

Integration of Gender Perspectives in Humanitarian Assistance in the Israeli-Hamas Conflict

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Abstract

The Palestinian militant organization Hamas launched an abrupt attack on southern Israel in October 2023, marking the deadliest attack on Israelis in history. Following this event, Israel declared war on Hamas in an attempt to destroy it, worsening the miserable situation in the Gaza Strip, home to over two million Palestinians before the battle started. In this ongoing crisis, it is fundamental to address the diverse needs and vulnerabilities of affected populations, particularly through integrating gender perspectives into humanitarian assistance. This paper aims to explore the rationale and policy recommendations for mainstreaming gender considerations in humanitarian interventions in Gaza Strip. It examines the different gender-based problems faced by Palestinian women, namely the inaccessibility to secure shelters, the lack of sanitary items, conflict-related sexual violence, and the maltreatment of women with special cases. In order to ensure the rights, dignity, and well-being of individuals affected by crises, this paper advocates for a more inclusive, effective, and sustainable approach to humanitarian assistance in Gaza, highlighting the significance of taking into consideration the essential services needed by Palestinian women in wartime, including assisting females with unique needs. Drawing on lessons learned and successful practices, the paper suggests concrete policy recommendations to enhance the integration of gender perspectives in humanitarian assistance: building suitable makeshift homes, dispatching international forces to protect women, providing sanitary and menstruation products, and offering humanitarian relief specifically designed for women with special needs.

Introduction

The roots of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict date back to the late nineteenth century when Jews immigrated to Palestine which was part of the Ottoman Empire seeking

refuge from massacres and other forms of persecution in Eastern Europe, coinciding with the emergence of the Zionist movement (McGreal, 2023). In 1947, the United Nations passed Resolution 181, generally referred to as the Partition Plan, aiming to divide the British Mandate of Palestine into separate Arab and Jewish states (Global Conflict Tracker, 2024). Ever since the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948, violence has persisted between Palestine and Israel, encompassing sundry armed conflicts: the Six-Day War in 1967, the Yom Kippur War in 1973, two Palestinian intifadas from 1987 to 1993 and 2000 to 2005, the withdrawal of Israeli settlers from Gaza in 2005 followed by Hamas seizing control in 2007, numerous flare-ups between Palestinian militants and Israel in Gaza, and the recent ongoing war between Israel and Hamas starting in October 2023 (Reuters, 2023). It is important to mention that women and children are the most targeted victims of this Israel-Hamas conflict, accounting for 16,000 casualties and an estimated two mother deaths each hour since Hamas launched an unexpected attack on Israel (Lederer, 2024). These individuals – women and children – struggle to access homes, safety, healthcare facilities, or medical care, and they primarily lack justice and hope as they are on the verge of starvation (Bahous, 2024). Due to the prolonged conflict, the UN estimates that almost 700,000 women and girls in Gaza undergo their menstrual cycles without having enough access to basic utilities such as running water and bathrooms, or even crucial hygiene supplies including pads and toilet paper (Batrawy, 2024).

Therefore, the integration of gender perspectives in humanitarian aid within the context of the Israeli-Hamas conflict is essential. This paper delves into the various gender-specific challenges encountered by Palestinian women, including difficulties in accessing safe shelters, inadequate availability of sanitary products, and instances of sexual violence related to conflict, as well as the abuse of a particular group of females. Moreover, it will tackle the various roles of stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the United Nations, governmental bodies, and public officials. This paper will consequently develop some recommendations to alleviate the gender-based challenges faced by women in the Gaza Strip. In reality, these measures are fundamental to guarantee that Palestinian women are protected from dehumanizing actions and illegal activities, and are granted vital services ensuring a life with dignity.

Overview

This study is grounded in an analysis of existing literature concerning the integration of gender perspectives in humanitarian assistance efforts in Gaza, particularly focusing on the challenges faced by women in times of war. Previous research has emphasized the importance of inclusion of gender perspectives in humanitarian assistance in Gaza by demonstrating the presence of significant gender-based challenges, including the inaccessibility of women to safe shelters, absence of hygiene products and essential services, exposure to different forms of conflict-related violence such as rape, and the vulnerability of women with special needs.

