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A photograph of two women walking through a city of rubble. The woman on the left wears a blue patterned headscarf and a matching jacket. The woman on the right wears a black and white patterned headscarf and a black jacket, carrying a red and yellow bundle. The background shows destroyed buildings and debris under a clear blue sky.

Gaza: The Impact of Conflict on Women

November 2015



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Researched and written by Hannah Rought-Brooks.

Edited by Elisabeth Koek, Martin Clutterbuck and Wafa Kafarna.

Thanks to UNRWA, OCHA and UN Women for their valuable inputs.

Cover photo (front): Palestinian women around destroyed houses in Shejaiya neighbourhood, Gaza City (Emad Badwan, 2014).

Cover photo (back): A Palestinian woman in Al-Fakhura school bombed by Israel during the July-August 2014 conflict (Emad Badwan, 2014).

The **Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)** is an independent, international humanitarian non-governmental organisation that provides assistance, protection and durable solutions to refugees and internally displaced persons worldwide.

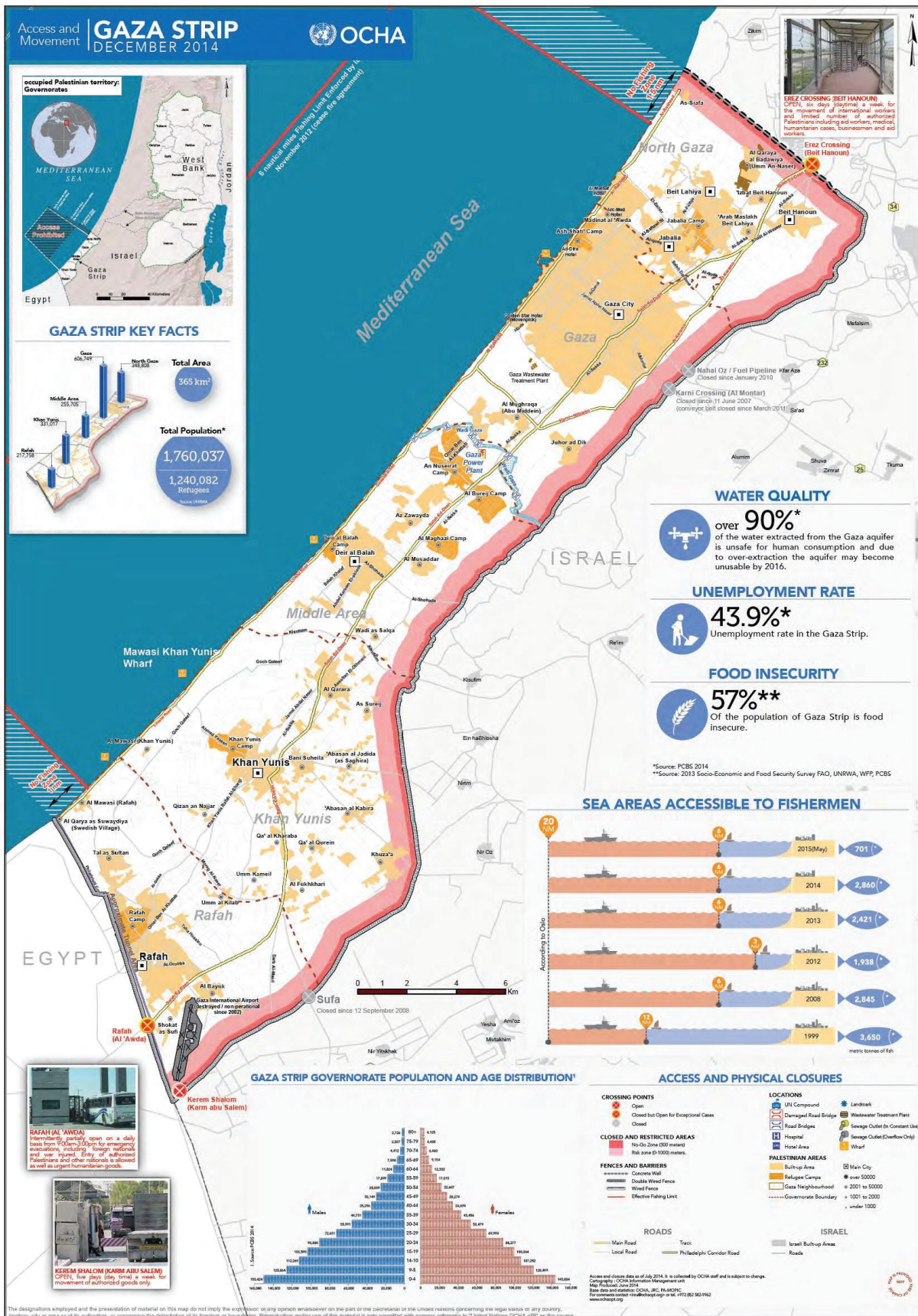


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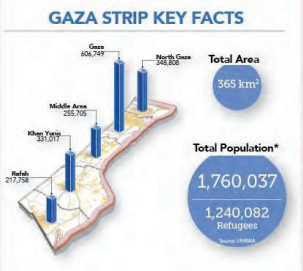
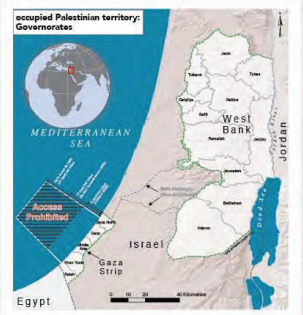


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Access and Movement | **GAZA STRIP**
DECEMBER 2014



WATER QUALITY

90%*
Over of the water extracted from the Gaza aquifer is unsafe for human consumption and due to over-extraction the aquifer may become unusable by 2016.

*Source: PCBS 2014

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

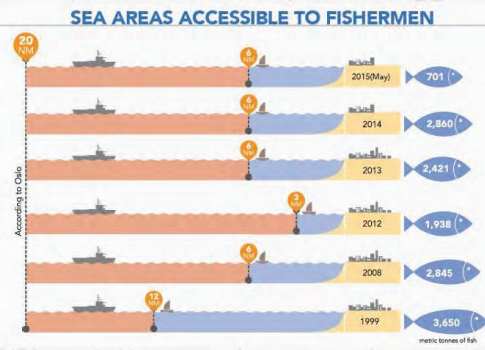
43.9%*
Unemployment rate in the Gaza Strip.

*Source: 2013 Socio-Economic and Food Security Survey FAO, UNRWA, WFP, PCBS

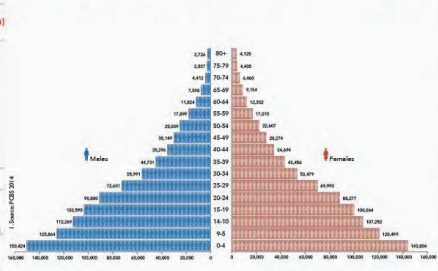
FOOD INSECURITY

57%**
Of the population of Gaza Strip is food insecure.

**Source: 2013 Socio-Economic and Food Security Survey FAO, UNRWA, WFP, PCBS



GAZA STRIP GOVERNORATE POPULATION AND AGE DISTRIBUTION*



ACCESS AND PHYSICAL CLOSURES

- CROSSING POINTS**
 - Open
 - Closed but Open for Exceptional Cases
 - Closed
- CLOSED AND RESTRICTED AREAS**
 - No-Go Zone (500 meters)
 - Risk zone (5-1000 meters)
- FENCES AND BARRIERS**
 - Concrete Wall
 - Double Wired Fence
 - Wired Fence
 - Effective Fencing Limit
- LOCATIONS**
 - UN Compound
 - Landmark
 - Damaged Road Bridge
 - Wastewater Treatment Plant
 - Road Bridges
 - Storage Cistern in Concrete Use
 - Hospital
 - Storage Cistern (Overhead Only)
 - Hotel Area
 - Wheat
- PALESTINIAN AREAS**
 - Built-up Area
 - Main City
 - Refugee Camps
 - over 50000
 - Gaza Neighborhood
 - 2000 to 50000
 - Governorate Boundary
 - 1000 to 2000
 - under 1000
- ROADS**
 - Main Road
 - Twice
 - Local Road
 - Philadelphian Corridor Road
- ISRAEL**
 - Israeli Built-up Areas
 - Roads



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Source: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, December 2014

Executive Summary

This report focuses on the impact of the on-going occupation, conflict and Israeli imposed blockade on women's lives in Gaza. Over a year after the July-August 2014 Israeli military operation on Gaza, it is clear that women remain profoundly affected by the events. The conflict left more than 2,200 dead and more than 19,000 homes destroyed or uninhabitable.¹ The memories and experiences of the women and men interviewed for this research, of the conflict and of displacement are recorded in this research. This report does not purport to be comprehensive or statistically representative but rather to offer an insight into the experiences of women during the recent conflict, and beyond, and how and if they are recovering. It documents their challenges in Gaza in 2015 and makes some suggestions as to how agencies working in the field can meet these challenges.

As there are certain rules for the conduct of hostilities, particularly those contained in the Fourth Geneva Convention, the report sets out the background to the conflict in Gaza, as well as the applicable protections owed to the civilian population under principles of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and the particular provisions relevant to women. The report also addresses the key human rights protections owed to women in conflict.

During focus group discussions, the women described their experiences and recounted their terror of fleeing the bombing, running from place to place. Some women were pulled out of the rubble, amazed at being alive, others saw children and other family members killed in front of their eyes. Rabab Wahdan's home was destroyed during the war and eight members of her husband's family were killed. She said: "I still can't understand how I didn't get injured when others died or were injured. I saw the rocket coming down. I can picture it as it came down. It was red. It was coming down towards me. This cannot escape my mind. Now if I hear war planes I feel terrified."

Most of those who were interviewed or took part in focus group discussions for this research were displaced during the 2014 war. At the peak of the conflict, according to UNOCHA, 485,000 Palestinians, or 28 per cent of the population were internally displaced.² Only three out of the 117 people who took part in the focus group discussions for this research said that they had remained in their homes, the rest were displaced, most multiple times, fleeing to relatives, friends or neighbours and then often on to shelter at the UNRWA schools. The women talked about their experiences of displacement, and for pregnant women the experience of giving birth while displaced during the conflict. Shireen who fled her home in Rafah and was staying at an UNRWA school, gave birth during the conflict: "I went alone to the hospital to give birth, and then returned to the UN school with my newborn baby... We were sleeping on a cardboard box on the floor

By 3 August 2014, UNRWA was providing shelter to 269,793 persons in 90 schools throughout the Gaza Strip, representing an average of approximately 3,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) s per shelter, which normally have the capacity to accommodate only 500 people.³ The women participating in this study recalled sharing classrooms with 50-60 people and the struggle to keep the space clean and their children free from disease, as well as issues with privacy for themselves and their daughters. Three of the UNRWA collective centres were hit by Israel on 24 and 30 July and 3 August 2014, killing 45 people, including 17 children.⁴ The attacks led to widespread fear and panic amongst those sheltering in the schools, and a clear sense among those interviewed for this research that nowhere was safe.

¹ Shelter Cluster - Palestine, *Factsheet June 2015*, 30 June 2015, p. 5, available at <http://shelterpalestine.org/Upload/Doc/d3631325-697d-4fca-9dc0-619e79e63ab0.pdf>.

² UNOCHA, *Gaza Emergency Situation Report*, 4 September 2014, available at http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_04_09_2014.pdf.

³ UNOCHA, *Situation Report*, 4 August 2014, available at http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_04_08_2014.pdf.

⁴ Human Rights Watch, 'In Depth Look at Gaza School Attacks', 11 September 2014, available at <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/09/11/israel-depth-look-gaza-school-attacks>.

Another common pattern amongst those interviewed, was the number of women who entered the collective centres on their own, either because they were already widowed or because their husbands had separated from them to stay with relatives or to care for others, believing that their families would be safer in the centres. This may have been true, but it also meant that women were left with the responsibility of caring for young children and elderly adults as well as navigating the system of food and Non-Food Item (NFI) distribution on their own and dealing with their children's, as well as their own fears, alone.

In chapter six, the report considers the continuing impact of the conflict, blockade and humanitarian crisis on the lives of women and their families in 2015. For many, the most pressing concern was the damage to, or destruction of their homes. Forty eight of the 117 participants interviewed for this report stated that they had not yet been able to return home because either their homes had been destroyed or their houses were not safe to return to. Some of those participating in the study with minor damage to their homes have received some assistance. Many others were dealing with the uncertainty as to when they would receive help with rebuilding or repairing their homes so they could return home. They wanted more information from agencies.

Another priority for the women participating was support for their children. Almost all of the women who spoke in the focus groups identified their children, grandchildren or other young relatives as having been profoundly affected by the war. They spoke of the children having nightmares linked to their experiences and talked of children exhibiting behavioural problems and difficulties studying at school. The women wanted this to be a priority for those who were looking at providing assistance to families in Gaza. One focus group took place in an UNRWA school in the Khan Younis area where psycho-social support is being provided through an NGO. One woman talked about her children who are now receiving counselling: "The children stopped having faith in us as parents. My children can see that their mother can't protect them. My five children clutched on to me during the war... We were wondering when we would die. The children are now getting better." The report also explores the psychological impact on the women and their relationships with their husbands and family.

Finally the report addresses the issue of the impact of the conflict and the blockade on the livelihoods of those participating in the study. Unemployment rates in Gaza are at 45 per cent ⁵ and 1.3 million people were classified as being food insecure and vulnerable to food insecurity ⁶ and therefore it is not surprising that unemployment and a lack of jobs was a pressing concern, with many women expressing their fears for their children's futures. One woman said: "There is no work. I have four sons and they don't work and so they can't marry. They all live with me in one room."

The UN's food and agriculture organisation (FAO) reported that during the 2014 military offensive, about 42,000 acres of croplands had sustained substantial direct damage.⁷ In addition to this destruction, Israel imposes an Access Restricted Area (ARA) on land in Gaza up to 1,000 to 1,500 metres from the Green Line and sea areas beyond six nautical miles from shore. This land is of crucial importance to Palestinian agriculture as it constitutes 17 per cent of Gaza's total land area and nearly 35 per cent of the arable land in Gaza.⁸ Many women interviewed particularly in the rural areas of Gaza have had their livelihoods profoundly affected and had had their crops destroyed or felt that it was too dangerous to access the land. One woman said "All my family would work on the land – we grew olives, tomatoes, peas and lentils. But then land and the projects were repeatedly destroyed by the Israelis and the military. There are now only some trees left and we have planted some more olive trees."

⁵ World Bank, *Gaza: Fact Sheet*, available at http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/MNA/Factsheet_Gaza_ENG.pdf.

⁶ UNOCHA, *Occupied Palestinian Territory: Humanitarian Needs Overview 2015*, January 2015.

⁷ FAO, 'Gaza: Damage to Agriculture will Have Long Term Effects', 14 August 15, available at <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/240924/icode/>.

⁸ UNOCHA, *Farming Without Land, Fishing without Water: Gaza Agriculture Sector Struggles to Survive*, 25 May 2010; UNOCHA, *Between the Fence and a Hard Place*, August 2010, p. 5.

The stories from the focus groups and the interviews demonstrate the devastation that the on-going blockade, the ARA and the wars have wreaked on the Palestinian economy and on the lives of the people living in Gaza. When livelihoods are destroyed whether this is in agriculture through the destruction of land and farms, or of small businesses through the destruction of vehicles, shops and garages, whole families become dependent on aid and experience a loss of dignity and independence.

Some women participating in the study have taken on new tasks such as breadwinning, dealing with agencies and engaging in community activism while they continue to have responsibility for children and care for elderly relatives, highlighting the changing roles of women and also their resilience. However, as homes and infrastructure remain in rubble and women struggle to manage their own feelings of distress, grief and loss and fear for another war, the report finds that this resilience may be ebbing away with an unquantifiable potential impact on the social fabric of Palestinian society.



Palestinian woman forced to flee her house in Shejaiya neighbourhood, preparing a handmade tent for her family inside Al-Shifa Hospital, Gaza City (Emad Badwan, 2014).

1 Introduction

More than 70 per cent of the 1.8 million population of the Gaza Strip are UNRWA-registered refugees who were forcibly displaced or whose direct ancestors were forcibly displaced in 1948. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were again displaced in 1967, and in the absence of any durable solution, Palestinians living in Gaza today continue to face protracted and repeated displacement or remain at high risk of displacement due to on-going conflict, blockade, and the prolonged occupation.

In the last six years, three serious military operations have been carried out by Israel against the residents of the Gaza Strip following military conflict between Israel and Gaza. These have caused further waves of displacement amongst civilians. The most recent conflict was the July/August 2014 military operation code-named “Protective Edge” by Israel in which more than 2,100 Palestinians lost their lives. Over one year after the conflict the visible scars of this conflict remain: buildings, including homes and schools, reduced to rubble, thousands still living in transitional accommodation and many families living in houses with bullet and bomb damage to walls and ceilings.

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) provides humanitarian assistance to the residents of the Gaza Strip through a variety of programmes in the areas of Shelter, Education, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), Urban Displacement Out of Camps (UDOC), Gender Based Violence (GBV), Child Protection and Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA). Through its on-going work and as a result of earlier research studies conducted in the Gaza Strip, NRC has a particular concern about the impact on women of the on-going occupation and periodic conflict and the significant challenges faced by women in accessing their rights.

Whilst no distinction has been made in this report between UNRWA refugees and non-UNRWA residents of Gaza, it is clear the majority of the population are direct beneficiaries of the services provided by UNRWA. These includes services in the areas of health, education and relief and social services.

This research report seeks to document the impact of on-going conflict, blockade and the humanitarian crisis on women in Gaza. It highlights the gender specific impact of these issues and provides a window into women’s experiences of conflict by allowing them to speak in their own words about their experiences as told in focus groups and in individual interviews. These narratives are intended to highlight the challenges and difficulties that women face in Gaza, many having lost husbands, children and relatives as well as their homes and livelihoods. It further attempts to assess existing interventions and the capacity of agencies to meet those challenges. The report sets these experiences within the context of international law, but does not seek to analyse the legality of particular or individual incidents; a process carried out by others. The report also builds on existing research and evidence in order to develop programmatic interventions in NRC’s core competencies that meet displaced women’s needs and strengthen women’s rights. The focus of the report on women and girls should in no way be taken as diminishing the different impact of the conflict of the lives of men and boys in Gaza. However this is not the subject of this report.

The 2014 war remains raw for a large number of affected persons and , and many victims have not previously spoken of their experiences. Consequently there is a focus in this study on these memories and the subsequent challenges. Women’s experiences of the war itself and of loss and of displacement is the focus of chapter five of this report. Chapter six moves forward to 2015 to consider how the lives of women have moved. It explores the continuing impact of the conflict, blockade and humanitarian crisis on their lives and their families. In this section the report specifically considers the following areas:

- Shelter and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH);
- Family life, children, grief and loss;
- Housing, land and property (HLP);

- Livelihoods and women's changing roles.

