



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



Research Paper
The Impact of the October 2023 War on Bereaved
Women in the Gaza Strip
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The Impact of the October 2023 War on Bereaved Women in the Gaza Strip Women's Affairs Center Gaza - June 2024

Introduction:

The relentless genocidal war on the Gaza Strip, ongoing since October 7, 2023, has had devastating bearings, particularly on women. Many have endured bereavement due to the loss of their husbands, children, brothers, or even their entire families, not to mention the destruction of their homes, personal belongings, and all sources of security and safety. Women are considered the most disproportionately affected segments of the society in times of war and armed conflict, a reality that has been starkly evident during the ongoing genocide against the Gaza Strip, which even prior to the war, was already grappling with dire economic and social conditions due to the internal division and the Israeli siege imposed since 2006. As death tolls continue to rise due to the repeated massacres committed by Israel, the scale of the devastation is staggering. As of mid-October 2024, there have been (3,695) documented massacres, resulting in (42,438) deaths, including (11,585) women and (17,029) children, and over (99,013) injured people, while around (10,000) persons remain missing under the rubble. Women and children constitute 69% of the casualties.¹

Israel's actions represent unprecedented war crimes and violations of international humanitarian law, causing more suffering for bereaved women, who are now undergoing multi-dimensional challenges as Israel continues to disregard all international treaties and conventions that mandate the protection of women during armed conflicts.

This paper aimed to highlight the impact of the current war on bereaved women, to ensure effective and equitable humanitarian interventions for this particularly vulnerable group, taking into consideration the unique circumstances and pressing needs of these women, who remain among the most impoverished and marginalized as a result of the genocide.

In a statement entitled, "Investing in Women to Accelerate Progress" marking the situation of Palestinian women on International Women's Day eve, March 8, 2024, Dr. Ola Awad, Head of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), highlighted that women comprise 49% of the total population in Palestine and that by mid-2024, the number of women amounted to (2.76) million, with (1.63) million residing in the West Bank and (1.13) million in the Gaza strip.

Since the onset of the Israeli genocide on the Gaza Strip on October 7, 2023, up to the release of the statement, women and children constitute 70% of the missing persons in the Gaza Strip, totaling (7,000) individuals. Reports from Gaza indicated that nearly (2) million persons have been forcibly displaced, 50% of whom are women. Also, health data reveals that pregnant women are encountering severe challenges, with approximately (60,000) pregnancies in the Strip and an average of (180) births occurring daily.

1. Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, October 20, 2024. Available at: https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/lang__en/1405/Default.aspx

An estimated 15% of these women are at high risk of experiencing pregnancy and childbirth complications that are challenging to manage due to inadequate medical care. These circumstances indicate a high possibility of increased deliveries under unsafe health conditions, constituting a grave violation of women's rights and endangering the health and lives of both mothers and newborns. Women in the Gaza Strip are facing tragic conditions during their pregnancies and childbirth, struggling to access healthcare facilities and prenatal care services due to shortages in essential medical supplies and medications. Ambulances are difficult to deploy, hospitals are grappling with severe shortages of supplies and fuel, and (85) hospitals and healthcare centers have halted their services; all these factors have contributed to a rise in miscarriages and maternal deaths during childbirth rates. According to CARE International, the number of premature births has increased by nearly one-third due to factors such as stress and trauma, with some women undergoing miscarriages due to fear, resulting in a 300% increase in miscarriage cases. Women, particularly bereaved women, have been significantly affected by the persistent war on the Gaza Strip, whereas all women have suffered from food insecurity, which has, in turn, exposed them to major health risks. Of the two million displaced persons in the Gaza Strip, one million are women. In addition to facing death, arrests, injury, loss, and profound psychological trauma resulting from bereavement, these women have endured severe hardships that compound their suffering.

Similar to other marginalized groups, they have undergone intolerable, inhumane living conditions in displacement camps and shelters which are overcrowded and lack basic essential services such as electricity, drinking water, and adequate sanitation facilities.

