Planning a gender-responsive and inclusive emergency response

BACKGROUND

Gaza has experienced a protracted humanitarian and food security crisis, exacerbated by successive conflicts. Since 2007, Israel has imposed a restrictive blockade on Gaza, which was subject to a series of escalations, with the two most significant in 2008–2009 and in the summer of 2014. Other rounds of fighting were much smaller, such as those that occurred in November 2012, May 2021, and August 2022. The recent escalation of hostilities between Hamas and Israel, which erupted on 7 October 2023, has further exacerbated the challenges faced by the population, with distinct consequences for men and women.

As of 5 March 2024, according to OCHA’s latest flash update, at least 30,631 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza, approximately 70 percent of whom were women and children. Additionally, about 72,043 people have been injured. The situation remains critical also in the West Bank, where 413 Palestinians have been killed, including 107 children. Over 1.7 million people in Gaza are internally displaced, including some 17,000 children who are unaccompanied or separated, and many who have fled multiple times, and most are in need of immediate food assistance.

Prior to the current conflict, Gaza already faced a dire economic situation characterized by high unemployment, food insecurity, electricity shortages, and health and sanitation crises. According to the World Bank, during the first half of 2023, Gaza’s economy contracted by 2.6 percent largely due to a decline in the agriculture, forestry and fisheries sector, which shrank by almost 30 percent following the restrictions imposed by Israel on the sale of fish from Gaza to the West Bank since August 2022.

Before the current crisis, more than 1.5 million Palestinians already required essential food security and livelihood assistance. This represented 53 percent of the population in Gaza and 11 percent in the West Bank. Moreover, according to FAO, up to 2021, 28.1 percent of the population was moderately or severely food insecure and 4 percent was severely food insecure, with 30.2 percent of women experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity, compared to 26 percent of men. The main cause of food insecurity prior to 7 October 2023 was the lack of economic access to food resulting from high levels of poverty driven by high unemployment rates.

This situation is compounded by the alarming state of water resources, with over 97 percent of water from the coastal aquifer in Gaza reported unfit for human and animal consumption, as per UNICEF’s 2021 findings. Lack of access to food and water has particularly harsh impacts on lactating and young women who are already vulnerable due to preexisting inequalities shaped by harmful social and cultural norms.

The current hostilities are accompanied by gender-related risks and impacts, and it is therefore crucial to identify the specific needs, resources, capacities, and coping strategies of different groups of men and women, girls and boys including those further impacted by other factors such as the disability status, in order to ensure an appropriate and accountable response that identifies and addresses gender-based constraints and vulnerabilities, making sure to leave no one behind.
GENDER RELATED IMPACTS

Food insecurity

As of December 2023, more than 90 percent of the population in the Gaza Strip (about 2.08 million people) was facing acute food insecurity at imminent risk of famine (IPC Phase 3 of crisis or worse). Among these, over 40 percent of the population (939,000 people) was in Emergency Phase 4, and over 15 percent (378,000 people) in Catastrophe Phase 5. The prevailing food security situation across the Gaza Strip is dire in terms of food availability, accessibility and utilization.

The recent escalation has caused interruption of trade and massive damage to the agriculture sector, which contributes to the overall food availability of Gaza. Electricity cuts have affected refrigeration, crop irrigation and crop incubation devices, consequently harming various livestock, including poultry, fish and other commodities. Farmers and women-led agribusiness, particularly small-scale breeders, face significant challenges due to their displacement, lack of access to fodder, damage from the airstrikes and disruptions in telecommunication. Many farmers (both men and women) are reporting substantial losses, particularly those involved in the poultry sector, damages in food processing facilities, and crop losses in agricultural lands.

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, about 44 percent of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip have lost their sources of local agricultural production for household consumption. The repercussions of food shortages on food prices have been felt primarily in Gaza, where the acute scarcity of essential commodities has led to a substantial increase in food prices, averaging a 10 percent hike month-on-month. The cost of bottled water surged by 75 percent, while gasoline prices soared by nearly 120 percent.

