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Navigating Through the Pandemic 1

# Navigating Through the Pandemic

*Gender-Specific Report on the Impact of COVID-19 on Women in Gaza*



Palestinian Centre  
for Human Rights

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## Introduction:

For two years and counting, the world has been gripped with a rapidly spreading pandemic that has altered almost every aspect of modern life. In one study, it was estimated that the COVID-19 pandemic's global financial costs amount to more than 16 trillion dollars in lost output and health reduction (Cutler, 2020). Yet not all countries, communities or individuals had the same ability and resources to support themselves as they navigated the pandemic's substantial consequences. Vulnerable groups, especially those living in developing countries, were specifically in a more disadvantaged position.

This report takes the case of Palestinian women living in Gaza, who have specific daily vulnerabilities and challenges that exacerbated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its repercussions on their lives. This focus has been chosen because of the exceedingly evident gender-based discrimination and the significantly heavy pressures and challenges that have been added to the everyday lives of Palestinian females from the household, work, and the political and legal environment which have weakened their ability to meet their financial obligations. Moreover, Palestinian females working in healthcare and social work have been impacted by unequal payments compared to males, which further weakened their ability to navigate through the pandemic and its challenges. Indeed, Ghandour et al. (2020) found out that women are likely to be more exposed to gender-based discrimination since they may not get the required protections or have access to a protection services office. For example, restriction of movement was a fundamental shortcoming for women in Palestine. Affected women could not get help because movement in their territories was restricted and this significantly accelerated the effects of the pandemic on their daily lives. Secondly, stigmatization was a key determiner of increased gender-based discrimination and abuse among women during the pandemic. According to Women & Kaizer (2021), stigmatization among women is a common problem affecting them during the pandemic since the majority of those affected by gender-based discrimination were unable to receive sufficient support due to being frequently stigmatized and hence sidelined. The pandemic has also affected the livelihood of many families, especially those headed by women in Palestine (Kira et al., 2020), after employers closed businesses where women once worked, leaving them unemployed without social and financial protection (Standish, 2020). Consequently, women in

Palestine lacked other means of survival, and providing for their families became an added challenge to their already long list of challenges. For many women, they had to seek financial support from their male partners, which often created tensions between them as males felt the added financial burden which they could not easily manage (Allabadi et al., 2020).

Given the significance of the topic, this report will first provide an overview of the gendered impact of COVID-19 in Gaza, followed by a discussion and statistics on the impact of the pandemic on women's employment, livelihood and safety. The core of the report will include narrative accounts from women in Gaza where they highlight how they adapted to and faced the challenges imposed by the pandemic. It will end with a set of recommendations for the effective provision of protective measures for Palestinian females in Gaza.

### Hurdles Upon Hurdles

The pandemic-imposed hurdles put a heavy strain on the socio-economic conditions of women in Palestine. To stem the spread of the virus, Palestinian authorities in both besieged Gaza and the West Bank imposed strict restrictions that started in work settings and continued with closing private and public institutions, schools, and day centers. This exacerbated both professional and domestic burdens on Palestinian women and has occurred within the wider context of lowered income, poverty, and a deteriorating standard of living.

Nevertheless, the barriers to progress in the participation of Palestinian females in the labor force existed well before the pandemic. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), females in Palestine were “registering higher unemployment rates, lower wages, while also being subject to increased discrimination and gender-based segregation.” This is supported by The Palestinian Non-Governmental Organizations Network (PNGO), which reveals that female-led households have experienced increase rates of poverty and unemployment, namely in the besieged Gaza strip. Unemployment discrepancies exist between genders: in 2020, while 37 percent of women were unemployed, the rate was 20 percent among men. As of 2021, the level of employment of 25 to 49-year-old Palestinian women is only 23 percent (The Palestinian Non-Governmental Organizations Network, 2020). This shows that the negative implications of the pandemic had a disproportionate impact on Palestinian females in the workforce. Their ability to move freely was further hampered through frequent travel bans, lockdowns, and quarantine

measures. These hurdles imposed by the pandemic add to the preexisting hurdles resulting from Israel's occupation of West Bank and Gaza, which have been impeding the ability of Palestinian women to grow in the formal employment sector for many years.

