensure that women's involvement is meaningful and effective, rather than a token gesture.

Methodology

The report uses a mixed-method qualitative approach, including focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and testimonies from Palestinian women, men, and key stakeholders in Gaza and the West Bank. It aims to understand the physical, psychological, and social impacts of the conflict on women, emphasising the systemic issues worsened by the ongoing belligerent occupation, the war on Gaza and the escalating Israeli military violence in the West Bank, particularly since October 2023. Central to the report's objectives is the emphasis on women's critical role in leading Gaza's reconstruction and broader efforts toward Palestinian self-determination.

The research included a comprehensive desk review and primary data collection across all regions of Gaza, using gender-sensitive techniques within internally displaced person (IDP) camps and UN shelters. Eight focus group discussions, eleven key informant interviews, and five testimonies were gathered, enriched by personal stories shared on social media platforms. This methodology provided robust, evidence-based insights, highlighting women's leadership in Gaza's recovery and the wider fight for Palestinian rights.

Introduction

Israel's 57-year-long occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and of the Gaza Strip, has systematically denied Palestinians many of their rights, resulting in far-reaching and deeply harmful consequences for all members of society. Palestinian women bear a significant portion of this burden, experiencing specific and sustained attacks. The ongoing attack on Gaza and entrenchment of Israel's control over Palestinian territory have exacerbated these challenges, culminating in the recent intensification of violence.

Since October 2023, Israeli military operations have resulted in the deaths of more than 11,269¹ Palestinian women in Gaza and 4,700 missing women and children. Between 15,000 and 25,000² children have lost at least one parent. In addition to coping with such devastating personal losses, survivors have been forced to flee multiple times – resulting in an estimated 2 million³ people being displaced from their homes -and subjected to starvation during relentless bombardments and ground attacks.

In the West Bank, Palestinian women face other acute protection threats, including arbitrary and punitive home demolitions, physical and psychological violence inflicted by Israeli soldiers and settlers, and the fragmentation of territory and communities. These actions directly and seriously impact women, often causing stress and trauma, and contribute to the disintegration of the social fabric and the deterioration of economic conditions.

Violence against women is exacerbated in conflict settings, manifesting in heightened threats of rape, femicide, forced marriage, exploitation, and dispossession of women's lives, bodies, and territories.⁴ For example, during Israel's 2014 war in Gaza, violence against Palestinian women significantly increased. Research commissioned by ActionAid found that 39.6 percent of women experienced at least one form of domestic violence following the war, with psychological abuse, including insults and threats, the most prevalent. Of those surveyed, 14 percent reported physical abuse, and 18.9 percent experienced economic abuse, where they were denied financial support or had their expenses controlled.⁵

Both in Gaza and the West Bank, women may also face other forms of marginalisation, such as poverty or disability.

The dual impact of military operations and broader systems and policies of dispossession therefore presents a comprehensive challenge to Palestinian women, affecting every aspect of their lives and requiring multifaceted

solutions. Gaza, reduced to ruins and rendered virtually unliveable by Israel's military assault, faces a reconstruction and recovery process of unprecedented scope and scale. Addressing the full range of needs in this devastated society, spanning physical reconstruction—with the cost of damage to critical infrastructure in Gaza alone estimated at around \$18.5 billion⁶—as well as rebuilding economic, social, cultural, and political systems, will require years, vast investment, and sustained, targeted support by the international community.

However, there is a serious risk that following the end of the active hostilities, women's issues and rights will be forgotten in the rehabilitation of Gaza and, more broadly, in political discussions about the future of Palestine. As has been witnessed in other contexts, the international community may prioritise physical reconstruction and basic services without giving specific or sufficient attention to gender equality, women's rights considerations and the role of women, particularly young women, in creating a just and durable peace. Rebuilding Gaza and moving the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) towards a just and durable peace, with Palestinian rights respected and protected, necessitates leveraging the experiences of women who, as in other places of occupation and conflict, play crucial roles as humanitarian responders, caregivers, community leaders, human rights defenders, mediators, and peace activists. These women bring unique perspectives and experiences, offering invaluable resources for delivering innovative, comprehensive, and inclusive approaches to conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Such perspectives are crucial for identifying and addressing the structural nature of violence faced by Palestinians and the factors that continue to enable its existence, breaking the continuum of this violence and ensuring the construction of a peace that promotes equality and guarantees women's rights.⁷ In other words, Palestinian women must not merely be seen as victims of the occupation and conflict but as essential agents for reconstruction, recovery, and peace.

This report outlines the gendered direct impacts of Israeli practices and policies imposed throughout the oPt, with a particular focus on the shifts since October 2023. Furthermore, it emphasises the critical role women must play not only in a Palestinian-led, rights-based Gaza reconstruction and recovery process, but in initiatives to bring Israel's prolonged occupation of Palestinian territory to an end, and fully realise the Palestinian right to self-determination.

Israel's war against Palestinian women

Throughout the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Israel enacts practices and policies which—directly and indirectly—severely impact the ability of Palestinian women to enjoy their basic rights. These policies and practices are deeply harmful in themselves, while also intermixing with broader structural phenomena to produce a landscape of acute suffering and denied opportunity.

“Palestinian women live at the intersection of three forms of oppression: Israeli settler colonial violence; patriarchy; and sociolegal discrimination.”

Shalhoub-Kevorkian; Wing.⁸

The Gaza Strip before October 7th

The denial of the rights of women in Gaza long predates Israel's mass military assault initiated in October 2023. Since 2007, Israel has enforced a closure of the Gaza Strip, with crippling restrictions on the movement of people and goods, maintained through a complete sea and air blockade as well as through tightly controlled land crossings. According to OCHA, in 2022, despite an increase in the number of Palestinians permitted to exit the Gaza Strip, such **“movement remained the exception rather than the rule, with the vast majority of residents, over 2 million people, virtually ‘locked in.’”** In July 2022, Gaza's food insecurity rate and poverty rate both stood at 65 percent.¹⁰

Between 2009 and 2023 Gaza experienced multiple large scale Israeli military offensives. The most destructive of these was the so-called ‘Operation Protective Edge’,

launched in July 2014 and resulting in the deaths of at least 1,462 Palestinians (including 299 women), destruction of 18,000 Palestinian homes and forced displacement of 500,000 people (28 percent of the population).¹¹ In addition, between 30 March to 31 December 2018, Israeli forces shot dead 183 Palestinians (including one woman and one girl) and injured at least 6,106 (including 159 women) with live ammunition in the context of the right of return protests along the border fence between Gaza and Israel.¹²

This cycle of extreme physical violence, against a backdrop of 57 years of occupation and 16 years of blockade, left the Gaza Strip and its inhabitants isolated and devoid of hope. It is in this context that the present Israeli operation—unprecedented in its scale and resulting level of death and destruction—takes place.

The Gaza Strip after October 7th

Since commencing its bombardment in October 2023, the Israeli military has launched thousands of aerial attacks throughout the length and breadth of Gaza, backed up by a large-scale ground invasion, with political, financial and material support from its allies¹³. These actions are reported to have killed more than 41,000 Palestinians, damaged or destroyed a reported 55 percent¹⁴ of Palestinian homes in the enclave, and inflicted serious damage on essential civil infrastructure, including medical facilities, and water, electricity, transport and communication networks. In the face of such violence, and in search of safety, around 2 million Palestinians,¹⁵ representing 85 percent of Gaza's population, have fled their homes and communities and spend each day not knowing whether it will be their last.

Furthermore, Israel has severely limited the entry of essential aid into Gaza, including food and fuel. As a result, Palestinians in Gaza are starving. According to the World Food Programme, 96 percent of Gaza population faces acute levels of food insecurity¹⁶ and Gaza is at risk of famine.¹⁷ According to Save the Children, as of 2 April 2024, at least 34 children in Gaza had been killed by starvation and disease.¹⁸ In May 2024, the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court announced his decision to seek arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and Minister of Defence, Yoav Gallant, for alleged crimes in the Gaza Strip including the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare.¹⁹

Chronic overcrowding, malnutrition and the lack of adequate health and hygiene services has created a breeding ground for disease, now compounded by the onset of winter rains. According to UNICEF, more than 152,000 cases of diarrhoea²⁰ were reported between mid-October 2023 and mid-January 2024, half of which were among children under the age of five. These case numbers are 23 times higher than prior to October

2023. In addition, the World Health Organisation has reported more than 150,000 cases of upper respiratory infection,²¹ and numerous cases of conditions including meningitis, skin rashes, scabies, lice and chickenpox. In August 2024 a baby was left partially paralysed after contracting Polio in what was the first case of the disease in Gaza in 25 years, before a vaccination campaign was rolled out across the territory.²²

Gendered effects of Israeli military operations in Gaza

The gendered effects of the catastrophic humanitarian situation created by Israel in Gaza are pervasive, complex and interrelated.

