



مركز شؤون المرأة - غزة
Women's Affairs Center - Gaza



UNDP/PAPP Gaza Insights Series

Impact of the 2023 Gaza War on Displaced Women in the Gaza Strip



Summary Report

April 2024

This Executive Summary provides an overview of key findings from a rapid analysis carried out by the **Women's Affairs Center (WAC)** with the support of **UNDP's Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People (PAPP)** as part of its Gaza Insights series, in collaboration with **UN Women** and with technical review and inputs from **UNFPA**.

The Gaza Insights series is a **UNDP/PAPP initiative**, working in **close collaboration with local, international, and UN partners** to gain insights and perspectives on different aspects of the situation in Gaza, to **inform immediate and medium-term responses** on the ground.

The Gaza Insights are developed through various qualitative and quantitative research methods that can be applied within the current security conditions and access limitations in Gaza, which do not allow for large samples or validation of information.

BACKGROUND

The ongoing war in the Gaza Strip has resulted in a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented scale, with the entire population of over 2.2 million people needing urgent assistance, now more than ever. Between 7 October 2023 and 21 March 2024, at least 31,988 Palestinians have been killed in the Gaza Strip – with around 70% being women and children. Over 74,188 more were injured¹, while thousands more are still missing under the rubble. Since the beginning of the war, at least 1.7 million people (i.e., more than 75% of Gaza’s population) have been forced to flee their homes and have become internally displaced, including many families being displaced multiple times in search for safety². Homes, healthcare facilities, schools, electricity and water networks, and other critical infrastructure have been damaged and whole neighbourhoods have been destroyed, while the humanitarian aid currently being allowed into Gaza represents only a “drop in the ocean” compared to the enormous needs on the ground.

The ongoing war constitutes a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented proportions, which has been severely affecting all Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip – women and men, girls and boys. Nevertheless, the most vulnerable civilians – including displaced women, children, persons with disabilities and the elderly - are further faced with compounded layers of challenges and vulnerabilities. Thus, shedding light on the emerging and most pressing needs amongst the most vulnerable groups is critical to ensure the ongoing humanitarian response, as well as the post-war early recovery efforts, leave no one behind.

Against this backdrop, the Women’s Affairs Center (WAC) - with the support of UNDP’s Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People and technical review and inputs from UN Women and UNFPA – has carried out a rapid analysis focused on women internally displaced in the southern Gaza Strip. The rapid analysis aimed to shed light and gain insights on the immediate impact of the war on displaced women’s living conditions in the Rafah governorate, focusing on a set of key socio-economic indicators (including *inter alia* livelihoods and access to shelter, protection, healthcare), to identify the most urgent needs to inform programmatic response. A mix of quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis tools were deployed as part of this participatory research effort. These included a survey filled out by a total of 716 women³ displaced in the Rafah governorate, 12 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), five focus group discussions and five case studies, as well as field participant observation and literature review.

KEY FINDINGS⁴

Places and Experiences of Displacement

Forced displacement and overcrowding in the Rafah governorate is further compounded by the insufficient availability of decent shelter solutions, thus resulting in surging waves of people having no other option than to set up tents and makeshift camps. Almost **37%** of surveyed women are currently **living in tents on the streets and in empty areas**, while another **31%** are displaced in overcrowded **UNRWA schools**. Almost 8% of surveyed women are displaced in government schools and over 5% are sheltering in the facilities of civil society organizations and other entities. Almost 15% of surveyed women are seeking shelter in relatives’ homes, while 2% are staying with the husband’s family. Only a small percentage (2%) of surveyed women are displaced in houses / shops / rooms that they are renting.

Whether people are seeking refuge in UNRWA shelters, makeshift camps or relatives’ homes, overcrowding is a common feature of forced displacement in the Rafah governorate, with gendered consequences and

1 OCHA. Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel – reported impact | Day 166. Available at: <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-day-166>

2 Ibid.

3 Most survey respondents were displaced from Gaza governorate (45.9%), followed by those displaced from North Gaza (26.9%), Khan Younis (15.4%), Middle Area (5.4%) and Rafah (6.4%). Most survey respondents are married (82.7%) and the overwhelming majority of survey respondents (83%) live in families with children under 18 years of age. Women with disabilities represent 3.6% of survey respondents, while an additional 31.7% of them suffers from chronic diseases. Around 52% of survey respondents had their homes completely destroyed, while another 40% had their homes partially damaged.