Moreover, the recent closure of all commercial crossings and restrictions on humanitarian access have severely impacted food accessibility. Between 7 and 20 October 2023, no humanitarian aid trucks were permitted to enter Gaza. While the Rafah border crossing reopened for humanitarian access on 21 October 2023, the majority of aid distribution is concentrated in the southern governorates. Since the beginning of 2024, only 21 percent of trucks containing food and other lifesaving supplies reached their destination north of Wadi Gaza. Consequently, the Gaza Strip is currently facing significant shortages of crucial food items, with 66 percent of local markets lacking essential goods.

Food and water shortages are also having a negative impact on food utilization, leading to catastrophic levels of food insecurity and increased risk of famine, especially among the young population in Gaza. All children under the age of five – an estimated 335,000 children – are at high risk of severe malnutrition and preventable death. In the coming weeks, at least 10,000 children under the age of five are expected to experience severe wasting and require therapeutic foods. More than 80 percent of young children face severe food poverty.

According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA, the conflict has reduced the water supply in Gaza by 95 percent. Currently, only one of the three water pipelines from Israel into Gaza in the south is functioning, forcing the population to use unsafe water and sanitation facilities, increasing the incidence of disease and exacerbating public health risks.

As security concerns escalate, the responsibility for seeking and securing food and water for families is increasingly falling on men and boys, while women and girls tend to remain inside the shelters. The growing hunger crisis has led to instances of people intercepting humanitarian trucks to obtain aid before it reaches its intended destination. Consequently, it has become more challenging to deliver aid to UN shelters and warehouses. In this context, female-headed households, elderly people, and persons with disabilities face additional obstacles if there are no family members available to receive the aid on their behalf.

A coping strategy of affected families, including displaced persons, has been to reduce the number of meals eaten per day from three to one. Children and women, especially pregnant and lactating women, are therefore at higher risk of under or malnutrition, making them more susceptible to contracting maternal nutrition-related illnesses. Limited access to infant formula and fortified foods in overburdened hospitals can affect during conflict the survival of newborns, who are already at high risk, due to the compounding negative effects of the blockade.

Livelihoods and employment

The recent escalation has caused a severe blow to Gaza’s economy, leading to decreased household incomes due to injured or killed family members, damage to infrastructure, temporary or permanent loss of employment as local livelihood systems collapsed, and economic activities and food production have...
come to a near-complete standstill. In Gaza, the extent of damage to infrastructure critical for commerce is severe, with approximately 70 percent of such facilities either damaged or destroyed. Moreover, as of November 2023, ILO estimated that 468,000 jobs were lost in Gaza and the West Bank, of which 192,000 in Gaza and 276,000 in the West Bank.

Prior to 7 October 2023 unemployment disproportionately affected women - 41 percent of them were unemployed, compared to 20 percent of men in both Gaza and the West Bank. There remains a significant disparity in the unemployment rate between the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Before the conflict, the unemployment rate in Gaza was already three and a half times higher (46 percent) than in the West Bank (13 percent). For women in Gaza, unemployment stood at 67 percent compared to 39 percent among men. The majority of unemployed women are young (34 or younger) and highly educated (93 percent of them have completed 13 or more years of schooling). According to the IMF, the difficulty of commuting to work poses a major obstacle for women and significantly influences their outcomes in the labor market, primarily because of Israeli checkpoints and associated restrictions. Additionally, women may be discouraged from commuting daily by male family members anticipating extended wait times at checkpoints. Consequently, women tend to look for employment options close to their homes or remote work, severely restricting their job opportunities.

The FAO’s 2019 Country Gender Assessment reveals that the agriculture and rural sector employed 6.7 percent of women and 5.9 percent of men. However, these statistics tend to underrepresent women’s employment as they cover only the work devoted to producing for the market, while most of their work in agriculture is unpaid and/or focused on production for household consumption. Palestinian women provide 87 percent of the labor for livestock production and 54 percent for crop production. Additionally, they fulfill traditional gender roles in child-rearing and household management.

