



Photo: UN Women/ Samar Abu El-ouf

Scarcity and Fear:

A Gender Analysis of the Impact of the War in Gaza on Vital Services Essential to Women's and Girls' Health, Safety, and Dignity - Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)



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“In Gaza, we [women] cannot meet our simplest and most basic needs: eating well, drinking safe water, accessing a toilet, having (sanitary) pads, taking a shower, ... changing our clothes...”

A woman from Gaza

As the war on Gaza reached its six-month mark, it continues to be a war on women. According to UN Women estimates, over 10,000 women have been killed to date, amongst them an estimated 6,000 women who left 19,000 orphan children behind. Women who have survived have been displaced, widowed, and facing starvation. More than one million women and girls in Gaza have almost no food, no access to safe water, latrines, washrooms, or sanitary pads, with disease growing amidst inhumane living conditions.

Since the start of the war, UN Women has been documenting the experiences of women in Gaza in a series of gender alerts that look at various aspects of how the war is impacting the daily lives of women and girls, including food, water, shelter, health, and protection. This new alert is the latest in this series, and it focuses on Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) services, which are integral to women's health, dignity, safety, and privacy.

Since the start of the current hostilities on 7 October 2023, more than three quarters of the 2.2 million people living in Gaza are estimated to be internally displaced. Many have been displaced multiple times in search of temporary safety from Israeli bombardment and ground operations. Most of the displaced population now resides in Rafah, in the south of the Gaza Strip, with no safe place to go. The conditions in Rafah are at breaking point, with more than 1 million people crowded into an extremely overcrowded area and more arriving by the day.¹ This situation is exacerbating pre-existing gender inequalities and vulnerabilities, with women and girls facing heightened threats and risks as they seek life-saving services and assistance.

UNRWA shelters, government schools, public facilities, newly established tented settlements, and the few existing rented spaces holding displaced people are overcrowded and have limited capacities to offer water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services to meet the needs of the population. In Khan Yunis,

shelters designed to host 2,000 people are hosting 20,000, with close to 650 people accessing only one latrine facility.² Even more dire, countless others are living on the streets of Gaza³ or in tents with no access to WASH facilities. The rapid spread of infectious diseases within crowded spaces puts women and girls at significant health risks and makes pregnant women particularly vulnerable to maternal complications.

Long before 7 October, access to safe, potable water was already limited in Gaza as a result of decades of Israeli occupation.⁴ Prior to 7 October, more than 1.1 million Palestinians in Gaza were not receiving adequate water and sanitation services, and some 82.5 per cent of Gaza residents (1.8 million people) depended on water supplied by trucks as their main source of drinking water. Today, Gaza's water supply is at only 7 per cent of its pre- 7 October levels.⁵ 1.7 million people are displaced, and UN Women estimates that 1.1 million women and girls are in need of access to sufficient and safe water to meet their drinking and domestic needs.^{6,7} It is reported that only one of the three main water pipelines into Gaza from Israel remains operational. Since 19 November 2023, municipalities in Gaza have had limited water treatment and no water quality testing capacity. Moreover, only 17 per cent of groundwater wells are operating, with 39 destroyed, 93 severely or moderately damaged, and 48 possibly damaged.⁸

WASH addresses the most basic of human needs, from hydration to hygiene. Currently, none of the human needs for water are met in Gaza. Limited access to water and sanitation facilities, standing in long queues for limited portions of water, and managing water in overcrowded households leads to undignified living conditions and the spread of waterborne diseases such as Hepatitis and Diarrhoea. This gender alert focuses on the gendered impact of these shortages.

1 UN relief chief warns military operations in Rafah could lead to a slaughter in Gaza and put a fragile humanitarian operation at death's door | OCHA (unocha.org)

2 Gaza Strip Update - Lack of fuel at crisis point: water and sanitation services on the verge of shutdown | Global WASH Cluster

3 20231114 Water Supply and Fuel in Gaza Strip[7]. 0.pdf (washcluster.net)

4 20231213 ACAPS briefing note Palestine water crisis in the Gaza Strip.pdf

5 Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel | Flash Update #88 [EN/AR] - occupied Palestinian territory | ReliefWeb

6 Based on PCBS estimates, female population in the Gaza Strip, 2023.

7 Occupied Palestinian Territory: Water, Sanitation and Hygiene | ReliefWeb Response. The Gaza Strip on the brink of a public health catastrophe: Health and WASH. Clusters reassert calls for immediate long-lasting ceasefire.