4 Figures provided across this section have been rounded (e.g., a 36.8% has been referred to as “almost 38%”).

risks in terms of privacy, dignity and personal safety. About **94%** of surveyed women reported that they **do not have privacy or feel safe** in their respective places of displacement.

Overcrowding in the different displacement sites, coupled with the lack of essential basic services (including clean water, electricity, food, and healthcare), further exacerbate the already dire living conditions that displaced women are faced with. This has an impact not only on women's privacy and safety (and perceptions thereof), but also on their sense of dignity, as well as increasing risk of sexual and gender-based violence.

“The whole school [shelter] knows that I am going to take a shower.”

Amani, a displaced woman in Rafah

Bereavement

The ongoing war has resulted in an unprecedented loss of human lives. As the war continues and the death toll increases, civilians in the Gaza Strip are not only faced with the daily struggle for survival, but also with the emotional impact of losing loved ones. **More than half of surveyed women (51%) have lost at least a family member** during the war, and 6% of surveyed women have lost their husbands. Inevitably, bereavement and grief over losing loved ones further compound the mental health impact of the war – already marked by protracted trauma, as the war continues to rage on.

“Monday, November 6 at twelve-thirty at night, I woke up to rubble, destruction, and smoke. I thought I was dreaming. I woke up to a painful reality. [...] I lost my sister and her children, and the rest of my family members were injured.”

Suhair, displaced woman in Rafah

Disrupted Livelihoods

Almost two third of surveyed women (around 68%) already had no income prior to the onset of the war. Amongst those displaced women who did have an income, almost **81% lost their livelihood** because of the war. Furthermore, around 30% of surveyed women are reportedly the sole breadwinner within their respective families. As the war continues, livelihoods are further disrupted, humanitarian aid continues to face major barriers, and the local market must cope with shortages of basic commodities coupled with increasing prices. Against this backdrop, a striking **95%** of displaced women who participated in the survey stated that they **do not have enough money to meet the basic needs** of themselves and their families.

“I lost my only source of income in the war, and I was unable to provide the necessities of life for my family, including food, drink, clothes, and blankets. We were displaced from our home and did not take anything with us, and I was unable to buy our necessities because there was not enough money.”

Jamalat, displaced woman in Rafah

Essential Documents

Half of surveyed women (52%) were able to bring along essential personal documents for themselves and their families, such as identity cards, passports, birth certificates, property ownership documents. About 24% of surveyed women were able to keep only their own personal documents, and another 11% managed to keep essential documents for their family members – but not their own personal documents. Around 13% of women participants were unable to bring any kind of personal documents – whether their own or their family members' ones. Lack of essential personal and/or family documents increases women's vulnerability and represents an impediment to their access to aid and essential services available.

Personal and Menstrual Hygiene

Almost **96%** of displaced women participating in the survey stated they **have not been able to meet their basic personal hygiene needs**. As lack of access to clean water continues to severely affect the over 2.2 million people in the Gaza Strip, there are significant consequences in terms of personal hygiene, with resulting negative impact not only in terms of health, but also on people's dignity. When asked about the frequency at which they were able to take a shower, over **38%** of surveyed women reported they have been **showering only once every three weeks or more**. Another **34%** of displaced women participating in the survey stated they have been able to take **a shower once every two weeks**, while **24%** have been able to shower **once per week**. Only the remaining 3% and 1% of surveyed women have been able to take a shower once every three days and every day, respectively.

Most displaced women in Rafah are also unable to meet their menstrual hygiene needs. When asked about the main challenges in addressing their menstrual hygiene needs, around **94%** stated that the **lack of access to clean water** represents a key challenge. Around **96%** of surveyed women also reported **inability to purchase menstrual hygiene supplies due to lack of money** as a critical barrier. Almost **89%** of women participating in the survey also indicated the **limited access to toilets** as a key issue, as well as **shortage of menstrual hygiene supplies in stores/markets** (83%) and their inability to move around and buy supplies because of **continued air and artillery bombardment** (73%).

“Bathing is the most difficult challenge for me. Every two weeks I heat water on firewood. We ask the people in the tent to go out to [be able to] shower, me and my daughters.”