This chapter looks at how the impact of the war of 2014 continues to be felt both in a visible and less tangible way, namely through physical destruction and by reference to the psychological effect on women coping with their losses and dealing with their grief and that of their children and family. It also highlights the economic consequences of the on-going occupation and blockade and how unemployment and a lack of livelihoods impacts on families and relationships. This chapter also draws attention to the changing roles of women, many of whom have taken on new tasks such as breadwinning and dealing with agencies while they continue to have responsibility for children and caring for elderly relatives at home. Overall, the narratives of women's struggles in the most difficult of circumstances demonstrate the strength and tenacity of the women in Gaza.

Objectives of the Report

Women in Gaza face significant challenges in accessing their rights particularly in light of the on-going Israeli occupation and blockade as well as periodic military operations in Gaza. The objective of this report is to document the impact of conflict on women and to assess the capacity of the UN, international and national NGOs and local authorities to promote the provision of humanitarian assistance and emergency services to women in conflict in a gender sensitive manner.

In particular the report will focus on the following areas:

- Protection of women during and after conflict;
- Women's vulnerability as a result of conflict;
- Displacement of women and the situation for women in transitional housing including shelters and collective centres;
- Impact on women's HLP rights:
- Widowhood and custody of children;
- Women's access to sources of livelihoods;
- Impact of the blockade on women

Methodology

Whilst a desk review of available information on the impact of the conflict on women in Gaza was conducted as part of this study, the report is predominantly based on field research conducted in Gaza from 2nd to 12th March 2015. This serves as the primary source of the information for the report. Research was conducted only in the most affected areas of the Gaza Strip. The main purpose of the research was to talk to women in Gaza about their experiences of conflict and to this end eight focus groups were conducted with a total of 123 participants comprising 113 women and 10 men. The focus groups took place in Khuza'a, Khan Younis, Al-Zeitoun, Beit Hanoun, Al-Shoka, Kherbit Al-Adas, Rafah, and Al-Shuja'iyya and were organised by NGOs including the Bait Al-Mustaqbal Society, Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC), the Ghassan Kanafani Association, the Al-Batol Society, the Palestinian Rural Women's Society for Development (PRWSD) and the Zakher Association. The author wishes to express her gratitude to those organisations that helped facilitate the focus group discussions and provided important information about the context in Gaza.

The researcher also met and interviewed in depth eleven women in Khuza'a, Al-Zeitoun, Al-Shuja'iyya, Beit Hanoun and Rafah as case studies, almost all involving home visits. The women in the focus groups were aged between 16 and 70 years old. The ten men who attended the focus group were aged between 21 and 83 years old. One men's focus group had to be cancelled for logistical reasons. Although the numbers of men participating in the research was very low, their experiences still feature in some parts of the report. Because of the limited numbers of persons interviewed there is no statistical analysis provided of the information provided by the participants. Figures provided in the text are in number form and are not gender disaggregated, again because of the low numbers. The focus groups were

organised by local community organisations and participants attended voluntarily after being provided with information about the focus group and the purpose of the research.

In addition, during the period of field research the researcher carried out 16 key informant interviews with a wide variety of individuals including staff from humanitarian and other organisations, female community leaders, a local municipality mayor, male *mukhtars* and female *mukhtara* and NRC staff.

The author wishes to thank those individuals for the time taken and the information provided.

This report does not purport to be comprehensive or statistically representative but rather offers an insight into the challenges faced by the women and men participating. It does not attempt to compare the experiences of men and women as it is primarily a study of women's experiences. It seeks to present their narrative, as well as consider the work that is being done to try and repair their lives, both human and structural. It is an attempt to explore the experiences of these women during the recent conflict, and beyond, to explore how and if they are recovering and what their challenges are in Gaza in 2015. It concludes with some suggestions as to how agencies working in the field can meet these challenges.⁹ The author is grateful to the inputs provided by various agencies, but particularly by UNRWA, UNOCHA and UN Women who provided invaluable information about their activities, experiences and responses to issues arising during the conflict.

⁹ Recommendations have been made separately and are not contained within this report.

2 Background and Context

Gaza: Conflict and Crisis

More than 1.2 million out of the 1.8 million people living in the Gaza Strip are UNRWA-registered refugees who were forcibly displaced in 1948 and 1967 or are the direct descendants of those displaced.¹⁰ Palestinians living in Gaza today continue to face protracted and repeated displacement or remain at high risk of displacement due to on-going conflict and the prolonged occupation. Moreover, the eight-year Israeli blockade and restrictions on access to farmland and fishing areas of the Gaza Strip have caused a de-development of the Palestinian economy and a humanitarian crisis, exacerbating the already deteriorating social, educational and health conditions. According to the United Nations, as of 21 January 2015 1.3 million persons – more than 70 per cent of the total population of the Gaza Strip – were classified as being vulnerable to food insecurity.¹¹

After decades of occupation, war, blockade and internal conflict, Gaza was further devastated by the war of July/August 2014. This was the latest and most deadly conflict since the 1967 Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip, leaving more than 2,200 persons dead and more than 19,000 homes destroyed or uninhabitable.¹² At the peak of the conflict, according to the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), 485,000 Palestinians, or 28 per cent of the population were internally displaced.¹³ As of 30 June 2015, almost one year after the start of the hostilities, some 100,000 people in Gaza remained internally displaced according to the Shelter Cluster.¹⁴ The July/August conflict came only eighteen months after the Israeli operation known as “Pillar of Defence” and five years after operation “Cast Lead” which left 1,366 people dead, more than 4,000 homes destroyed and 75,000 people displaced.¹⁵



Tenants of the ‘Italian Tower’ trying to salvage their belongings, Al-Nasser neighbourhood (Emad Badwan, 2014).

¹⁰ UNRWA refugees are ‘persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict’.

¹¹ UNOCHA, *Occupied Palestinian Territory: Humanitarian Needs Overview 2015*, January 2015.

¹² Shelter Cluster - Palestine, *Factsheet June 2015*, 30 June 2015, p. 5, available at <http://shelterpalestine.org/Upload/Doc/d3631325-697d-4fca-9dc0-619e79e63ab0.pdf>.

¹³ UNOCHA, *Gaza Emergency Situation Report*, 4 September 2014, available at http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_04_09_2014.pdf.

¹⁴ Shelter Cluster - Palestine, *Factsheet June 2015*, 30 June 2015, p. 5, available at <http://shelterpalestine.org/Upload/Doc/d3631325-697d-4fca-9dc0-619e79e63ab0.pdf>.

¹⁵ Figures provided by OCHA in *Voicing the Needs of Women and Men in Gaza: Beyond the Aftermath of the 23 Day Israeli Military Operations*, produced by UNIFEM, 2009, p. 9.

Any discussion of challenges facing women in Gaza must be set in the context of the on-going blockade. Following the Hamas victory in 2006, Israel closed down Gaza's main entry and exit points and banned the export of all goods from the Gaza Strip and the importation of anything except what the Israeli government labelled as 'humanitarian' into Gaza. The border with Egypt was also sealed by Egyptian authorities and subject to major restrictions on the import and export of goods and the movement of people into and out of the Gaza Strip. Between 2007 and 2015 the blockade continued with minimal easing. The overall situation in Gaza consequently deteriorated significantly in terms of unemployment, food security, provision of sufficient electricity and the quality of the living environment. By 2010, it was being reported that the blockade had resulted in the closure of most of the manufacturing industry and led to a surge in unemployment to 40 per cent.¹⁶ In May 2015, the World Bank reported that this number has risen to "43 percent in the fourth quarter of 2014— probably the highest in the world".¹⁷ "The unemployment problem is much worse for young people between the ages of 15 and 29 years: the unemployment rate for this group exceeds 60 percent".¹⁸ According to statistics from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), the overall female unemployment rate in Gaza during Quarter 1 of 2015 was 55.2%, whilst the female youth unemployment rate was 73.3%.¹⁹ UNOCHA describe the blockade as triggering "a protracted human dignity crisis with negative humanitarian consequences."²⁰

As part of the comprehensive blockade, Israel continues to restrict the import of materials deemed to have "dual use" purposes, including steel bars and cement. All are essential construction materials necessary to rebuild homes destroyed after 2008-9 and 2014 conflicts. Such materials are also necessary for ordinary levels of need based on natural population growth. This has resulted in the lack of adequate housing for the people of Gaza who are living in inadequate and overcrowded housing.



The mass destruction of Shejaiya neighbourhood - around 10 dunams (Emad Badwan, 2014).

¹⁶ UNDP, *Gaza: One Year After*, May 2010, p.10.

¹⁷ World Bank, *Economic Monitoring Report to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee*, 27 May 2015, p. 5, available at http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2015/05/27/090224b082eccb31/5_0/Rendered/PDF/Economic0monit0oc0liaison0committee.pdf.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 14.

¹⁹ Palestinian Bureau of Statistics, Q1 2015 results.

²⁰ UNOCHA, *Locked In: The Humanitarian Consequences of Two Years of Blockade of the Gaza Strip*, August 2009, p. 2.

Over the years since the Hamas takeover in Gaza there has been periodic conflict between authorities in Israel and the Gaza Strip including the firing of rockets from Gaza into Israel causing damage to property and some loss of life. Between 8 July and 26 August 2014, the people of Gaza were subjected to a massive military offensive by Israel that entailed intensive bombardments and ground invasions across the Gaza Strip. ‘Operation Protective Edge’ resulted in the deaths of 2,205 Palestinians including at least 1,563 civilians, of whom 306 were women and 551 were children. Seventy one Israelis were killed including five civilians, as well as one foreign national.²¹

According to preliminary damage assessments conducted after the end of hostilities by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the UNRWA, approximately five per cent of homes in the Gaza Strip were rendered uninhabitable, with more than 19,000 homes destroyed or uninhabitable,²² leaving more than 117,000 people displaced.²³ The scale of destruction has left complete neighbourhoods flattened, damaged and destroyed infrastructure including roads, hospitals, schools, kindergartens, the power station, water and wastewater networks and treatment facilities.²⁴

Faced with the level of damage and Israel’s blockade on the entry of goods, the challenges of reconstruction are enormous. This was the most deadly of wars in the Gaza Strip since the start of the Israeli occupation in 1967. It is therefore not surprising that this recent war remains vivid in the minds of the women and men interviewed for this research.

²¹ UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Bulletin Monthly Report June-August 2014*, 3 August 2014.

²² Shelter Cluster - Palestine, *Factsheet June 2015*, 30 June 2015, p. 5, available at <http://shelterpalestine.org/Upload/Doc/d3631325-697d-4fca-9dc0-619e79e63ab0.pdf>.

²³ Shelter Cluster – Palestine, *Gaza Situation Report December 2014*, 8 January 2015.

²⁴ NRC website description, <http://www.nrc.no/?aid=9147817>.

3 International Legal Framework

3.1 International Humanitarian Law

In the context of Israel's occupation of Palestine, both International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL) apply to the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip. Under these bodies of law, there are certain protections owed to the civilian population in general, and particular provisions of key relevance to women. Given the level of control Israel still exercises in relation to the Gaza Strip, most States and legal experts maintain that Gaza is still occupied despite the Israeli withdrawal of military personnel and settlements inside Gaza during the 2005 'Disengagement Plan'. Israel continues to maintain direct control over Gaza's borders (apart from the Rafah crossing with Egypt), as well as over airspace and territorial waters. While the Israeli government has denied the formal applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention (GCIV) to Palestine,²⁵ the international community has almost universally accepted its application. This was confirmed by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in its Advisory Opinion on the *Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory*, which held that the Fourth Geneva Convention is applicable in relation to Israel's occupation of Palestine.²⁶

IHL provides protection for civilians during conflict, stating that they shall enjoy general protection against the "dangers arising from military operations" and "shall not be the object of attack".²⁷ Parties to an armed conflict must at all times "distinguish between civilians and combatants", especially in that "attacks may only be directed against combatants" and "must not be directed against civilians."²⁸ As indicated by the ICRC in its commentary, "In wartime conditions it is inevitable that individuals belonging to the category of combatants become intermingled with the civilian population, for example, soldiers on leave visiting their families. However, provided that these are not regular units with fairly large numbers, this does not in any way change the civilian character of a population."

A similar rule requires parties to distinguish between "civilian objects" and "military objectives". These rules are part of the fundamental principle of "distinction".²⁹ Military objectives are limited to those objects which by their nature, location, purpose or use make an effective contribution to military action and whose partial or total destruction, capture or neutralization, in the circumstances ruling at the time, offers a definite military advantage.³⁰ "Civilian objects are all objects that are not military objectives."³¹ In cases where it is unclear whether a specific object such as a home or residential building, place of worship, school, media office, medical facility, or government building is being used for military purposes, "it shall be presumed not to be so used".³² According to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, intentionally directing attacks against the civilian population as such or against individual civilians not taking direct part in hostilities and intentionally directing attacks against civilian objects constitute war crimes.³³

²⁵ ICJ, *Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory*, Advisory Opinion ('Wall advisory opinion'), 2004 43 ILM 1009 para. 90.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, para. 101.

²⁷ Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions (AP I), art 51(1)(2).

²⁸ Jean-Marie Henckaerts and Louise Doswald-Beck, *Customary International Law, Volume I: Rules*, ICRC, 2005 ('ICRC Customary IHL Study'), Rule 1; see also AP I, art 48 and Additional Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions (AP II), art 12(2). Also see *Prosecutor v Dusko Tadic*, Opinion and Judgement, IT-94-1-T, ICTY, 7 May 1997, paras. 644-646; ICRC Customary IHL, Rule 6; AP I, art 50(1). A similar decision was made in the Special Court for Sierra Leone in *Prosecutor v Fofana and Kondewa*, Judgement, SCSL-04-14-A, 2 August 2007, paras. 116-117 and 136-137.

²⁹ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 1; see also AP I, art 48 and AP II, art 2(2).

³⁰ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, Rule 9.

³² AP I, art 52(3). The authoritative ICRC Commentary on the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions interprets the expression "definite military advantage anticipated" by stating that "it is not legitimate to launch an attack which only offers potential or indeterminate advantages."

³³ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court ('ICC Statute'), arts 8(2)(b)(i) and (ii).

IHL expressly forbids the destruction of private property unless it is absolutely necessary for military purposes (Article 53 GCIV), while extensive destruction and appropriation of property not justified by military necessity and carried out unlawfully and wantonly constitutes a grave breach of Article 147 of GCIV and, therefore, is a war crime.

Apart from the general protection afforded to the civilian population in time of armed conflict, including the prohibition on deliberate attacks against civilians³⁴ and on the destruction of private property in the absence of a military need,³⁵ IHL provides specific measures of protection for women (in particular pregnant women and mothers of young children). Indeed, on several occasions, the UN Security Council has called the parties to a conflict to make special arrangements to meet the protection and assistance requirements of women.³⁶

While IHL protections equally apply to men and women without discrimination,³⁷ this body of law recognizes women's specific needs and grants them these protections:

- IHL provides that “women shall be the object of special respect”.³⁸
- Women must be specially protected against any attack on their honour, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution, and any form of indecent assault.³⁹ Rape, or any other form of sexual violence, constitutes a war crime.⁴⁰
- There is an obligation to separate women deprived of their liberty from men detainees.⁴¹
- States are to consider the possibility of establishing safety zones for, among others, pregnant women and mothers with children under seven (GCIV, Article 14).
- Parties should endeavour to evacuate “maternity cases”, namely women about to give birth or in the process of giving birth, from conflict zones (GCIV, Article 17).
- Maternity cases among internees in occupied territories must be admitted to medical facilities where they may receive adequate care; that care must be the same as that available to the population at large (GCIV, Article 91). Mothers and pregnant women should receive special treatment in regards to medical care (GCIV, Article 91; AP I, Article 76(2)).
- Hospitals for the care of the wounded and “maternity cases” must be protected and respected (GCIV, Articles 18, 20, 21 and 22).
- States must allow free passage of foodstuffs and supplies to pregnant women and nursing mothers (GCIV, Article 23).
- Detaining powers must supply extra provisions of food to interned expectant and nursing mothers (GCIV, Article 89).
- Pregnant women and nursing mothers are to be given priority in the distribution of relief supplies (AP I, Article 70).

3.2 International Human Rights Law (IHRL)

Israel is also bound by its obligations under the major human rights treaties. Israel is a party to the following conventions: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), the

³⁴ AP I, art 51.

³⁵ GCIV, art 53.

³⁶ For example, UNSC Res 1296 (19 April 2000).

³⁷ GCIV, art 33; AP I, arts 10, 75(1); ICRC Customary IHL Study, p. 474 (Rule 134).

³⁸ AP I, art 76(1).

³⁹ GCIV, art 27; AP I, art 76(1); ICRC Customary IHL Study, pp. 324-5 (Rule 93).

⁴⁰ ICC Statute, arts 8(2)(b)(xxii), 8(2)(e)(vi).

⁴¹ GCIV, arts 76, 85; AP I, art 75(5); ICRC Customary IHL Study, p. 431 (Rule 119).

Convention Against Torture (CAT), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts.

According to the principles of international law, States are obliged to respect IHRL extra-territorially such as when a State acts in relation to a population or territory outside of its own borders, but which is under its effective control. The International Court of Justice reiterated the views of the Human Rights Committee when it confirmed that Israel's obligations under the ICCPR, the ICESCR and the Convention on the Rights of the Child applied to Palestine,⁴² all of which must be respected without discrimination.⁴³ The Court found that "... the protection offered by human rights conventions does not cease in case of armed conflict, save through the effect of provisions for derogation of the kind to be found in Article 4 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights."⁴⁴

Human rights treaties prohibit the arbitrary deprivation of life (Article 6, ICCPR), and provide that everyone has the right to liberty and security of the person (Article 9, ICCPR) and to freedom of movement (Article 10, ICCPR). IHRL also provides that no one shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his privacy or home, and has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks (Article 17, ICCPR). The right to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, housing and clothing is protected by Article 11 of the ICESCR,⁴⁵ and the rights to the highest attainable standards of physical and mental health (Article 12) and to education (Article 13) are also provided by the ICESCR.

In 2014, and following the Gaza conflict (Operation 'Protective Edge'), the Human Rights Committee reviewed Israel's periodic report on its compliance with the ICCPR, and stated as follows:

The Committee expresses its concern at allegations of human rights violations committed during the military operations in the Gaza Strip known as "Operation Pillar of Defence" (14-21 November 2012) and "Operation Protective Edge" (8 July-26 August 2014), inter alia, the disproportionate number of casualties among civilians, including children; the destruction of homes and other civilian infrastructure, including medical facilities and schools, in particular the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) schools used as shelters for civilians and other United Nations installations during the "Operation Protective Edge" (arts. 2, 6, 7, 9, 12, and 17).⁴⁶

The Committee also expressed its concerns regarding the long-standing blockade of the Gaza Strip imposed by Israel and noted that the blockade continues to hamper freedom of movement; to negatively impact on Palestinians' access to all basic and life-saving services such as food, health, electricity, water and sanitation; and to delay reconstruction efforts in the Gaza Strip.⁴⁷ The Committee recommended that Israel should, inter alia:

Lift its blockade of the Gaza Strip, insofar as it adversely affects the civilian population and provide unrestricted access for the provision of urgent humanitarian assistance and construction materials needed for civilian reconstruction efforts.⁴⁸

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has expressed concern about Palestinians' lack of access to agricultural land for Palestinians living near the Wall or in the Access Restricted Area

⁴² *Wall* advisory opinion, paras. 102-113

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, paras 50-53.