8 The Gaza Strip on the brink of a public health catastrophe: Health and WASH Clusters reassert calls for immediate long-lasting ceasefire - occupied Palestinian territory | ReliefWeb

Key Data Points



Over 10,000 women killed, UN Women estimates more than 6,000 mothers may have been killed, leaving 19,000 children orphaned.



Gaza's water supply remains at only 7 per cent of its pre-October 2023 levels.⁹ 1.1 million women and girls in the Gaza Strip need access to sufficient safe water to meet their drinking and domestic needs.¹⁰ 337,057 girls and boys under five are at particular risk of waterborne diseases.^{11,12,13} More than 540,000 women and girls in Gaza are of reproductive age and need access to appropriate items to support hygiene, health, dignity, and well-being.¹⁴



Women and girls in Gaza are resorting to the use of desperate coping mechanisms including using improvised sanitary cloth or sponges as sanitary pads to compensate for the lack of menstrual items. 10 million disposable menstrual pads are needed each month to cover the needs and preserve the dignity of women in the Gaza Strip.¹⁵



There is limited privacy for menstrual hygiene management for over 690,000 women and girls in Gaza.¹⁶



107,000 elderly men and women face increased risks during hepatitis A outbreaks, as the disease, though treatable, presents a heightened severity and fatality risk among older age groups.^{17,18} Women and girls also face a heightened risk of exposure to infectious diseases while caring for sick family members, as they bear primary responsibilities as caregivers.



Access to WASH facilities are a particular challenge for persons – and women - with disabilities, particularly those with motor and multiple disabilities who require highly specialized tools, equipment, and facilities to allow for their use of WASH services.



People in Gaza have resorted to using agricultural wells that are 30 times saltier than freshwater. This increases the risk of immediate health consequences, particularly for infants, pregnant women, and people with kidney diseases

9 Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel | Flash Update #88 [EN/AR] - occupied Palestinian territory | ReliefWeb

10 Based on PCBS estimates, female population in the Gaza Strip, 2023.

11 20231213 ACAPS briefing note Palestine water crisis in the Gaza Strip.pdf

12 The consumption of contaminated water poses a great risk of gastrointestinal and infectious diseases.

13 Water-related diseases were already reported as the primary causes of child morbidity in the Gaza Strip prior to 7 October.

14 Crisis in the occupied Palestinian territory (unfpa.org)

15 Or 4 million reusable sanitary pads, based on UN Women estimates. There are 690,000 menstruating women and girls. The sphere standards recommend either absorbent cotton material (4 square metres per year), or disposable pads (15 per month).

16 UNFPA Situation Report 23 January 2024

17 20231213 ACAPS briefing note Palestine water crisis in the Gaza Strip.pdf

18 Based on PCBS estimates for population 65+. PCBS | The International Day of Older Persons 01/10/2023



Photo: UN Women / Sameer Abu Elouf

HOUSEHOLDS' WASH NEEDS AND USAGE



Photo: UN Women/ Samar Abu El-out

The desperate water and sanitation conditions in the Gaza Strip present life-threatening risks for all groups. However, women and girls face distinct challenges when accessing scarce resources, including health risks related to pregnancy and birth, urinary tract infections, as well as protection-related risks linked to seeking WASH resources.¹⁹ In non-emergency situations, the WHO recommends a daily supply of 50 to 100 litres per person for drinking, washing, sanitation, cooking, hygiene, and household cleaning.²⁰ Under the international humanitarian standards for emergencies, the minimum amount of water required per person is 15 litres per day (about the size of a medium bucket).²¹ By mid-December 2023, the daily consumption rate in Gaza had declined to one-tenth of that bare minimum, with the daily supply per person averaging at just 1.5

litres.²²

Access to clean water is critical for breastfeeding mothers. Pregnant and lactating women have higher daily water and caloric intake requirements.²³ Pregnant and lactating women need 7.5 litres of water a day to keep themselves and their babies healthy and hydrated,²⁴ or five times the amount presently available. Dehydration during breastfeeding induces lack of energy and fatigue, reduces breast milk supply, and has negative consequences for infants. UNFPA reports that more than 7,000 deliveries took place in the first 47 days of the war,²⁵ and 5,500 were expected to deliver in March 2024.²⁶ Data estimates that there are 540,000 women of reproductive age living in Gaza.