### Impact On the Females' Employment and Livelihood

According to the UN statistics, 85 percent of the total daily market workers in Palestine were women in 2020 (UN Women, 2020). Women have dominated the markets, most especially the food and recreational-based markets in Palestine. These women greatly depend on the money they receive from the businesses to survive because they head most single-parent families in Palestine. According to Jones et al. (2020), women are likely to secure less-paying jobs and have fewer savings. Women have greatly dominated the informal business sector. The majority of both the official and supporting staff of these informal businesses have been dominated by women. After the pandemic strike in Palestine, most informal businesses were shut down due to government restrictions (Al-Ali, 2020). This was since these businesses could act as supper spreaders for the virus. The Palestinian government requested the closure of other core service providers where the majority of the employees were women. As such, women have been greatly affected since they lack adequate means for financial survival. According to Al-Ali (2020), the action is based on social interactions and public interplanetary for women to get adequate employment. These factors lagged the potential of the unemployed women and girls not being insignificant positions to secure other employment during the pandemic.

### Interviews:

To collect the data for this report, a sample of 12 Palestinian females from Gaza were interviewed. The questions revolved around the impact of COVID-19 on their health, work, personal and social affairs. Other questions revolved around the challenges they faced as females during the pandemic, and how their challenge compared to the challenges faced by their male counterparts in Gaza. The females were also asked about their sources of support and their assessment of the Palestinian government in supporting their gender during the pandemic. The interviews also invited the affected females to offer suggestions on how their gender should be supported during similar times of crisis.

The resulting report is divided into the following key subtopics: health priorities and coping mechanisms, pandemic challenges, gender differences, the performance of public authorities, and sources of support.

Within the subtopics, the report presents narratives from the women who were directly impacted by the pandemic and its health, social, psychological, and economic repercussions. They included wives, mothers, professionals, and divorced women who adopted new habits and faced new types of challenges with little or no support.

The significance of the interviews is that they formed the basis of these subtopics as narrated by those who experienced them firsthand. Therefore, they act as a personal testimony of women from Gaza during the pandemic. They accurately reflect how these women learned to cope and what impact the pandemic had on their physical, psychological, social, and emotional health. Each subtopic offers an insight into the daily lives of those women during the days of lockdown and isolation.

### *Health Priorities and Coping Mechanisms*

The interview findings appear to show that the top health priorities for the women during the pandemic revolved around ensuring the highest levels of personal hygiene and safety, despite the personal and social inconvenience that ensued. This included increased attention to personal hygiene, daily sanitization, and masking, avoiding social gatherings and public, crowded places. Abir, an unemployed, 30-year-old woman, developed daily habits that included limiting social visits, taking the necessary safety precautions, not interacting with others, and always making sure sanitizers were present. “More than that, I started to constantly follow health and safety news in publications and websites, to make sure I make the right decisions, including the choice of vaccine,” she said. On the few occasions when social interactions and gatherings were necessary, the respondents always maintained social distancing and always wore masks. Another respondent, Rasha, said that the top health priorities include mental health stability, prevention of depression, prevention of breast cancer and other general health concerns like diabetes and osteoporosis for example. These priorities reflect an awareness by Rasha that amid the pandemic, healthcare services are ever more strained, and primarily focused on treating COVID-related cases. This often comes at the expense of treating chronic disease and preexisting health conditions. On the career level, Rasha hopes to be in a position that ensures career advancement, pay equity, and does not

discriminate based on gender. Some women adopted habits that they previously abandoned, such as reading and embroidery, yet there were complaints of necessary habits that have become exhausting. “Continuously having to clean, use alcohol and disinfect our surroundings and items every day is exhausting” she said. These new habits appear to be a result of the increased anxiety and fear of the severe and often deadly health repercussions of the Coronavirus combined with the limited availability of public healthcare.

### *Pandemic Challenges*

While the new precautions and behavioral changes resulting from the pandemic helped in supporting the women’s health and safety, they did not come without costs: increased pressure on household duties, psychological and emotional challenges, and lack of job opportunities were among the most cited repercussions. For 26-year-old, divorced Rawaa, a handcrafts artist, her business stopped because of COVID, denying her from her only source of income: “When my work stopped with no social interactions to help me cope, I experienced more psychological stress daily. This made it harder for me to provide my child with the needed care and attention as he remained next to me all the time”. Similarly, 35-year old Hiba, a divorced mother who works as a voice-over artist at Al Aqsa Voice and Studio, made sure to pay close attention to her personal and physical wellbeing through constant checkups, yet psychological wellbeing was damaged because of not being able to see or even receive her children personally or through a phone call: “the social distancing procedures limited the relationships and social visits at a time when I needed them the most” she said. Other challenges included the increased pressure on mothers to support their children in their studies, without having the expertise or sometimes the knowledge of the material: “I had little knowledge of the material and even less knowledge of online learning procedures” said Abir, who recalled being constantly worried about her child’s academic performance in addition to his health, especially after he was infected with Covid and could well be infected again. Similar education-related challenges were identified by the teachers themselves. Rasha, a university lecturer, noticed Covid-19’s impact on her students on campus. “Being a university lecturer, I have seen the decrease in the educational levels of students, no motivation to study and complete dependence on online courses,” she said.