Inaccessibility of Women to Safe Shelters

Over 70% of Gaza's homes were destroyed in December 2023, making it one of the most devastating urban conflicts of modern times (The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2024). As a result, 1.9 million Palestinians, equivalent to 85% of Gaza's total

population, had to relocate internally into bunkers (UN Women, 2024). The overloading in shelters, combined with heightened stress levels among refugees resulting from insufficient access to food, water, and privacy, has aggravated the risks of gender-based violence (United Nations Population Fund, 2023, as cited in Swan, 2024). Consequently, the UN has warned about the extent to which women and girls displaced in Gaza are experiencing severe physical violence as they are susceptible to sexual harassment (Swan, 2024).

Absence of Hygiene Products and Essential Services

Since 11 October 11, 2023, Gaza has entered a state of complete blackout due to Israel's cutout of electricity and fuel supply, resulting in the collapse of vital infrastructure and unbearable living conditions for its inhabitants (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2023). Women and girls seeking refuge in Gaza amid the conflict face a serious shortage of sexual and reproductive health resources, leading to the risk of disease outbreaks (International Planned Parenthood Federation [IPPF], 2023). Since hospitals and healthcare facilities are increasingly being targeted, medical tools are in short supply and healthcare institutions are overburdened (OCHA, 2023), which aggravated the problem leading to instances of sexually transmitted diseases and urinary tract infections in the severely overcrowded shelters, with minimal to nonexistent access to medical treatment (IPPF, 2023). Furthermore, due to a shortage in water and menstrual products, women resort to norethisterone (synthetic oral progestin) tablets to mitigate menstrual discomfort, risking side effects such as irregular bleeding and nausea (Alsaafin & Amer, 2023). In a broader sense, experts in the field seem to agree that the multiple crises in Gaza, ranging from infrastructure collapse due to blackouts to shortages in healthcare and essential supplies, necessitate a revolt against the acute humanitarian situation faced by women.

Violence as a Weapon of Conflict against Palestinian Women

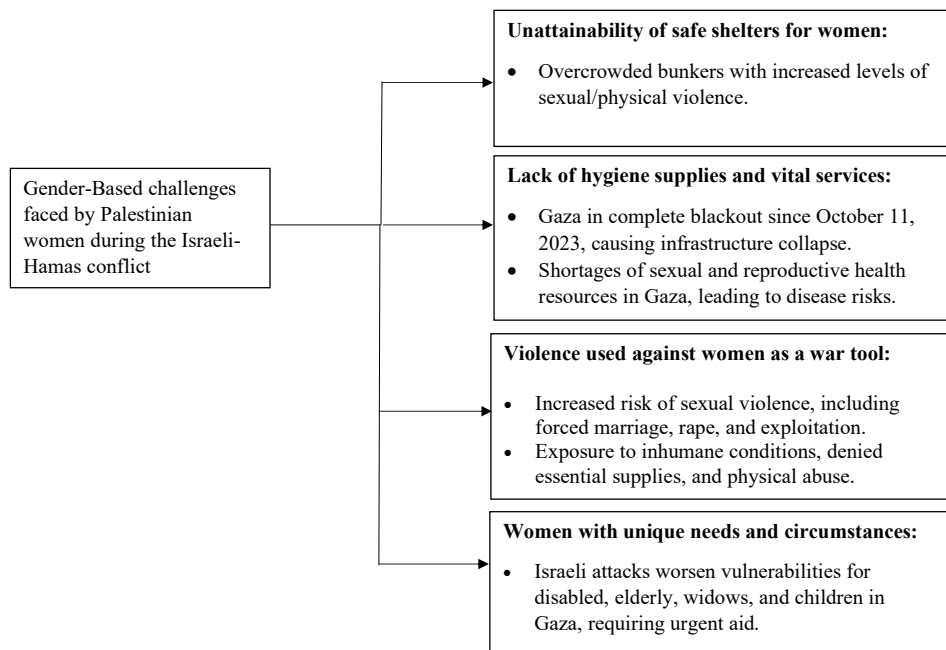
Previous studies have demonstrated that during times of conflict, women confront increased susceptibility to sexual violence such as forced marriage, rape, sexual slavery, prostitution, compelled pregnancy, mandatory abortion, and imposed sterilization. To illustrate, the UN refers to the several forms of sexual assaults as Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) affecting women disproportionately (Morgan, 2023). Numerous Palestinian women and girls detained by Israeli military in Gaza have reportedly experienced inhumane and degrading conditions, including denial of menstrual sanitation items, essential supplies, and medical care, coupled with severe physical abuse, such as being confined outdoors without provisions (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights [OHCHR], 2024). It is equally important to emphasize that the Israel-Hamas war has escalated violence and displacement, exposing Palestinian women to heightened risks of sexual exploitation and human trafficking, further intensifying the longstanding dangers of the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Morgan, 2023). Authorities have voiced concern over reports indicating that some Palestinian women and children, including girls, have disappeared following interactions with the Israeli army in Gaza; disturbing accounts highlight instances of infant girls involuntarily transferred to Israel and children being separated from their parents, with their locations remaining unknown (OHCHR, 2024).