Ola, displaced woman in Rafah

Mental Health

As the war continues to rage on, with all its resulting massive destruction, displacement and death, the humanitarian catastrophe in the Gaza Strip is inevitably coupled with a mental health crisis, as all civilians – women and men, girls and boys, are confronted with extreme loss, suffering, fear and inhumane living conditions, all leading to deep and lasting trauma. Not surprisingly, displaced women in Rafah have been experiencing **all sorts of negative feelings and emotional distress**, including stress and anxiety, restlessness, sadness and despair, intense fear, as well as hopelessness. When asked about negative emotional states experienced since the beginning of the war, women participating in the survey confirmed they have been coping with multiple negative feelings, in particular the following:

Emotional state	Percentage (of surveyed women reportedly experiencing such feeling/condition)
Fear, anxiety and panic attacks	99%
Inability to sleep	98%
Despair and frustration	96%
Anger	96%
Loss of appetite	95%
Feeling numb	85%

“I feel emotionally dulled. I feel like I don't feel anything.”

Iman, displaced woman in Rafah

When discussing with displaced women about their ways of dealing with their feelings and the harsh conditions faced since the onset of the war, praying, reading the Quran and practicing other religious rituals appeared to be a common positive coping mechanism. Nevertheless, some women also reported resorting to painkillers and sedative drugs, as well as failing to control their temper and behaving

extremely nervously with others, including their children. Losing control of their emotions, including through intense and constant crying, was also experienced by some women.

Protection

All displaced civilians in the Gaza Strip - women and girls, men and boys - search for safety in overcrowded shelters and makeshift camps, amidst the rubble in the streets and at relatives' homes, looking for places that might be safe from airstrikes. However, no place and no one is safe in Gaza. As the war continues, civilians suffer from an almost complete erosion of individual and collective adaptation and coping mechanisms. With the prolonged exposure to violence and inhumane living conditions, tensions are reportedly increasing within families and communities – particularly in overcrowded shelters and makeshift camps - which in turn raises increasing concerns about gender-related protection risks, including gender-based violence (GBV)⁵. Due to the massive destruction and the continued warfare, there is very limited to no capacity to provide GBV response services in the Gaza Strip, including lack of safe havens for GBV survivors as the two shelters previously operating have been destroyed. The absence of any GBV protection mechanism and services further exacerbates the vulnerability of women and girls, and it is closely linked with the expected increase in sexual and gender-based violence as the war continues. Throughout the participant/field observation carried out throughout this rapid analysis, a few women reported they had been exposed to violence by their husbands and/or relatives (including verbal, psychological and physical violence) during the war, while others spoke of increased tensions and quarrels between husbands and amongst families.

Coping Mechanisms and Urgent Needs

As the war continues, with the resulting forced displacement, destruction and harsh living conditions, most displaced women in Rafah have been forced to resort to a variety of coping mechanisms. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Resorting to traditional, time-consuming methods when performing main household chores, such as using firewood and charcoal for cooking, as well as clay ovens.
- Reducing the amount of food and water consumed, and even fasting for several days in a row, to make whatever amount of food and water available last longer to feed their families. It is relevant to highlight that this further exacerbates malnutrition amongst pregnant and lactating women, children, and elderly, with ensuing health complications.
- Minimizing the amount of water used for domestic purposes (e.g., for washing cooking utensils), as well as for personal hygiene, which poses significant health risks.
- Selling food and non-food items received in humanitarian aid parcels, in order to get money needed to secure other items that their families may need (e.g., hygiene supplies, clothes, medicines).
- Using cloth as an alternative to feminine pads during menstruation, as well as an alternative to diapers for their babies. This has negative consequences not only for women's dignity, but it can also lead to significant health risks, including reproductive and urinary tract infections.
- Wearing prayer clothes around the clock, as well as borrowing clothes from others and/or buying used clothes.
- Many women with chronic diseases have been forced to significantly reduce the number of times per day they take their prescribed medications, so that they would last longer. This raises serious concerns in terms of health risks and complications.