⁴⁵ Ratified by Israel on 3 January 1992.

⁴⁶ Human Rights Committee, *Concluding Observations: Israel*, CCPR/C/Isr/CO/4, 21 November 2014, para.6.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, para. 12.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

(ARA) in Gaza,⁴⁹ and noted that those living in Gaza have severely restricted access to health facilities, goods and services in violation of Article 12 ICESCR.⁵⁰

Israel, and now Palestine since its accession to the treaty in April 2014, also have obligations under CEDAW.⁵¹ The CEDAW Convention provides the basis for realising equality between women and men through ensuring women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life as well as education, health and employment. The CEDAW Committee has made it clear that Israel should “give full effect to the implementation of its obligations under the Convention in regard to all persons under its jurisdiction, including women in the Occupied Territories...”⁵² General Recommendation (GR) 19 provides that gender-based violence, which impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of human rights and fundamental freedoms under general international law or under human rights conventions, is discrimination within the meaning of Article 1 of the Convention.⁵³

In 2013, the CEDAW Committee adopted a General Recommendation focusing on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations. The GR reiterates that State Parties’ obligations continue to apply during conflict or states of emergency without discrimination between citizens and non-citizens within their territory or effective control, even if not situated within the territory of the State Party,⁵⁴ and further notes that: “Conflicts exacerbate existing gender inequalities, placing women at a heightened risk of various forms of gender based violence by both State and non-State actors.”⁵⁵

The CEDAW Committee last reviewed Israel’s policies in January 2011 and in its concluding observations, coming after the 2008-9 Gaza war, included the following : “While noting the complexity of the local administration, the Committee notes with deep concern that Palestinian women and girls continue to suffer from violent attacks from both State (Israeli soldiers) and non-State (inter alia settlers) actors, as well as all other forms of violence within their communities, including violations of the right to life, physical, psychological and verbal abuse, and sexual harassment. The Committee also notes with serious concern that such cases are rarely documented, prosecuted and punished.”⁵⁶

3.3 Legal Status of Women in Gaza

In Gaza, existing laws do not offer sufficient protection to women and are often discriminatory and even condone the second class status of women in society.⁵⁷ Reforming these laws and ensuring progress towards change is, however, held back by both patriarchy and by the ongoing occupation, the blockade, isolation and war. Efforts at the mainstreaming of women’s rights through legislative reform, such as by the efforts of women’s groups and the establishment of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs by the PA in 2003, have not produced substantive change to laws or underlying practice. The conservative approach of Hamas in Gaza, Sharia law provisions which treat women as having lesser rights than men, and a political context of continuing conflict and violence in Gaza have impeded meaningful change.⁵⁸

⁴⁹ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *Concluding Observations: Israel*, 47th Session, E/C.12/Isr/CO/3, para. 12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, para. 32.

⁵¹ CEDAW was ratified by Israel in October 1991.

⁵² See, for example, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *Consideration of Reports Submitted by State Parties: Third periodic report of Israel*, 685th and 686th meetings, 6 July 2005, paras. 243.

⁵³ CEDAW, *General Recommendation 19*, para. 7.

⁵⁴ CEDAW, *General Recommendation No. 30 on Women in Conflict Prevention, Conflict and Post Conflict Situations*, para. 8, available at <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CEDAW/GComments/CEDAW.C.CG.30.pdf>.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, para. 34.

⁵⁶ CEDAW, *Concluding Observations: Israel*, 48th Session, CEDAW/C/Isr/CO/5, 2011, para. 22.

⁵⁷ Nadera Shaloub-Kevorkian, ‘Researching Women’s Victimisation in Palestine: A Socio-Legal Analysis’ in Lynn Welchman and Sara Hossain (eds.), *Honour: Crimes, Paradigms and Violence against Women*, 2005, pp.160-180.

⁵⁸ NRC, *Realities from the Ground: Women’s Housing, Land and Property Rights in the Gaza Strip*, 2013, available at http://www.nrc.no/arch/_img/9194678.pdf.

In Palestinian personal status law women (but not men) require the consent of a *wali* (guardian) in order to marry.⁵⁹ Whilst the legal age of marriage in Gaza for females is 17 years, and 18 years for males,⁶⁰ in practice many girls in Gaza marry at a younger age. As set out in the NRC study on Women's Housing, Land and Property rights,⁶¹ "guardianship" is required by *shari'a* law: Article 9 of the Personal Status Law also concerns the concept of guardianship. A male guardian has to agree to a woman's marriage, and usually this man is the woman's father or brother. If they are not available, then a judge will assume the guardianship. Single women of any age are subject to this provision and it is only women who have been married before who have the right to marry without the permission of a guardian. Women also require the permission of their husband or other male relative to travel with their children and to open a bank account for their children.⁶²

Palestinian women also do not have the same citizenship rights as men. Citizenship rights are still governed by the laws and regulations in effect before the 1967 Israeli occupation: the Jordanian nationality code (No. 6 of 1945) and its amendments are applied in the West Bank, while the applicable law in Gaza is the Palestinian Citizenship Order of 1925 and 1941 which were promulgated during the British mandate era. Both codes allow only men, not women, to pass their nationality to their spouses or children. In addition, a woman loses her nationality if she marries a non-Palestinian, unless she submits a written application to the Minister of Interior within one year following her marriage.⁶³ Article 16 of the Personal Status Law states that in order to ensure the validity of the contract of marriage it is a condition for two Muslims males or one male and two female Muslims to witness the marriage. This provision enshrines discrimination in the law by providing that the witness of two women is equal to the witness of one man. This means that women are not recognised as full persons in the *shari'a* courts where the witness testimony of a woman is seen as holding less weight than a man, evidencing the inferior legal status of women.

When women are seen as second class by society at large, this can often mean that gender aspects of crises are ignored or overlooked because interventions are planned without consulting women. As a result of social norms, women often spend a large amount of time at home and are often less visible in public life, leading to a decrease in access to information and participation in public forums. Women and men can highlight different concerns and bring different perspectives, experiences and solutions to the issue and a clear picture cannot be obtained when 50 per cent of the population has not been consulted.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ The Law of Family Rights (1954), arts 11-12.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, arts 5-9. It should be noted that according to an administrative directive in *Sharia* courts n. (78) of 1955, following the approval of a *Sharia* judge the legal age of marriage for females is 15 *Hijri* years, and 16 *Hijri* years for males. (A *Hijri* year is 11 days less than a year according to the Gregorian calendar)

⁶¹ NRC, *Realities from the Ground: Women's Housing, Land and Property Rights in the Gaza Strip*, 2013, available at http://www.nrc.no/arch/_img/9194678.pdf.

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 33.

⁶³ Suheir Azzouni, 'Palestine' in Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin (eds.), *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: UN Progress amid Resistance*, Freedom House, New York, 2010, p. 5, available at <http://www.freedomhouse.org>.

⁶⁴ UN Women, *Gaza Guidebook*, 2011, p. 9.

4 Women's Experiences of Conflict

This research was commissioned to assess the impact of the on-going occupation, conflict and blockade on women's lives. At the time that the field research was conducted in March 2015, seven months after the Israeli assault on Gaza, it was clear that women were still profoundly affected by the events of July-August 2014. Their memories were vivid and horrifying and they had in no sense been able to 'move on' from those days. Many of them had not received any psychological support and there has been no accountability or findings of responsibility for those who had caused the deaths of their loved ones, their displacement or the destruction of their homes.

This section of the report therefore provides an opportunity for those women's voices to be heard and for their experiences of war and displacement to be recorded. Many of the men and women that participated in focus groups or were interviewed were fearful of another war. With Gaza still in ruins and the people still emotionally and physically devastated, a further conflict would be shattering for the civilian population of Gaza.

4.1 Memories of the 2014 War: Loss of Life

Since Israel announced its military operation "Protective Edge" on 7 July, Gaza has been subjected to daily intensive bombardment from the air, land and sea, employing well over 2,100 air strikes alone...The targeting of civilian homes is a violation of international humanitarian law, unless the homes are being used for military purposes. Attacks against military objectives must offer a definite military advantage in the prevailing circumstances, and precautions must be taken to protect civilian lives. The fact that an attempt to warn civilians has been made, does not release the attacker from its obligation to spare civilian lives. A number of incidents, along with the high number of civilian deaths, belie the claim that all necessary precautions are being taken. People – particularly the elderly, sick and those with disabilities – are not given sufficient time to scramble out of their homes. When they do manage to run out into the street, there is nowhere to hide and no way of knowing where the next shell or missile will land. (Statement of UN High Commissioner Navi Pillay to the Human Rights Council 21st Special Session: Human Rights Situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem 23 July 2014).⁶⁵

During the focus groups, the women described their experiences and recounted their terror of fleeing the bombing, running from place to place. Some talked about forgetting children and leaving them behind, passing dead bodies, chaos and confusion and little time to think about where to go and what to take when they fled. Some women were pulled out of the rubble, amazed at being alive, others saw children and other family members killed in front of their eyes. These were experiences that they cannot forget.

The researcher met with women from Rafah in southern Gaza which was subject to extremely heavy shelling and fighting at the start of August 2014.⁶⁶ A 72-hour ceasefire had come into force on 1 August 2014 and many internally displaced people (IDPs) had returned to their homes, however in response to the reported abduction of an IDF soldier Lieutenant Goldin, the IDF responded with a massive force which lasted from 1-3 August 2014 and during which time 225 Palestinians lost their lives and 2,579 houses were destroyed.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Available at: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?LangID=E&NewsID=14893>.

⁶⁶ http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_03_08_2014.pdf.

⁶⁷ Al Haq, *Divide and Conquer: Targeted Killing of Civilians*, 2015, p. 35.

Focus Groups: Experiences of the 2014 War in Rafah

Two groups of women living in Rafah recalled their experiences of the events of the 2014 war. One group were from the Al-Shoka neighbourhood and another group was from Kherbet Al-Adas, both areas severely affected by the bombardment and incursion into Rafah on 1 August 2014.

Many women talked about the chaotic situation as they left their homes and the horror of seeing injured people. A woman from Al-Shoka also saw a man separated from his daughter and found an abandoned baby: “On Friday 1 August during the supposed ceasefire, I was staying at the school and went back to the house at 7am to check up on the house and also to get together and sit with all my family as we had been scattered. There was no warning – we saw warplanes and I heard gun shots from everywhere. People started running in the streets – and as I was running I saw injured people in the streets and people who had lost members of their families. I saw a man who had lost his daughter while running – he wanted to carry her but they told him not to and he lost her. I saw a tiny one-week-old baby left in the street and I picked him up. We took him with us and announced that we had found this baby and for someone to come and pick him up.”

Wajeha, in tears, told us about the devastating loss of three of her children during the war. “One of my sons went outside and there was a drone missile and he was killed. A man came to tell me – Ibrahim was killed. They wanted to take my son to the hospital and my oldest son went on a motorbike with my brother in law to the hospital – but this was also hit and they were killed. This happened on Friday but I only heard about it on Saturday. Ten days later they bombed our house over our heads and my 13-year-old daughter was killed in the bombing. I was interviewed by the press after it happened and called on the nations to stop the war.”

The women in this focus group said that their family members were not combatants. One woman was clear that the attack that killed her son was a random attack: “The situation became very dangerous and I wanted to leave, but my children insisted that we stay. I saw people running outside, then my son left. We were walking and my son, who was 24 years old was hit and killed. He had seen two of his friends and went out to see them. He wasn’t part of the resistance; he was unarmed and they were hit by a drone missile. They were dressed as civilians; it was obvious that they were civilians.”

The experiences of the women in Rafah highlight the reality for the women of living through war and the importance of effective accountability mechanisms to investigate and hold those responsible to account for their actions.



Palestinian families from Beit Hanoun fleeing their homes due to heavy Israeli shelling (Emad Badwan, 2014).

Experiences from Beit Hanoun

On 6 August, UNOCHA reported that: “The most serious incident recorded during the reporting period [4-5 August 2014] was the recovery of the badly decomposed bodies of eight members of the Wahdan extended family from under the rubble of their home in Beit Hanoun. Some members of the family managed to flee Beit Hanoun before the ground invasion, with some taking refuge in the house of Jameel Abu Al Qomsan in Jabalia Camp. However, this house was itself shelled by the Israeli air force on 3 August. Three other members of the Wahdan family were killed in this attack, a man and two women; a two-year-old girl died later from her injuries. Eleven others were injured in this incident, including four children and three women, four in critical condition.”⁶⁸

Rabab Wahdan is a member of that family. She and her husband survived the attack but are still clearly traumatised by what happened. Rabab’s husband Majde has made a temporary home for the family next to the site of their destroyed home – they had not received any assistance and it has been creatively made from timber and materials, like tiles, taken from the ruins of their home.

Case Study 1: Rabab Wahdan

Location: Beit Hanoun

Date: 05.03.15

Rabab is a quiet and shy young woman and looks much younger than her 24 years. Rabab feels lucky to be alive after her experiences during the war, but life is very difficult for her and her family; living in their temporary home and surrounded by the loss and grief for all those who died around her.

“I am 24 years old and married, my husband is 25 years. We don’t have any children yet. I live with my husband and his brothers and their families. There are 27 of us altogether. During the war, we left the house at a time when there were missiles landing in the land behind us. Eight of my husband’s family were killed – they were trapped in the house – they were aged between 2 years and 70 years old.

My uncle was injured and he left and took his children. We left and went to the UN school for shelter but then left and went to a house in Jabalia. This house was bombed while we were in it and four more of my family were killed. I survived. I don’t know how. The house collapsed around me – 17 other people were injured but I was not. They took me to hospital but I wasn’t injured.

I still can’t understand how I didn’t get injured when others died or were injured. I saw the rocket coming down. I can picture it as it came down. It was red. It was coming down towards me. This cannot escape my mind. Now if I hear war planes I feel terrified. I went to Shifa hospital and stayed there for some time with the many injured and then went to the UN school.”

During a ceasefire Rabab found that her home had been completely destroyed with all their belongings in it. Her husband built a temporary home on the site in ten days with materials from their destroyed home as they couldn’t afford to rent somewhere else, but they are concerned that they have had little information about help with rebuilding their home.

Her husband Majde lost eight of his immediate family members and is quite clearly heartbroken. He told us that eight members of his family had been held and kept in the house by the Israeli military and when they were still in the house, it was targeted. His father and other family members had been killed in the second attack that Rabaab described. He gave the names and ages of his family and wanted the researcher to see and record the photographs of his family members who had been killed:

⁶⁸ UNOCHA, *Emergency Situation Report*, 6 August 2014, available at http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitreps_06_08_2014.pdf.

Baghdad Wahdan – sister in law
Ahmed Wahdan – brother, 14 years old
Hussein Wahdan – brother, 11 years old
Zeinab Wahdan – sister, 27 years old who worked at the hospital.
Sumad Wahdan – sister, 24 years old and Reina her daughter two years old
Suhad Wahdan 67 years old – Mother and Zaki Wahdan - Father

Experiences from Al-Shuja'iyya and Zaitoun

The UN reported that on 15 July, the Israeli military delivered text messages to virtually all the residents of Al-Shuja'iyya and Zaitoun neighbourhoods in eastern Gaza City, approximately 100,000 people, warning them to leave their homes by 8 am on 16 July, ahead of attacks to be launched in the area.⁶⁹ The majority of Al-Shuja'iyya's 92,000 residents had remained in their homes, despite Israeli warnings during the previous days as they had felt that there was nowhere else to go.⁷⁰

Medicines Sans Frontiers reported that following heavy shelling overnight on 19 July 2014, women and children comprising most of the wounded people arrived in the emergency room in Al Shifa Hospital in Gaza City on the morning of 20 July 2014. The MSF field coordinator in Gaza, said: "While official claims are that the objective of the ground offensive is to destroy tunnels into Israel, what we see on the ground is that bombing is indiscriminate and that those who die are civilians... They have nowhere else to go and crossing the border does not seem a realistic option, United Nations shelters are now overcrowded and hygiene conditions are extremely worrying."⁷¹

After the massive military offensive, by 23 July 2014, UNOCHA reported that, 120 people had been reported killed or their bodies recovered from under the rubble in the Al-Shuja'iyya neighbourhood, including 26 children and 15 women, many of whom remained buried under the rubble, in areas that were not accessible for some time afterwards.⁷² An estimated 2,700 housing units were totally destroyed and a further approximately 2,000 housing units were severely damaged beyond repair. Altogether a total of 4,700 housing units need reconstruction and an additional 5,000 require minor repairs.⁷³

Case Study 2: Hadiya Abu Mrahel

Location: Gaza City

Interviewed: 4 March 2015

Hadiya is married and has eight children; six boys and two girls. Her daughters are 19 and 18 years and her sons are 23, 22, 15, 12 and 8 years old. She lives in the Zaitoun neighbourhood and her home was completely destroyed in the war. Five years ago a missile also landed on the land next to their home. She had trouble remembering what had happened when the missile hit their home in July 2014, but her sister-in-law Nehad tells us that they had to help her and her children out of the rubble together with her own two children. Hadiya is clearly still shocked and deeply affected by what happened to her and her children. She told us:

"It was 10am in the morning during the war and I was baking. There was no warning and a drone missile hit our home and the roof came down on me. I wasn't unconscious but I can't really remember

⁶⁹ UNOCHA, *Gaza Emergency Situation Report*, 17 July 2014, available at http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_17_07_2014.pdf.

⁷⁰ UNOCHA, *Gaza Emergency Situation Report*, 20 July 2014, available at http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_21_07_2014.pdf.

⁷¹ MSF, 'Israel Must Stop Bombing Trapped Civilians', press release, 21 July 2014, available at <http://www.msf.org.uk/article/gaza-strip-israel-must-stop-bombing-trapped-civilians>.

⁷² http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_23_07_2014.pdf.

⁷³ NRC, *Fact Sheet: Reconstruction in Shuja'iyya Neighbourhood*, Gaza Housing, Land and Property Series, March 2015.

what happened. An ambulance took us to Shifa hospital and gave me stiches in my head; you can see the scar. My children had been sleeping because it was Ramadan and they had been up early to break their fast. All of my children were at home with me but they all survived. One of my daughter's hips and waist still hurt her. I didn't have to stay at the hospital for long, but I stayed there with my son for eight days and my nephew was in hospital for about a month."

After the bombing, she went to stay with a cousin where they were 40 people in the house and stayed there for the rest of the war. On return the house was completely destroyed and uninhabitable. They received money from UNRWA which paid rent on another home for six months. Her husband then borrowed money from friends to rebuild a small one bedroom house on the site of the old one. The family lost all their possessions in the war and Hadiya and her family are still badly affected by the trauma of the war: "The children are all fine physically but it does affect the children psychologically. I feel stressed and I don't feel I have any support. We feel that there is going to be another war in Gaza."

4.2 Displacement

This section will build on the previous section and look more specifically at women's experiences of displacement during the 2014 war. Most of those who were interviewed or took part in focus group discussions for this research were displaced during the 2014 war. Only three out of the 117 people who took part in the focus group discussions for this research said that they had remained in their homes, the rest were displaced, most multiple times, fleeing to relatives, friends or neighbours and then often on to shelter at the UNRWA schools. Although this is a higher proportion than for the population at large it is likely to be reflective of the reality in those areas where the research took place.

