



Photo: Women's Affairs Centre-Gaza

GENDER ALERT:

Voices of Strength: Contributions of Palestinian Women-Led Organizations to the Humanitarian Response in the Occupied Palestinian Territory



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Photo: The Center for Women's Legal Researches, Counseling and Protection (CWLRCP)-Gaza

The war on Gaza has become one of the world's most brutal man-made humanitarian crises. The war has directly impacted more than 2.2 million people, resulting in an unprecedented number of civilians killed, alongside overwhelming displacement. Since 7 October 2023, more than 36,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces in Gaza, including at least 10,000 women, and an estimated 82,000 people have been injured.¹ The Israeli incursion into Rafah has led to the displacement of nearly 800,000 people since May 2024, many of whom had already been displaced multiple times since October 2023. In tandem, the situation in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, has also deteriorated, with more than 500 people killed and 5,000 injured since 7 October.² As the death toll increases, severe humanitarian needs continue to grow at an unprecedented rate, in a context where needs were already dire before the current escalation.

The war on Gaza remains, among other things, a war on women. Over the past eight months of the war, UN Women has been documenting how the lives of women and girls have deteriorated across sectors. Three Gender Alerts have been published to date, focusing on food security, water, shelter, health and safety. This fourth Gender Alert is on the work of Women-Led Organizations (WLOs).³

Gender inequalities shape how women and girls access life-saving supplies, services, and resources,

placing them at a disadvantage. Women and girls are eating least and last, increasing their risks to food insecurity. Pregnant and lactating women face the highest health and malnutrition risks among the population in Gaza. UN Women data from April 2024 found that more than 8 out of 10 women rely on food assistance as their primary source of food. Seven out of 10 women interviewed by UN Women reported weight loss in the last 30 days and more than half experience dizziness often. Furthermore, 83.5 per cent stated that the assistance they received did not meet their household needs.⁴ Women generally — and female heads of households, older women, and women with disabilities in particular — face serious security and protection threats when attempting to access food distribution.⁵ In the West Bank, frequent incursions and demolitions have created gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities, and women-headed households face increased protection risks. Heightened movement restrictions impede access to health care, which has a severe impact on pregnant and lactating women, and people with chronic diseases.⁶

Despite all their suffering and deprivation, Palestinian women, and the organizations they lead, are also at the heart of the current humanitarian response that is seeking to deliver life-saving assistance to those in desperate need. Across Gaza and the West Bank and East Jerusalem, Palestinian women-led organizations are contributing to urgent humanitarian coordination

1 UN Women estimates, May 2024

2 Health Cluster dashboard, Microsoft Power BI

3 Local women-led organization (WLO): An organization with a humanitarian mandate and/or mission that is (1) governed or directed by women; or 2) whose leadership is principally made up of women, demonstrated by 50 per cent or more occupying senior leadership positions. Definition included in the IASC Guidance on [Engagement, Participation and Decision-making by Women-led Organizations in Humanitarian Action](#).

4 UN Women primary data collection with 600 respondents across Gaza -305 females- April 2024.

5 [Gender Alert The Gendered Impact of the Crisis in Gaza.pdf \(unwomen.org\)](#)

6 Ibid



and response efforts in concrete and important ways. They are providing critical support in the fields of legal aid, psychosocial assistance, gender-based violence prevention and protection, shelter and reintegration, cash, and livelihoods. They do this through a strong grassroots focus and with wide outreach to communities, which enables them to reach groups furthest left behind, including women with disabilities.⁷ They are working to ensure that humanitarian planning and response strategies are informed by a gender perspective and by the voices of Palestinian people, including women and girls.

In March 2024, UN Women conducted a rapid assessment study to evaluate the impact of the war on Gaza on 25 women-led organizations operating in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The 25 organizations surveyed, of which 18 are headquartered or have a presence in Gaza, have a strong network of support personnel, totalling more than 1,500 people, with a significant level of engagement and community involvement. Understanding their operational capacity is key for the international community to support an effective and timely response in Gaza.

⁷ [WOMEN-LED ORGANIZATIONS AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS ROLE IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION IN PALESTINE: BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES | Publications | UN Women – Palestine Country Office](#)

Key Data Points

Since 7 October 2023,



The war has directly impacted more than
2.2 million people



more than 36,000

Palestinians have been killed, including:



**at least 10,000 women
have been killed.**



**an estimated 82,000 people
have been injured.**

Since May 2024,



Nearly **800,000 people**
have been displaced
multiple times.

**Many of whom had already been displaced
multiple times since October 2023.**



SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS ON UN WOMEN

RAPID ASSESSMENT



Women-led organizations in Palestine are resilient. They continue to operate in Gaza and the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem, despite complex operational challenges and immense security risks. In Gaza, **their teams face risks to their personal safety, with the majority being displaced or having lost loved ones**, further heightening the stress and fear they operate under. In the West Bank, they operate within a network of community-based organizations, collaborating closely among themselves to make sure that emerging needs are responded to quickly.