### *Gender Differences*

While statistics indicate that the pandemic's impact on genders was disproportionate, the interviewed Palestinian women appeared to show mixed responses. On one hand, Israa and Fedaa argued that the males were at an advantage, since they had more opportunities to go out of their homes, while the females were forced to remain inside and face the pressures of the household. On the other hand, Amal emphasized that males were equally affected, especially those who were business owners: "the shops and restaurants had to close, and a big number of male employees were laid off from their work" she said, adding that this affected their family life and created conflicts, given that they are the bread winners. Similarly, Elham recognized her brother's suffering, as he was forced close his shop for a long period of time, which cost him his primary source of income. "Even during his days of work, my brother was in direct contact with customers daily, which put him at great risk" she added. This was consistent with Hiba, who recalled the suffering of her brother who worked as a nurse and was infected with COVID-19 in the early months of the pandemic. Rawa agreed, explaining that males were affected even greater than females, since their presence at home became both a barrier and a problem, since it created more interpersonal conflicts and therefore hampered the family's ability to cope. Moreover, for Nahed, the impact of the pandemic on the Palestinian male's lives was long lasting: "My brother had to stop his family-building journey because of the pandemic. He could not marry, find a house to move to or a new job after being laid off," These findings show that, while the impact of the pandemic on the Palestinian females in Gaza was specific, given their vulnerable position, it was not less challenging on the males, given their pivotal position as providers and heads of households. They also show a clear level of empathy on behalf of the Palestinian females towards their male counterparts.

### *Public Authorities and Sources of Support*

Officially, the Palestinian governments in both Gaza and the West Bank put forth emergency response plans to alleviate the impact of the pandemic on their communities. While there was a provision of financial and medical aid, efforts to promote the economic recovery of the highly vulnerable Palestinian females in Gaza were far from being felt. "The situation and needs of females are never a priority here. They are either taken lightly or totally ignored," said Heba, who described the efforts exerted by the authorities as "very weak". For Yusra, she received no support at all from any public authority: "Even in remote areas, very limited aid was received, far from



being enough to fulfill the rising needs of our families,” she said. Yusra used to work in a lingerie shop, and after she was infected with COVID, she was laid off without any compensation. Other respondents stressed on the lack of female-specific health support during lockdowns by the authorities, as Abir explained: “the authorities exerted general efforts but did not provide support that specifically targeted our needs as females, whether it was through awareness, or job specific training related to corona precautions,” The frustration voiced by these respondents is a clear reflection of their unfulfilled basic needs as females in the mid of the pandemic. Even when decisions were taken, they were still ineffective. According to Abir, the Palestinian authorities made some good decisions regarding the pandemic, yet they faced implementation issues. “Most of the decisions couldn’t be fully applied due to the harsh economic situation the strip lives under because of the siege. Also, the occupation’s closure of borders prevented the arrival of medical resources in hospitals,” she said.

### *On the Rise: Gender-Based Violence*

Domestic gender-based violence in Palestine’s patriarchal society appeared to be widely spread, with the females being its main victims. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) revealed in its 2019 Violence Survey that as much as 27 percent of females are victims of GBV in Palestine, a percentage that increases to 35 percent in the Gaza strip. The report attributed this to two main reasons: the occupation and the deeply rooted traditional patriarchal norms and values. The pandemic only exacerbated this problem, with parents, workers and students from both genders spending more time at home. The females mostly fell victim to interpersonal and an anger management issues from their male counterparts. In one example, Abir’s husband gradually started showing a new attitude during the pandemic: “he has become more violent and offensive especially after spending long days at home. He used to verbally abuse me, swear at me and humiliate me”, adding that this ordeal significantly affected her psychological well-being, to the extent that she filed a lawsuit against him. In another case, while Yusra did not personally face any gender-based violence, she is aware of what happens in her community. “In our area, Khan Younes, we have a neighbor that gets repeatedly physically and verbally abused by her husband. It got worse during the pandemic as the husband spent more time at home.” More than that, gender-based violence in Gaza was not limited to physical and verbal abuse. There was an economic dimension to it. After she was infected with COVID, Amal was laid off her work and was not given a full salary. This

weakened her ability to provide for herself and her family at a time when they desperately needed the financial support.