The Difficulties Faced by Women with Special Needs

Following the Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023, the Israeli military’s airstrikes, ground operations, and blockade in Gaza disproportionately affected individuals with disabilities, increasing their risk of harm due to being separated from caregivers and assistive devices, making it harder for them to seek refuge (Human Rights Watch, 2023). According to OCHA (2024), elderly women frequently encounter violence, mistreatment, and disregard of their age, gender, or other circumstances, such as disability or widowhood. In Gaza, where over 15% of internally displaced individuals have disabilities, most shelters lack proper accommodations, including essential medical equipment. For instance, lack of mattresses and medical beds causes unsterile environments and usually results in health issues, ulcers, and allergies. Likewise, the quality of food fails to cater to those with swallowing difficulties when the components are hard to digest (Humanity & Inclusion [HI], 2023).

According to UN Women (2024), approximately 3,000 women may have become widows and breadwinners, in need of urgent protection and food assistance; meanwhile, almost 10,000 children may have lost their fathers, leading to increased fears among women about families resorting to desperate coping strategies such as early marriage. From a wider perspective, the aftermath of the Israeli attacks in Gaza has worsened pre-existing vulnerabilities, leaving people with disabilities, elderly women, widows, and children without proper care, shelter, or support. This misery highlights the urgent need for comprehensive humanitarian aid and protection measures. In sum, recent findings have underscored the interconnected nature of the

Figure 1: Conceptual Model Illustrating the Gender-Based Challenges Faced by Palestinian Women during the Israeli-Hamas War



obstacles such as the limited access to safe shelters, inadequate hygiene provisions, various forms of violence, and heightened vulnerability among women with special needs, resulting in the necessity of integrating gender perspectives into humanitarian assistance in Gaza.

Recommendations

In light of this analysis, it is imperative to emphasize a number of implementation actions to alleviate the severe conditions of Palestinian women.

Building Provisional Housing Structures

To address the various challenges faced by displaced Palestinian females in Gaza, a comprehensive response is essential. Firstly, immediate efforts should focus on providing adequate shelter and basic amenities to reduce overcrowding and improve living conditions. Constructing temporary housing facilities equipped with essential utilities and ensuring equitable distribution of resources is a priority. Additionally, targeted support programs should be employed to address the specific needs of vulnerable groups, including women and girls at heightened risk of gender-based violence due to increased levels of stress among refugees. Moreover, collaborative initiatives involving local authorities and international organizations are essential for delivering effective assistance and fostering resilience among displaced populations in Gaza. In response, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) is collaborating with Palestinian organization Juzoor to provide fundamental services covering healthcare, disease prevention, financial aid, and psychological support in over 20 shelters across Gaza (International Rescue Committee [IRC], 2024).