Death and injury toll

Women are direct victims of violence, with many killed or maimed during Israeli bombardments and ground operations. By the end of October 2023, women and children accounted for 64 percent of the Palestinians killed who had been fully identified by the Gaza Health Ministry. By the end of April 2024, this figure stood at 54 percent,²³ representing a catastrophic level of loss and suffering. UN experts have highlighted “reports of the deliberate targeting and extrajudicial killing of Palestinian women and children in places where they sought refuge, or while fleeing. Some of [whom] were reportedly holding white pieces of cloth when they were killed by the Israeli army or affiliated forces.”²⁴

This violence has torn families apart. In January 2024, UN Women reported that two mothers had been killed every hour in Gaza since the beginning of the war, and at least 3,000 women left as heads of households after their husbands were killed.²⁵ Research conducted by Alianza por la Solidaridad and ActionAid with women, men, and girls living in camps and UN shelters in July 2024 found that the grief and pain from losing family members due to the ongoing war were deeply felt. The mental health impacts are profound, often manifesting in conflicting emotions that highlight the intensity of their suffering. One girl, who lost her mother, expressed her anguish by saying, **“Life stopped after mom’s death.”** In contrast, another girl who lost her father described feeling numb, stating, **“I felt nothing.”**

Mental health and women’s wellbeing

Women and men are equally exposed to the devastating psychological impact of the war, and both reported experiencing severe psychological and physical distress. However, women reported feeling that they are the most affected group in the current situation. Both women and men agreed that two experiences in particular were keeping their stress levels high. They said the absence of stability due to multiple forced displacements was putting them in a continued state of fight or flight mode²⁶, leaving them unable to settle and forcing them to start again from scratch an average of 10 times in the last 10 months. One of the girls, aged 16, who participated in the focus group discussion said: **“We don’t know where to go to find security.”** Living in crowded conditions has increased family tensions and exposed women and girls to safety and public health risks. Another participant in the focus group discussion said: “No one can tolerate the other.” The second prevailing reason for stress and anxiety was the lack of privacy, safety and dignity. One of the women who participated in the focus group said: **“In the past, walls were our cover, today it’s just a piece of nylon”.**

The main concern for men revolves around the safety and privacy of their female family members, which has been compromised due to the harsh living conditions they all must endure. This breach of privacy deepens men’s sense of helplessness and weakness, as they struggle to provide necessities like safety and privacy for their families. As a result, their feelings of shame and despair continue to grow.

Despair, Insecurity, and Abandonment: The Emotional Toll on Men and Women

The ongoing brutal war has left men grappling with overwhelming feelings of despair, insecurity, and abandonment. They are haunted by a pervasive sense of powerlessness, compounded by the lack of psychological support and recreational outlets for their children. As they struggle to protect their families, particularly their children, men are acutely aware of the increasing domestic burdens their wives and daughters face. Despite their attempts to help, their despair often renders them physically and emotionally paralyzed. One of the male participants in the focus group said: **“We wish for death nothing else!”**. Their concerns extend beyond their own families to encompass broader issues of internal security. The absence of law enforcement, the spread of family disputes, and the lack of internal protection all add to their fear and stress.

Women, on the other hand, share many of the same fears, particularly the fear of losing loved ones. As one woman in a focus group discussion expressed, **“The feeling of loss and fear of death dominates due to the repeated scenes of death among family, friends, and neighbours.”** Sadness is a pervasive emotion among women and girls, though it is often internalised, buried beneath the surface of their daily tasks and priorities. Many delay their grief, prioritising the immediate needs of their families. As Riham, an ActionAid staff member, observed: **“There is postponement of grief among women, the end of the war for women marks the beginning of another journey of suffering.”**

Many women reported a loss of self-worth and confidence as daily life becomes a gruelling battle for survival made up of physically demanding and repetitive tasks: carrying heavy buckets of water long distances, collecting firewood, cooking on open fires. Hala, a staff member at Alianza por la Solidaridad, said: **“I am doing things that I have never done before—washing clothes by hand, cooking on an open fire. Sometimes I was laughing and crying at the same time in my first attempt to cook this way.”** This sudden shift has affected women deeply, leading to feelings of humiliation.

Suicide and the willingness to die was repeatedly mentioned during our data collection across different target groups. Girls, men and women were in despair to the extent they either wished death or had thought of suicide. Jihad, the protection cluster coordinator, said: **“Suicide, is highly expected to increase”**. Samira, a displaced woman who

manages the Al-Istiqama Camp in Deir Al Balah, said she had observed an increase in suicidal attempts. She said: **“There was a lady who was subjected to violence by her husband, she tried to commit suicide (we rescued her at the last moment)”**.

Forced displacement

Israel’s mass forced displacement of Palestinians in Gaza,²⁷ combined with severe limitations on humanitarian aid delivery, has created grave protection concerns for women. Of the two million Palestinians displaced due to the threat of bombardment, or by unlawful displacement orders issued by the Israeli military, roughly one million are women. Shelters for displaced Palestinians in Gaza are chronically overcrowded, lack adequate food, water or medicine and, at times, are subjected to attack by Israeli forces.

According to UNRWA, many women at the massively overcrowded shelters for displaced Palestinians report not eating or drinking not only because of insufficient food or water, **“but also to limit the time they have to spend going to use the filthy and unsanitary restroom facilities.”**²⁸ Some women have gone weeks without showering, with serious implications for their health and wellbeing, while others have resorted to shaving their heads due to the lack of water and to rid themselves of lice.

In situations of displacement, women also face heightened risks of gender-based violence (GBV), harassment and exploitation.²⁹ Survivors of GBV need treatment for injuries and sexually transmitted diseases and access to medical supplies, including emergency contraception and treatment, as well as psychosocial support. This is virtually impossible with Gaza’s health system close to collapse.

Women and girls reported serious concerns that multiple displacements are encouraging their male family members to enforce early marriage for girls as a coping mechanism amid the scarcity of food, the closure of schools, and the loss of educational opportunities. Sexual abuse and domestic violence are also reportedly increasing due to lack of privacy, displacement and harsh settings. Buthaina, director of Wefaq association for women and childcare, said: **“Early marriage! No logic is helping people, we are not able to warn people not to do this, men are thinking to protect their girls through marriage, even if she was sexually abused when she is married, better than when she is not married!”**

The repeated forced displacements are particularly difficult

for those with disabilities and, tragically, family members have sometimes been forced to leave disabled relatives behind as it is too difficult or dangerous to bring them along. As one staff member for Alianza por la Solidaridad said: **“Many women with disabilities have become a serious burden on their families during displacement, some people with disabilities were left behind during displacement because people can’t carry them or because of sudden attacks!”**. Some women with disabilities struggle to make their way around the camps for displaced people, which are not designed to accommodate their particular needs. Buthaina, the CEO of Wefaq association, said there had been, **“many cases of women with disabilities crawling to go to the common toilets on their hands and knees”**.

Displacement is also causing financial struggles, increasing the economic burden and hardship on exhausted families, and forcing women and girls to work outside the home to get income. The stress and pressure of the situation has led to a breakdown of some marital relationships, resulting in increased divorce rates and/or a breakdown in respect between spouses.

Crucially, the multiple forced displacements are also negatively impacting access to humanitarian assistance, particularly protection services. The constant changes in displacement locations, communication blackouts, bombardments and overall fragility leave people without access to information about the protection services available, especially for women and girls. Raihana, a mother who has been displaced to Deir Al-Balah, said **“We were displaced from Gaza to Rafah. And we are constantly being displaced and moving. We are currently displaced to Deir Al-Balah. This constant displacement has left us without stable shelter, relying on temporary accommodations that lack basic amenities”**.

Hunger and malnutrition

The developing famine in Gaza, resulting from the Israeli military’s bombardments from land, air and sea and denial of sufficient aid access, has profound gendered impacts. Women, as primary caregivers, bear the brunt of food insecurity, struggling to provide for their families amidst severe shortages. Julia, a lawyer and member of the Palestinian Development Women Studies, described the dire situation, saying: **“We have lived on canned foods for over five months, which has caused illnesses such as gastroenteritis. It is clear how thin and emaciated we are because of the severe hunger we are currently enduring”**. Women also carry the burden of managing household food crises and caring

for malnourished children, leading to heightened stress and mental health challenges. During hunger crises, women act as ‘shock absorbers’ for their households, deprioritising their own food consumption to ensure more food is available to others,³⁰ further compromising their health and wellbeing. Hala, an Alianza por la Solidaridad staff member, said: **“The worst thing women do, they put themselves in the bottom of everything, the last on the list, deprioritising herself and taking care of others”**. Describing the impact of the food shortage impact on relatives and people around her, she said: **“Weight loss is [a] very obvious symptom to the extent some people you won’t recognize”**.

This is particularly true for women with existing health conditions, including those with chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer. Pregnant women and new mothers are also among the most affected due to the lack of nutrition and medical support. Abeer, a new mother who has just given birth at Al-Awda Hospital in north Gaza, said: **“I suffered a lot during pregnancy and throughout childbirth due to lack of food and lack of nutrients.”** These experiences have led to an increase in miscarriages, premature births, and complications during childbirth as confirmed by Doctor Adnan Radi, a Consultant and Head of the Obstetrics and Gynaecology Department at Al-Awda Hospital, who said: **“Hunger will negatively impact so many pregnant women, and children will be malnourished from birth”**.

Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare

Access to adequate sexual and reproductive healthcare is essential for the overall health and well-being of individuals, particularly women, as well as for the health and stability of families and communities. However, in Gaza the level of destruction, forced displacement and the Israeli-imposed siege has rendered such access virtually impossible. As a result, protection risks for women have escalated dramatically, threatening their safety, dignity and fundamental rights.