Even before recent events, rural women, producers, and small business owners faced more challenges than men in accessing and using available resources and had limited rights to own land and move freely. As a consequence of the conflict, ILO projections suggest a possible replacement of women by men in the agriculture sector, with a slight increase in the number of male workers and a decline of female workers in this sector. The rise in male unemployment may lead men to push women out of the agriculture sector, where women are often employed as subsistence workers.

Finally, economic distress disproportionately affects female-headed households, which make up 10 percent of all households in Gaza. Before 7 October 2023, female-headed households were highly vulnerable to impoverishment, accounting for nearly 20 percent of households in extreme poverty. In the wake of the ongoing conflict, as of January 2024, an additional 3,000 households in Gaza are now headed by women due to the death of their male partners. These households are at higher risk of poverty and food insecurity, particularly when the new female head is unemployed or has never been part of the labor market.

Unpaid work burden

Before the recent conflict, women were heavily involved in unpaid care work, including childcare, family farming, and domestic chores. On average, Palestinian women spent about 35 hours on unpaid care work compared to only 5 hours for men - about seven times more. Employment status adds another layer to gender differences in the allocation of time to paid and unpaid work. Comparing the time spent on unpaid care between employed and non-employed, married and never-married women and men, data show that married and employed women invest almost 20 hours more in total work (combining household responsibilities and earning a living) than their married and employed male counterparts. The current conflict has magnified the workload for women. Prolonged electricity cuts, water scarcity, and shortage of cooking gas have increased women’s domestic burdens and strained their already overstretched coping mechanisms in the context of massive displacement of the population.

A Rapid Gender Analysis (RGA) conducted by UNRWA in October 2023 revealed that the pre-existing household division of labor persists in emergency shelters. Although some men were observed to participate in care-related duties, such as looking after young children, women remain overwhelmingly responsible for care and unpaid work, including cleaning, cooking, and water collection. Most men continue to spend significant time with other men and search for a suitable place for their families to live. With schools closed, traditional gender roles are further reinforced among youth, with girls assisting their mothers in cleaning, food preparation, and water collection, while boys engage in maintenance work and accompany their fathers to markets. This division of tasks mirrors the gender dynamics existing within households before the recent crisis.
Access to health and protection services

The disruption of schooling, the collapse of the healthcare system, and the destruction of physical infrastructure have severely limited the ability of the population in Gaza to access essential goods and services.

WHO has warned that the lethal combination of starvation and disease will lead to more deaths in Gaza. The arrival of cold and wet winter weather is worsening the situation, compounded by a shortage of blankets, insufficient fuel for heating devices, and a lack of access to hot water. According to the latest assessments, Gaza has currently 13 (out of 36) partially functioning hospitals and only 17 percent of primary health care facilities remain functional. Many hospitals and health-care centers have shut down, either due to damage caused by Israeli bombardment or the lack of fuel as a result of the siege. Furthermore, due to the significant number of individuals injured and left with long-term disabilities as a result of the conflict, there is a growing concern about the limited capacity to address the needs of people with disabilities, including both women and children.

Of Gaza’s population, over 572,000 people (or about one in four) are women and girls of reproductive age. Approximately 50,000 pregnant women face extreme challenges in accessing prenatal and maternity care, and maternal deaths are expected to rise due to the lack of adequate care. Approximately 40 percent of current pregnancies are considered high-risk. Some women are forced to give birth in shelters, homes, streets amidst rubble or in overcrowded healthcare facilities where sanitation is deteriorating. This situation increases the risk of infection and medical complications, adding to an already high-risk public health environment. In the West Bank, pregnant women, especially those in marginalized and remote communities, face an elevated risk of giving birth at home or at checkpoints due to the constraints imposed by movement restrictions, closures, and general insecurity.