Ensuring the Essential Sanitary Needs and Services for Palestinian Women

To address the sanitary and healthcare crisis faced by women during the Israeli-Hamas conflict, urgent actions should be applied. For instance, international organizations must pressure Israel to restore electricity and fuel supply to Gaza, ensuring the functioning of the remaining infrastructure and promoting living conditions. Simultaneously, intensive efforts are needed to secure and distribute sexual and reproductive health resources, such as contraceptive and skilled attendance during childbirth, to women, especially those in shelters, to impede the risk of disease outbreaks. Furthermore, humanitarian aid must prioritize the replenishment of medical supplies and support for healthcare facilities, including protection from Israeli airstrikes. Initiatives to provide adequate water and menstrual products such as sanitary pads are essential to safeguard women's health and dignity. To add, cooperative activities between governments, NGOs, and local authorities are crucial for sustainable solutions to address the interconnected challenges facing women in Gaza. For example, in order to offer critical humanitarian aid, such as psychological support, legal counseling, and the distribution of hygiene bundles and dignity kits, to the roughly 1.5 million individuals seeking safety in Rafah, the Women's Affairs Center (WAC) opened a new office in that region (UN Women, 2024).

The Integration of Various Strategies to Face CRSV

In order to prevent the usage of sexual violence as a weapon of war against women in conflict zones such as Gaza, a multidimensional approach is necessary. To elaborate, prompt steps should be taken to strengthen protection mechanisms, including the

deployment of international forces to deter perpetrators and ensure the safety of women and girls. Additionally, comprehensive support services must be made readily available, including accessible medical care, trauma counseling, and legal aid for survivors. Collaborative efforts between local authorities, international organizations (e.g. the UN Women), and community leaders are central in raising awareness, promoting gender equality, and challenging the culture of lawlessness surrounding sexual violence. As a consequence, incorporating the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Resolution 1820 of 2008, as well as condemning acts of sexual violence against women in conflict situations, including those perpetrated by military forces, is crucial in addressing the deteriorating situation in Gaza.

Addressing Vulnerabilities Through Tailored Humanitarian Assistance

In response to the aggravated vulnerabilities faced by disabled females, elderly women, widows, and children in Gaza following the Hamas attacks and subsequent Israeli military actions, urgent humanitarian interventions are vital. Shelters must be equipped with proper accommodations, including essential medical resources and facilities tailored to the needs of disabled individuals and the elderly. Humanitarian organizations (e.g. Anera) should prioritize the distribution of aid that considers specific dietary requirements, such as soft foods for those with swallowing difficulties. In addition, specialized support services and protection measures should be implemented for widows and female-headed households, including access to food assistance, legal support, and psychosocial care.

Furthermore, efforts to prevent harmful coping mechanisms, such as early marriage among vulnerable widows' children, should be intensified through community engagement and education campaigns that can be done by the UNICEF. Subsequently, coordination between international humanitarian agencies, local authorities, and community-based organizations is essential to ensure the effective delivery of comprehensive aid and protection measures to address the diverse needs of affected populations in the Gaza Strip. In the context of armed conflict, states must fight discrimination against individuals with disabilities, especially against those who are subjected to numerous and overlapping forms of discrimination, as stated in UN Security Council Resolution 2475 of 2019.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has deep historical roots and has resulted in devastating consequences, particularly on women and children. The ongoing violence, intensified by the recent war between Israel and Hamas, has led to a humanitarian crisis in Gaza, where women face immense challenges in accessing basic necessities, such as a safe shelter, sanitation, and healthcare. Integrating gender perspectives into humanitarian aid efforts is crucial to addressing these specific needs and ensuring that Palestinian women are protected from harm and CRSV, as well as provided with essential services.

Stakeholders, including NGOs, the United Nations, and governmental authorities, must collaborate to implement effective solutions such as constructing temporary houses, deploying an international army for women's security, and ensuring access to sanitary products and healthcare. By prioritizing the wellbeing and rights of Palestinian women,

it becomes possible to work toward a more just and dignified resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, promoting peace and stability for all affected communities. Looking forward, upcoming studies must focus on the long-term consequences of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on women, shedding light on the resilience, intergenerational impact, and routes to peacebuilding and sustainable recovery.

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