Obstetrics

The field of obstetrics—the medical care provided to women during pregnancy, childbirth and immediately after delivery—has been severely impacted, with horrific consequences for affected women and their families. According to the United Nations, as of April 2024, there were 155,000 pregnant or breastfeeding women in Gaza.³¹ An estimated 183 women give birth every day,

with a baby being born every ten minutes. Yet, just two of the 12 partially functioning hospitals in Gaza were able to provide maternity services, compared to a total of 36 hospitals that were functioning before October 2023.³² Palestinian women are forced to give birth without adequate care, including undergoing caesareans and emergency operations without sterilisation, anaesthesia or painkillers.³³ UNICEF has described how babies in Gaza are being **“delivered into hell”**.³⁴

The absence of contraceptives increases the risk of unintended pregnancies in extremely harsh conditions. Women are forced to engage in sexual relations without protection, leading to pregnancies in tents under poor humanitarian conditions. Feryal Thabet, manager of a women's health centre, said the inability to sterilise medical equipment presented another issue, explaining: **“Inserting an IUD is not possible due to the lack of sterilisation of the materials needed by the doctor to insert the IUD. Sterilisation and cleanliness are limited and unavailable, leading to the spread of infections”**.

There is a general lack of prenatal and postnatal care, leading to complications during childbirth. Iman, a new mother who has just given birth by caesarean section at Al-Awda Hospital, said: “During my pregnancy follow-up, I discovered that I was pregnant with twins. The other twin had died due to health conditions and movement from one place to another”. The mortality rate among women giving birth and their newborns is higher due to inadequate medical care, lack of proper nutrition, and unavailability of essential services. These risks were confirmed by Dr. Adnan Radi, a Consultant and Head of the Obstetrics and Gynaecology Department at Al-Awda Hospital, who said: **“This is in addition to the problems that pregnant women already suffer from, such as lack of primary care, lack of [medical] follow-up for pregnant women, a sharp increase in the rate of [high-risk] pregnancies, complications [relating to] premature birth, an increase in miscarriages and problems such as infections, sepsis, bleeding, and others.”**

Menstrual health

Menstrual health—the state of physical, mental, and social well-being in relation to the menstrual cycle—is crucial for the dignity, mobility, and productivity of women and girls. This includes access to clean menstrual products, proper hygiene facilities, healthcare for menstrual disorders, and education about menstruation. Compromised menstrual health carries the risk of reproductive and urinary tract infections, as well as other serious conditions, and can have serious psychological impacts.

According to UNRWA, there are an estimated 690,000 menstruating women and girls in Gaza.³⁵ With the continued denial of aid, mass forced displacement and a devastated healthcare system overwhelmed by vast demand, the lack of access to sanitary products, clean water and privacy for Palestinian women and girls is a serious protection concern. For example, chronically overcrowded displacement centres and informal camps lack access to hygienic, lit, private, lockable and gender-segregated toilets and bathing facilities, which would allow for the managing of menstrual health in privacy and dignity.³⁶ These difficulties are further increased for Palestinians with mobility issues, with emergency facilities and informal camps typically lacking suitable access. Meanwhile, UN experts have reported “contraceptive pills being taken to avoid the unhygienic menstrual conditions.”³⁷

Young girls experiencing menstruation for the first time face significant stress due to the absence of necessary support, including sanitary pads and pain relief. The scarcity of clean water and hygiene products exacerbates these issues. Girls experiencing their first period needed care and support, but one humanitarian worker said: **“Now we are struggling to secure sanitary pads... there used to be full intervention to support girls at teenager's age, now all these services are not available anymore”**.

Access to protection services

During the ongoing war on Gaza, women and girls face severe challenges in accessing protection services, exacerbating their vulnerability. One of the main issues is their exclusion from essential humanitarian assistance, such as food, WASH, and cash aid. With aid often accessed through registration by men, households led by divorced or separated women disproportionately face challenges obtaining it. Even when services are available, women may encounter significant barriers in physically accessing aid, including long wait times, harassment, and blackmail by service providers. One NGO staff member described women's experiences in accessing humanitarian aid by saying: **“Women are usually at the end of the line [or] queue. She can't interfere between men in the crowd... women could go more than four times for food baskets because she can't have entry between men. Women face blackmailing from service providers to help them access faster by paying higher fees or commissions.”**

The prioritisation of sectors such as food security and shelter over protection services further limits the

availability of critical support. Jihad, the protection cluster coordinator, said there was a risk of unqualified personnel being involved in protection services, potentially increasing harm due to the lack of capacity building and proper orientation and preparation. This is compounded by resource shortages, with protection actors being excluded from essential resources like fuel, hindering their ability to operate effectively.

The breakdown of formal local protection services, such as police stations and women's safe homes, has left women at risk or survivors of GBV without safe spaces or support. Only 62 percent³⁸ of women who participated in the focus group discussions reported being aware of protection services, compared to 38 percent who had no idea about available services. Communication barriers, exacerbated by the destruction of infrastructure and multiple forced displacements, have made it difficult for women to access consistent information about protection services. The war has also deepened the silence surrounding gender-based violence, with cultural norms and social attitudes further discouraging women from speaking out about their experiences. Meanwhile, protection service providers are under immense operational stress due to funding shortages, security concerns, and the destruction of their facilities, severely limiting their ability to support those in need. Riham, an ActionAid communication officer, said: **“Local and INGO partners’ staff themselves are affected and face challenges to be able to continue provision of regular and stable protection services”**.

In Gaza many women and girls have been left without family members after all their family members have been killed. Local protection mechanisms are not available, and they are staying with their relatives or friends, which might expose them to gender based violence or coping mechanisms such as early marriage.

Law enforcement

The war on Gaza has had a devastating impact on the local legal system, resulting in the complete collapse of legal infrastructure, absence of law enforcement, and loss of legal representation. Courts are non-functional or partially functional with continued interruptions due to the security situation on ground, and there is widespread destruction of the legal framework, leading to significant challenges in accessing justice. The challenged capacity of protection actors and the security situation on ground, have also contributed to increased risks of absence of law. Buthaina, the director of Wefaq, said: **“Some women got divorced during the war we couldn't support as we used to do, there were no communication mechanisms, our**

staff were not able to reach them”. Personal efforts are now being taken by some of the community leaders for essential legal processes like registering child births in camps. Jihad, the protection cluster coordinator, said that this was essential stating: **“Some women didn't even give birth in hospitals.”**

One NGO staff member expressed her deep concerns about absence of law enforcement, saying: “The current war [has] reinforced the traditional [gender] roles which has negative consequences specifically on women and girls, this war brought us back 50 years back”. Without a functioning legal system, women have been unable to secure their legal rights, such as getting the “Nafaqa” - their financial entitlements from their ex-husbands.

Overall, the war has left a legal vacuum, making it extremely difficult to re-establish a functioning legal system and protect the rights of vulnerable people. Some organisations are initiating efforts to support legal documentation like NRC and PCHR, yet more efforts are needed to achieve immediate solutions to the several legal issues that are arising.

The West Bank

The post-October landscape in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, is characterised by an intensification of existing discriminatory practices, with the result that life for Palestinian women has become even more difficult.

Violence (military, settlers)

Israeli violence in the West Bank significantly affects women, with many being directly exposed to violence or witnessing it. Women are at increased risk of GBV due to the stresses and disruptions caused by political instability. Women activists, in particular, face harassment, arrest, and detention, which often includes psychological torture and sexual violence. Issues such as invasive checks and the surveillance of women's personal data by the Israeli forces at checkpoints in Hebron, highlight the increasing risk to their safety. Horeya, an activist in the H2 area³⁹ in Hebron, described the impact of offensive practices by the Israeli forces on women and girls, saying: **“There is physical harassment, some families had to rent outside the area, they hack photos and phones.... to access all data”**.

This environment of violence perpetuates a cycle of trauma and socio-economic dependency, limiting women's ability to participate fully in public life and increasing their susceptibility to further violence and exploitation. Horeya further elaborated on how soldiers from the Israeli forces treated a Palestinian woman from her neighbourhood in H2. She said: **“A woman [was] taken inside a room, all her clothes [were] taken off and [they] let [a] dog attack her, in front of her husband and kids.”** The feeling of fear accompanied with shame, with others being helpless to do anything in such incidents, brings severe consequences on the mental health and wellbeing of all the family members.

Detention

Israeli arrests and detentions of Palestinians dramatically intensified in the aftermath of 7th of October. In the months following the attacks, more than 2,200 Palestinians were detained.⁴⁰ Although men were the primary focus of this increase, Palestinian women were also targeted. According to Al Dameer, there were approximately 240 cases of Palestinian women being detained in the West Bank and Israel between 7 October 2023 and March 2024.⁴¹

Moreover, the treatment of female detainees may amount to serious violations of international law. In February 2024, UN experts expressed serious concern at reports

of female detainees being **“subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment, denied menstruation pads, food and medicine, and severely beaten.”**⁴² This same report highlighted claims **“that Palestinian women in detention have also been subjected to multiple forms of sexual assault, such as being stripped naked and searched by male Israeli army officers. At least two female Palestinian detainees were reportedly raped while others were reportedly threatened with rape and sexual violence.”**

Pregnant women, elderly people and children could be detained at checkpoints for more than six or seven hours without food or water, one Hebron resident said. Such allegations come in the context of longstanding complaints by rights groups that Israel routinely subjects female Palestinian detainees⁴³ to harsh conditions, including lack of fresh air and sunlight, overcrowded and unsanitary cells, and little or no access to medical services.⁴⁴

Creation of an impossible living environment in Area C of the West Bank

Under the 1995 Oslo Accords, Israel was afforded full but temporary administrative and security control over 'Area C', a land designation covering approximately 60 percent of West Bank territory. Although the Oslo Accords envisaged the transfer of civil powers and responsibilities in Area C from Israel to the Palestinian Authority (PA) over a period of five years, this did not happen.⁴⁵ Instead, Israel has exploited its control over Area C—and particularly its control over the applicable planning regime—to create an impossible living environment for Palestinian inhabitants.