### *The Weakest Link*

Overall, the respondents in this report agreed with the fact that the female is the weakest group in the society, hence, she often falls victim to the widespread norms and traditions which are mostly unfair towards the female gender. “We also live in a highly patriarchal society” said Amal, “which only makes it worse for us” she added. In a society where men are the main breadwinners, pandemic-induced financial hardships are often used as a pretext for gender-based domestic violence. “When the father can no longer afford to buy the basic necessities for his family, such as food, drink and healthcare, their wives become the primary target of their anger”. With repeated lockdowns often lasting weeks, one can imagine how prolonged the Palestinian female exposure was to gender based domestic violence. More than that, these females had no place to go: ‘El Aman Shelter’, which was a safe place for GBV-affected women to seek refuge in closed for a long period during the pandemic, which ultimately increased the number of affected women.

### *Access to Justice*

COVID-19 has had serious and extensive impacts on people’s access to justice in Palestine. For example, Sharia courts in Gaza suspended their work during the two states of emergency periods in March-April and August-September 2020. Judicial operations only opened partially between and after the complete shutdown of the courts. During the limited periods of operation, marriage and divorce cases were considered the most urgent by these courts, on the expense of other equally important cases. One interviewee revealed that the reason behind this prioritization was mainly financial, since every marriage and divorce request was priced at 70 Jordanian dinars in 2020. For the interviewed females, their work could have been significantly facilitated during the pandemic if they received information about hearings and cases on every Sharia court website. When services resumed, the courts were overcrowded with citizens and lawyers, which created public safety issues and limited the courts’ efficiency. This highlights how access to local justice services for vulnerable groups was greatly limited with little or no facilities provided by local authorities – a reality further exacerbated by the Israeli occupation, internal Palestinian division and the continued blockade of the Gaza strip.

### Recommendations:

With the lack of public or private support throughout the pandemic, the respondents were keen to provide their own recommendations with regards to supporting females as vulnerable groups as the pandemic continues. Among the main recommendations included:

#### **Gender-Responsive Mental Health and Psychosocial Support:**

This report has shown that the heavy stress and disproportionate impact which COVID-19 had on females took a toll on not only their physical health but also their mental and psychological wellbeing. Gender-responsive mental health and psychosocial support is therefore necessary and can be in the form of training the local social workers and counsellors, whether directly or through online means. This can be organized within a period of one month and should not be limited to the adolescent females and should extend to girls and teenage females in households by assisting them with activities that would allow them to better cope during times of crisis and protect them from the psychological impact of the domestic violence that they may witness.

#### **Safe Spaces:**

With regards to gender-based violence, the provision of safe spaces for affected and vulnerable females where they would feel recognized, heard, and protected. Spaces where they would be able to share their pains, questions and experiences and feel that their anxiety, concerns and stress are normalized, not stigmatized. Finally, these spaces should provide the affected females with safe mechanisms to request and receive immediate protection whenever they need it.

#### **Supporting Health and Social Care Workers:**

Specific support should be provided to the female staff members, nurses and medics which are exposed to frontline stresses and dangers by providing them with regular psychosocial support and a mechanism to send their complaints and feedback in case they get subjected to any kind of harassment or gender-based violence whether at work or in their household. They should also be provided with recreational activities that would allow them to better cope with exhaustion and lockdown related stresses. Finally, any gender pay gap that exists in the healthcare sector should be addressed immediately, to ensure that the females in this sector are fairly recognized and motivated.

### **Increasing Female Participation in Decision Making:**

Given their vulnerability and the central role which they play in their societies, Palestinian women should be approached by local and international humanitarian and political decision makers when planning processes, activities or designing policies that impact them. Namely, local women's organizations should be particularly targeted and invited to take part in designing these policies and processes as they would be more suited to provide updated, first-hand information that can make these policies and processes more responsive and relevant to the specific needs of the Palestinian females. Palestinian females should be involved in discussions related to cost and resource allocation, prioritization of needs, revision of existing policies, types of facilities that should be provided and accountability measures related to domestic violence and gender injustice issues.

### **Facilitating Access to Online Services:**

The access to internet is a critical prerequisite for access to key information, public services, relevant news updates and educational opportunities. Yet this access has been extremely limited for the Gaza residents as a whole and especially females, with the shortage of electricity and the lack of proper infrastructure. It is therefore recommended to invest in expanding and developing the internet and communications infrastructure in the Gaza strip, with the objective of ensuring internet access is both facilitated and reliable.

Other recommendations included:

- Forming notification centers that would provide updates on any changes, policies, decisions that take place as the pandemic changes and unfolds
- Dedicating special support for females: whether through closed female circles, awareness workshops and training on how to deal with the pandemic and especially how to handle new household pressures.
- Designing a system of compensation to laid off workers, whether males or females.

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