Bereaved women are living in tents that have failed to shield them from the extreme weather conditions, including the intense heat of summer and the harsh cold of winter. They have also been disproportionately affected by poverty, unemployment, deteriorating economic conditions, and malnutrition, compared to their male counterparts. They have endured prolonged waiting periods in adverse conditions, often exposed to the scorching sun or rain while queuing for essential resources such as water, food, medicine, and humanitarian assistance. Additionally, they have faced significant hazards from open flames and burning wood used for cooking. Bereaved women are subjected to various forms of violence, extreme psychological pressures, and major health issues, including respiratory and dermatological diseases. These health problems have arisen from inadequate access to medication, poor living conditions in tents and shelters, a lack of public sanitation, and shortages of health and hygiene supplies.

A report published by the UN Women highlighted the alarming toll of the ongoing genocide, noting that an average of (63) women are killed daily, (37) of whom are mothers. This not only destroys families but also reduces the protection for their children.

The report also indicated that more than 84% of women, that is around (4) out of (5) women, have reported that their families now receive half or less of the food they used to consume before the war. Mothers and women are particularly responsible for securing food for their households, yet they are the last to eat and consume the least amounts of food. Moreover, approximately 95% of mothers skip at least one meal to ensure their children are fed, as the entire population of Gaza, approximately 2.3 million people, is now facing unparalleled levels of food insecurity.

The report further noted that 87% of women, nearly (9) out of (10) women, experience greater difficulty accessing food compared to men; some women have resorted to extreme coping strategies, such as searching for food in the rubble of destroyed buildings or scavenging through trash bins. These statistics underscored the disproportionate impact of the genocide on women, effectively positioning them as primary victims within a broader strategy of collective punitive measures imposed on the population of the Gaza Strip.

This paper examined the multi-layered implications of the ongoing war on bereaved women, highlighting the need for targeted, equitable interventions to address their specific needs.

The analysis underscored the importance of ensuring that these interventions are both effective and accessible for women who have become among the most marginalized and impoverished populations due to the war.

Paper Objectives:

- 1- Identifying the most prominent consequences of the genocide on bereaved women through legal, economic, health, social, and psychological lenses.
- 2- Evaluating the level of responsiveness of service providers to the specific needs of these women during the war.
- 3- Formulating a set of recommendations to improve the overall conditions of these women.

Paper Methodology:

The researcher utilized a descriptive-analytical approach, which aims to describe any given phenomenon by collecting and analyzing all related information. In addition, qualitative data collection methods were employed to engage stakeholders and officials, aiming to obtain in-depth insights that can inform effective, realistic, and applicable recommendations.

The qualitative data collection methods included:

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): (2) FGDs were conducted with bereaved women who have been directly impacted by the war in the Gaza Strip, and (1) FGD was held with service providers from civil society organizations (CSOs) who work with women in general, and bereaved women in particular.

In-depth Individual Interviews: (5) in-depth interviews were conducted with experts across various fields, including psychologists, women's rights activists, and providers of legal and psychosocial support services, as well as experts on gender-based violence (GBV) issues.

Paper Findings: Implications and Needs:

Since October 7, the Israeli occupation has indiscriminately targeted all residents of the Gaza Strip, including women, children, and the elderly, disregarding all international norms, treaties, and humanitarian and ethical classifications. This has led to an escalation of acts of violence, forced displacement, and the perpetuation of collective massacres, not to mention the obstruction of humanitarian aid to civilians, leading to a state of chaos and severe humanitarian need. Research indicated that bereaved women constitute one of the most vulnerable populations during this genocidal war, as they have been deprived of their fundamental right to a dignified life. In addition, their responsibilities have intensified amid escalating needs and worsening humanitarian conditions in the Gaza Strip, further exacerbated by the absence of social protection mechanisms. These women have encountered complex psychological, social, and economic challenges, including the loss of their husbands, children, relatives, and loved ones, which intensifies their exposure to psychological trauma due to grief. Consequently, they were compelled to assume additional roles, burdens, and responsibilities toward their children, family members, and relatives. Additionally, these women have faced significant economic challenges stemming from direct bombardment and complete destruction of homes as well as loss of jobs and disruption of livelihoods due to the bombing of factories, agricultural lands, and offices of service providers, further worsening the dire economic situation of these women.