UN Women reports that, as of January 2024, almost 1 million women and girls have been displaced from their homes in Gaza, revealing gender-related risks and concerns associated with internal displacement. For instance, girls may be expected to assume the role of caregivers for injured family members or assist with household activities that were previously performed by their mothers. Child marriage may also increase as a coping mechanism for families struggling with limited resources, amidst school closures, and the absence of educational opportunities, or as a measure to protect young girls from the risks of sexual violence from strangers, which are particularly high in overcrowded shelters. In contrast, boys may be pressured to enter the workforce to compensate for family income loss or to take over the role of the lost male guardian.

The widespread destruction of homes has forced families to seek refuge with host families, where possible. However, the majority (nearly 1.4 million IDPs) are sheltering in 154 UNRWA facilities across all five governorates. Combined with shortages of food, water, and privacy, this has increased the stress levels within families, leading to heightened tensions between parents and children, husbands and wives, and higher vulnerability of children to multiple risks and Gender-Based Violence (GBV). As seen with other conflicts, the breakdown of the rule of law and social structures during armed conflicts is associated with higher rates of GBV.

Most collective shelter centers and sites are overcrowded and not equipped with the necessary infrastructure and services to maintain the dignity and privacy of female IDPs. Past escalations of hostilities in Gaza have shown that such overcrowding can contribute to an increase in sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls. While accurate data on GBV trends is currently unavailable, UN Women has reported that the only two women’s protection shelters previously operational in Gaza, are currently closed due to the conflict. Furthermore, telecommunication and electricity disruptions are significantly impeding the remote delivery of gender-based violence services, especially at a time when the risks are most pronounced. Furthermore, the loss of shelter has a negative impact on the dignity of men, who are frustrated by their inability to protect their families. Female-headed households, already subject to significant levels of marginalization, further experience the adverse effects of overcrowding and insecurity.

In the West Bank, meanwhile, unrest, clashes and violent incidents involving Palestinians, Israeli settlers and Israeli forces have raised significant concerns for the affected people. Entire herding communities have been forcibly displaced. According to OCHA, between 7 October 2023 and 4 February 2024, a minimum of 198 Palestinian households from at least 15 herding/Bedouin communities, totaling 1208 individuals, including 586 children, have experienced displacement, due to settler violence and restricted access. Additionally, 524 Palestinians, including 256 children, have been forced to move after the demolition of their homes.
Demolitions have a gender-related impact, as homes are traditionally considered the “woman’s sphere.” This puts additional pressure on women to provide for the family’s practical and emotional needs, including dealing with the trauma of displacement for children.\textsuperscript{24} Data from previous conflicts in Palestine indicates that women, who have lost their husbands during armed conflicts, face significant threats. Beyond the emotional toll, these women are vulnerable to forced remarriage, frequently to a member of their deceased husband’s family.\textsuperscript{34} Moreover, households aiming to enhance protection for children and women may impose additional mobility restrictions beyond those dictated by the overall context, jeopardizing the rights and freedoms of women and further impacting their livelihoods.\textsuperscript{34}

**POSSIBLE ACTIONS AND INTERVENTIONS**

In line with repeated calls by United Nations Secretary General António Guterres\textsuperscript{36} and others for rapid, safe, and sustained humanitarian access, gender-responsive humanitarian and development aid interventions are necessary to address the specific needs and priorities of affected and most vulnerable women, men, girls and boys, based on available sex- and age-disaggregated data and periodic rapid gender and vulnerability assessments.

It is also necessary to provide protection for all civilians, comprising women and girls, mainstream gender issues into essential strategic planning documents, including the Humanitarian Flash Appeals\textsuperscript{i}, and to the extent possible channel resources to women’s organizations.\textsuperscript{3} Furthermore, it is essential to safeguard infrastructure, involving housing, agricultural land and health care facilities in Gaza and the West Bank, in accordance with the international humanitarian law.