Eighty-nine per cent of WLOs surveyed have sustained damage to their offices in Gaza, compromising their operational capacity and services in the medium to longer term. Of these, 35 per cent have sustained complete damage to all their offices. According to the survey, 56 per cent of the organizations have been able to continue operating at full capacity in terms of

personnel despite the damage by relying on extensive volunteer networks, while 40 per cent are working at partial capacity – facing shortages in personnel.

Most (88 per cent) of the responding organizations in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank have expanded or **shifted their priorities towards life-saving assistance and emergency relief**, adapting and readjusting their work overnight, stretching their limited resources and capacities. Since 7 October, **WLOs' responses have focused on the provision of life-saving essential services** such as distribution of non-food items (performed by 64 per cent of organizations), distribution of food parcels (56 per cent), cash assistance (48 per cent) and protection-related services, such as multisectoral face-to-face or remote counselling services, including psychosocial support, case management, and dignity kits.

Key Data Points



89%

of WLOs surveyed have sustained damage to their offices in Gaza, compromising their operational capacity and services in the medium to longer term.

Of these,



35%

have sustained complete damage to all their offices.



56%

have been able to continue operating at full capacity in terms of personnel despite the damage by relying on extensive volunteer networks.



40%

are working at partial capacity – facing shortages in personnel.

All the surveyed organizations reported concerns about their **staff's physical safety** (76 per cent of which said they were concerned “to a large extent”), and 84 per cent were concerned about the **mental health** and well-being of their staff.

Eight months into the escalation of the conflict, 56 per cent of the surveyed women's organizations reported

a decrease in funding since October 2023, and 88 per cent reported that they are facing significant funding challenges that impact their ability and capacity to deliver life-saving services for those most in need. This is despite their positioning within their communities where they have extensive trust and a unique reach, particular with women and girls.

WLOs play an important role in addressing the needs and priorities of women and girls, based on a deep understanding of intersecting vulnerabilities and capacities. They amplify women's and girls' voices and perspectives and promote their participation in key decision-making spaces and processes. To this point, the Agenda for Humanity's Grand Bargain⁸ has prioritized bolstering the decision-making influence of women-led organizations within humanitarian responses. They remain a critical driving force in providing essential life-saving interventions, including the multisectoral services that are most needed during the sudden onset of conflict and its aftermath.

⁸ An agreement among humanitarian organizations and donors.

THE IMPACT OF THE WAR ON WOMEN-LED ORGANIZATIONS

Impact on staffing and personnel

Physical safety and mental health remain a priority and a concern for responding organizations. To date, in Gaza, 11 staff from the responding organizations have been killed, and 32 have been injured by the Israeli bombardment. All of the surveyed organizations reported concerns about their staff's physical safety (76 per cent "to a large extent"), and 84 per cent were concerned about the mental health and well-being of their staff.

Despite the challenging environment, the surveyed organizations maintain a total of 1,575 staff members across Gaza and the West Bank, of which 977 are volunteers. Most of these staff members are themselves displaced and have lost relatives and friends.

According to the surveyed organizations in Gaza and the West Bank, in terms of personnel, 56 per cent of these organizations are operating at full capacity – relying on extensive volunteer networks, and 40 per cent at partial capacity. When asked about their ability to pay staff salaries, 64 per cent reported that they could pay staff salaries, and 32 per cent said that they were unable to do so for several reasons, including cash unavailability and funding cuts.

To date, in Gaza, 11 staff members have been killed and 32 have been injured, adding to the emotional and psychological strain for the remaining staff.

Physical damage to offices

Many of these organizations rely on their physical offices as operational hubs for delivering assistance and coordinating with a wide range of stakeholders. Eighty-nine per cent of the responding organizations based in Gaza faced significant physical damage to their offices due to heavy bombardment. Of these, 33 per cent indicated that all of their offices were completely destroyed.

Impact on operations and emergency response

Sixty per cent of responding organizations reported scaling up their operational response by embracing new priorities or expanding their emergency response,

while 36 per cent scaled down. These organizations are performing a wide range of activities, which fit into the response areas: protection-related services (performed by 88 per cent of organizations), non-food item distribution (64 per cent), food distribution (56 per cent), and cash assistance (48 per cent). Other areas of work include documentation of human rights violations, supporting women and girls with disabilities, shelter management, and coordination.

"The needs of women in the West Bank are enormous. After 7 October, women have had to deal with new challenges. To the best of our capacities, we have been responding to some of those needs. However, there is a mismatch between the response from the international community and the actual needs of women. While we were able to give psychosocial support to women who lost their family members, homes, and livelihoods, women have also expressed the need for unconditional cash assistance, allowing them to prioritize their needs based on their circumstances. This is a very important factor for compensating for the loss of their assets, for example."

WLO based in the West Bank

"Our organization's priorities have changed in response to the current circumstances; the focus is now on emergency humanitarian response and relief services such as providing food parcels, clothes for children, winter blankets, food baskets, dignity bags, and sanitary parcels, and establishing public toilets for displaced persons outside shelter centres and in random gatherings."