Women living in H2 face extreme restrictions on their movement, which impacts women experiencing or at risk of gender-based violence. Horeya, from H2, said: **“Only birds can leave the area so women at risk or GBV victims can't find enough support if needed”**. According to OCHA **“the Israeli authorities' destruction of Palestinian-owned structures in Area C of the West Bank on grounds of lack of building permits is preceded by the issuance of demolition orders. Together with other policies and practices,**

the threat of destruction of homes and sources of livelihood represented by these demolition orders, contributes to the generation of a coercive environment pressuring people to leave their areas of residence”.⁴⁶

The gendered impacts of this brutal reality are profound. Since the UN began its monitoring of Israeli demolitions in 2009, Israel has destroyed almost 11,341 Palestinian structures across the West Bank, displacing almost 17,739 people.⁴⁷ Home demolitions have a particularly serious impact on women as traditional patriarchal norms designate the home as the "woman's sphere," with associated domestic duties.⁴⁸ This places an additional burden on women to maintain family stability and care for children amidst the trauma and displacement resulting from the destruction of the home. Displaced families often relocate to the husband's relatives, leading to a decrease in women's decision-making power and agency.

The psychological toll and the disruption to daily life exacerbate women's vulnerability and reduce their social participation. This is especially true in Palestinian herder communities, which are the most heavily targeted for demolitions. Women play crucial roles in agricultural practices in such communities, and therefore face severe economic challenges as they are deprived of their means of livelihood.⁴⁹ Thousands of Palestinian labourers in the West Bank who used to work inside Israel have lost their jobs post October 7th. Additionally, businesses are losing income due to continued closures from the Israeli forces and settler attacks. The resulting economic stress put on families may result in increased incidents of domestic violence.

Many areas of the West Bank regularly face intensive military raids, which have escalated in recent years and particularly since October 2023. Faraha, who lives in Jenin refugee camp and is director of the "Not To Forget" association, said electricity was often cut during military incursions into the camp, putting **"extra workload on women for the household chores"**, while damage to water network infrastructure often left families without access to water. People with medical needs or disabilities were particularly affected, she said. Describing the challenge of one woman, whose child has a disability, she said: **"That woman she needs to get her child for regular treatment outside of the camp, if she want[s] to transfer her disabled child through taxi [drivers] refuse to transfer her or they increase the travel cost (because they are afraid from of security situation inside the camp)"**.

The rapidly growing⁵⁰ issue of illegal settlement activity has a severe impact on Palestinian women, in some cases confining them to their homes due to the threat of settler harassment and violence. This erodes women's productive roles and community participation, and limits access of Palestinian girls to education. The fear and insecurity caused by these activities further isolate women and reduce their access to essential services and economic opportunities, exacerbating existing gender inequalities. Horeya, an activist from Hebron, reported numerous instances of physical attacks by settlers, saying, **"Our neighbour, a 16-year-old boy, was attacked on his head with a metal stick last week, and he is now in the hospital. Children and adults, and women are also subject to verbal abuse, sexual insults, and physical assaults from settlers"**.

Protection service providers in the West Bank, including H2, Area C, and refugee camps face significant challenges, including the security of their staff, who are at risk of detention or attacks, the destruction of their facilities, restrictions on access in and out of these locations, and limited resources to operate effectively and provide the needed support to the most vulnerable. Faraha from Jenin Camp confirmed this dire situation, saying, **"There is a women-led organisation that was totally destroyed. We are at security risk always; even after repair work, they would destroy it again. Electricity cuts and many operational challenges are encountered, because of the occupation"**.

These challenges are compounded by the perception among these women that INGOs and UN institutions are not building reliable and meaningful partnerships with local CBOs and actors working within these areas. The focus appears to be on security considerations rather than on fulfilling the needs of the vulnerable populations. Farah further described this challenge, stating, **"West Bank women-led organisations are somehow neglected. There is no real vision on how to engage them; they usually deal with these areas as hot security-wise."**

(Non) Accountability for Failure to Protect Women during Armed Conflict

Though allegations of Israeli atrocity crimes in Gaza have grown steadily since the most recent military operations commenced in October 2023, most of these allegations have focused on how Israel has conducted attacks inside Gaza, or its denial of humanitarian aid to Palestinians inside Gaza. The investigation and address of such alleged crimes is critical, but to focus on these violations at the expense of other essential legal protections risks devaluing these protections and obscuring the incredible hardships faced by Palestinian women in Gaza. Nor is this an issue limited to the Gaza context.

As noted by Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, former UN Special Expert on promoting gender equality in times of conflict and peace-making, **“given the unique protections set out in the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols for maternity, newly born, and young children under the law of war, it is extraordinary that the international community has devoted so little effort to hold States and combatants accountable for their failure to implement these specific obligations.”**⁵¹

The study also uncovered significant mistrust and scepticism among humanitarian and protection service providers regarding the effectiveness of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in safeguarding the most vulnerable populations. The research team was met with expressions of frustration and a sense of hopelessness about any potential impact these laws might have on Israeli practices. Faraha, the manager of the “Not to Forget” association in Jenin, questioned the effectiveness of IHL and IHRL, particularly Law 1325,⁵² stating: **“There is no protection for us. If IHRL were effective, it would have protected Gaza from the start. All these laws are just ink on paper.”** Another respondent labelled IHL and IHRL as mere **“big lies”**, arguing that they fail to compel the Israeli side to cease its alleged crimes against innocent civilians.

Why Women-led Reconstruction, Recovery and Peacebuilding Initiatives?

In the ongoing war on Gaza, women have taken on crucial roles that highlight their resilience and adaptability amidst adversity. Primary household chores and responsibilities have become a central aspect of their lives. For example, one participant reported managing all household chores

and fulfilling her children’s needs single-handedly, embodying both maternal and paternal roles. This reflects a broader trend where women are shouldering basic household tasks – many of them physically demanding – such as preparing food, organising living spaces, washing clothes, baking bread, and carrying water from distribution points, often under challenging conditions. Many women express frustration at their increased burden. Additional roles have emerged, with women stepping up to care for injured family members. As one participant described, **“My role in the family is important; my mother left me due to her injury and left my injured siblings and their children with me. I am now responsible for them and everything.”** This underscores the evolving and critical role women play in maintaining family stability and supporting their communities during the conflict. Some women were offended when asked about resilience, asserting that they do not see themselves as heroines. Instead, they feel they are in an unavoidable situation with no other options but to survive and support their children.

On the other hand, some interviews also revealed, that men are also engaging more in household chores, and collecting wood, baking on fire, baby sitting when their wives are working outside, and supporting households tasks, this has revealed that the drive for survival and well-being often surpasses traditional gender norms and roles, suggesting that in crisis situations, practical and adaptive responses take precedence over the maintenance of conventional gender identities. This shift in social dynamics, including reported increased engagement of men with women, highlights how difficult circumstances can create opportunities for collaboration and change, even when these actions challenge established masculine community identities. The desire to survive and ensure collective well-being becomes a stronger force than adhering to traditional gender expectations. This was obvious when men interviewed in focus group discussions, but also reported observations from some women that some men now accept to do things that they would never accept to do before the war like taking care of the kids. Women’s influence on household decisions varies widely, with some having significant decision-making power and others having limited or consultative roles. Their influence is generally stronger in areas related to children and family priorities, but less so in matters involving their husbands. One woman expressed her frustration about men’s attitudes by saying: **“They never listen to us”**.

Women have emerged as highly effective leaders during the crisis, with some women taking up the role of running displacement camps. Hala, an Alianza por la Solidaridad staff member, said: **“Most of the successful camps I have observed are the ones managed by women... women’s needs are considered, [as well as] children and people with disabilities.”** Samira, the manager of AL Istaqamh camp in Deir Al Balah, explained how she managed to convert her pain into motivation to help others, saying: **“After losing my children and home, I sought refuge in Al- Istaqamh camp, lived in tents, and suffered like the rest of the people. I took it upon myself to strive to help displaced people. I turned to associations, local institutions, and some friends to help the people”.**

Samira’s experience seems to confirm the findings of research⁵³ conducted by Zenger Folkman institute, which revealed that women are better leaders during times of crisis. The research found that women leaders often bring strong interpersonal skills, such as empathy and effective communication, which are crucial during crises, and they also tend to foster more inclusive and participatory decision-making processes. As one of the participants in the focus group discussion said: **“The woman is the knight of the journey, she leads it, but she must be wise, compassionate, and patient.”**

Hanan manages the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) displacement camp in Gaza and is also a mother of five, including a blind child who needs specific care. Like Samira, she has found the strength to help others in similar situations. Both women demonstrate leadership and initiative, taking charge of projects within the camps to improve the lives of displaced people. Collaboration is key, as these women work closely with community institutions and associations, securing resources and support for their initiatives. Their efforts also highlight their role in advocacy and representation, as they successfully engage with key organisations like the UN to bring aid and attention to their communities. Additionally, they rely on support networks, acknowledging the crucial assistance they receive from men, young men, and the broader community. They adeptly balance their multi-tasking responsibilities, managing both humanitarian work and family duties. These traits collectively underline their vital role in leading and improving conditions within IDP camps. It is very important to flag that all these positive traits should not undermine the fact that these women too need support at the individual level and should never be treated or defined as being strong as an excuse to exclude them from assistance as well. Samira

explained: **“If a woman is given some attention, she will have a significant role in society”.**

Women-led INGOs and NGOs, as well as women-led organisations (WLOs) and women’s rights organisations (WROs) are among the key providers of emergency and protection services in Gaza. Interviews with them have revealed their ongoing collective efforts focusing on a range of critical activities aimed at supporting the most vulnerable, particularly women and children. These include the management and coordination of humanitarian projects with an emphasis on technical and financial aspects, and the assessment and support of protection needs on the ground. There is a strong focus on raising awareness and providing psychosocial support through individual, group, self-care, and family counselling sessions. Economic empowerment initiatives are in place to help women gain financial independence, alongside legal support services like birth certificate registration and support of civil affairs cases. Efforts also extend to supporting children at risk, including those involved in orphan projects and those requiring parental support from vulnerable families. Advocacy for women’s rights is a significant component, alongside the coordination of communication and advocacy campaigns. Additionally, grassroots activism plays a crucial role, with community members addressing violence against women and girls, volunteering in mental health and support organisations, and running income-generating projects like kitchens, despite the challenges posed by security situations.