At the peak of the conflict, according to UNOCHA, 485,000 Palestinians, or 28 per cent of the population were internally displaced. The people took refuge in UNRWA schools designated as emergency shelters (290,000), government schools (15,000), in informal shelters such as empty buildings, churches or mosques, and with host families (170,000).⁷⁴



Families return to their homes in Beit Hanoun during a humanitarian ceasefire (Emad Badwan, 2014).

⁷⁴ UNOCHA, *Gaza Emergency Situation Report*, 4 September 2014.

Maternal Health and Babies

IHL provides for additional protections for pregnant women and women caring for children under seven years old. There are provisions that require states to consider the possibility of establishing safety zones for pregnant women and mothers with children under seven (GCIV, Article 14) and to endeavour to evacuate “women about to give birth or in the process of giving birth”, from conflict zones (GCIV, Article 17). In Gaza however, there were no safety zones established and no measures to enable maternity cases to be evacuated from the many areas of Gaza that were subject to prolonged fighting and violence.

It is not surprising therefore that information from the maternity ward of the Shifa hospital in Gaza City, noted in an OCHA situation report at the time, highlighted increased numbers of miscarriages, premature births, and child mortality amongst pregnant women during the war. The report states that access to obstetric care was limited due to the hostilities and noted that many health facilities providing obstetric care were not operating.⁷⁵ During the crisis, more than 45,000 pregnant women were deprived of access to basic reproductive health services, and around 5,000 deliveries took place in extremely poor conditions.⁷⁶



A displaced child whose home was destroyed sleeping in an UNRWA schoolyard, Beit Hanoun (Emad Badwan, 2014).

Focus Group Discussion Findings

The following is a selection of comments from some of the women taking part in the focus groups in all areas of the research. Their experiences reinforce the fact that there was no safe place for pregnant women, or those with very young children; and that there was no special provisions made for women

⁷⁵ UNOCHA, *Gaza Emergency Situation Report*, 25 July 2014.

⁷⁶ UN Economic and Social Council, *Report of Secretary General*, E/CN.6/2015/5, 19 December 2014, available at http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=E/CN.6/2015/5.

giving birth. The hospitals were prioritising the severely injured and dying meaning that women had to leave hospitals early into extremely unsafe and often unsanitary conditions putting themselves and their new babies at risk. Other women with very young children faced similar dangers and risks.

A woman participating in the focus group in Gaza City who was pregnant during the war spoke about her experiences: “During the war, my children were saying let’s leave. I was eight months pregnant and we were living on the third floor of a building. I have diabetes and high blood pressure. They struck a house behind us and it made a huge hole in the wall. I was in the bathroom and I came out and 8 months pregnant, I slipped. The windows and doors were blown in. I went to the UN school with my husband and five of my children. There were 70 of us in a classroom. It was the same in each classroom. We had mattresses made of straw and they were just big enough for one person but not enough. I didn’t feel safe and I was worrying about my children who weren’t with me.”⁷⁷

Another woman from Rafah also said that she couldn’t think about her own safety and wellbeing as she was just concerned for her children: “I was four months pregnant and I suffered a lot, it was very difficult. I wasn’t thinking about my pregnancy though. I was just worrying about my other children. My youngest is 3 years and the oldest is 12 years.” She left her home to stay at her brother’s friend’s house, but the neighbour’s house was hit and they went from there to a UN school: “We had one blanket and I slept on it with all my children. We were on the third floor and the children would play out near the railings and I would have to chase them. No matter how much I cleaned it was still dirty. There were 50 of us in the classroom.”⁷⁸

An older woman from Khuza’a had the responsibility for her pregnant daughter-in-law and her pregnant daughter, taking both to hospital during the war: “When the war started my daughter in law was 9 months pregnant and very close to her due date and my daughter was 7 months pregnant. We stayed in the house as long as we could but later had to leave. My daughter in law thought she was in labour but they told her it was the gas. We went to the UNWRA school and it was there that she went into labour and gave birth by C-section at the hospital to a baby boy. She was only allowed to stay for three days at the hospital and then they said she had to leave because there weren’t enough beds so we brought her back to the school. We were told there she shouldn’t stay because it wasn’t hygienic and not safe and so I helped move her to a friend’s house where she needed to stay for 40 days.”



A young woman with physical disability taking refuge inside an UNRWA school (Emad Badwan, 2014).

⁷⁷ Focus Group Discussion, Gaza City, 4 March 2015.

⁷⁸ Focus Group Discussion, Al-Shoker, Rafah, 8 March 2015.

During the conflict, there was no organised assistance for women with very young children through government agencies or humanitarian organisations, and often no passage for ambulances or the Red Cross. Often women had to flee and try and ensure the safety of their children in extremely difficult and dangerous conditions as the experience of this woman from Rafah highlights: “On Friday after breaking the fast, the Israelis started bombing with F16s and all you could see was shrapnel. Me, my aunt, my husband and two children – my youngest was 9 months old at the time. We called the ambulances and the Red Cross but nobody could reach us.” She stayed in the house and could see the tanks outside and she thought one of her children was going to die because he was having trouble breathing and turning blue. A missile then hit their house but it didn’t explode and she described fleeing outside in the dust and smoke carrying her three year old child, not knowing where the rest of her family were: “I remember a moment when I thought that I had lost my children.”⁷⁹

Case Study 3: I’tidal Ayad, Wedad Ayad and Fida Ayad

Location: Al-Shuja’iyya

The researcher interviewed three members of the Ayad family from three different generations, in their home in the heart of Al-Shuja’iyya. One of the floors of the house had been repaired and most of the family is now living on that floor. The top floor is still in ruins with large holes in the walls and rubble over the floor and it is too expensive for them to carry out the repairs. The house looks out onto the ruins of a completely destroyed house only metres away from their own.

I’tidal Ayad is 48 years old and has 12 children and 13 grandchildren. She lives with her mother-in-law, Wedad Ayad who is 70 years old. I’tidal’s daughter Fida Ayad is 26 years old, and although she lives with her husband she returned to live with her mother and gave birth to her third child during the 2014 war. I’tidal was therefore taking responsibility for keeping her children, including her pregnant daughter, and then newborn child, as well as her elderly aunt safe and provided for during the crisis, highlighting the vital role that women play during war.

I’tidal said : “Thirteen of my cousins were killed during the attacks. They were killed by a missile as they were fleeing their home. None of them were involved in the resistance, it was a random bombing.” She and her family – all 26 people living in the house, including her daughter with her two day-old baby, fled during the bombing to a cousin’s house

Fida recalled going into labour just days prior to having to flee her mother’s home: “I didn’t know I was in labour because I was so scared, and I didn’t want to tell anyone. My mother told me that I had to go to the hospital but I didn’t want to leave. I walked to the hospital with my mother, it was after 9pm, it was dark and there was a curfew and it was as awful, as you can imagine, I was very frightened. I was at the hospital for four hours only to give birth and then came back to my mother’s home. That night they hit the mosque nearby and then we ran outside and when we were out on the street they hit our living room with a missile and then hit the house with another missile. There were four in total hit the house while we were still on our way out.”

I’tidal described how the family went first to a cousin’s house, then on to her sister’s in the Moghrabi district and then on to a UN school. She recalled that: “There were 70 of us in one classroom. There was no water and the bathrooms were dirty. We used to go to neighbours, to the Red Cross or to hospitals to wash.”

Wedad also had terrible memories of the time: “At the school it wasn’t safe, we could hear the bombing and I was worrying all the time about all my children and grandchildren. I didn’t have anything to sleep on until they provided me with a cardboard box to sleep on. During the ceasefire I came to the house to get clothes for the new baby and bought some more.”

⁷⁹ Focus Group Discussion, Rafah, 8 March 2015.

The family's home had some repairs done and they are all back living there, but the top floor still has gaping holes in the walls where the missiles hit and is uninhabitable meaning they all have to crowd into the few rooms that have been repaired.

Khuza'a: Fleeing Under Fire

As of 23 July 2014, Khuza'a, was exposed to severe artillery fire as Israeli forces entered several hundred metres into the village and at least 20 persons were killed.⁸⁰ Khuza'a, near the southern Gaza town of Khan Younis, which has a population of about 10,000, was the scene of fighting between Israeli forces and Palestinian armed groups during an Israeli ground offensive in the area. Israeli forces provided general warnings to Khuza'a residents to leave the area prior to July 21, but many of those interviewed explained that when they tried to leave they were confronted by Israeli tanks and soldiers preventing them from leaving their homes.

The situation was made even more dangerous and difficult for the residents of Khuza'a as it was impossible for ambulances to enter the area. The UN reported over several days that it was difficult to know numbers as an evacuation of casualties had not yet taken place because ambulances were not being given safe access to the area.⁸¹ In the following days, the UN continued to report that the area was inaccessible.⁸²



Woman crying upon seeing her destroyed neighbourhood in Gaza City (Emad Badwan, 2014).

⁸⁰ UNOCHA, *Gaza Emergency Situation Report*, 23 July 2014, available at http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitreprep_23_07_2014.pdf.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² UNOCHA, *Gaza Emergency Situation Report*, 26 July 2014, available at http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitreprep_27_07_2014.pdf.

Focus Groups in Khuza'a, Khan Younis

In the two focus groups held in Khuza'a, the women described the warnings that they received telling them to leave but then being confronted by tanks and Israeli soldiers blocking their way. They witnessed people being shot and killed as they tried to escape from the bombing. Some were trapped with nowhere safe to go. In some cases women also walked out of their houses first to protect the men in their families who were more likely to be shot at or fired upon, thus placing their own lives in danger.

One woman told the group: "We got a call to leave but then we saw that there were tanks coming. We left the house and saw the tanks ahead, and there were airstrikes all around us. We left the house in lines – my husband and the older men first, and then me and my daughters. Then suddenly the tanks came and approached us – the most difficult situation was when the tanks were coming towards me and the Israelis saying to us to get down. I just started yelling – and said how could I bear to see my children get shot and how could I carry them to the hospital and what would I do if they were too heavy for me to carry. Most of the groups of people had got through peacefully, but then the men in the tanks were saying for us to get up and then for us to get down, playing games with us."

Another woman described leaving her home and being confronted by Israeli tanks in front of her: "As we were leaving Khuza'a, we were stepping over dead bodies. My son is very affected and still remembers this. When we left, we came to a road with cactuses on either side and we came to a tank and we had to stay there in the road under the planes hovering and tanks around us. A man tried to stand up to say something and he was shot. Everyone was crying and screaming for help. It was unforgettable." Another woman described leaving her home while the incursion was taking place: "First it was the women who decided to leave. I went out first to show the Israelis we were women and children and so they wouldn't fire at us, then followed by the men." Even then she couldn't leave the area and she recalled: "They forced us to the entrance of Khuza'a and even though they had told us to leave, it was very dangerous and there were missiles and dead bodies everywhere. Even after they asked us to evacuate, they then told us to go back."

Emergency Shelters

Prior to Israel's ground invasion on 17 July 2014, Israel announced the expansion of the buffer zone from 300 metres to 3 kilometres,⁸³ restricting civilian access to 44 per cent of the Gaza Strip where approximately 250,000 people reside.⁸⁴ As part of the expansion, Israel forced the evacuation of large numbers of Palestinians living in these areas, particularly in the northern and eastern Gaza Strip – in Al-Shuja'iyya, Zaitoun, Jabalia, Beit Hanoun and Beit Lahiya. In the south, residents in East Khan Younis and Rafah were advised to evacuate.⁸⁵

It was not surprising therefore that as early in the war as 19 July 2014 UNRWA was reporting a massive strain on its limited resources and ability to cope with the numbers of displaced people. In a 19 July UN situation report the Director of Operations for UNRWA in Gaza was quoted as saying:

"The number of displaced persons doubled in one day and more than 25,000 moved to our schools only yesterday. We are very concerned. These men, women and children are relying on us to provide them with shelter, and the reality is that UNRWA only had relief supplies in stock for about 35,000 people. We are procuring additional supplies now but remain critically short of funds."⁸⁶

⁸³ UNOCHA, *Situation Report*, 18 July 2014, available at http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_18_07_2014.pdf.

⁸⁴ UNOCHA, *Situation Report*, 30 July 2014, available at http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_30_07_2014.pdf.

⁸⁵ UNOCHA, *Situation Report*, 28 July 2014, available at http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_28_07_2014.pdf.

⁸⁶ UNOCHA, *Situation Report*, 20 July 2014, available at: http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_20_07_2014.pdf.

By 3 August 2014, the UN was reporting that approximately 10,000 more IDPs had taken shelter in UNRWA schools and that by that date UNRWA was providing shelter to 269,793 persons in 90 schools throughout the Gaza Strip, representing an average of approximately 3,000 IDPs per shelter, which normally have the capacity to accommodate only 500 people.⁸⁷ UNOCHA reported in their Situation Report dated 4 August 2014: “Overcrowding at shelters is challenging the already stretched capacity to provide IDPs with basic necessities, maintain hygiene conditions, and prevent the outbreak of epidemics. While showers in shelters have improved personal hygiene and decreased the risk of spread of disease, an accelerated level of diarrhoea has been reported among children. WHO and UNRWA are monitoring health in shelters in order to prevent and control any outbreak of communicable disease.”⁸⁸

The women in the focus groups conducted for this research identified serious concerns around the conditions in the shelters, reflecting the comments above made by United Nations, and also raising concerns that were more particular to women, such as protection and safety risks and also the particular difficulties which were faced by pregnant women (addressed above). A UNFPA study dated October 2014 has highlighted many of these concerns and made recommendations to the relevant agencies.⁸⁹



Palestinian women from Beit Hanoun take shelter at an UNRWA school in Jabalia refugee camp (Emad Badwan, 2014).

⁸⁷ UNOCHA, *Situation Report*, 4 August 2014, available at http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_04_08_2014.pdf. It should be noted, however, that there are more than 150 UNRWA school buildings in Gaza which vary significantly in size and capacity as shelters according to international standards.

⁸⁸ UNOCHA, *Gaza Emergency Situation Report*, 3 August 2014, http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_04_08_2014.pdf.

⁸⁹ UNFPA, *Protection in the Windward: Conditions and Rights of Internally Displaced Girls and Women during the Latest Military Operation on the Gaza Strip*, October 2014.

Three UNRWA collective centres were hit by Israel on 24 and 30 July and 3 August 2014, killing civilians sheltering inside and heightening the fears of those staying in them. Human Rights Watch carried out an investigation into the attacks concluding that: “The Israeli military carried out attacks on or near three well-marked schools where it knew hundreds of people were taking shelter, killing and wounding scores of civilians,”⁹⁰ The UN Commission of Inquiry report into the conflict, released on 27 April 2015 documented seven incidents affecting UNRWA schools which were attributable to the IDF and which killed 44 persons and injured at least 227 persons.⁹¹ After the last of these attacks, which killed ten people, the UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon called it: "a moral outrage and a criminal act."⁹² The attacks led to widespread fear and panic amongst those sheltering in the school, and a clear sense among those interviewed for this research that nowhere was safe.

Another common pattern amongst those interviewed, was the number of women who entered the shelters on their own, either because they were already widowed or because their husbands had separated from them to stay with relatives or to care for others, believing that their families would be safer in the UN Shelters. This may have been true, but it also meant that women were left with the responsibility of caring for young children and elderly adults as well as navigating the system of food and Non-Food Item (NFI) distribution on their own. The following case study highlights that many families were displaced multiple times, usually seeking shelter with friends or relatives before going to the UN Shelters.



Displaced Palestinians taking shelter at an UNRWA school in Beit Hanoun (Emad Badwan, 2014).

⁹⁰ Human Rights Watch, *In Depth Look at Gaza School Attacks*, 11 September 2014, available at <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/09/11/israel-depth-look-gaza-school-attacks>.

⁹¹ See Report of the detailed findings of the Commission of Inquiry on the 2014 Gaza Conflict, p110, p4, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIGazaConflict/Pages/ReportCoIGaza.aspx>

⁹² BBC, ‘Gaza Crisis: Deadly Strike at UN School in Rafah’, 3 August 2014, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-28628682>.

Case Study 5: Sabreen and Shireen, 8 March 2015

Location: Al-Shoka, Rafah

Sabreen and Shireen are sisters who are married to two brothers and live in the Al-Shoka area of Rafah that was particularly affected by the war. Sabreen is 26 years old and she has two sons, one aged three years and one aged nine months in August 2014. Shireen also has two children – aged 4 years and 2 years, but was also pregnant and due to give birth at that time.

The two sisters were already staying with family members during the war and then the family made the decision to move to their aunt's home where they thought it would be safer. But soon after they arrived the house next door was bombed and shrapnel came into the house. Sabreen recalled: "Suddenly I could hear a shelling outside and it was getting closer and I thought it would hit us. It came through the wall and I couldn't see anything and there was dust and smoke everywhere. A missile had come through the wall – it was massive, we waited a moment for it to explode and then took the chance and fled the house." She found her way to a nearby shop with her husband and children and stayed the night there. Shireen and her children had made their way to the house of another sister. The following day Sabreen then went alone to the UN school where she met up with her sister. Her husband had stayed behind because he said he needed to look after his mother and check on her.

Shireen went into labour shortly after they arrived at the school and had to go to hospital to give birth: "It was unspeakable. My sister looked after the other children when I went to the hospital. I only spent three hours there and they sent me back. It was terrible there. Other pregnant women there were miscarrying and bleeding." She was alone at the hospital, with her sister Sabreen looking after the other children: "I went alone to the hospital to give birth, and then returned to the UN school with my newborn baby. I tried to keep hydrated. We were sleeping on a cardboard box on the floor. There was nothing for the baby except nappies. I probably would have breastfed but it was too difficult to do that and keep an eye on my other two children and I was hysterical and tense. My husband visited me once 20 days after I'd given birth."

The sisters then stayed at the school for the remainder of the war, sharing a classroom with 50 others, spending their days queuing for food. They also said that they worried about their children's health. When they returned to their home, they found that it had been damaged in the war with the windows broken and holes in the ceiling. Sabreen's husband is a farmer and his land is next to the border. He lost his crops during the war and now won't return because it's too dangerous. She told us: "We lost everything last year."

Findings of the Focus Groups: Emergency Shelters

The majority of respondents when discussing the conditions in the shelters/collective centres talked about the overcrowding. This was clearly the case and the women in the focus groups described being 50, 60 or as many as 70 people together in a classroom. One woman from the focus group in Gaza City said: "It was very unclean and dirty at the UN school and I was with my six children without my husband. I went together with my sisters and their children and together we were 60 people in one room. I couldn't keep control of my children; they needed their father. The children were out of control – they started looking out of the railings to get out."

Many women in the focus groups reported that the mattresses in the shelters were insufficient: that they and their children were sleeping on the floor, on cardboard boxes or sharing a mattress. There was also little by way of facilities for mothers with young children and babies. One woman who stayed at a UNRWA school in the Rafah area said: "I had a four month old baby and I left to the UN school. They gave us one mattress and one blanket for all 8 people. The bathrooms were very dirty and there was no

cooking gas to heat the milk for the baby. They would give us canned food but no spoons and forks.”⁹³ Shireen in the case study above also recalled sleeping on a cardboard box with her two children and newborn baby, and said that she hadn’t been able to breastfeed her baby. ⁹⁴ Although UNRWA stated that they provided specific rooms for women with babies and to breastfeed, they acknowledge that this came at a late stage and none of the women who participated in this research mentioned these facilities.⁹⁵ At the height of the conflict they advise that there was simply not enough space. Further, some women’s committees requested that available space be used as child-friendly areas. In juggling the needs of beneficiaries, UNRWA very clearly needed to weigh competing priorities as well as health and safety issues. For instance they did not allow private cooking inside the shelters as this may have caused a major safety issue with up to 3,000 persons inside shelters at any given time.