**Responses to the crisis could include:**

1. Strengthen collection, analysis, and dissemination of data disaggregated by sex, age, and disability status to continually update available information on the impact of the conflict on the food security and livelihoods of women and men of different age, residency status, and socio-economic conditions. The evidence generated should guide the planning of targeted gender-responsive interventions and strategies to better meet the specific needs of affected women, men, girls, and boys. Periodic rapid gender analysis and gender-sensitive vulnerability assessments, including gender-sensitive indicators in monitoring and evaluation systems, should follow the gender-related impacts of agricultural development, food and nutrition security policies and investments in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

2. Ensure that the immediate needs of women and girls in Gaza are met through the provision of quality basic services and improved access to resources, services, fodder and other essential agricultural inputs and tools to support their early recovery and rehabilitation, taking into account their specific needs and constraints and existing capacities.

3. Support efforts to restore the functioning of markets in Gaza. Revitalization of the private sector is fundamental, as humanitarian aid alone is insufficient to meet the huge needs of the population. Moreover, without functioning markets, cash assistance will lead to inflation.

4. Once domestic markets are reactivated, scale up a broader array of social protection initiatives, including targeted cash transfers and vouchers, to provide immediate assistance to affected and vulnerable families. These interventions will need to be specifically tailored to address the loss of income experienced by female-headed and single-headed households and prioritize households with people with disabilities, recognizing their heightened vulnerability.

5. Continue efforts undertaken to assess the immediate and long-term impacts of damage to infrastructure, loss of livestock, and disruption of agricultural activities on the livelihoods and productive capacities of men and women. As the situation permits, identify new or alternative income-generating and employment opportunities in the post-conflict period, with a focus on women, youth, and the most vulnerable people. Possible interventions include cash-for-work programmes to reconstruct damaged infrastructure, rehabilitate lands and irrigation systems.

6. Participate in ongoing efforts made to mainstream protection and GBV mitigation considerations during

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\textsuperscript{i} UN women’s assessment of the funding for the 2023 Flash Appeal revealed that less than 1 percent of funds directly reached national or local women’s rights organizations in Gaza.
and after the conflict, based on the results of protection risk analysis conducted among affected and vulnerable people and adopt special measures to ensure that interventions do not put people at risk of GBV, Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) and other forms of discrimination ("Do No Harm"). This also requires targeting the most vulnerable women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities; addressing the underlying causes of discrimination and structural barriers; and re-establishing community-based protection networks to be involved in the humanitarian response. Other recommended actions include raising community awareness of GBV while engaging men and boys, as well as building social peace among farmers and local communities, and establishing protection, feedback, and complaint mechanisms. Securing safe access to fuel and energy, productive inputs, and water will reduce tensions and competition for resources, minimizing the risks of violence.

7. Provide support to women-led and women’s organizations to serve as early responders in conflict-affected areas in the West Bank, including but not limited to Area C, Hebron, Jenin camp, and Nablus. It is also crucial to engage local women’s groups and women leaders in anticipatory actions and peacebuilding processes, by developing women-led risk mappings and involving women in hotlines addressing violence. In the long term, invest in formal and informal education and training of women and girls to strengthen their technical capacities and leadership and negotiation skills, and support female heads of households in overcoming recent shocks.

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ii In line with the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 adopted in October 2000 (S/RES/1325) on Women, Peace and Security that reaffirms women’s important role in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, humanitarian response and post-conflict reconstruction.

iii In line with the forthcoming FAO’s report How the UN System Can Advance Tangible Results on Women’s Participation in Peacemaking, Peacekeeping, and Peacebuilding by 2030.
NOTES
12. OCHA. 2023. Flash Appeal for the Occupied Palestinian Territory 2023 Humanitarian Programme Cycle, October–December 2023 (First Revision November 2023). In: OCHA. [Cited 12 February 2024] https://www.ochaopt.org/content/flash-appeal-occupied-palestinian-territory-2023?_gl=1*1q8ejjn*_ga*NDkyNQg2ODk5LjE2NzU2OTgzNjQ.*_ga_6eS0N2F68*MTcwNzcyNjY5M4xLjE3MjciMzYyMzQuMTgxMC4w
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CC9810EN/103.24