Emergency response services have been provided through these actors since the early weeks of the war. Yet despite these ongoing efforts, there is widespread consensus that WLOs and WROs are under-engaged in both emergency and post-emergency planning. This lack of involvement is compounded by a general frustration regarding the seriousness with which key actors and decision-makers, such as the UN, approach the inclusion of WLOs and WROs in decision-making processes, both during the current emergency planning and in the later stages of recovery and reconstruction. While there should be high engagement, active participation and power for these organisations’ voices, interviews have shown that in practice this is not the case. Farah from Jenin camp, questioned the current form of localization and partnership between the UN/INGOs with local actors, saying: **“We don’t see it as a real partnership or collaboration”.** Buthaina, director of the Wafaq Association, shared critical lessons learned from the 2014 war, highlighting that although women were expecting to participate in decision-making, this did not happen, and instead of being empowered as WLOs, they encountered further

funding challenges. She recommended focusing on comprehensive, collaborative actions rather than individual efforts. Despite being partners with major NGOs, they were not approached again as experts for future collaboration, even though these issues were raised in the 2014 lessons learned. She emphasised: **“Comprehensive actions are always more effective than working individually. We were partners with large NGOs, yet no one returned to work with us as experts. We pointed this out in the 2014 lessons learned, but the same mistakes have been repeated. The next phase will be even more challenging than what we have already faced.”**

Benefits of women-led reconstruction, recovery and peacebuilding initiatives

The benefits of recovery processes which centre women's needs, and participation are proven and extensive. For example, economic empowerment of women is essential for broader economic recovery and conflict transformation. The UN emphasises that addressing women's marginalisation in economic activities is crucial for sustaining peace. Policies that support women's economic empowerment, such as providing microfinance, vocational training, and addressing power imbalances, are vital for fostering inclusive and sustainable growth in post-conflict societies. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, the integration of women into economic recovery processes, including recognition of the significant contributions of women to both formal and informal economies, has helped to rebuild local economies and provide essential goods and services.⁵⁴

Women face significant barriers to engaging in decision-making due to a combination of systemic, cultural, and practical challenges. Survival mode is a key reason, as women are often forced to prioritise immediate survival over broader participation in decision making platforms. Their resilience in these situations is not a choice but a necessity driven by dire circumstances, leaving them exhausted and unable to engage in community or political activities. Deprioritization further exacerbates this issue, as women frequently neglect their own needs in favour of supporting others, which undermines their health and effectiveness. Another critical barrier is systemic exclusion and invisibility. Despite playing crucial roles in their communities, women are often excluded from decision-making processes, leading to the oversight of their specific needs and contributions. This exclusion is particularly evident in their absence in planning and policy discussions, where they are not represented in critical

meetings, such as those concerning water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services. A staff member at Alianza por la Solidaridad highlighted an example during a needs assessment with community members, where there was a noticeable absence of women. None of the men present were able to answer questions related to women's personal hygiene during menstruation, underscoring the critical gap in addressing women's specific needs.

Moreover, women are overburdened and undervalued. They carry a triple burden of managing unpaid domestic responsibilities, caring for children and others in the household while generating income, often without adequate support or recognition. This situation takes a toll on their physical and mental health, further limiting their ability to participate in broader community activities. Compounding this is the lack of resources necessary for resilience and survival, making it difficult for women to support themselves and their communities effectively. Inadequate support systems also play a significant role in limiting women's engagement. There is often limited support from NGOs and donors, with women not receiving the necessary backing or recognition despite their vital roles. Additionally, insufficient safety measures leave humanitarian workers, including women, vulnerable to threats and violence, with inadequate protection or response from the international community.

Societal and cultural barriers further restrict women's participation. Cultural resistance from traditional male-dominated structures hinders women from taking on leadership roles or advocating for their rights. One community activist described her experience of being told by male community members that she would not be able to succeed as a woman and how several challenges were placed in her way. This is compounded by gender-based violence and discrimination, which not only limits resources but also perpetuates societal norms that undervalue women's contributions and restrict their roles.

Lack of long-term planning and collaboration between women and other stakeholders is a significant obstacle to addressing these resilience challenges effectively. Nevertheless, 100 percent of the women, men and girls who participated in the focus group discussions confirmed that they were willing to have a role in the recovery and reconstruction.

Family rehabilitation and psychological support were considered vital, as women plan to rehabilitate their children through systematic educational schedules and provide psychological support to help them recover from the trauma of the war. One of the women participating in

the discussion said: "I will teach my children to adapt to starting a new life after the war where there is no shelter. We were in a tent, and we will return to a tent". They are also committed to launching initiatives for children, focusing on educational and recreational activities to foster emotional and educational development. Another participant said: "I will enrol my children into psychological support activities".

Empowerment, capacity-building and engagement experiences are crucial for enabling women to engage in decision-making. Access to decent work and living conditions is essential for women to become more knowledgeable about their rights and to participate actively in community development. Women intend to participate actively in recovery efforts, including cleaning streets, removing rubble, and promoting environmental awareness. They also plan to conduct educational and awareness campaigns on health and environmental issues to support community development.

Economically, women are focused on income-generating projects, such as starting small businesses in areas like pastry-making, hairdressing, and juice production, leveraging their pre-war skills and experiences. One of the participants said: "I will return to my own business making sweets" while another said, "I will continue my journey in memorising the Holy Quran and achieving my goal". Additionally, they plan to make skill-based contributions by using their talents in cooking, nursing, and other areas to aid in community reconstruction.

Lastly, women recognize their diverse perspectives on post-war roles. They value their varied skills and education, with some focusing on returning to pre-war activities and others leveraging their professional backgrounds. Their experience in adapting to incredibly challenging circumstances made them confident they could play an essential role in the recovery process. One of the women in the focus group explained: "A people who lived with minimal resources, endured and were patient, I think they are capable of rebuilding with minimal resources too". Yet, some women remained frustrated over the availability of choices, with one of the girls declaring: "I will be forced to adapt and recover, and I have no other option."

Men perceive their roles post-conflict as multifaceted, focusing on leadership within the family, providing emotional and psychological support, recovering the family's economic stability, and ensuring safe and adequate shelter. They emphasise their ongoing responsibility in safeguarding their families and addressing both immediate and long-term needs in the aftermath of the conflict. Men also provided their perception on women roles post-war, recognising that women will play a significant and multifaceted role. Women are seen by men as active participants in various professional fields and community services, contributing their experience and skills to support recovery efforts.

Gender justice and the future of Gaza and Palestine

Women have expressed significant concerns regarding the challenges they will face in the post-war recovery period, emphasising several key needs for the future. Shelter and living conditions are a major concern, with many women anticipating that the available shelters will be unsuitable for their families, lacking essential features such as adequate toilets, water tanks, alternative energy sources, and proper ventilation. The daunting task of rubble removal to make spaces habitable further compounds these concerns.

Infrastructure deficiencies present another critical barrier to recovery. Women foresee significant issues arising from the lack of infrastructure, including damaged or missing sanitation supplies, water networks, power lines, and internet connectivity. Women are severely worried that they will continue living in harsh living conditions due to electricity cuts, which force them to do many tasks manually, increasing the burden and time for these activities. They fear they will be forced to prioritise these time-consuming tasks over participating in more strategic roles in their communities. The absence of basic services such as healthcare, education, and municipal support is also a pressing concern, as it will hinder efforts to rebuild a sense of normalcy.

On an emotional and social level, women expect to face renewed grief over the loss of family members and loved ones, which will add to the complexity of their recovery process. The challenge of providing psychological and educational rehabilitation for their children is significant, with the impact of disrupted education and emotional trauma being major worries. Additionally, concerns about security issues, including fears of thefts and disputes over property boundaries, contribute to the anxiety surrounding their future.

Leaders of women-led organisations said that uncertainty in terms of the political and security situation in Gaza makes it difficult to plan how they will effectively contribute to the recovery. They offered a negative perspective about potential civil unrest and family clashes due to absence of rule of law on the ground. Buthaina, the director of Wafaq association, wondered: “How the change in the political direction might affect the WLOs share of funding with huge needs to support women? And the need for operational costs like admin costs, staff costs. From previous experiences we faced less funding streams”.

The future security of women is highly dependent on the political stability and clarity of the governance system in

Gaza. Without an accepted and functioning political entity, effective law enforcement and protection mechanisms for women will remain uncertain.

Educational and economic concerns are also prominent. The lack of educational facilities, such as schools and universities, poses a serious threat to the future education of children and youth as agents of the future. Economic challenges, particularly the high cost of transport and the loss of economic resources, further exacerbate the difficulties women anticipate.