Bereaved women have consequently experienced significant psychological strains, including depression, anxiety, stress, and fear, as well as somatic symptoms such as lethargy and dyspnea, all stemming from compounded psychological and social pressures. This underscores bereaved women's elevated need for targeted psychological support.

Key Challenges Bereaved Women

Face:

- **Pain of Bereavement:** The war has profoundly impacted bereaved women, depriving them of both material and emotional support, and in most cases, stripping away their sense of purpose. The experience of bereavement in itself has been deeply excruciating and has drastically altered the trajectory of these women's lives, particularly for those who have lost the majority of their family members. These women have transitioned into a new phase of their lives, where they have abruptly become the primary caregivers and sole managers of their homes. The trauma associated with bereavement has led to significant psychological distress among affected women, mainly as the war has now extended into its tenth month. This has further eroded the social protection networks of bereaved women, especially as the extensive implications of the prolonged war on all community members have amplified personal struggles and psychological strains.

* "Following the loss of both my husband and my eldest son on the same day, I became solely responsible for my family. I was unprepared to manage the affairs of my children and meet their needs. Now, facing these responsibilities alone, I am uncertain how I will cope."²

* "When women lose their husbands, they lose their ability to provide financial and emotional support to their families."³

- **Increased Family Burdens:** Following the loss of their husbands, women have been compelled to assume complete responsibility for raising their children and managing their households, thereby increasing the pressure they face amid the extremely dire conditions in the Gaza Strip. These women have now become responsible for securing shelter, food, water, and other essential resources for their families. Reports from the United Nations indicated that 90% of the population in the Gaza Strip has been displaced, and 95% are facing food insecurity, a situation further compounded by inequitable distribution of aid.

- **Social Isolation:** In addition to grappling with insecurity, frequent displacement, limited resources, and harsh living conditions in overcrowded displacement camps and shelters, bereaved women, particularly those who have lost their husbands, have suffered from significant social isolation.

They often experience feelings of alienation, loneliness, and insecurity, aggravated by a loss of privacy due to the absence of community support. Not only have these women lost the support networks traditionally associated with their husbands, but they have also encountered societal norms and controls imposed by male relatives, who assert that, in the absence of providers, these women require additional oversight and support. Hence, new and stringent restrictions were imposed on them, limiting their mobility and ability to access aid, which in turn impeded their capacity to support their children.

* "Since I had lost my husband, I have been experiencing significant social isolation. I lack both companionship and support. My brothers have prevented me from going out because of prevailing social norms and have failed to provide for my basic needs due to current food shortages. As a result, I find myself alone today, overburdened by responsibilities."⁴

2. Interview with a 34-year-old bereaved woman who had lost her husband

3. Interview with Reem Al-Raqab, Project Manager at SOS Children's Villages

4. Interview with a bereaved woman, 27 years old.

- Health and Mental Well-Being: The October 2023 war on the Gaza Strip has had profound health repercussions on bereaved women. Many have suffered from infectious diseases, skin conditions, and respiratory illnesses due to the destruction of healthcare facilities and the closure of most hospitals and medical centers. These women have encountered substantial health challenges resulting from the limited availability of essential services; they have not received sufficient food rations or basic healthcare, thereby adversely impacting their physical well-being. These health issues align with reports of food insecurity and the destruction of health infrastructure. Access to other crucial services, including shelter, potable water, and psychosocial support, remains critically limited.

* "The challenges related to accessing essential services such as food, water, and healthcare significantly heighten our vulnerability and increase our exposure to disease."

* "Bereaved women residing in displacement camps and shelters experience a complete lack of privacy and endure dire health conditions, coupled with inadequate healthcare services. These women are often compelled to live with families they do not know, further exacerbating their lack of privacy."