UNRWA also pointed out that the typical practice in UNRWA collective centres was for women and children to sleep in classrooms, and for older male youth and adult males to sleep outside. They noted that whilst each classroom did sleep an average of 60 persons as per UNRWA’s ability to shelter all IDPs, this standard changed when the shelters moved from Designated Emergency Shelters (DES) to Collective Centres. The highest number of IDPs housed by UNRWA during the crisis stood at 292,959 persons sheltering in 85 schools. With regard to mattresses, UNRWA acknowledge that whilst they distributed tens of thousands of mattresses and sleeping mats, there may have been occasions where there was insufficient stock. In total UNRWA distributed 223,263 blankets, 63,340 mattresses and 89,649 mats during the emergency phase.⁹⁶

Some women also talked about the lack of food and the coping mechanisms they adopted, highlighting the responsibility of the women to feed their families and the personal dangers in doing so. A woman from the Beit Hanoun area said: “I went to the Al-Gharbiya school and stayed there for 15 days. There wasn’t enough food or water and the school was targeted. To make food we went to a nearby house and found flour, then baked bread with this and got other food from nearby houses.”

Another woman acknowledged the difficult job for the UN and others in the crisis: “You can’t deny the UN efforts – there was food, but there wasn’t enough because the numbers of people were so huge. The numbers are not so much now.” UNRWA consider it unlikely that IDPs went without food for more than 12 hours depending upon when they arrived at the collective centres. They advised that sometimes midnight arrivals would not receive their first food rations until the morning.⁹⁷

In dealing with the food needs of refugees, it is clear that there was considerable planning by UN agencies. UNRWA and WFP coordinated on the daily food rations for refugees to ensure that the rations covered the minimum caloric requirements of 2,183 Kcal per person as per World Health Organisation (WHO) standards.⁹⁸ From 20 July to 26 August 2014, during the height of the conflict, UNRWA had distributed around 3,167,823 daily food rations and 68,000 food parcels to over 290,000 IDPs in the 85 UNRWA shelters. Whilst UNRWA made all efforts to distribute food on a daily basis, due to the rapid escalation of violence and rapid increase in the number of IDPs in its designated emergency shelters, or non-UNRWA school shelters, UNRWA opportunities to secure the required basic food items could become limited and delays were faced due to the security situation. UNRWA advise that this sometimes resulted in shortfalls in some, but not all, commodities needed for daily food rations. In order to cover such shortages until the available quantities became available, UNRWA adopted a strategy of distributing family food parcels that would last a family for three days.

⁹³ Also see section above on Maternity cases and babies.

⁹⁴ A full interview with Sherine and her sister appears above.

⁹⁵ Interview, UNRWA, 11 March 2015.

⁹⁶ Comments by UNRWA to NRC.

⁹⁷ Comments by UNRWA to NRC.

⁹⁸ Rations consisted of bread, canned meat/tuna, milk, cheese, tomato, cucumber and halwa/biscuits as well as water.

The issue of the lack of hygiene, particularly in the bathrooms was frequently cited by the women in the focus groups. Many of the women linked the lack of hygiene in the toilets to their concerns about health, particularly the health of their young children. One woman in Beit Hanoun spoke about how her children had been affected: “There wasn’t any clean water and we had to drink the water they used to water the trees. My children got diarrhoea and we called the Red Cross but they said it was not their responsibility. We wanted to leave [the school] but the Red Cross said they couldn’t be responsible if we left. There was nothing to treat my children with.”

It is clear that this was an extremely serious issue being raised by the women, who largely took the main responsibility for caring for their young children in the shelters. The problem was recognised by UN agencies such as WHO and UNRWA who monitored the health situation during the crisis. As of mid-August 2014, UNRWA had distributed maternity packs to all mothers who had given birth during the conflict.

None of the women participating in the research said that they or their families had experienced any sexual or other harassment themselves.⁹⁹ Therefore, it is not possible to come to any conclusions in relation to the issue of women’s safety in the shelters. Other reports address this issue in detail¹⁰⁰ In the collective centres, there was an on-going fear and, for some the reality, of becoming victim to an Israeli attack: One woman from Beit Hanoun, where a UN school was hit by indirect artillery fire attributable to the IDF, told the group: “I went to the UN school for two days and then heard the threats that it was going to be targeted and so we left for Abu Hussein school. I was very scared especially for my children. I saw people running out – when I went to the second UN school it was targeted and my son was injured.”

In recording the difficulties faced by women in the collective centres, it is not intended to criticise or to apportion blame to any agency or organisation but rather to highlight the horrendous situation that all in Gaza had to endure; to identify areas that could be improved upon; but above all to emphasise that this should not be allowed to happen again. The UNRWA schools and government schools which were made into emergency shelters during the crisis were not equipped to deal with the unprecedented numbers of people displaced by the conflict. With the crossings out of Gaza closed to most people, there was nowhere safe for the people to go leaving the UNRWA schools as the only option for most people internally displaced during the war. According to the Goldstone Report,¹⁰¹ during the 2009-10 “Operation Cast Lead” war, UNRWA had provided shelter to 50,896 displaced persons at the height of the conflict in addition to those who found temporary shelter with relatives.¹⁰² During the 2014 conflict, the numbers provided with shelter by UNRWA was nearly six times that of 2009-10 – with 292,959 people sheltering in UNRWA schools at the height of the conflict.¹⁰³ According to one humanitarian worker: “The whole situation was beyond the agencies’ imagination. It was unprecedented in terms of the level of destruction, the bombardments, the massive number of IDPs – everyone east of Salah al Din road had to move to the west and we’re talking about almost half of the population of the Gaza Strip, including three refugee camps.”

A staff member of UN Women visited schools (shelters/collective centres) during the war and said that: “I went to the schools on the first or second day and what I saw was beyond my capacity to describe. Thousands were staying in them...They [the agencies] were focused on providing the families with

⁹⁹ There are various possible reasons for this: that it did not happen; that the women were ashamed, that they felt unable to talk about it in front of a group; or that there are other reasons related to the situation and social context that inhibited women from discussing this issue.

¹⁰⁰ This issue is addressed in UNFPA, *Protection in the Windward: Conditions and Rights of Internally Displaced Girls and Women during the Latest Military Operation on the Gaza Strip*, October 2014.

¹⁰¹ The United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict, known as the Goldstone Report, was established in April 2009 by the United Nations Human Rights Council as an independent international fact finding mission to investigate alleged violations of international law during Operation “Cast Lead.”

¹⁰² Goldstone Report, para. 1243.

¹⁰³ UNOCHA, *Gaza Emergency Situation Report*, 4 September 2014, available at http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrept_04_09_2014.pdf.

sleeping mats and food...UNRWA were trying to do their best, but could not support all those people.”¹⁰⁴

An UNRWA representative who was involved with co-ordinating the collective centres in Gaza said “We prepared very well, but we didn’t expect the huge numbers... We found shelter for all the people, provided food and NFI. It was a very difficult situation – we were working all night.”¹⁰⁵

Some NGO employees, such as those from the Palestinian NGO, Al-Mezan Centre for Human Rights raised concerns about the adequate participation of women in formal decisions made at the collective centres: “UN Security Council Resolution 1325 is about women in conflict and including women, yet there was no respect for that. Why didn’t they let women join the committees to run the shelters? All the Shelters had committees to run and control the shelters and be responsible for services and water.”¹⁰⁶ UNRWA however point out that the IDP committees purposely sought out not just men and women, but also older persons, youth and other members of marginalised or vulnerable groups. Hygiene committees, as part of WASH related services, included 50% women and men with half of the members being youth. UNRWA further note that some UNRWA collective centres included females in shelter management positions such as shelter managers and deputies in area operation rooms and central operation rooms.

UN Women was involved in the emergency planning and attended the daily meetings held at the Emergency Operation Centre (EOC) where a daily briefing on the situation was provided and action coordinated between those agencies responding to beneficiary need. UN Women stated that they ensured that information on gender related needs and priorities of the IDPs were disseminated amongst humanitarian actors and women’s organisations from the onset of the crisis. They provided further information for this study after the research had been conducted, stating that during these meetings they: “pointed out that women should be involved and included in all areas of decision making, such as the running of the shelters during the conflict, as they should also be equally involved in early recovery efforts and reconstruction processes.”

Sheltering with Friends/Relatives

As highlighted above, the large majority of those participating in the focus groups and those who were interviewed individually had fled to the homes of neighbours or relatives before having to leave again to seek refuge at UNRWA schools. A minority of women stayed for the duration of the war with relatives, with a large majority of each group saying that they had been to the UNRWA schools for at least part of the war. The experiences for women staying with friends or family was similar in many ways to that in the UN collective centres: overcrowded, lacking in resources and unsafe.

One woman from Khuza’a who had been internally displaced to a relative’s home in Gaza City spoke about leaving her home for a supposedly safer place but then finding herself living near Al Zafer Tower which was destroyed by an Israeli attack. She also talked about the difficulties of living in a crowded, unfamiliar place and about the tensions between the family members. “The day before [the Israelis] came to Khuza’a, we received a recorded message to leave the area. We left because of the message. We had left before, but we came back, and then left again. Two days before the message things had been very difficult because there was a bombing of a mosque right next to us. At the moment of the bombing I was upstairs and there was a huge sound and dust in my eyes and we evacuated to Bani Suheila to a relatives’ home. We then left for Gaza City where we went to my in-laws house and there were four families living in one building. While we were there they targeted Al Zafer Tower and this was the most terrifying moment that won’t ever be erased from my mind. My son was playing outside and told me that they were going to target Al Zafer Tower and I remember the people all streaming out

¹⁰⁴ Interview, Heba Zayyan, UN Women, 11 March 2015.

¹⁰⁵ Interview, UNRWA, 11 March 2015.

¹⁰⁶ Interview, Al Mezan Centre for Human Rights, 9 March 2015.

evacuating the building. Then when the first rocket hit, I felt the air pressure and after 15 minutes the tower came down. I was looking out of the window and I saw it crumble like a piece of bread.”

One woman from Gaza City explained that she had wanted to stay in her parent’s house but that they had not accepted that she could stay there for the duration of the war and her father in particular could not cope with the number of children in the home, and she had reluctantly left to go to a UN school on her own with sole responsibility for her six children:

“We lived in a humble house and during the war, my husband was scared for me and so asked me to leave to my parents after the building next door was damaged after a bomb went off nearby because it was badly built. I went first to my parents’ house but it was difficult and they were not tolerant of me. I have a back problem and it was going to be very difficult at a UN school but my parents said they couldn’t keep me. It was very unclean and dirty at the UN school and I was with my six children without my husband. I went together with my sisters and their children and together we were 60 people in one room. I couldn’t keep control of my children: they needed their father. The children were out of control – they started looking out of the railings to get out. But my children at least were in front of me – my worries were focused on my husband who was back at the house. Now I don’t speak to my parents. Things were ok to begin with, but after I came with my sisters my father couldn’t take it and all the noise from the children. My father used to beat the children. Until this day I don’t speak to my parents.”¹⁰⁷

It was a common theme amongst women who stayed with relatives to describe themselves as being a ‘heavy burden’ as they weren’t able to contribute to the household expenses or provide any contribution by way of food or non-food items.

The men in the one male focus group conducted talked more about ‘pulling together’ and ‘taking responsibility’ in sharing accommodation with their families. One 83 year-old-man said: “We are 35 people, I escaped with my wife, sons and daughters-in-law and went to the house of my sister in Al-Remal area and when we entered we found 22 people already there. Eventually there were 75 people in the house and no food, no flour. I took responsibility for everyone.”

Some of the women also talked about issues of privacy and modesty for their daughters as a difficulty when they were staying with friends. This woman, also from Khuza’a said: “...First we went to a friend’s house, but it was difficult there. They were very respectful but I had five older daughters over 18 years and they had two older sons and I was worried about my daughters and their reputation.”¹⁰⁸

Many people in the Gaza Strip relied on the kindness and generosity of others to provide them with a safe or safer place and with basic facilities such as water, food and bedding. However, for some families, overcrowding and the stressful situation resulted in increased tensions and even the breakdown of family relations.

¹⁰⁷ Focus Group Discussion, Gaza City, 4 March 2015.

¹⁰⁸ Focus Group Discussion, Khan Younis, 4 March 2015.

5 Women's Lives in 2015

5.1 Shelter and WASH¹⁰⁹

The extent of the damage to homes following the 2014 conflict has been assessed by the Ministry of Public Works and Housing, UNDP and UNRWA and as at 21 December 2014, these figures indicate that 158,935 homes have been damaged, affecting half a million Palestinians. Out of this figure, 17,357 homes (housing over 95,000 people) are completely destroyed or rendered uninhabitable by severe destruction.¹¹⁰ This section will assess the impact of the housing crisis and of continuing displacement on women.

The destruction of homes as a result of the 2014 war added to a pre-existing housing shortage in the Gaza Strip. The Palestinian Ministry of Public Works and Housing and the Shelter Cluster in Palestine estimate that between 100,000 and 150,000 housing units are required to replace homes destroyed or damaged during previous military operations as well as to respond to the pre-crisis housing deficit and the increase required because of natural population growth.¹¹¹

Oxfam has written that it could take more than 100 years to complete essential building of homes, schools and health facilities in Gaza unless the Israeli blockade is lifted. The amount of vital construction materials entering Gaza until October 2015 represents 9.1% of total amount of construction materials necessary to replace housing units destroyed or damaged as a result of the 2014 Israeli military operation in Gaza and 2.3% of the total amount necessary to build homes, schools, health facilities and the other infrastructure required after repeated conflicts and years of blockade. According to the ongoing rates, this means it will take up to 44 years to respond to the overall housing needs in the Gaza Strip.¹¹²

The consequence of the lack of building materials and financial assistance means that many Palestinians in the Gaza Strip either continue to live in rented accommodation away from their communities or have returned to their homes and are living in unsafe and potentially dangerous conditions.¹¹³

Gaza's water and wastewater situation was already dire prior to the war, and services were made even more difficult due to electricity and fuel shortages and the inaccessibility of many installations. Services remained affected after the ceasefire due to the damage sustained by the Gaza power plant. Approximately half a million people were directly affected by damage to water facilities and one million persons were affected due to damage to the wastewater plant and wastewater pumping stations.¹¹⁴

Findings from Focus Groups

The situation of the approximately 100,000 IDPs as a result of the July-August 2014 hostilities remains precarious and uncertain.

In the focus groups conducted for this research, 48 of the 123 participants stated that they had not yet been able to return home because either their homes had been destroyed or their houses were not safe to return to. Although this figure is higher than the figure for the country as a whole, it may reflect the higher levels of damage in the areas in which the focus groups were conducted. Of those that had not

¹⁰⁹ Water, Sanitation and Hygiene.

¹¹⁰ *Shelter Cluster Situation Report*, October 2015, p.1, available at <http://shelterpalestine.org/Upload/Doc/0157bf4b-6480-4dca-beef-b0ea8cc9bbd0.pdf>.

¹¹¹ NRC, *Rebuilding from the Rubble: Post Conflict Land Tenure Challenges and Opportunities in the Gaza Strip*, March 2015, p.4.

¹¹² *Shelter Cluster Construction Material Tracking for Gaza*, October 2015, p.1, available at: <http://shelterpalestine.org/Upload/Doc/7d432c7a-56f9-446e-81e6-f82cea068c20.pdf>.

¹¹³ UNRWA closed the remaining collective centres on 17 June 2015 and helped the remaining centre residents find alternative housing.

¹¹⁴ UNOCHA, *Gaza Initial Rapid Assessment*, 27 August 2014.

been able to return to their homes, the majority, 22, were renting alternative accommodation, ten were staying in transitional shelters and seven were staying with relatives.¹¹⁵

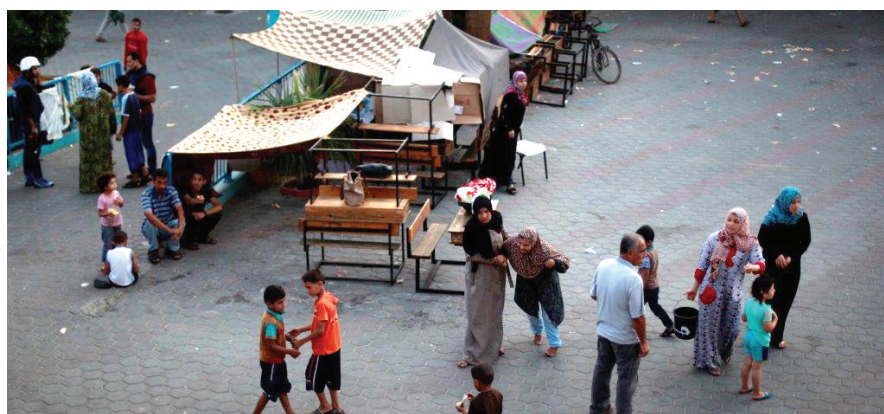
Transitional Shelters

The conditions in the UNRWA collective centres clearly improved over the course of the conflict and afterwards. In an interview with UNRWA and the Principal of an UNRWA school previously used as a collective centre, UNRWA spoke of improvements including a kindergarten for the children, psycho-social support for children and activities for women such as knitting and embroidering. They also referred to the improvement of basic services. For example, hot water for showers was provided during the winter and on account of the reduced numbers of IDPs each classroom was accommodating only one to two families. UNRWA also advised that health care was specifically provided for pregnant women and mothers and babies.¹¹⁶

Testimonies were taken from women for this report at a time when centres were still operational, although the last centre closed on 17 June 2015. The testimonies highlighted the challenges faced by some of the female residents of the centres. Some women were living separately from family members because of their different needs and priorities. A woman from Beit Hanoun with responsibility for her disabled husband as well as her son said that: “I am living in the UN school with my son, and I go back and forward to my disabled husband who is living in a tent next to our house. I can’t take care of them both at the same time.”

A woman from Gaza City told the focus group that her husband was staying with his other wives in a UN school while she had to stay with her parents who did not want her to stay there and were putting pressure on her to leave. Most tragically, she was separated from her daughter highlighting the devastating consequences of the destruction of homes during the war: “Until this day I am displaced. I fled to my parent’s house, but my husband is in the UN school and my daughter is in an orphanage. My husband has two other wives and he stays with them at the school. There are lots of problems at my mother’s house and so I can’t keep my daughter there. My family wants to kick me out, my father is dead and my mother and brothers and sisters want to throw me out because they think I should be with my husband. We can’t go back home to our house; it is too damaged – everything is lost.”¹¹⁷

This woman’s story was unusual but may not be unique and highlights the importance for agencies in registering and documenting IDPs, particularly those living with family members, in order to ascertain a complete picture of the circumstances for IDPs and thereby enable the appropriate allocation of resources.