Finally, women are grappling with the challenges of general adaptation and recovery. There is a widespread anticipation of difficulty in accepting the new reality of their lives, including the loss of their homes and the devastation of their living conditions, highlighting the need for comprehensive support as they navigate these profound challenges.

Women who are currently active in the emergency response foresaw that women will likely continue to be marginalised in decision-making processes about their safety and future. Cultural norms may limit their ability to make critical decisions, such as whether to leave or where to settle after the war. As one NGO staff member said: “Women and girls won't have the space to decide where to settle! If the man decided to live over the rubbles of her house, she would follow, even if there are risks like Unexploded Ordnance”. Women foresaw a pressing need to enhance protection mechanisms, ensure effective legal enforcement, and provide comprehensive support services tailored to the needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls.

The lack of housing was the most pressing concern for all participants, as the destruction of their homes has left people struggling to find safe and secure places to live. The need for adequate temporary relevant housing solutions is seen as fundamental and immediate, requiring urgent attention. Economic concerns are also significant. The loss of income is a major issue for many participants, as the war has disrupted their ability to generate financial stability and support their families. This economic instability adds another layer of difficulty to their recovery, underscoring the need for strategies that will help people regain their livelihoods and restore their financial security in the aftermath of the conflict.

Legal and political barriers for future participation of women in peacebuilding

Legal barriers are likely to significantly hinder women's active participation in post-war peacebuilding and recovery, primarily due to weak legal frameworks that fail to provide adequate protection and justice. During or after conflict, the erosion of legal systems can severely diminish protections for women, leaving them with limited access to formal mechanisms for justice. War can also reverse progress made in legal reforms, especially if traditional or patriarchal systems regain prominence, potentially disregarding or overriding advancements aimed at enhancing women's rights. Additionally, some harmful practices during emergency responses have exacerbated these issues. By reinforcing cultural systems to secure aid delivery, some organisations have undermined the protection and empowerment of women.

Inadequate representation is another significant barrier. While legal or policy quotas for women's representation might exist in the Palestinian Authority (PA) legislative council, a 30 percent quota in councils often does not translate into meaningful participation. Women's voices may be tokenized, or they may be represented by those lacking firsthand experience of the war, leading to recovery strategies that fail to address the actual needs of local women who lived through the war experience.

There is a critical need for legal reforms in post-war environments to address new and existing issues, such as crimes committed against women during the war. However, the lack of resources within legal systems can prevent women from accessing justice, particularly in cases related to honour crimes and domestic violence. Fragmented support systems, combined with inadequate awareness and training, leave women unaware of their rights or unable to access necessary services. Without coordinated efforts from legal entities, community committees, protection actors, and other stakeholders, women's contributions to recovery remain limited, reducing the overall effectiveness of post-war rebuilding efforts.

For Palestinian women to move forward, it is imperative to address the legal and social barriers hindering women's rights through comprehensive reforms and coordinated support systems. Central to this progress is the political will to engage women meaningfully in planning processes, ensuring their representation across various platforms. The future of the region depends not only on rebuilding its physical infrastructure but also on fostering a just and inclusive society where women play

an active role in shaping their communities and securing a just and lasting peace.

True recovery must begin with a person-centred approach that recognizes women as equal partners, valuing their diverse skills, traits, and potential as change leaders in the journey toward a stable and prosperous future. This approach would help fulfil the dreams of women like Raihana, a displaced mother in Deir Al Balah, who envisions a better future when she said, "We help each other, hand in hand as brothers and sisters, surpassing hardships and leading better lives." Access to meaningful participation in policy and decision-making platforms is crucial—not merely counting the number of women involved but measuring the influence they exert. Learning from post-conflict in Sierra Leone, we see that the involvement of women in governance and economic activities has led to greater recognition of their rights and increased participation in decision-making processes. Women's participation has been shown to significantly enhance the likelihood of a successful peace initiative, increasing the chances of a peace agreement lasting at least two years by 20 percent, and 15 years by 35 percent.⁵⁶

Without these opportunities, women remain marginalised in decision-making, unable to fully contribute to the resilience and development of their communities. The path to engagement for women is uneven, and without the support of policymakers and decision-makers from the UN and INGOs, it will be challenging to ensure their effective participation in the post-war recovery phase. Women in Gaza must therefore be actively involved in all peace negotiations and political dialogues related to the region's future. Setting quotas for women's participation and providing financial and technical support to women's peacebuilding organisations will help ensure that their involvement is meaningful and effective, rather than a token gesture.

Conclusions

The massive military operations and systematic policies of oppression by Israel during its 57-year occupation have inflicted devastating harm on Palestinian women in both Gaza and the West Bank. Women are not just collateral damage; they are direct targets of a multi-layered system of violence that exploits their vulnerabilities and undermines their rights. In Gaza, the relentless bombings in the latest war has killed thousands of women and left many more mourning the loss of loved ones, deprived them of their homes, and left them struggling for basic survival. Women are enduring profound suffering due to the compounded effects of violence, forced displacement, and systemic discrimination. They face heightened risks of gender-based violence, exploitation, and psychological trauma, often with limited access to essential protection services. The destruction of infrastructure and the collapse of legal systems further exacerbate their vulnerability, leaving many women without the necessary support to secure their safety and well-being. Despite their critical need for protection, cultural norms, logistical barriers, and inadequate humanitarian responses frequently exclude women from accessing the services they desperately need, perpetuating a cycle of insecurity and suffering. In the West Bank, women face daily threats of settler violence, home demolitions, and psychological trauma that erodes their sense of security and dignity. It is imperative that international actors hold Israel accountable for these gender-specific atrocities and prioritise the protection and empowerment of Palestinian women in all humanitarian and diplomatic efforts.

Women in Gaza and the West Bank have shown extraordinary resilience, stepping into leadership roles and driving community recovery efforts under the most challenging conditions. Research confirmed that women possess several key traits that make them exceptionally qualified for leadership in emergencies and crises. Their innate resilience, often forged through managing multiple roles in challenging environments, enables them to adapt quickly and effectively in high-pressure situations. Women are typically strong communicators, able to articulate needs and mobilise resources efficiently while fostering inclusive decision-making processes that consider the perspectives of all stakeholders. Their empathy and ability to build trust within communities are crucial for maintaining social cohesion and ensuring that the most vulnerable are not left behind.

However, their contributions are too often overlooked and undervalued in formal reconstruction and peacebuilding processes. It is essential that women are not only included

but are at the forefront of these initiatives, shaping the future of their communities. To achieve this, international donors and local governments must invest in women-led and women's rights organisations, provide targeted funding for women's initiatives, and establish formal mechanisms that ensure women's voices are central in all decision-making processes. Failure to do so will undermine the effectiveness and sustainability of recovery efforts, perpetuating cycles of exclusion and inequality.

The future of Gaza and Palestine cannot be separated from the pursuit of gender justice. True recovery and peacebuilding require dismantling the legal and social barriers that have historically marginalised women. This demands comprehensive legal reforms, the establishment of robust protection mechanisms, and the active participation of women in every stage of the recovery and governance process. International stakeholders must prioritise funding and support for gender-sensitive initiatives, focusing on human-centred approaches in parallel to the physical recovery and reconstruction, ensuring that women's rights are not just an afterthought but a cornerstone of the region's future. The international community, alongside local actors, must commit to a gender-just recovery that sees women not as victims, but as powerful agents of change who are essential to building a just, peaceful, and prosperous Palestine.

The failure of the international community to hold Israel accountable for its blatant violations of IHL and IHRL against Palestinian women is a collective stain on humanity. The absence of accountability not only perpetuates the cycle of violence but also sends a dangerous message that the suffering of Palestinian women is inconsequential. Urgent and decisive action is required from international legal bodies to enforce accountability measures against the Israeli government, ensuring that the rights and lives of Palestinian women are protected. This includes imposing sanctions, pursuing legal actions in international courts, and demanding that all allegations of war crimes be thoroughly investigated and prosecuted.

Recommendations

It is critical that Palestinian women take a leading role in both the Gaza post-war recovery process and the delivery of a just and durable peace for Palestinians generally. Conditions must be created, through inclusion and empowerment, to make women's voices heard. This involves the creation of formal structures and frameworks to achieve meaningful participation by women not only in the development and sharing of ideas, but in the making of decisions. The capacities of Palestinian WLOs and WROs must be further developed, including through provision of financial, technical and political support for such groups.

However, any reconstruction and recovery process which fails to recognise and address the broader legal and political context—characterised by a belligerent occupation of Palestinian territory now in its 58th year—is destined to fail. The unprecedented escalation in violence and human suffering seen in the oPt and Israel since 7 October 2023 must force a complete and immediate recalibration of the international community's approach to the 'Palestinian question'. 'Business as usual' is no longer an option.

We recommend:

1. Donors

- **Increase Funding for Gender-Sensitive Programs:** Allocate specific funds to support women-led organisations (WLOs), women's rights organisations (WROs) and initiatives focused on the empowerment and protection of Palestinian women. Ensure that funding is flexible and long-term to support sustainable recovery and peacebuilding efforts.
- **Support Legal Reforms:** Provide financial and technical support for initiatives aimed at reforming legal frameworks to protect women's rights during and after the war. This includes supporting local organisations advocating for gender justice and legal accountability and supporting the local governance systems.
- **Invest in Capacity Building:** Fund training programs for women in leadership, peacebuilding, and economic recovery to enhance their capacity to lead reconstruction efforts and participate in governance.
- **Implement Relevant and Realistic Monitoring Systems:** Donor monitoring systems should prioritise indicators that measure the actual impact of women's engagement in policy and decision-making. This requires a shift from purely quantitative measures, such as counting the number of participants, to a more qualitative approach that evaluates whether women hold positions of power and are genuinely contributing to decisions. The focus should be on asking the right questions: Are women occupying influential roles, and do they have a meaningful voice in shaping policies and strategies?
- **Assess Donor Political Will and Organisational Culture on Women's Empowerment:** Donors, like governmental entities, must critically evaluate their political will and organisational commitment to supporting Palestinian women's leadership. Without genuine leadership and a true commitment to empowering women, efforts may fall short. Donors should ask themselves a crucial question: Are we truly serious about positioning Palestinian women in powerful leadership and decision-making roles? This self-assessment is essential to ensure that their support goes beyond rhetoric and translates into meaningful action.