When asked about their most urgent and pressing needs, displaced women participating in the survey prioritized the following:

Priority Need	Percentage <small>(of surveyed women who indicated this need as urgent/priority)</small>
Money/cash	97%
Food	95%
Clothes	93%
Bed linen and blankets	91%
Safe and decent shelter	90%
Protection and safety	89%
Personal hygiene items	88%
Medication and treatment	86%
Water	82%
Privacy	81%

It is evident that money/cash is an urgent need, which would allow crisis-affected women not only to meet immediate needs of themselves and their families, but would also empower them to make choices aligned to their priorities. Food also emerges as an extremely urgent need, as the entire population in the Gaza Strip faces high levels of acute food insecurity and famine is imminent⁶. Acute food insecurity and malnutrition amongst pregnant and lactating women has severe and lasting impacts on the health of mothers and their unborn and/or newborn children, as well as on the ability of lactating mothers to adequately breast-feed their children. Safe and decent shelter is also a critical need, while the need for protection, privacy and safety expressed by displaced women highlights and is linked to vulnerability to gender-based violence and exploitation. Furthermore, the lack of personal hygiene items, especially menstrual hygiene supplies, accompanied by the lack of clean water and privacy, cannot be underestimated. Overall, these priority needs will not be sufficiently and adequately addressed sufficiently unless there is an end to the war.

“We need an immediate and permanent ceasefire. The war, forced displacement and starvation of the Palestinian people in Gaza must stop now.”

Amal Syam, Gazan woman and Director of Women’s Affairs Center (WAC) in Gaza

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overarching Recommendations

- Continue advocating for an **immediate humanitarian ceasefire**, for the **protection of civilians**, and for **safe and unimpeded humanitarian access** to allow at-scale delivery of humanitarian aid in the Gaza Strip.
- Mobilize **at-scale, flexible and multi-year funding**, to address the unprecedented scale and severity of needs on the ground, while ensuring that adequate funding is allocated to respond to women’s critical needs and mitigate their vulnerability.
- Support the **capacities of human rights and women’s rights CSOs** to document and demand accountability - through the appropriate legal mechanisms - for the **rights violations** perpetrated against women and girls during the war, including sexual and gender-based violence.
- Further strengthen **evidence-based coordination** to ensure that ongoing humanitarian response, as well as future early recovery efforts, address **gendered needs** of women and men, girls and boys, and – at a bare minimum – do not exacerbate pre-existing gender inequalities.

⁶ IPC Global Initiative – Special Brief. 18 March 2024. Available at: <https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-website/alerts-archive/issue-97/en/>

- Take necessary measures to ensure that the ongoing humanitarian assistance, as well as future early recovery efforts, **reach the most vulnerable and at-risk women**, including women with disabilities, pregnant and lactating women, widowers, and survivors of GBV.
- Take necessary measures to **restore and sustain provision of gender-responsive essential services** – including emergency maternal, sexual and reproductive healthcare - in and around shelters and displacement areas, with targeted efforts for facilitating women’s safe and effective access to such services.
- Support the capacities of local civil society organisations (CSOs) – in particular, **women’s organisations** - to provide **gender-responsive humanitarian aid** to displaced women and girls, including menstrual hygiene supplies, food and cash assistance, as well as to meaningfully engage in future early recovery efforts.

Sector-Specific Recommendations

- Enhancing **coordination** and scaling-up **joint actions** between relevant local CSOs and international non-governmental organizations, as well as UN agencies and other humanitarian actors, to restore and sustain the provision of **GBV response services**.
- Integrate and scale-up provision of **gender-responsive Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS)**, including by supporting the capacities of local women’s organisations to implement such interventions at-scale in and around displacement sites.
- Prepare for **decent transitional shelter solutions** to be deployed as soon as possible and scaled-up in early recovery phase, prioritizing **women-headed households** – to ensure women’s access to shelter solutions that restore privacy, safety and dignity.
- Scale up **gender-responsive cash assistance and livelihood restoration**, to address financial insecurity and enable women to meet their essential needs, prioritizing the most vulnerable women (e.g., widowers with no income). Cash assistance and livelihood support should be coupled with tailored solutions for managing childcare responsibilities (e.g., childcare solutions integrated in cash for work schemes).
- Provide **safe spaces for women** to be able to access relevant/available support services to **retrieve essential documents** for themselves and/or their families (e.g., IDs, birth certificates, property documentation).
- Support restoration of **gender-responsive legal aid** services and alternative dispute resolution, including with regards to inheritance and land rights.