Displaced Palestinian families at an UNRWA school in Beit Hanoun (Emad Badwan, 2014).

¹¹⁵ The remaining figures provide that five stated they were in their own home – which could indicate that they had rebuilt their home and three did not specify where they were.

¹¹⁶ Interview, UNRWA at collective shelter, Gaza City, 10 March 2015.

¹¹⁷ Focus Group Discussion, Gaza City, 4 March 2015.

Friends and Relatives

A woman from Beit Hanoun told her group about also being put under pressure to leave the home of her relatives: “I’m staying at my cousin’s house. It is a three storey house. The first floor is my cousin’s, second floor in-laws and then me and my two sons – One is married and one is engaged. My uncle told me I needed to leave the house to my in-laws and in return they would help me and my husband rebuild. After the war the UN gave each an amount of money and when my in-laws saw that we had the money they said now you can leave, and told us we had to go. There is a lot of pressure on me to leave and a lot of stress because the money is not enough.”¹¹⁸



A Bedouin family fleeing their village. In the background - Al Nada Towers, Gaza (Emad Badwan, 2014).

¹¹⁸ Focus Group Discussion, Beit Hanoun, 5 March 2015.

Homes: Dangerous and in need of Rehabilitation

Many people with minor damage to their homes have received some assistance and the following case study is an example of a widow who has had bomb damage to her home in Beit Lahiya repaired through an NGO shelter programme.

Case Study 6: Laila Mohammed Abed Al Aziz Abu Shedeq
Location, Beit Lahiya, Gaza.
Interviewed: 4 March 2015

Laila is 39 years old and was widowed in the last war. She has eight children, three boys and five girls. The girls are aged 23 years, 22 years and 17 years, 12 years and nine years. Her sons are 15 years, 8 years and she has a baby who is 2 years old. She says “My two oldest daughters are married but I am their mother and still responsible for them.” She lives in a house that she inherited from her father; the furniture also belongs to her through inheritance.

During the war she stayed in her house up until the 30th July because she didn’t want to go to the schools. Talking to her in the sitting room, Laila told us: “There were 26 people living in this one room, my family and my in-laws. It was safer because it has a door that leads out of the back. It was dangerous on the other side because it is next to a mosque. We stayed because we thought it was safe.” A nearby school, Abu Aziz was bombed and people were killed, and she says that many of her neighbours returned home after that. She and her husband had been out to comfort their neighbours and her husband had helped bury the dead. But on their return home, their own home was hit by pieces of a bomb targeting a nearby house and her husband, who had been at the back of the house, was hit with a piece of shrapnel.

After this, she left with her family to an UNRWA school and returned home at the end of the war to her damaged home. She said: “The house was badly damaged – the bottom floor was targeted and the damage was major. There were also large pieces of shrapnel that came through upstairs. The [NGO] came and saw all the damage. I wasn’t there, but my sister in law and daughters were and they assessed the damage and sent us a message to go to the municipality. We were given \$400 USD and we added some money of our own. The work done to rebuild has been very good.”



A Palestinian family whose house was completely destroyed by Israeli attacks, Jhr al Deek village (Emad Badwan, 2014).

Laila's circumstances are very difficult and as a widow she may be considered vulnerable and in priority need for assistance. However, there are many others who have not received assistance. Some of those appeared extremely vulnerable and were living in very precarious circumstances. Many women in the areas in which the research was carried out spoke about having returned to live in their homes but without enough money to repair their homes and having to live in poor and unsafe conditions. Many other women described water coming through their ceilings and walls during the winter and bad weather as the holes had not been repaired.

Fathia Samouni who participated in the focus group in Gaza City told the group about her situation as a widow: "We were fifteen people in one house with four rooms. It is full of holes. We escaped to our in-laws and then we came back. Even though it is still not good we are still living in it. There are cracks and holes. The house was burned. I haven't been for help as I don't know where to go. My husband is dead. I worry about the winter and the weather. It was very hard as a widow. I have no source of support or income."

Some of the men in the focus group in Al-Shuja'iyya were also living in dangerous conditions. One man said: "We had a three storey building but the top and middle storeys were destroyed in the war. The ground floor is ok, just missing the doors and windows. There are 13 of us living together in that building. When we're there it feels like it's going to come down on our heads. We are all living in one room but we are getting on ok."

For some of the women, particularly in Beit Hanoun, this was not the first time that their homes had been affected by war, and they fear for another one: "There were bullets holes in the ceiling in the last war, and the ceiling came down on us. And my relative's land was bulldozed. And now my home has been destroyed again. I feel there is no safety and there is another war coming. The children hear and see on the television about the next war."

Other women talked about another sort of damage since the war; that caused by vandalism by Israeli soldiers during the war. A woman from Khan Younis said: "There are also houses that have been damaged by shooting and also vandalised – my house was. The soldiers vandalised everything in the house –we had to throw the mattresses and furniture all away. The top floor of the house looks fine but the ground floor is 100 per cent destroyed."

A woman from Beit Hanoun had also found that her home and furniture had been vandalised during the war: "I lost all my clothes. The Special Forces were in my house and went into my room and they destroyed my clothes and closet and the mattresses. The roof came down on the house... Our house is full of buckets to catch the water."

In Gaza City, a woman whose house was bombed told the focus group that she was renting but that her family were getting in to debt trying to pay the rent: "My neighbours invited me to come to their house. We heard on the radio that our house was bombed and I was shocked and I went to the house and found that it was rubble. I couldn't even rescue one thing. During the ceasefire we went to go and find somewhere else to stay and found a small room. We had had to pay \$250 a month – the mosque gave us \$1000 but it wasn't enough and until now we're in debt."

As of August 2015 UNRWA had disbursed over \$124.9 million to families eligible for shelter packages and the bulk of these funds were distributed to over 59,000 refugee families for home repairs. However, UNRWA estimates a total funding requirement of \$720 million for repair, reconstruction and transitional shelter cash assistance. Of the \$3.5 million pledged for the reconstruction of Gaza during

the Cairo Gaza Reconstruction Conference in October 2014, as of July 2015, the humanitarian appeal for Gaza remained 70% underfunded.¹¹⁹

It is clear from the discussions in the focus groups, as well as from simple observations in the areas visited, that despite the work already done by UNRWA and others, there has been little progress in respect of rebuilding destroyed homes and that in many cases even basic repairs have not been carried out or not completed because people have not received sufficient financial support and do not have the financial means to do this.

While the process of repair and rehabilitation on such a massive scale will take time, particularly with the restrictions in place, what is less understandable is the lack of information that people have been provided with. None of the women in the groups felt that they had been informed about the reconstruction process (although some had received some assistance to carry out minor repairs). However, this lack of knowledge was not limited to the women interviewed - the men taking part in the focus groups and spoken to during home visits also said that they had no information about what was happening with the reconstruction process.

One man was critical of why those with completely destroyed homes were not receiving assistance: “There is an unfair distribution of building materials. They came to assess the damage and then said other people with minor damage would receive help first, although my house was completely destroyed. I feel they should help people with completely destroyed homes – if only to provide materials to help build one or two rooms.”

An UNRWA representative also acknowledged that they were having some difficulties in communicating information about the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism¹²⁰ to certain sections of the population, particularly women, saying: “We are trying to reach out to people on three levels. First, we communicate through press statements and the director talks to the press and the media about how to access the mechanism. Second, at a community level, we communicate with the chiefs and notables and they engage with the people and try to explain at the community level. Third, at the more individual level we communicate through our offices to inform people about how to access the mechanism. But we haven’t looked at the ability of disabled populations to access the information, or people in remote areas, or women and haven’t been able to reach out to those groups. We haven’t tailored a mechanism to reach out to them. It is a big gap, in particular women not accessing information.”¹²¹

Shahinaz Abedallah who was interviewed for this report lives in a particularly isolated area in Al-Shoka, a village near Rafah, living in a tent next to the ruins of her home. She has no access to the internet and no radio but does volunteer at her local women’s organisation. Links to women’s organisations, particularly local CBOs can be a good way of providing information to both men and women as they are often well known and trusted by local people. Well-advertised meetings with information going out well in advance and providing an opportunity for those affected to ask questions and to be informed about the process is a good way of both providing information and being held accountable by those affected. Agencies that provide an outreach programme through their mobile clinics or other such services would also be well placed to assist in disseminating information.

¹¹⁹ OCHA, ‘Humanitarian Coordinator calls for an accelerated recovery effort for the Gaza Strip one year after the 2014 hostilities’, 7 July 2015, available at <http://gaza.ochaopt.org/2015/07/humanitarian-coordinator-calls-for-an-accelerated-recovery-effort-for-the-gaza-strip-one-year-after-the-2014-hostilities/>

¹²⁰ The Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM) is a temporary agreement brooked by the United Nations and agreed between the Palestinian Authority and Israel in September 2014. The mechanism is designed to address Israel’s security concerns while allowing the entry of necessary construction materials into the Gaza Strip, to enable large scale construction and reconstruction work that is necessary in Gaza after the 2014 Israeli military operation. More details on the GRM available at <http://www.unsco.org/Gaza%20Reconstruction%20Mechanism%20Fact%20Sheet%2009%20October%202014.pdf>.

¹²¹ Interview, UNRWA, 11 March 2015.

There is an opportunity to ensure that women are included in the consultations as well as being kept informed. A humanitarian professional interviewed from the Women's Affairs Centre said: "There is a need for women to be involved in negotiations and reconstruction in Gaza. There are no women involved in this this... We need to have women participating in this process."¹²² Where meetings are held, or individual meetings take place, it is important to ensure that women, not just heads of household are included in such meetings.

5.2 Family Life, Children, Grief and Loss

A total of 1,563 Palestinian civilians were killed during the July/August 2014 conflict including 551 children and 306 women. There were 142 Palestinian families that lost at least three family members.¹²³ A further 11,000 persons were injured including 3,374 children, 2,088 women and 410 elderly.¹²⁴ As the primary care givers in Gaza, women bear the main responsibility for caring for the injured, as well as managing the grief amongst remaining family members and their own grief, loss and psychosocial distress. A staff member of the Women's Affairs Centre talked about the years of coping with conflict in Gaza that women have endured, and how this has impacted on them: "It is always the women who have to pay. In the internal conflict too it was like a civil war, and women lost their sons. There were division in families, a fragmentation when they were divided between political parties and it was the women who have to work hard to keep their families together. In this war, women lost husbands, homes, children and are having to search to provide for their basic needs. She has to manage all of this and it affects her psychologically."

In September 2014, UNICEF identified at least 373,000 children in Gaza in desperate need of psychosocial support.¹²⁵ As at February 2015, UNICEF was stating that they had provided nearly 35,000 children and more than 7,000 caregivers with psychosocial support, and 12,000 public school teachers with additional coping skills to support children.¹²⁶ This means that there are still nearly 330,000 children who have not received any psychosocial support and highlights the massive role that parents, particularly mothers have to play in coping with their children's trauma and distress. UNRWA provided children in UNRWA centres and schools with psycho-social support from counsellors as part of UNRWA's Community Mental Health Programme.



Woman crying upon seeing her destroyed house during the ceasefire, Shejaiya neighbourhood (Emad Badwan, 2014).

¹²² Interview, Women's Affairs Centre, 9 March 2015.

¹²³ UNOCHA, *Occupied Palestinian Territory: Humanitarian Needs Overview 2015*, 21 January 2015. Figures recorded by the Palestinian Human Rights Coalition put the total number of Palestinians killed at 2,215 with 1,639 of those being civilians and 556 children, see Al Haq, *Divide and Conquer*, February 2015, p. 27.

¹²⁴ UNOCHA, *Gaza Initial Rapid Assessment Report*, 27 August 2014, p. 2.

¹²⁵ UNICEF, *Overcoming Loss in the Rubble of Gaza*, 29 September 2014, available at http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/oPt_76083.html.

¹²⁶ UNICEF, 'Six Months after Ceasefire: Children of Gaza are Trapped in Trauma', 25 February 2015, available at http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/oPt_80746.html.

Impact on Children

Almost all of the women who spoke in the focus groups identified their children, grandchildren or other young relatives as having been profoundly affected by the war. The women wanted this to be a priority for those who were looking at providing assistance to families in Gaza. But it is also important to look at the needs of the parents, particularly mothers who have the primary caring role in Gaza. As one woman stated: “The biggest responsibility is on the mother – because the first person they turn to is their mother, not their father.”

Many of the women spoke about their children having nightmares that were linked to their experiences during the war. One woman from the Al-Shuja'iyya neighbourhood who took part in the focus group in Gaza City said: “Until now my children are affected. My son is nine years old and he shouts during nightmares. I've taken him to a psychologist but he is still the same. During the war one of my sons became very violent and at school they always give me a note about his behaviour. My daughter is 12 years old and afraid to go to the bathroom. We were living in Al-Shuja'iyya. When we were told to evacuate; we were running over dead bodies.”

A woman from Rafah explained her children's situation: “I was pregnant and have young children. My youngest was two and a half years old and my oldest was eight years old... Now, any noise or bangs, it triggers their crying because of the war. They think another war is coming. Even for me I get lots of nightmares and sometimes I have insomnia. I still have a lot of bad memories. I used to tell them it was going to be okay, I would hide my fear behind the phrases”.

Others talked about their children wetting the bed in a way that hadn't happened before. A woman from Rafah said: “I have a son who is seven years old and he never used to wet his bed, but now constantly wets his bed. Sometimes I wake him up to take him to the bathroom. I have no support from school. I took him to someone but nothing works.” Another woman from Beit Hanoun explained that: “I have a two and a half year old daughter and she wets her bed. She won't go out and says she's afraid. I'm still living with the stress even though she's still young. When she hears fireworks she will say that it's shooting. I feel very worried for her – I'm running backwards and forwards for her.”



Palestinian woman and her children watching a funeral ceremony of four Palestinian children killed by an Israeli airstrike while playing near the Gaza sea, Beach camp (Emad Badwan, 2014).

Losing interest in school and education, was mentioned by other women who had noticed real changes in their children towards school and their futures. Two women, both from Beit Hanoun were both very concerned about their children's education: One said of her 14 year old son: "He was a top student but after the war he hasn't been doing well. He used to study very hard but now he hasn't been able to study much." Another agreed and explained her son was also now struggling at school: "I have a ten year old son and he was studious but when it comes to the exams he sits and can't write anything. He's become very slow and forgetful."

A 15 year old girl who attended the focus group in Rafah talked about her own experience: "I was one of the top students in class but my level has taken some steps back and my sisters are also affected. It affected us the last war. We used to be able to walk alone now but we have to walk with others to go to school because we're nervous."

Other women talked about changes in their children's behaviour and how their play had changed since the war. One woman who had fled from Khuza'a to Gaza City with her family said: "My son is 9 years old and he still recalls events from 2008-9 when he was four years old as well as the last war. He plays with Lego and he makes a shape of Al Zafer tower and brings it down – every day." Another said: "My children are still affected by it. My son is in fourth grade, he suffers from a psychological disorder – he is very aggressive, and we have taken him to the doctors and he wets his bed. It's ok between me and him but he tends to be isolated. I have a three year old daughter who used to bite her nails during the war and now it is impossible for them to grow. I try to put socks on her hands to stop her biting them. She would bite her nails down to the flesh."

One of the men in the focus group spoke about his children, and shared similar concerns to the women, telling the group: "I have a five year old daughter. She never left my side – whenever a bomb would fall I started singing to distract her. After each bombing we would pull together and bring everyone together. I had fear but I had to pull myself together... My five year old daughter is still in shock and has speech issues and I can't find treatment. There is a centre for speech therapy and I hope to be able to afford it."

One focus group took place in an UNRWA school in the Khan Younis area where psycho-social support was being provided through NRC and UNRWA. One woman talked about this: "I lost faith in everything. The children stopped having faith in us as parents. My children can see that their mother can't protect them. My five children clutched on to me during the war: I said to them to go to their father but they said they wanted to stay with me... We were wondering when we would die. The children are now getting better." Another simply said: "The psychological support is helping the children get better."

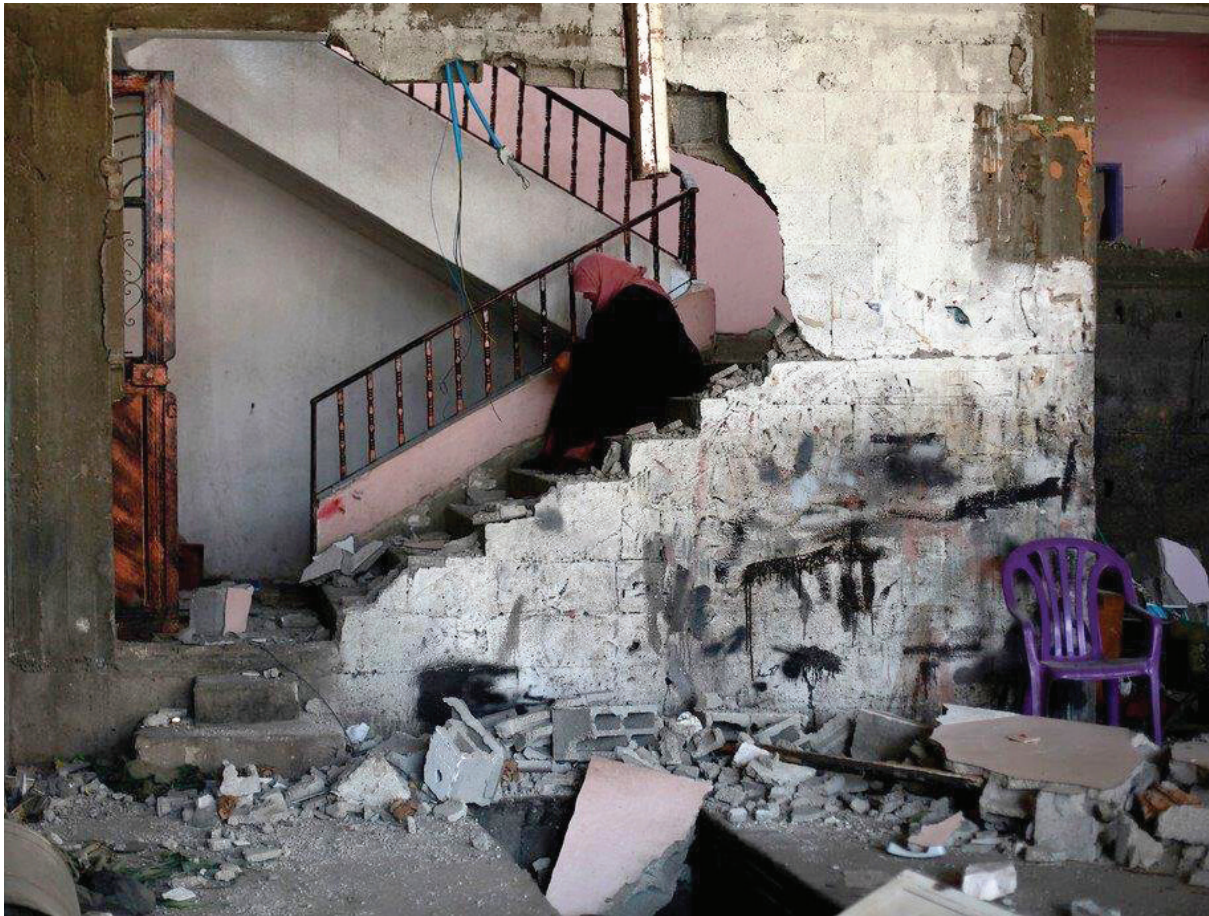
The positive experiences of women whose children are receiving psychological support highlights the importance of this work with children.