19 UNFPA-Situation-Report-4-Dec11.pdf

20 <https://bit.ly/3uZ9qUA>

21 State of Palestine - WASH Cluster, <https://bit.ly/3ROWG0F>

22 This is 15 times less than the internationally accepted minimum standards for water human consumption necessary for minimum survival. Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, <https://bit.ly/48pVaT8>

23 unfpa-situation-report-4-dec11.pdf

24 <https://actionaid.org/news/2023/lives-peril-gazas-pregnant-nursing-mothers-and-children-face-imminent-danger-amid>

25 Statement by UNFPA Executive Director Dr. Natalia Kanem during the Security Council open briefing on the Situation in the Middle East

26 [Impossible choices in Gaza: "Women are giving birth prematurely because of terror"](https://impossiblechoicesingaza.org/) (unfpa.org)

WASH AND HEALTH



Photo: UN Women/ Samar Abu El-ouf

In some of the Khan Younis sites for internally displaced people, which are among the most overcrowded shelters in the south, there is little running water and only one toilet was reported available per 600 people, compared to the minimum international standard of one toilet per 20 people.²⁷

Lack of fuel has diminished sewage treatment facilities' ability to operate, causing sewage to contaminate water sources, heightening the risks of communicable and waterborne diseases. This has led to over 80,000 documented cases of diarrhoea by December 2023, with more than 50 per cent affecting children.²⁸ Furthermore, a Hepatitis A outbreak, transmitted through contaminated water

and food, was also detected in a UNRWA shelter in December 2023.²⁹ Women and girls face a heightened risk of exposure to Hepatitis A due to their traditional domestic responsibilities and roles in caring giving, including caring for sick family members.. WHO has also reported more than 74,712 cases of scabies and lice.³⁰

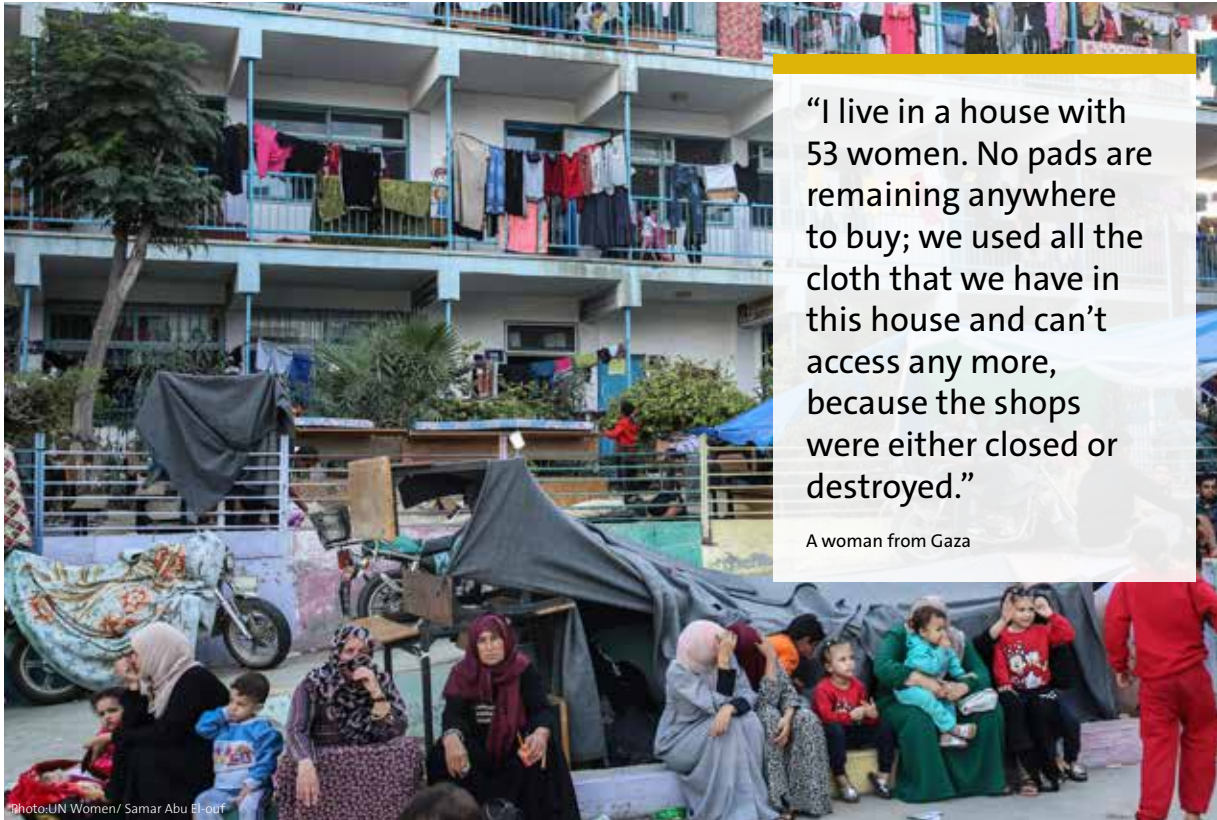
²⁷ [Gaza's Water Crisis Puts Thousands at Risk of Preventable Death - occupied Palestinian territory | OCHA](#)