Women have consistently been disproportionately affected, regardless of the type of loss experienced within society. The mental health of bereaved women has significantly deteriorated, with most of them facing compounded psychological and social pressures. They have also reported experiencing somatic symptoms such as lethargy and dyspnea, underscoring the urgent need for psychological support for this vulnerable population. While they frequently grapple with feelings of sadness and depression, they often lack sufficient opportunities to process their grief, adapt to their loss, and maintain their daily lives. Thus, they have expressed a pressing need for psychological support services to enable them to navigate through their grief and cope with their losses. The persistent anxiety resulting from the loss of their husbands, coupled with the pressures of displacement and the war, has heightened their fears of further loss. Similar to other groups of women, bereaved women have encountered significant challenges related to a lack of privacy and inadequate living conditions in shelters. These difficulties have been aggravated by the focus of people within bereaved women's circles on their own psychological burdens resulting from the war. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that approximately 20% of the population in the Gaza Strip suffers from mental health issues in light of a significant gap in mental health services. Bereaved women likely constitute a considerable percentage of these cases, given their exposure to multiple losses and tragedies.

- **Human Rights Implications:** The war has severely deprived bereaved women of their legal rights due to the destruction of courts, police systems, and judicial infrastructure. This erosion of legal support has left bereaved women vulnerable to exploitation, rights violations, and extortion, as well as the confiscation of their financial resources and entitlements owing to the near-total absence of the rule of law, lack of support, restrictions imposed by customs and traditions, as well as interference in their personal affairs, often by relatives or their late husbands' families exercising control over significant aspects of their lives. Research revealed that approximately 70% of bereaved women lack awareness of their legal rights and concepts related to GBV.

* "The disruption of court functions as well as the absence of justice and police forces have led to an increase in incidents of violence and rights violations, resulting in the exploitation of women. Consequently, the current situation in the Gaza Strip reflects a lack of accountability and oversight."⁵

- **Difficult Economic Conditions:** Bereaved women have faced substantial economic challenges since the onset of the war that was waged on October 7, 2023, due to direct bombardment, total destruction of homes, loss of employment and livelihoods, and devastation of factories, businesses, and agriculture lands, as well as offices and buildings of organizations and service providers, which have further compounding the already dire economic conditions in the Gaza Strip. Also, the rise in the number of women-led families in the Gaza Strip coincides with a significant increase in poverty among these households. As a result, bereaved women often find themselves exposed to economic exploitation in displacement settings, where they are viewed as vulnerable groups. They have become particularly susceptible to economic violence from individuals and relatives within extended families. Bereaved women have experienced interference in their personal affairs, control over their decisions, and violations of their economic rights, as well as restrictions on their access to entitlements and financial resources. This situation is aggravated by the ongoing war, which has left many women without support or providers. Compounding this vulnerability are cultural and social customs that undermine and exploit bereaved women, further intensified by the absence of the rule of law.

5. Interview with Lawyer and Human Rights Activist Aya Al-Ostaz

* "Bereaved women encounter social pressures imposed by customs and traditions, compounded by interference from extended family members and the imposition of specific restrictions that hinder their ability to fully exercise their economic rights."

* "I am unable to provide food for my children. Despite the challenges posed by restricted mobility, exploitation, and many other hindrances, I still do not receive my food ration. I do not know who to approach for assistance."⁶

- **Access to Humanitarian Aid:** Bereaved women have frequently encountered inappropriate treatment in shelters and aid distribution centers, including harassment and discrimination. They have also faced significant barriers in accessing support and essential services, often failing to receive food rations or adequate healthcare, which exacerbates their vulnerability to poverty and hunger. The severe shortage of services, particularly food, and water, combined with social isolation, movement restrictions, and a lack of awareness about available services during the war, has severely limited their ability to secure aid resources and meet their families' needs. Many bereaved women have reported experiencing harassment and exploitation while attempting to access aid, which has forced many of these women to refrain from seeking help.

- **Violence and Exploitation:** Bereaved women have encountered an elevated risk of violence and sexual exploitation in displacement camps and shelters, where the absence of familial protection, social protection networks, and law enforcement renders them particularly vulnerable to exploitation by those seeking to capitalize on their precarious circumstances. This risk has intensified with the ongoing genocide, further exposing bereaved women as targets for exploitation. Munira Al-Fayoumi, a lawyer, stated, "Many women, particularly bereaved women, have been subjected to harassment and exploitation while attempting to access aid. This has also occurred in shelters."