Impact on Women

The earlier sections of this report covered some of the devastating stories from women who lost their children or close family members during the war, and the experiences of fleeing from bombs and shooting past the dead and injured. These experiences highlight the horror that the people in Gaza – men, women and children - have lived through. These experiences are still very much alive and real for the people spoken to for this research. Yet families continue to try and get on with their normal life, women try and care for their families, maintain their homes and return some semblance of normality to their families in extremely difficult circumstances. As stated by the Chief of the UNICEF Gaza Field Office:

How do we expect parents and caregivers to care for their children and to raise them in a positive and nurturing way when they themselves are barely functioning as humans?

People have lost entire strands of their family in one blow. How can a society cope with this? This is a deep, deep, deep wound.¹²⁷



A woman crying after seeing that her destroyed house, Gaza City (Emad Badwan, 2014).

Focus groups

In the focus groups, the women were willing to talk about the impact of the war on their own psychological and mental health. For example, the following woman who attended the focus group in Gaza said: “As a mother I am suffering from psychological disorder and stress and I don’t know how to manage my children because of my own problems. I have a pregnant daughter and our house in damaged. I have medical problems and have to have injections.” Another woman, from Rafah talked about how not having dealt with her own psychological issues meant she took out her stress on her children: “I myself as an adult need psychological support. Day by day I see that I can’t control my anger and take out my anger on my children.” The men in the focus group¹²⁸ did not want to answer questions about their own personal or family psychological or emotional issues but this does not mean that they have not been affected, only perhaps that they were not as willing to share their experiences in a group situation.

¹²⁷ UNOCHA, *Emergency Situation Report*, 6 August 2014, available at http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_06_08_2014.pdf.

¹²⁸ There was, however, only one focus group conducted with men, and therefore this finding cannot be indicative of anything other than that this group did not wish to discuss any psychological or personal family matters.

A woman from the Rafah area linked the problems in her family, and her husband's response to the situation, with not just the war but also the on-going economic situation. She told the group: "The tough economic conditions have piled up the pressure. My husband comes home and just sits alone. He won't speak and goes to bed and lies there with his eyes open. We're in debt and he worries about the debt. He also has diabetes and high blood pressure and gets dizzy spells. There is no money. He used to work in Israel but now there is no work. I have no degree to help me apply for jobs to earn money. It affects me and all the family. My oldest son is sick, they are all affected."

Another of the participants in Rafah acknowledged that she would find some support useful to deal with her family problems: "I'm stressed and I fight with everyone. I can't tolerate anyone. It might be useful if I get some support and help. I have 11 people in my house and my husband has married again."

In discussions about how the women dealt with the pressures and stresses of life this varied; many not really having any answers. One woman from Al-Shoka whose three sons had been killed in the war told the group that she would pray to try and deal with her situation and grief. In Khan Younis a woman said she would turn to her husband: "I'm a very sensitive person and if I face any pressure it is psychologically difficult. My husband was there for me and I was there for my children." Another woman from Gaza City said: "To deal with the stress I go to the land and work there."

But another woman said "Even our attempts to deal with stress are in vain because there is another war coming and so there is no point in managing the stress." This was a common thread through the focus groups and interviews. Many people are fearful of another war and scared of what the future holds for them.

Some of the community based organisations have provided women specifically or families with psycho-social support. For example the director of Bait Al-Mustaqbal, a CBO in Khuza'a, said that they had been providing psycho-social support. She said: "We also provide psycho-social support where we gather to talk about our experiences and what happened in the war. There are sessions for the women on their own, for the children on their own and for the women and children together, and we also do visits to see them in their own homes."¹²⁹

The Director of the Palestinian Rural Women's Society for Development in the Al-Shoka area of Rafah advised that her organisation provided psycho-social support for families. However she acknowledged the difficulties with this: "Even though we have given them psychological support sessions – they need the help of specialist counsellors... We treat them in groups without looking at individual differences. I know this isn't appropriate."¹³⁰

There are real efforts taking place in the communities to try and support women and families and provide much needed psycho-social support. However, the need is clearly extremely great, demonstrated by the willingness of women to talk and share their experiences of the conflict and by the palpable grief and distress in the groups.

Case Study 7: Maha Salman Abu Rok

Location: Khuza'a, Khan Younis

Date: 03.03.15

Maha Abu Rok is living between a tent on the ruins of her demolished home and a room they have rented some distance away. She is 31 years old and married with four children, a son who is 11 years, a girl aged ten years, a boy aged eight years and a son aged six years. She is from Khuza'a and has lived there all her life. She was living in a four storey house with her family on one floor, her parents in law and brothers in law and their families on the other floors. She talked about the impact that the

¹²⁹ Interview, Sabah Al Qarra, Khuza'a, 3 March 2015.

¹³⁰ Interview, Aya Al-Sha'er, Rafah, 8 March 2015.

loss of her home has had on the extended family who have been separated and also on her relationship with her husband who has become more angry and aggressive.

“I never thought we would be targeted. My mother in law has diabetes and didn’t want to leave. Then we took her to a UN school but she didn’t want to leave her home. I didn’t want to leave because I was embarrassed about having to stay in other people’s homes. We all decided to go down to the ground floor of the house. Then the military called with a recorded message that we had to evacuate the house. The children were begging us to leave. We left without taking anything because we thought we were coming back. We went to a friend of my husband’s house, who said they could host us, but I was embarrassed to stay with them and they had a sick lady staying with them. So we went together to a hospital and then went to Abed Al Aziz school but I worried whether it was safe.”

She was shocked when she heard that her home had been destroyed and described herself as having an emotional breakdown. She says she lost all her possessions: “I lost all my money and my jewellery which was my *mahr*. It was all lost when the building was bombed. I tried to find my clothes in the rubble but there wasn’t anything left. I lost everything.”

They rented a house, but the family thought it was too far away and they now mainly live in a tent on the land where the house was.

Maha worries about the future and worries about her children: “My oldest son wets his bed and my youngest daughter bites her nails and even when they’re playing their father gets angry and so they can’t play anymore. I’m praying they will be successful.” She is also concerned about her relationship with her husband and about the lack of work: “I am only 31 years old and I’ve seen so much already. I don’t know who to complain to and if I do talk to my husband he gets angry. After the war he got very angry and aggressive towards me, verbal not physical. I just take it. I used to do three temporary jobs working the land and I could buy things for my children. I wish I could do this now but there isn’t any work. My husband isn’t working either. He has lots of time and nothing to do and so he gets into lots of arguments with people.”

5.3 Housing, Land and Property

In Gaza, the context of economic crisis worsened by years of the blockade and conflict, has resulted in an inevitable competition for ever scarcer resources. Women’s Housing, Land and Property (HLP) rights are crucially important in these times of crisis. Security of tenure is essential to provide women and their families with security and protection in their homes if they are widowed or divorced and when their homes are destroyed to ensure that they can benefit from reconstruction grants. Land and assets acquired through inheritance provide a vital source of financial security for asset-poor women and can make a vital difference for family’s a survival during the protracted economic crisis.

A study conducted by NRC in 2012-2013 found that women were increasingly willing to claim their inheritance rights as a result of awareness-raising and the availability of assistance through lawyers and NGOs.¹³¹ The Palestinian Centre for Democracy and Conflict Resolution (PCDCR) utilises an approach which combines mediation and negotiation techniques with *mukhtars* together with professional legal expertise to attempt to resolve HLP disputes.

However, the indications are that after the most recent conflict and because of the hardship and increasingly desperate circumstances, women have become even more reluctant to make their claims for inheritance. For example, one woman in the focus group in Rafah said: “Even if I do have the right to land and property I don’t feel like claiming it because all my family are going through a difficult time.” Another woman pointed out that even if she did have a claim to make, there was now nothing to claim, saying: “My family house was divided between my two brothers. I was trying to claim at least

¹³¹ NRC, *Realities from the Ground: Women’s Housing, Land and Property Rights in the Gaza Strip*, 2013, p. 90.

one bedroom in case something happened to me or my husband, but now the family house has been destroyed and so there is nothing to claim.”¹³²

Women have been deterred from claiming their inheritance because of fears of a breakdown in the relationship with their families and consequent social isolation, and this has only been exacerbated by the latest conflict. The challenge facing women’s organisations and civil society organisation, supported by international organisations is to continue to support women to claim their inheritance rights, while working to ensure that they can maintain their family ties which are vitally important in a context where families have been torn apart by war and destruction and are under increasing economic pressure as a result of economic crisis and the blockade.



An old woman sitting on the rubbles of her house which was already destroyed and rebuilt in 2012, Al Breij refugee camp (Emad Badwan, 2014).

¹³² Interview, PCDCR, 9 March 2015.

Young Widows

For some of the women who lost their husbands, particularly if they were young and had young children, traditional practice expects them to marry their brothers-in-law. The Head of the Women's Unit at the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights said: "Women are paying the price once more. For widows of the martyred, they have to marry the brothers of their husbands. There is one case I know where one man has two sisters-in-law who lost their husband and his father asked him to marry them both. In all of this the women's voices are absent. In the media stories they are talking about them being good men by marrying their sisters-in-law – but there is no mention of the women. Did anyone think of her or ask her? But who cares about how she feels and what her views are?"¹³³

The tradition of a widow marrying her brother-in-law is intimately tied up with traditional ways of living which dictate that women will move to live with their in-laws when they marry. If they then divorce or are widowed their situation becomes very difficult because often they will have no right to remain in the home of their husband and father-in-law. The concept of shared matrimonial property does not exist in Palestinian law effectively denying women any legal claim to housing.¹³⁴ This means that women are usually unable to remain in their homes following the death of their husband or following divorce. Marrying a brother-in-law is seen to resolve the problems and enable the women to remain in the family home and avoid disputes over custody of any children.

As stated in the NRC report on women's housing land and property rights:

Security of tenure is one of the key tenets of the right to adequate housing, yet for many women security of tenure is only achieved through their relationship with men – their fathers, husbands, brothers or sons. For many women, at the end of that relationship either through death or divorce, they will become vulnerable to losing their homes. Women are also likely to be thrust into abject poverty as women in Gaza are highly dependent on male breadwinners to access income and assets.¹³⁵

The difficulties and vulnerabilities of women if they are widowed are highlighted by a case described by a *mukhtara* at PCDCR. A woman whose husband was killed during the war came in desperation to the *mukhtara* because her mother-in-law had taken her two children aged five and seven years old and told her to return to her parent's house. The *mukhtara* managed to negotiate a settlement with the family by using some money that the woman had received from the government on account of her husband's death in order to build an extra room at the home of her in-laws. This meant that she could again live with her children and her mother-in-law would also be able to see her children.¹³⁶

Joint Tenancies

The Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing notes that property regimes which recognise joint rights with equal powers between spouses best protect women's right to adequate housing and to equality.¹³⁷

There is a window of opportunity following conflict where international organisations and governments can implement strategies and programmes which take a progressive and non-discriminatory approach on women's housing rights. This is in accordance with Principle 4.2 of the Pinheiro Principles¹³⁸ which

¹³³ Interview, Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, 4 March 2015.

¹³⁴ UNDP, *A Review of Palestinian Legislation from a Women's Rights Perspective*, September 2011, p. 25.

¹³⁵ UN Women, *Who Answers to Gazan Women: An Economic Security and Rights Research*, 2011, p. 113.

¹³⁶ Interview, PCDCR, 10 March 2015.

¹³⁷ Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing as a Component of the Right to an Adequate Standard of Living, and on the Right to Non-Discrimination in this Context*, A/HRC/19/5326, December 2011, para. 27.

¹³⁸ *Handbook on Housing and Property Restitution for Refugees and Displaced Persons: Implementing the Pinheiro Principles*, March 2007, p. 36.

highlights the fact that restitution programmes should seek to implement a gender strategy, in particular where the *status quo* effectively discriminates against women's right to ownership, either in law or practice. It is very positive therefore that UNRWA has now moved to include women's names on their documentation or 'undertaking' form in the agency's re-housing projects. The practice of asking the head of the household and spouse to sign the documentation has been tested in a pilot project and commenced in May 2015 with the new allocation of homes.¹³⁹

It is clear that such a policy led by governments and international agencies leads to greater security of tenure and protection of women's housing rights. A recommendation from NRC that goes further than this is that international organisations such as UNDP and UNRWA (and government) who award reconstruction grants could invite the recipients "To register their land in the name of both spouses, not just the name of the male head of household, thus protecting the entire family and enhancing women's security of tenure to an unprecedented degree."¹⁴⁰

5.4 Livelihoods and Women's Changing Roles: Impact of Conflict and Blockade

Prolonged conflict often demands shifts in the distribution of roles and responsibilities between men and women. Armed violence and economic collapse can make it impossible for men to fulfil their previous duties as breadwinners and protectors, while forcing women to take on new and expanded roles in the struggle for household survival. This transition often creates tensions between the new realities of men and women's lives and the gender norms to which they were previously accustomed. Women often carry new burdens without any expansion of their rights while men are often forced to accept new circumstances that are at odds with their expectations of masculinity.¹⁴¹

This quote from a 2010 UN Women study describes a phenomenon which was also evident during the research for this study. It draws attention to the fact that women have taken on new tasks such as breadwinning and dealing with agencies while they continue to have responsibility for children, caring for elderly relatives and for their increased burdens at home.

However, there are positives that can come from the change in roles as women develop their independence and find new skills and roles within their families and their communities. The following case study of Shahinaz Abedallah illustrates the shift in roles. For her, the shift came about because her husband had left for Libya when the war had started, leaving her in the position of head of household as well as carer for her children. Not only did she do this, but she also took on responsibilities as a cleaner at the UNRWA school that she was staying at, and assumed the job of maintaining the hygiene in the bathrooms. She was then given more responsibility. She says that she has been changed by the war and feels happy with her new-found responsibility for her family and for others. It is however difficult to know what would happen if her husband were to return, how they would adjust and whether they could adjust back to the traditional roles expected of men and women.

Case Study 8: Shahinaz Mahmoud Abedallah

Location: Shoker, Rafah

Interview: 09.03.15

Shahinaz is 45 years old, and she is married with ten children. She married when she was 21 years old. Her youngest child is a son who is nine years old and her oldest is a daughter who is 20 years old who already has two children and is pregnant again. She is looking after the family on her own. She says: "My husband is in Libya, he went to Libya before the war started and still hasn't come back."

¹³⁹ Interview, UNRWA, 11 March 2015.

¹⁴⁰ NRC, *Rebuilding from the Rubble: Post Conflict Land Tenure Challenges and Opportunities in the Gaza Strip*, March 2015, p. 13 .

¹⁴¹ UN Women, *Who Answers to Gazan Women: An Economic Rights and Security Research*, 2011, p. 17.

Shahinaz and her family are living in a large tent-like structure constructed of wood and canvas that was originally a social area for her husband and his friends. It survived the bombing during the war in July/August 2014, whereas her home which is a matter of metres away did not and is still a large pile of rubble. They wash using a make shift bathroom covered with a piece of canvas.

“During the war in 2014, I left with my entire family – I have ten children. It was horrifying. The Israelis had already started their ground invasion. I had to jump fences with my family and there were helicopters overhead. I took all my children with me;, my youngest was eight years old. We went to the UN school on foot and we were walking blindly from the fear. I could see the Israeli soldiers and the bombing was just random. The fear was indescribable.

We were all at the school on 1 August when the ceasefire started. My son Mohamed who is 18 years old went back to our house during the ceasefire with lots of other people who wanted to see what had happened to their homes. He saw that the house had been completely destroyed and he called me to tell me. I came immediately to see what had happened. When I arrived I saw that the house had been crushed and all my belongings and furniture with it. I could see that it had been hit with a missile and then everything had burned so there was nothing left. I could also see that a bulldozer had turned it over and could see the tracks on and around the house. There was nobody there and nobody involved in the resistance. We didn’t recover anything from the house.

When we were staying at the schools, and when I saw the dirty bathrooms I offered to clean them and the principal of the school at first said I couldn’t do it because of my age! I did it and showed her that I would do the work and they made me responsible for the people in the school. From the work in the bathrooms I started to take on more responsibility and became quite well known in the area and amongst people here. My role did change. I became the head of the household and the head of the family and I also won the hearts of others outside. I became responsible for my family and for others. I feel happy helping people.

Life is very difficult for us though - we are living in the tent which used to be a social room for my husband next to the house. It was damaged but not too difficult to repair. I don’t make any money from the land around the house; there are olives and we harvest them but just for ourselves and family. I am a volunteer and I sometimes receive donations and charity from the places I work with. I am also a refugee and so I get UNRWA assistance such as flour and sugar. The children’s education has been very affected. They can’t study because there is no space and there is no electricity and they can’t study when it gets dark.”

Shahinaz’s life is incredibly difficult, but she has shown remarkable resilience and courage in caring for her children and in taking on a role volunteering in her community in the most difficult circumstances. For many of the men and women participating in the focus groups, it was difficult to see a more positive side to their lives post the 2014 war and in the continuing context of the economic blockade and insecurity. Unemployment rates in Gaza are at 45 per cent and 39 per cent of the population is living in poverty.¹⁴² The unemployment rates for women, particularly young women are significantly higher, as noted earlier in the report. According to a UNOCHA report, as of 21 January 2015, 1.3 million people were classified as being either food insecure and vulnerable to food insecurity.¹⁴³ More than 360 factories were destroyed or badly damaged and thousands of acres of farmland ruined by tanks, shelling and air strikes during the 2014 war ¹⁴⁴ exacerbating the existing economic crisis.

¹⁴² World Bank, *Gaza: Fact Sheet*, available at http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/MNA/Factsheet_Gaza_ENG.pdf.

¹⁴³ UNOCHA, *Occupied Palestinian Territory: Humanitarian Needs Overview 2015*, January 2015.

¹⁴⁴ ‘Gaza Counts Cost of War as More than 360 Factories Destroyed’, *The Guardian*, 22 August 2014.

It is not just those without jobs who are financially insecure, At least 40,000 civil servants have not received full salaries since November 2013, or any salary since April 2014, apart from a one-off humanitarian payment of \$1,200.¹⁴⁵ Another 70,000 civil servants on the PA payroll, received only 60 per cent of their December 2014 salaries, while the payment of January 2015 and subsequent salaries is currently unclear.

Many of the women and the men in the focus groups, wanted to work but were unable to find work or had had their livelihoods destroyed by the war or by the continuing dangers of working the land in areas near the border. It is also important to note that the priority for the men in the focus group conducted was the economic situation and the lack of work and employment and the impact of this on their ability to provide for their families. This was their main concern and what the majority of them wanted to discuss during the focus group.