2. Policy Makers

- **Enforce Accountability Mechanisms:** Strengthen international legal frameworks to hold Israel accountable for gender-specific violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL). Advocate for sanctions and legal actions against those responsible for war crimes affecting women.
- **Integrate Gender Perspectives in Policy Development:** Ensure that all post-war recovery policies are developed with a gender lens, focusing on the specific needs and rights of women. This includes prioritising women's participation in peace negotiations and governance structures.
- **Promote Inclusive Governance:** Ensure that women are fully integrated into decision-making processes related to the recovery and future governance of Gaza and the West Bank. This goes beyond simply establishing quotas; it is crucial that women occupy powerful and influential positions within these quotas and other mechanisms, ensuring their participation is not just symbolic but genuinely impactful and meaningful.
- **Leverage Power Dynamics and Influence for Real Change:** Policymakers are aware of their influence over Israel, Palestinian Authority officials, and donor organisations. It is crucial to use this influence to actively reinforce women's empowerment and ensure their genuine engagement in decision-making processes. By strategically applying their power, policymakers can drive meaningful change and support the real advancement of women's roles in leadership and governance.

3. UN Agencies

- **Prioritise Reflection and Learning Moments:** UN agencies, particularly cluster leads, should urgently conduct reflection and learning activities with WLOs, WROs, NGOs, INGOs, CBOs, and community focal points from both genders. These sessions should directly inform current emergency response planning, contingency planning in case of further security escalations, and lay the groundwork for post-war recovery planning. Engaging these diverse stakeholders in reflective practices is crucial for adapting and improving ongoing efforts and preparing for the challenges ahead.
- **Strengthen Protection Services:** Enhance the capacity of local protection services to address the specific needs of women, particularly in areas such as gender-based violence (GBV), reproductive health, and mental health. Ensure that these services are accessible, culturally sensitive, and adequately resourced.
- **Support Women-Led Peacebuilding Initiatives:** Collaborate with and support women-led organisations in their efforts to lead peacebuilding and recovery processes. Facilitate platforms for women to contribute to international peace talks and policy discussions.
- **Coordinate Humanitarian Efforts:** Ensure that humanitarian responses are coordinated in a way that prioritises the safety and dignity of women. This includes ensuring that aid distribution is equitable and that women are not marginalised in the delivery of essential services.

4. Women-Led Organizations (WLOs)

- **Lead Community-Based Recovery:** Take an active role in leading community-based recovery efforts, focusing on rebuilding social structures, providing psychosocial support, and advocating for the rights of women and girls in the aftermath of conflict.
- **Advocate for Gender Justice:** Continue to advocate for gender justice, push for legal reforms, and hold perpetrators of gender-based violence accountable. Work with international partners to bring attention to the specific needs and challenges faced by women in Gaza and the West Bank.
- **Expand Networks and Partnerships:** Strengthen networks with other WLOs, WROs, INGOs, and UN agencies to build a collective voice that can influence policy and funding decisions. Collaborate on projects that address common challenges, such as GBV, economic empowerment, and legal rights.

5. International NGOs (INGOs)

- **Prioritise Gender in Program Design:** Ensure that all programs in Gaza and the West Bank are designed practically and realistically with a strong gender focus, addressing the specific needs of women and girls in areas such as healthcare, education, and economic empowerment.
- **Support Capacity Building for Local Actors:** Invest in the capacity building of local women-led organisations and other civil society actors to enable them to take on leadership roles in recovery and peacebuilding efforts. Provide technical assistance and resources to strengthen their organisational capacity.
- **Enhance Monitoring Systems:** INGOs should ensure that their monitoring and evaluation systems, as well as data collection processes, are gender-sensitive and provide analysis that addresses the gaps in the current practices and response and that they actively promote protection and gender mainstreaming. These insights should directly contribute to strengthening gender-responsive strategies and interventions.
- **Advocate for Policy Change:** Use their platforms to advocate for policy changes that promote gender equality and protect the rights of women in living in occupation, war and conflict zones. Engage in international advocacy to ensure that the voices of Palestinian women are heard, and their rights upheld.
- **Assess Protection-Centred Approach Capacity:** INGOs and UN agencies should critically evaluate their capacity and commitment to a protection-centred approach. This assessment should include an in-depth review of their planning, resources, knowledge, skills, localization efforts, and partnership strategies to identify gaps that hinder active participation and engagement of women. Based on these findings, they should develop and implement action plans to enhance their effectiveness in promoting women's involvement and protection in all aspects of their work.

Testimonies

Testimony 1: Arwa

Arwa, a 32-year-old mother of six (four boys and two girls), lived in Abasan, east of Khan Younis. Her ordeal as a displaced person began in November 2023, where she faced repeated forced displacements, overcrowded shelters, and a severe lack of services, which led to health and environmental issues and a loss of privacy. Multiple families were forced to share a single room, with inadequate and unhygienic bathroom facilities, and a scarcity of hygiene materials and cleaning supplies.

Arwa's greatest challenge during the war occurred on January 28, 2024, when she gave birth to her youngest daughter under dire conditions. She delivered her baby in an UNRWA shelter, where the medical teams were unable to reach her due to the Israeli occupation forces besieging the school-shelter. When she went into labour, a displaced midwife in the shelter stepped in to assist with the delivery, despite the absence of medical facilities. Volunteers did their best to provide some basic supplies and pain relief.

Arwa had never anticipated going into labour under such extreme conditions, especially given her diabetes. Every moment of her labour was filled with fear, as she faced the constant threat of an Israeli invasion of the shelter, with tanks surrounding the school and drones hovering overhead. She gave birth in the freezing January winter, with no access to healthcare supplies or proper clothing for herself or her newborn. She had to rely on other displaced mothers to provide clothing for her baby. Unable to receive any medical tests or services, her baby received the first vaccination only after 18 days, once they managed to leave the shelter and reach Mawasi, west of Khan Younis.

Like many pregnant and breastfeeding mothers in Gaza, Arwa suffers from a lack of health services, medical care, and personal care products. Due to the unavailability and high cost of sanitary pads, she resorted to using pieces of worn cloth during her postpartum period. The situation for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, as well as newborns, is catastrophic, with a severe lack of regular health check-ups, nutritious food, supplements, infant formula, and diapers. Arwa has been forced to use adult diapers for her baby, leading to skin problems like rashes and allergies.

Despite these hardships, Arwa remains hopeful about Gaza's future. She believes in the resilience of her community and its ability to rebuild through youth-led initiatives focused on environmental, economic, psychological, and social recovery. She witnessed this sense of cohesion and solidarity in the shelter during her childbirth experience.

Arwa is eagerly awaiting the announcement of a truce and ceasefire so she can return to her partially destroyed home. However, she remains psychologically scarred by the destruction of many familiar places in her neighbourhood and the death of relatives and neighbours. Additionally, her area still requires extensive rubble removal and infrastructure repair, including sewage systems, electricity, water networks, public roads, internet, and alternative energy sources, as well as the establishment of essential public services like education, healthcare, and municipal support.

For Arwa, the greatest desire is to take a deep breath and smell the clean air of her city once again, far from the tents with their air tainted by the smells of sweat, smoke, dust, and the garbage piled up at the entrances of the camps and shelters.

Om Ali, a 60-year-old resident of Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, once lived a comfortable and prosperous life with her husband, children, and grandchildren. Her husband was the primary provider for the family, allowing her to enjoy a life free from the burdens of livelihood. However, everything changed on October 17, 2023, when her home was bombed by Israeli occupation forces without warning. The bombing stole the lives of her husband, her son, two daughters-in-law, two grandsons, and a granddaughter. Another son was severely injured in his legs and is still awaiting surgery, pending the opening of Rafah crossing. One of her daughters was also injured and is currently receiving treatment outside Gaza. Tragically, two months later, another son was killed when he was walking back after an airstrike hit a nearby house, leaving behind two young children.

Om Ali's life has drastically changed. Once surrounded by her children, grandchildren, and their spouses who helped with household chores and filled her days with joy, she now faces overwhelming loneliness and responsibility. She reflects on the past, saying, **"They filled my life with joy, our life was sweet and comfortable, and my children were content."** Life was once easy and comfortable, with markets nearby and all essential services, including health and education, readily available. Household tasks were simple with the help of electricity, using appliances like an electric mixer and washing machine, and bakeries were operational. Now, without electricity, every task has become a burden, requiring time, effort, and money. Preparing food over an open fire has become physically and mentally exhausting for her, as she must gather and purchase wood, taking up space and energy she does not have.