6. Interview with Amani, a bereaved woman, 33 years old.

Recommendations:

To enhance the conditions of bereaved women, this paper proposes a comprehensive set of recommendations, as follows:

- **Dissemination of Information:** Provide information about available services and assistance specifically tailored for vulnerable groups, including bereaved women.
- **Awareness and Guidance:** Raise awareness on the rights and responsibilities of bereaved women; offer clear guidance on accessing available services; and assist them in obtaining required documents at no cost.
- **Support from CSOs:** Allocate attention and resources from local organizations in the Gaza Strip to provide psychological, legal, social, and financial support to bereaved women.
- **Economic Empowerment:** Promote the economic empowerment of bereaved women by creating job opportunities that enable them to meet their basic needs with dignity.
- **Vocational Training:** Offer vocational training programs and support for small and micro-businesses for bereaved women.
- **Educational Programs:** Establish an urgent educational program for the children of bereaved women to ensure their continued learning and development.
- **Facilitation of Access:** Facilitate safe access for bereaved women to humanitarian aid.

- **Support for Orphans:** Urge both local and international organizations to provide support for the orphans of bereaved women.

- **Psychological Support:** Offer both individual and group psychological support tailored for bereaved women.

- **Helplines:** Provide free and immediate helplines for protection, ensuring that contact information and communication mechanisms are disseminated through various media channels and displacement camps and shelters.

- **Health Services:** Provide free systematic comprehensive health services for bereaved women, within a unified protocol tailored to their needs, drawing on the experiences of other countries, such as Iraq and Syria, to enhance service delivery.

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- In-depth individual Interview, Mariam Shakura, Expert on GBV, 06/07/2024
- In-depth individual Interview, Munira Al-Fayyumi, Lawyer at Abdel Shafi Community Health Association, 04/07/2024
- In-depth individual Interview, Mona Moussa, Case Manager and Community Activist at Aisha Association for Woman and Child Protection, 07/07/2024
- In-depth individual Interview, Rasha Al-Bardawil, Lawyer and Project Coordinator at Culture and Free Thought Association, 08/07/2024
- In-depth individual Interview, Reem Al-Raqab, Project Manager at SOS Children's Villages, 12/07/2024
- FGD with (20) bereaved women from Amir Al-Mansi School, 04/07/2024
- FGD with service providers (psychosocial, legal, relief, health services), at Women's Programs Center in Al-Nuseirat, 14/07/2024

Appendixes:

*** Paper Tools**

A. In-depth Individual Interviews:

- 1- What is the impact of the war of October 2023 on the increased number of bereaved women?
- 2- What daily challenges and barriers do bereaved women face in obtaining their rights and achieving the human dignity they aspire for, particularly while residing in displacement camps and shelters?
- 3- To what extent are these women, both victims and survivors of GBV, aware of their rights and entitlements and of how to access humanitarian services, including relief and healthcare?
- 4- How satisfied are you with the services provided, and what impact do they have on women's access to necessary resources?
- 5- Do bereaved women encounter challenges related to the lack of healthcare in displacement and camps and shelters, especially concerning their psychological, health, legal, social, and economic conditions?
- 6- Are there legal procedures relevant to bereaved women that affect their roles in society?
- 7- What are the various and immediate needs and priorities of bereaved women?

B. FGDs:

- 1- What is the impact of the war of October 2023 on the increased number of bereaved women?
- 2- What daily challenges and barriers do bereaved women face in obtaining their rights and achieving the human dignity they aspire for, particularly while residing in displacement camps and shelters?
- 3- To what extent are these women, both victims and survivors of GBV, aware of their rights and entitlements and of how to access humanitarian services, including relief and healthcare?
- 4- How satisfied are you with the services provided, and what impact do they have on women's access to necessary resources?
- 5- Do bereaved women encounter challenges related to the lack of healthcare in displacement and camps and shelters, especially concerning their psychological, health, legal, social, and economic conditions?
- 6- Are there legal procedures relevant to bereaved women that affect their roles in society?
- 7- What are the various and immediate needs and priorities of bereaved women?