WLO based in Gaza and the West Bank

According to one of the responding organizations in Gaza, the absence of energy resources and fuel, alongside persistent disruptions in internet connectivity and the dire humanitarian conditions, significantly impedes the work of actors on the ground. These conditions contribute to inadequate coordination among stakeholders, and an inability to reach people in need with vital assistance. An inability to access operational hubs and offices due to security risks further complicates staff work and movement.

Funding

Since 7 October, 56 per cent of responding organizations have experienced a decline in funding, which the groups attributed to donors' decisions to suspend funding instalments or to cancel funding commitments altogether. According to the responding organizations, some donors have suspended instalments over concerns about the organizations' ability to access funds amid bank closures, a cash crisis, and challenging banking procedures. An organization in the West Bank highlighted that the sudden cuts in funding have severely impacted their ability to retain staff, adding another layer of complexity to scaling up.

When asked about their most critical challenges, staff safety and security was the most critical concern for all. Additionally, 88 per cent of the organizations reported a lack of funds to address the emerging needs, 56 per cent said transportation, and 52 per cent noted a lack of supplies, displacement of staff, and lack of facilities.

Partnerships and collaboration

Fifty-two per cent of responding organizations reported an increase in collaborations and partnerships over the last four months. Seventy-six per cent of these organizations reported collaborating among themselves. Additionally, collaborations extended to United Nations bodies (68 per cent) such as UN Women, the UN's Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, UNICEF, OCHA, UNRWA, and UNFPA; international non-governmental organizations (64 per cent) such as the Norwegian Refugee Council, Save the Children, and Oxfam; and volunteer groups (56 per cent).

Participation in humanitarian response

In this assessment, UN Women also sought to understand the extent to which WLOs are meaningfully engaged in the humanitarian response. Sixty-four per cent of the responding organizations reported high levels of participation, often attending cluster meetings or humanitarian programme cycle meetings. Additionally, 60 per cent are actively or highly engaged in the development and implementation of needs assessments and flash appeals, while 48 per cent demonstrate high participation in the advocacy working group, and 64 per cent in humanitarian emergency response efforts. The area with the least influence was related to funding decisions, with 64 per cent of the responding organizations reporting either low levels of engagement or no participation at all in this regard.



UN WOMEN'S HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE IN PARTNERSHIP WITH WLOS



Since 7 October, UN Women, in partnership with WLOs, has reached over 36,000 people – predominantly women and girls – with emergency assistance in Gaza and the West Bank. UN Women and partners have distributed emergency kits to 17,372 women and children, some of which have included assistive devices, medicine, clothing, and food. UN Women has supported its partners in the delivery of psychosocial counseling via mobile clinics, reaching 16,915 women and girls in Gaza and the West Bank. Some 2,300 winter clothing packages were also distributed to displaced women and girls in Rafah and Khan Younis

in Gaza, through WLOs.

UN Women has additionally supported the institutional and capacity strengthening of women-led organizations through small funds, and has worked to promote their leadership in humanitarian action. In partnership with WLOs, UN Women continues to amplify the voices of women who are affected by the war on Gaza and the escalation in the West Bank, document their stories, and advocate for their participation in humanitarian action, relief, and recovery efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

WLOs as emergency responders:

- Actively use and fund WLOs for the distribution of assistance in Gaza, to help ensure access to those most difficult to reach, in particular women and girls.
- Provide institutional funding to WLOs in Gaza to enable them to restore their operational capacities and services. This should include providing organizations with rental assistance, support for damage repair, and support for furnishing and equipment. This should also include funding for psychosocial support and trauma therapy for organizations' teams.
- Prioritize flexible funding for WLOs in Gaza and the West Bank, recognizing their vital role in providing life-saving services and support. Simplify and streamline funding application procedures, taking into consideration the challenges and capacity gaps WLOs (particularly small and medium-sized organizations) face under the current escalating crisis.
- Help amplify the voices of WLOs and raise awareness about their work and the issues they are addressing.
- Advocate for increased humanitarian access for WLOs in the West Bank so they can expand their response, diversify their geographical coverage, and avoid the safety risks that their operations and mobile teams face.

WLOs' participation in humanitarian coordination:

- Provide access and space for WLOs to participate in humanitarian coordination structures, including through the cluster and inter-cluster mechanisms – in particular on clusters and issues where they are most absent (e.g. cash distribution livelihood development, food security, and non-food item distribution), and to ensure their active engagement in humanitarian needs assessments and planning efforts.
- Promote the participation of WLOs in funding review committees and strategic advisory groups (e.g. the oPt Humanitarian Fund Advisory Board and Humanitarian Response Plan project vetting panels), which will allow them to inform discussions related to funding priorities, resource allocations, selection criteria, and strategic priorities in alignment with the priorities, needs, and rights of crisis-affected women and girls.

WLOs' participation in relief and early recovery efforts:

- Ensure WLOs' representation and participation in emergency committees established by local councils, municipalities, and humanitarian actors to ensure that women's needs and priorities are being adequately surfaced and met.
- As reconstruction and early recovery efforts begin, create spaces for women's engagement and decision-making, and ensure they benefit from relief and economic recovery opportunities and participate in local decision-making.

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

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