The increased responsibilities weigh heavily on Om Ali, as she now cares for her young, orphaned grandchildren. She describes the long distances she must walk with them to fetch water, navigating unpaved and difficult roads. Despite her grief and exhaustion, the love for her grandchildren and the moral and psychological support from her surviving children keep her going. The most devastating aspect of the war for Om Ali was losing eight family members—her husband, sons, and grandchildren—and being displaced three times, moving from one town to another, each time more exhausting than the last. Her grandchildren have been deeply affected, suffering from bedwetting due to fear and psychological trauma. Om Ali longs for her home, her neighbours, and the memories of her life before the war. She eagerly awaits the ceasefire so she can return to the remnants of her house and relive those cherished memories, despite knowing that her home is no longer standing. She passionately declares, **"I will run to my house, I will run to my place. Yes, there's no house, but I will go to the house, to my place, to my memories, and to the life I lived, even though there's no life. I won't see it, but I want to go. I swear I would go right now if I could."** Om Ali is determined to remove the rubble and build a tent on the remains of her house. Her greatest fear is the lack of infrastructure and suitable shelter for her and her family, especially her grandchildren. She worries about whether health and educational services will be available in the future. Although she feels overwhelmed by the prospect of raising, educating, and caring for her grandchildren at her age, she is resolved to try her best.

Om Ali is committed to rebuilding her home as the first step in helping her grandchildren develop their personalities, through education and guidance, and restoring some of the comforts they once knew. She is determined to find a way to generate income to support herself and her family. However, before she can embark on this journey, she needs psychological and moral support to continue caring for her grandchildren. She also requires financial assistance to start an income-generating activity for herself and her son, to cover her health needs as a former cancer patient, and to provide for her orphaned grandchildren. Despite the immense challenges, Om Ali sees a promising future for Gaza, driven by the efforts of its educated youth and the support of Arab and regional countries.

Raja, a 36-year-old resident of Gaza City and a Bachelor of Education graduate, was married and a mother of four children. Before the war on Gaza began on October 7, 2023, she led a stable life, working in development and self-improvement, and organising numerous training courses. Her children were always enrolled in sports programs like football and kung fu, ensuring they had a well-rounded upbringing. However, this life was shattered when her rented home in the Al-Nasr neighbourhood of Gaza City was bombed on the third day of the war. This marked the beginning of a harsh journey of forced displacement and suffering, as Raja and her family were forced to move within Gaza City more than seven times.

As the siege on Gaza City and the north intensified, Raja decided to move her family to the south, prioritising her children's safety, especially after the Israeli occupation army announced the evacuation of western Gaza City through a so-called "safe humanitarian corridor" (Netsarim junction area). When the Israeli army began invading Rafah, Raja and her husband decided to move once more, this time to Mawasi in Khan Younis. They prepared to leave, but the high number of displaced people, lack of transportation, and the steep cost of transport trucks made it impossible. Despite her tireless efforts to find someone to help, Raja and her husband had to postpone their departure, hoping the streets would be less crowded the next day.

On the night of June 7, 2024, heavy shelling targeted the Egyptian border strip. Raja, desperate for safety, raised a white flag on her tent, signalling their plea for peace. They decided to leave at dawn, but Israeli tank bullets shattered their plans. The tanks invaded a neighbouring tent, crushing the bodies of innocent children beneath them. Raja, filled with horror, awaited the same fate for her and her family. Her husband, Akram, threw himself over their three children, Mohammed, Ahmed, and Ibrahim, sacrificing himself in a desperate attempt to protect them. The tank tore his body apart, severing his hands and burying him under its tracks. Despite his efforts, Raja still faced the unbearable loss of her son Mohammed, her firstborn, who died instantly. As she lay injured, Raja screamed for help, yearning to hold her children one last time.

Minutes later, Raja was surprised to see her son Ibrahim emerge from the wreckage, seeking refuge in her arms after seeing his father's severe injuries. Akram, with his dying breaths, spoke to Raja, offering farewell words. Fearing for their lives as the tank returned, Raja crawled to safety, carrying Ibrahim and Sana. She encountered other surviving women and begged them to take her children to the nearest aid station. Despite being shot in the arm by an Israeli sniper, she continued to crawl for over 700 metres until she reached Al-Rashid Street, where civilians helped transfer her to the Red Cross hospital.

Raja reflects bitterly on the futility of international human rights and protection laws in Gaza, noting that **"the right to life, human rights, and protection laws were ineffective."** She remembers how her children went hungry that day, too afraid to eat or drink anything for fear of needing to leave the tent at night.

Despite the overwhelming trauma, Raja is determined to continue living and recover for the sake of her two surviving children. She plans to rebuild their lives, resuming her work as a trainer in development and self-improvement. Raja believes that the pain and suffering she and her children endured will drive her to launch initiatives to protect children and women survivors of war and violence. Raja eagerly awaits the ceasefire announcement so she can return to the place where their tent once stood and search for the remains of her husband and children, Mohammed and Ahmed, to give them a proper burial. She is acutely aware of the lack of government, humanitarian, and relief efforts in Gaza, lamenting the absence of systematic efforts to evacuate the wounded, the dead, and the survivors trapped in the cycle of violence.

Sundus, a 25-year-old resident of Gaza City, holds a Bachelor of Arts in English and worked as a research assistant at Pal Think. Her life was once vibrant, filled with cultural activities, including membership in a debate club and participation in cultural evenings. Now, Sundus spends most of her time at home, reading books and writing stories and blogs that document the war's events for a theatrical production planned in Britain.

Living alone with her sister, as the rest of her family has moved to the south, Sundus is now entirely responsible for the household. She manages essential tasks such as **“shopping, heavy household chores, and planning how to manage expenses,”** all while grappling with the immense difficulty of life and responsibility during the war. Her life has changed drastically, both externally and internally. She reflects, **“Even my way of thinking has changed.”** Before the war, Sundus was organised, with clear short-term and long-term plans, but now she feels as though life is on hold, sustained only by memories, with the future appearing distant and uncertain.

Despite these challenges, Sundus draws strength from the hope within her, believing that **“nothing lasts forever.”** This hope, coupled with her dreams and visions of the future, motivates her to keep going. She also finds support in her sister, who remains a source of strength for her.

However, Sundus endured profound trauma during the war. The killing of five of her sister's children has deeply affected her family, leaving her sister, once strong, in a state of severe sadness, distraction, and a loss of focus. Another harrowing experience was when Sundus and her sister went to Al-Shifa Hospital to assist friends who had been besieged by the Israeli army. They arrived shortly after the army's withdrawal, witnessing unimaginable horrors — bodies scattered everywhere, some decomposing, clothes soaked in blood, and buildings reduced to rubble.

Looking to the future, Sundus is determined to recover from the war and its calamities. She envisions herself walking long distances, even over rubble and destruction, as long as it's in freedom and safety. She plans to reconnect with her friends and eventually continue her academic studies. However, she is also acutely aware of the challenges that lie ahead. The destruction of infrastructure and the lack of sanitation concern her deeply, as she fears the spread of epidemics and diseases. She is trying to maintain her health through nutritional supplements, given the scarcity of healthy food. Sundus also fears the ongoing chaos in Gaza, knowing that reconstruction will take a long time. The absence of deterrents and protection laws makes her afraid to walk in the streets, as the psychological toll of the war has profoundly changed people's behaviour.

Sundus believes she can contribute to community recovery by participating in youth initiatives, particularly in the field of children's education. She hopes to offer educational workshops and awareness campaigns for marginalised women, noting that **“all women need such workshops now.”** The support she needs most is psychological. She believes she will recover by engaging in the community, meeting friends, and discussing books or events.

Sundus's view of Gaza's future is filled with fear. She sees immense destruction and predicts that reconstruction will take many years. The collapse of the educational sector, in particular, worries her, as it will create a significant gap in the community. She notes that the war has profoundly impacted people's psyches, changing them for the worse and straining social relationships, which have deteriorated due to the stress of close quarters and constant conflict. While Sundus believes the economy can be revived with effort, she recognizes that repairing social relationships will require significant time and effort. Despite these fears, she hopes for recovery to prevent negative phenomena from taking root in the community.

Testimony 5: Samira

Samira, a resilient displaced woman from Juhor al-Dik, now leads Al-Istiqama Camp and serves as the head of the social protection group affiliated with the Palestinian Center for Human Rights. A mother who tragically lost two children, Samira has transformed her grief into a powerful force for good. As a project coordinator, she tirelessly advocates for the needs of displaced families, coordinating with local and international organisations to secure essential services. Through her leadership, a medical clinic now operates twice a week in the camp, offering vital healthcare. She has also spearheaded psychological stress-release workshops for women and children, and successfully organised the distribution of food parcels, tents, and clothing to those in need.

Samira's dedication didn't stop there. She launched an educational initiative called "A School, Not a Teaching Tent," providing children with a proper learning environment, led by camp graduates. Despite losing her home and enduring immense personal loss, she sought refuge in Al-Istiqal camp, where she lived in tents and shared the hardships of her fellow displaced people. Committed to alleviating their suffering, she mobilised support from local associations, institutions, and key local figures, who helped provide emergency food, water, and tents.

Her relentless efforts caught the attention of international bodies. She successfully invited Muhannad Al-Hadi, head of the Palestinian file at the United Nations, to visit the camp on his first day working on the Gaza file. Currently, Samira is leading a \$5,000 initiative to install solar lighting in the camp, a project that will bring much-needed light and safety to the residents.

Samira considers herself a survivor and a role model for women who actively contribute to their communities in times of crisis. Despite facing significant challenges as a woman, she has successfully entered the world of humanitarian work and continues to make a profound impact under the most difficult circumstances. She believes that women, having endured so much in the war, will rise to lead and shape a secure future. She calls on the local community and both local and international institutions to prioritise and support women in this crucial role.

End Notes

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- 37 Ibid.
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