²⁸ [20231213_ACAPS_briefing_note_Palestine_water_crisis_in_the_Gaza_Strip.pdf](#)

²⁹ [20231213_ACAPS_briefing_note_Palestine_water_crisis_in_the_Gaza_Strip.pdf](#)

³⁰ [Health WASH - Advocacy note on public health catastrophe - Final.pdf - Google Drive](#)

MENSTRUAL HYGIENE



Menstrual hygiene is integral to women’s health, dignity, and privacy. According to UNFPA, there are over 690,000 menstruating women and adolescent girls in Gaza, all of whom are facing limited access to menstrual hygiene products in addition to inadequate WASH facilities.³¹ This is even more difficult for women and girls with disabilities who are already facing major access challenges. UN Women estimates the need for 10 million disposable menstrual pads each month or 4 million reusable sanitary pads to cover the needs of women and girls in the Gaza Strip.³² Despite the distribution of thousands of dignity kits by different

actors, the basic needs of women and girls remain largely unmet.

In overcrowded shelters, the lack of adequate and dignified facilities for menstrual health management affects all menstruating women and girls. Amongst other things, it exposes them to reproductive and urinary tract infections as a result of being unable to adequately wash or keep hygiene products clean. Daily trips in search of a bathroom and toilet poses protection risks, as women look for a minimum of water, privacy and dignity.

31 [unfpa-situation-report-5_0.pdf](#)

32 The sphere standards recommend either absorbent cotton material (four square metres per year), disposable pads (15 per month), or reusable sanitary pads (six per year), as preferred by women and girls.

Gendered experiences and accompanying quotes

Photo: Samar Abu El-ouf



“I am new to having my period; I was adjusting and dealing with it at home, but now, I hate that time of the month; I feel so self-conscious and sick to my stomach. I am using the occasion of the cold to cover myself more and more; I hate for anybody to see me. I try to be invisible; I don’t want to be seen or heard.”

(Female, 13, student, Deir Al Balah)



“My mother has cancer, requiring that she has consistent and continuous access to the washroom; diabetes—which so many women and men have—complicates her situation. My mother couldn’t live in a shelter and we had to find her any space anywhere, but with an adequate washroom. We couldn’t find any available space anywhere; we had to separate. My sister and I had to leave our family’s shelter, expose ourselves to death by venturing out to go care for our mother, where one of us must stay with her all the time.”

(Female, 33, university employee, Deir Al Balah)



Non-existent or substandard water and sanitation services are the tip of this human tragedy. Most shelters have no real toilets anymore. The schools have no showers, no hygiene products, and no drinking water. The destruction of the facilities is beyond description.”

(Male, school official, Khan Younis)



“Women are reporting many more difficulties breastfeeding these days; not only they are emotionally tormented by the war, the pregnancy, and the birth, but they must breastfeed under these impossible conditions. “The spread of dehydration, lower food intake, and the surrounding polluted environment is increasing exposure to food and waterborne pathogens and decreasing resistance to infections. We are already noticing an increase in women and children struggling with dehydration and diarrhoea. Infants who have no access to breastfeeding—due to the inability or the death of a mother—and must use the formula are especially exposed due to the need to use clean safe water, which is rarely available in Gaza at present.”

(Male, age not disclosed, medical doctor, Khan Younis)

RECOMMENDATIONS



UN Women joins the calls for an immediate and sustainable ceasefire, as demanded by the United Nations Security Council on 25 March (Resolution 2527(2024)), and the supply of safe, unimpeded, and at-scale humanitarian assistance across and within the Gaza Strip, including in northern Gaza, to effectively address the grave humanitarian and WASH conditions.



Improve women's and girls' access to food, safe drinking water, toilets and menstrual hygiene products that preserve their privacy and dignity and are age appropriate as part of emergency WASH responses and support.



Ensure that WASH coordination and response efforts fully consider the differentiated needs of women and girls. Gender analysis and sex, age, and disability disaggregated data (SADDD) should be systematically collected to inform WASH planning and response efforts.



Strengthen support to women-led organizations, including through direct and flexible financing. Women-led organizations play a key role in informing WASH sector interventions and can contribute to providing more inclusive and gender-responsive services to women and girls affected by the crisis.

UN Women has had an office in Palestine since 1997 to help women achieve their social, economic, and political rights, and we will remain.

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Photo: UN Women/ Samar Abu Elouf