Agriculture

Israeli imposes an Access Restricted Area (ARA) on land in Gaza up to 1,000 to 1,500 metres from the fence and sea areas beyond six nautical miles from shore. This land is of crucial importance to Palestinian agriculture as it constitutes 17 per cent of Gaza's total land area and nearly 35 per cent of the arable land in Gaza.¹⁴⁶ Even before the 2014 war, the precise parameters of the ARA were unknown, and Israeli policy was typically enforced with live fire putting those entering these areas at high risk of being shot. The population living there has been deemed by the humanitarian community as living in a high risk area, and at high risk of displacement.¹⁴⁷ In a survey conducted by Save the Children UK in 2009 on displacement in high risk areas, 75 per cent of respondents living in the ARA stated that their movement and access is directly impacted by Israeli restrictions. Fifty five per cent of respondents stated that they could not reach their land within the ARA and 74 per cent responded that they faced obstacles working their land.¹⁴⁸

The UN's food and agriculture organisation (FAO) reported that during the 2014 military offensive, about 42,000 acres of croplands had sustained substantial direct damage and half of Gaza's poultry stock has been lost due to direct hits or lack of care as access to farmlands along the border with Israel became impossible. Gaza also lost half of its population of poultry birds either due to direct hits on their shelters or lack of water, feed or care resulting from access restrictions.¹⁴⁹

Some 28,600 households in Gaza rely on farming (19,000 households), livestock raising (6,000) and fishing (3,600) for their livelihoods. Many of the women interviewed in this study lived in rural areas and had been dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods. One woman from the Khuza'a area said: "I work on land close to the border and just 150 metres from the border. I still work there to try and provide a good life for my family. My husband is blind and I have to take responsibility for him and the rest of my family. I grew grey because of the work there. We used to grow everything, but now it is just wheat. We see the tanks coming and going but I carry on because I have to for my family."

Another woman also from the Khuza'a area said "All my family would work on the land – we grew olives, tomatoes, peas and lentils. But then land and the projects were repeatedly destroyed by the Israelis and the military. There are now only some trees left and we have planted some more olive trees." Another woman said they had changed their crops because of the dangers of going to the land:

¹⁴⁵ UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Monthly Bulletin*, January 2015, p.5.

¹⁴⁶ UNOCHA, *Farming Without Land, Fishing Without Water: Gaza Agriculture Sector Struggles to Survive*, 25 May 2010; UNOCHA, *Between the Fence and a Hard Place*, August 2010, p. 5.

¹⁴⁷ Save the Children UK, *Life on the Edge: The Struggle to Survive and the Impact of Forced Displacement in High Risk Areas of the Occupied Palestinian Territory*, October 2009, pp. 11-12.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 46-48.

¹⁴⁹ FAO, 'Gaza: Damage to Agriculture will Have Long Term Effects', 14 August 2015, available at <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/240924/icode/>.

“We had large areas of land near the border. We used to have all sorts of crops – potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, but now we just have wheat so we don’t have to go there as often.”

For the women living around the Rafah area, the women talked about the impact on their livelihoods. One woman said: “We were living off our land and on 1 August the bulldozers came and destroyed everything – we grew cucumbers, peppers, tomatoes many things in greenhouse. All were destroyed. They overturned everything. My husband has become intense and aggressive and can’t tolerate any sounds in the house. He can’t bring himself to go to the land because he is so sad about what happened.” Another woman said: “My land was my source of livelihood. But now it doesn’t give us that. We had animals – chickens and goats but they were all killed during the war.”

It was a similar picture for those living in rural areas in the north of Gaza, in Beit Hanoun. One woman said: “My father’s livelihood has been affected. He used to plant the land but the Israelis took over the land and now he’s afraid to go. We used to plant olives and fruit. My father has gone blind with the stress.” Another woman described the impact of the restrictions on her family’s livelihood: “My family has two pieces of land and we couldn’t reach it because of the border and the restrictions during the war. We had oranges and other fruits. Now between ceasefires we plant things there, but afterwards they are destroyed. We can go but it’s dangerous.”

In the male focus group held in Al-Shuja’iyya, one of the men told the group: “We used to live independently in a house on the borders – we had agricultural land and planted food there that we could use. I lived in a three storey building and we all joined together to work the land – but the war changed that. . . After the war we found that everything was gone. It was all levelled to the ground. I will have to start all over again – I have no house, no job and we live from aid now.”

The following case study from Beit Hanoun is of a family whose extended family home was destroyed in 2014 together with their land and animals. The family had also been affected by another Israeli incursion in 2006 when their house had been destroyed and family members killed and injured.

**Case Study 9: Khawla Yousef Abu Ouda (24years) & Hatem Mohamed Ismael Abu Ouda
Intisar Mohamed Abu Ouda (57years) – Mother in law
Location: Beit Hanoun**

Khawla Abu Ouda is married to Hatem and has three daughters aged five, four and three years and one son who is seven months old. Their home and land in Beit Hanoun was destroyed during the war. She lives in a small house they have built, with her mother-in-law, Intisar Abu Ouda who lost her husband and three sons in a previous attack on Beit Hanoun in 2006.

Khawla: “During the war I was very tired all the time because I was pregnant. I was living in fear. We were staying under the staircase of our home because we were so scared. It was a three storey house and we were one family among the six families living there. My children were crying and wetting their beds, and as a parent I was so scared so couldn’t help them. The night we left there was a lot of shooting and fighting and so we ran to the UN School. I was so scared, I couldn’t keep control of my children because I was so tired and heavily pregnant. When I left I couldn’t carry them all. It was terrible, those days were unimaginable. I went to the hospital and they took good care of me. Back at the school it was very difficult because the bathrooms were far away and there was no mattresses, no clothes. Fortunately people donated clothes to the baby.” Now she adds, things are still difficult for the family: “The children wet their beds and are afraid of noises especially when we’re alone in the house. We have no money and we lost everything.”

Hatem: “The economic situation is really bad. We lost everything in our house – the house was worth more than \$100,000 and now we have nothing. There has been an evaluation of the damage but nothing has happened and there’s been no reconstruction. The government gave us a caravan. We were six families living in the three storey house and we’ve all now been split up. The house

was bombed in 2006 and then rebuilt and then bombed again in 2014. We are now staying on another piece of land we have and have built a small house on it that we are living in. The house that was bombed twice has still not been rebuilt. We had goats and chickens and our livelihoods on that land and it's all gone. After everything I am so sick. I need lots of medication, it costs lots of money. I used to work and bring in an income but after this it has all changed. There are no job opportunities. The house is on state land so there are complications about getting it rebuilt."

Impact on Families

Many of the women were particularly concerned for their sons on account of the lack of job opportunities. One woman said: "There is no work. I have four sons and they don't work and so they can't marry. They all live with me in one room." The women in some of the groups talked about the fact that young people in Gaza were looking for ways to leave because there were no opportunities for them there.

In the focus group with the men, the young men who participated talked about some of the difficulties they faced in accessing work. This young man explained how his source of livelihood had been destroyed during the war: "I am 21 years old, and my father had bought me a car as a source of livelihood to work as a driver but the car was hit during the war and now I can't use it. I have a sister at university and one at school and I used to support them but now I can't." Another 21 year old man explained that there were simply no job opportunities in Gaza and also described the responsibility that he feels: "I graduated from university in electronic engineering but now I can't find a job. I just graduated after the war, but there has been nothing since then. We're all in debt and we have nothing to support ourselves." Another young man, aged 24 years said that the lack of work meant they also couldn't get married and move on with their lives: "Twenty years ago, for our parents, they worked in Israel and studied in Egypt. They would have money and would have an apartment. But now I'm 24 years old, I've no job and no apartment and I don't think I will have anything before I'm 30 years old."

Another young man was positive despite not accessing the work that he wanted: "I finished school and graduated in accounting, but I now work as a driver. I don't feel frustration; it was frustrating to sit around. I know the situation and I feel lucky to be working."

For some of the older men, there were stories of losing everything. One man had lost his garage business that he had spent forty years building up and is now dependent on aid: "When I returned after the ceasefire to check up on my home – I found that the house, all three stories and the garage were levelled to the ground. The effort was 40 years of work...I've been a mechanic since 1974 and all the tools were destroyed and two cars in the garage. It was a family business and my two sons were also employed there. In the rubble we have put up a tent and my sons are trying to rebuild it, I have an injury so they are trying to carry on with some work.... We are living in a rented place and receive aid from Oxfam – sacks of flour and sometimes some oil." While he was waiting for assistance with rebuilding his home, he wasn't aware of any assistance available to help rebuild his business.

A woman from Rafah made the link between her husband's unemployment, the death of their son and the difficulties that they were experiencing in their relationship: "My husband is a construction worker and there are no materials coming in and he's unemployed. He's become very tense – he always was – but now it's increased. Especially after his son died. He smokes a lot."

There are some small programmes to help women take on more of a role in providing for their families in small businesses like embroidery, crafts and cooking traditional food. And one woman in the focus group in Al-Shoka, Rafah thought that there should be more of these to provide women with independence and the ability to provide for their families: "I am suggesting projects to employ women to provide for their families as you can't rely on men these days."

However, these projects were affected by the war. The Director of the Palestinian Rural Women's Society for Development in Al-Shoka in Rafah said they "had co-ordinated to start a new project giving opportunities for women to do handicrafts like embroidery and knitting but we couldn't start when the war commenced. We have now started to do a little more. We were also trying to do projects like farming and cultivating animals to promote livelihoods but so much was destroyed and so now it is more about giving out aid."

Through its Job Creation Programme (JCP), UNRWA provides short-term employment opportunities for refugees to ease the impact of widespread poverty and protracted conflict. In 2014, 20,550 refugees received a short-term employment opportunity, with participants placed at local organisations, health facilities, NGOs and UNRWA installations, including UNRWA collective centres. One component of this programme aims at placing participants in trade-orientated businesses in order to provide assistance to the private sector who are constrained by the blockade.

Oxfam who have traditionally worked in assisting in providing livelihoods for people are also focusing more on providing food vouchers for needy families – helping 10,000 families buy food using a value based voucher they can use in shops. However, in an interview they also said that they had received thousands of applications for a cash-for-work programme that was providing jobs clearing storm water drains. This highlights the desire of many in Gaza to work and not just receive aid. Oxfam are also starting a project providing sewing machines to assist women in supporting their families.¹⁵⁰

The stories from the focus groups and the interviews demonstrate the devastation that the on-going blockade, the ARA and the wars have wreaked on the Palestinian economy and on the lives of the people living in Gaza. When livelihoods are destroyed, whether this is in agriculture by the destruction of land and farms, or of small businesses through the destruction of vehicles, shops and garages - the impact is enormous. The story of the man whose mechanics business was destroyed underlines the impact – his business, built up over 40 years provided employment and a livelihood not just for him, but for his two sons and their families. Without the business they have become largely dependent on aid and charity removing their dignity and reducing them to poverty and dependency. This is the reality for the majority of families living in Gaza now.

¹⁵⁰ Interview, Oxfam, 10 March 2015.

6 Conclusion

Women are still profoundly affected by the events of July-August 2014 in Gaza. Their memories, recounted in focus groups and interviews, were vivid and horrifying and they had in no sense been able to ‘move on’ from those days. Many of them had not received any psychological support and there has been no accountability or findings of responsibility for those who had caused the deaths of their loved ones, their displacement or the destruction of their homes.

During the focus groups held for this research, the women described their experiences and recounted their terror of fleeing the bombing and running from place to place. Some talked about forgetting children and leaving them behind, passing dead bodies, chaos and confusion and little time to think about where to go and what to take when they fled. Some women were pulled out of the rubble, amazed about being alive, whilst others witnessed children and other family members being killed in front of their eyes. The scale of destruction has left complete neighbourhoods flattened, and damaged and destroyed infrastructure including roads, hospitals, schools, nurseries, the power station, water and wastewater networks and treatment facilities.

Hundreds of thousands of people were displaced during the conflict and 28 per cent of the population, fled their homes to makeshift shelters in UNRWA or government schools or to stay with friends or family. Despite the efforts of the humanitarian community the conditions in the collective centres were sub-standard. The majority of the women interviewed for this research described overcrowded and unhygienic conditions with a lack of support and facilities for pregnant women, women with babies and the elderly. Neither were they safe: three of the UNRWA shelters were hit by Israel on 24 and 30 July and 3 August 2014, resulting in the deaths of 45 people, including 17 children heightening the fears of those staying in them. Those who stayed with friends and family or remained at home were equally subject to the terror of the 51 days of intensive bombings and attacks with nowhere safe to go.



Palestinians forced to flee their homes in the north areas of the Gaza Strip (Emad Badwan, 2014).

In the 2014 war, 1,563 Palestinian civilians were killed including 551 children and 306 women and there were 142 Palestinian families that lost at least three family members.¹⁵¹ A further 11,000 were injured including 3,374 children, 2,088 women and 410 elderly.¹⁵² As the primary care givers in Gaza, women bear the responsibility for caring for children and elderly relatives, and after each war in Gaza, women also take on the responsibility of caring for the injured, and managing the grief amongst remaining family members. But how can women do this as they struggle to manage their own feelings of distress, grief and loss? The strain on women in holding their family and community together and the potential impact on society of the deterioration in the social fabric resulting from this is unquantifiable.

The people of the Gaza Strip cannot endure another war. As stated by UNRWA Field Protection Co-ordinator “The consequences of the conflict have been unprecedented and can be seen on three different levels: there has been the physical destruction; the second is the human loss of life; and the third is the deterioration of the social fabric.”¹⁵³ This report endorses this assessment. The women and men interviewed for this report have simply not recovered from the 2014 war which came on top of the ongoing Israeli occupation and blockade as well as regular military operations in Gaza. As homes and entire neighbourhoods remain in rubble, as there continues to be no accountability for the destruction and loss of civilian life, and as livelihoods continue to be lost through the war and the blockade leaving 70 per cent of youth unemployed and 80 per cent of the population dependent on aid,¹⁵⁴ there is hopelessness, distress and fear amongst the women interviewed for this research.

¹⁵¹ UNOCHA, *Occupied Palestinian Territory: Humanitarian Needs Overview 2015*, 21 January 2015. Figures recorded by the Palestinian Human Rights Coalition put the total number of Palestinians killed at 2,215 with 1,639 of those being civilians and 556 children, see Al Haq, *Divide and Conquer*, February 2015, p. 27.

¹⁵² UNOCHA, *Gaza Initial Rapid Assessment Report*, 27 August 2014, p. 2.

¹⁵³ Interview, UNRWA, 11 March 2015.

¹⁵⁴ <https://www.oxfam.org/en/emergencies/crisis-gaza>.

7 Recommendations

UN Agencies and International NGOs

- **Increased advocacy efforts in relation to the impact of conflict on women:** Advocacy efforts directed towards the Israeli authorities, in shadow reports and reports to Special Rapporteurs and to the international diplomatic community, should highlight the impact on women of Israeli military operations and the destruction of homes. Such efforts should call for accountability as well as an end to the blockade which has devastated livelihoods. Case studies collected by NGOs can be effective ways of highlighting this impact and the need for accountability and the end of the blockade. Advocacy efforts must also note the actions of militant groups and the authorities within Gaza that contribute to the on-going conflict, with its resultant impact on women.
- **Act on recommendations in the UNFPA study to implement psycho-social support for women and girls where this has not already taken place.**¹⁵⁵ This should particularly focus on women in areas that have been particularly affected by the war in 2014 and the blockade such as Khuza'a, Beit Hanoun, Al-Shuja'iyya and areas around Rafah. Where possible, the existing provision of support for children should be extended to meet the needs of all affected persons and should be linked with psycho-social support for parents and care-givers to provide an integrated approach for families.
- **Extend and support programmes by community based organisations and women's organisations that provide employment and training to women.** Many of these have been badly affected by the war and require support and funding. Small projects that focus on women such as agricultural projects and traditional cooking can provide training for women in essential skills and an opportunity to support their family financially.
- **Extend programmes of cash for work to provide employment and money for families with dignity.** Increasing opportunities for men and women to work outside the home can relieve stress on families both financially and emotionally and decrease the likelihood of domestic violence.
- **Take into account the concerns raised by women about the conditions in the used during the conflict in future contingency planning.** Whilst noting the various improvements made by UNRWA to the collective centres during and after the conflict to meet beneficiary needs, there are some further basic protections that could be taken, such as ensuring toilets and bathrooms are single sex and improving safety and security in those areas by providing locks, better provision for pregnant women, women with newborn babies and the elderly and priority allocation of resources to these groups. Whilst the level of disease and sickness was low considering the magnitude of the conflict, hygiene and cleanliness particularly in bathrooms could be further improved to prevent minimise the risk of illness in crowded environments, such as the collective centres.
- **Continue to ensure the active involvement of women in decision making and committees in all areas of decision making, including the running of the shelters, during conflict.** As noted in the report, UNRWA did make efforts to ensure equal representation of women in IDP committees in the centres. However the perception of some women interviewed in the focus groups for this report was clearly that more could have been done to ensure their voice was heard and their concerns addressed.

¹⁵⁵ UNFPA, *Protection in the Windward: Conditions and Rights of Internally Displaced Girls and Women during the Latest Israeli Military Operation on the Gaza Strip*, October 2014, p. 3.

- **Put in place a clear strategy to disseminate information about the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism to both women and men, as well as information about assistance for those who have lost their livelihoods.** Existing methods include the internet and press announcements and should also include broadcasts on popular radio stations. Women's CBOs in rural areas provide an existing network to families living in remote and hard to reach areas and to women who have no access to the internet. Outreach sessions should be conducted with these organisations to ensure that women are updated regarding the GRM as well as their own individual cases. Further, information disseminated should include information about what assistance is available for those who have lost their livelihoods as a result of the conflict whether in businesses, agriculture or fishing.
- **Consultation of women in reconstruction programmes:** Ensure that women as well as men are consulted about reconstruction programmes that involve the reconstruction or repair of their homes. Women should also be involved as decision makers and participants in any plans and proposals for large scale housing projects that will affect them and their communities. It is not sufficient to dispense information to the head of household and expect information to be passed on from and to women in the household. Women have different needs and priorities and they should be given a full opportunity to be engaged in the process.
- **Devising an appropriate and fair system of priority need for the reconstruction programme.** It is not clear if one exists and what the process will be for allocating the next stages of assistance to those with destroyed homes. Ensure that women are included and consulted with during any assessments of need..
- **UNRWA has implemented a recommendation that rights of usage contracts and housing undertakings** should include both the husband and wife as the named beneficiary of the allocated housing to provide security of tenure to both. This is extremely positive and it is recommended that a similar approach is implemented by all agencies providing new housing in the Gaza Strip.
- **All INGOs should consider their obligations to ensure security of tenure for women in their shelter and housing programmes.** Consideration should be given to whether new homes built in the Gaza Strip with international agency involvement should be designated to husbands and wives jointly. As a minimum men and women should be informed of options for them and the potential consequences for them if women are excluded from the title.
- **Establishment of links between Gender Based Violence and Housing, Land and Property programmes:** There are still few links made between GBV and HLP issues and it appears that the prevalence of GBV increased during the recent conflict. There are no powers to exclude violent men from the home and women often lack security of tenure to enable them to remain in the home in these circumstances. It is recommended that more consideration is given to how domestic violence/GBV links with women's lack of security of tenure and what programmes can be developed around this issue. This may include possible criminal law reform to include provisions to exclude violent men from their homes as well as measures to increase security of tenure for women.

