

Makeshift Camps in Gaza

A Harsh Environment Depriving Women of
Safety and Privacy

2025



Introduction

The Israeli occupation army issued dozens of evacuation orders during its military offensive on Gaza while simultaneously destroying entire residential neighborhoods. This resulted in the obliteration of 69% of Gaza's buildings¹ and the forced internal displacement of 90% of the population. Forcibly displaced individuals sought refuge in makeshift shelters such as hospitals, schools, and public buildings², which quickly became overcrowded due to the escalating Israeli attacks. As the number of displaced persons surged, makeshift tents spread across open spaces in a desperate attempt to accommodate those fleeing death.

These camps lack even the most basic humanitarian necessities, suffering from severe shortages of clean water, the absence of sanitation, and the total collapse of medical care, rendering them uninhabitable. Women and girls bear the brunt of this crisis, facing a loss of privacy and heightened risks of gender-based violence in an environment devoid of gender-sensitive humanitarian response and protective measures. They remain exposed, without shelter that safeguards their dignity or provides them with even minimal security.

This report aims to highlight the crisis of privacy deprivation faced by women in displacement zones in Gaza. This issue manifests in the absence of personal spaces, the necessity of communal living, and the lack of privacy in sanitary facilities. It also extends to performing household chores in an exposed environment, exacerbating the struggles of pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers who are deprived of even the minimal conditions for safety and comfort.

Furthermore, the report explores the psychological and social impact on these women in the absence of a gender-sensitive humanitarian response in Gaza.



1- UNOSAT. (13 December 2024). UNOSAT Gaza Strip Comprehensive Damage Assessment. <https://unosat.org/products/4047>

2- The forcibly displaced in the Gaza Strip have sought refuge in various locations, primarily in schools, clinics, warehouses, and facilities belonging to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

International Humanitarian Law Protects Women's Privacy in Shelters:

International humanitarian law recognizes the importance of shelter in protecting civilians during armed conflicts. Accordingly, it establishes provisions to safeguard it through various measures. First, it prohibits targeting civilian homes or forcibly displacing them. However, if these protections fail or civilians are forced into displacement, international humanitarian law obligates conflicting parties to provide them with adequate housing. It also mandates the establishment of protected zones offering a safe refuge for specific groups of civilians.³

Additionally, certain humanitarian relief measures and safety zones grant women extra protection.⁴ Warring parties are required to provide women with safe shelters that ensure suitable living conditions, respect their specific needs, maintain security, uphold privacy, and accommodate cultural considerations.⁵

Women must also have access to sanitary facilities that preserve their dignity and protect them from risks within or outside the shelters. Such measures may include appointing female security personnel to monitor shelters, erecting fences, and ensuring adequate lighting to guarantee safe access to these facilities.⁶ Moreover, it is essential to involve women in all decisions related to their housing needs to ensure that their requirements are effectively met.⁷



3- International Committee of the Red Cross, *Women Facing War*, p. 119.

4- Same as Previous.

5- Same as Previous, P. 117.

6- Same as Previous, P. 123.

7- Same as Previous, P. 118.

The Reality of Forced Displacement in Gaza's Makeshift Camps: _____

Since the start of the Israeli offensive on Gaza on October 7, 2023, forced displacement has become a grim reality, exacerbating the suffering of women in particular. Indiscriminate bombings and repeated evacuation orders forced 90% of Gaza's residents to flee without a clear destination, seeking refuge in makeshift shelters or makeshift camps lacking even the most basic living conditions. In these overcrowded spaces, families reside in schools and public buildings, separated only by fabric sheets or plastic partitions that offer no privacy. In many cases, multiple families share a single room.

As displacement numbers surged and so-called "safe zones" dwindled, these shelters became overcrowded, pushing thousands into makeshift tents set up on open land without planning. These tents, made of thin or worn-out fabric, provide neither protection nor privacy, making women particularly vulnerable. Under such conditions, hundreds of forcibly displaced individuals must use unsafe, poorly secured shared bathrooms, exposing women to severe physical and psychological distress and putting their safety and dignity at continuous risk.

Despite ceasefire declarations, the destruction caused by the Israeli occupation army was immense, with 69% of the sector's buildings demolished⁸, leaving hundreds of thousands of Palestinians homeless. Families continue to endure harsh conditions, with some forced to remain amid the ruins without doors or windows to shield them from the cold or provide even minimal privacy. The ceasefire was short-lived, as the Israeli attacks resumed, trapping Palestinians in a relentless cycle of bombing, forced displacement, and suffering. Any prospect of safety or reconstruction remains distant as devastation and the humanitarian crisis deepen.



8- UNOSAT. (13 December 2024). UNOSAT Gaza Strip Comprehensive Damage Assessment. <https://unosat.org/products/4047>

The Privacy Crisis Facing Women in Gaza's Makeshift Camps: _____

This crisis is most evident in the overcrowding within shelters, where personal spaces are nonexistent due to communal living arrangements. Privacy is entirely absent, whether in sanitary facilities or while performing household tasks. Pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers endure particularly dire conditions that negatively impact their health and that of their infants, which will be clarified later on in the report.



1. Overcrowded Shelters [Makeshift Camps] with No Personal Space: _____

Makeshift camps suffer from extreme overcrowding, with dozens of families packed into school classrooms without any partitions to ensure even a minimum level of privacy. In some cases, multiple families are forced to share a single tent, leaving women to sleep next to unrelated men, causing profound discomfort and a sense of insecurity. This situation severely restricts their movements and freedom of action.

Riham Al-Ar'eer reported to the PCHR's team: **"Since the beginning of the war, my family and I have been forcibly displaced to a classroom in Al-Daraj School after our home was bombed by Israeli warplanes. We now live in an 8×8 meter room, divided into four sections, with each family occupying a small portion. There are nine of us trying to adapt to this cramped space, while the entire classroom holds forty people in an unbearably tight area. I am going through the hardest moments of my life—this situation is unbearable by all standards. The overcrowding makes even the most basic living conditions impossible. Fear and anxiety consume me, and I lack the most fundamental sense of security. I suffer from insomnia at night; there is no space, no privacy, and not a single moment of peace. I am forced to sleep fully clothed, always on edge, wary of any movement around me, clinging to my blanket in search of a sliver of safety among strangers. The only divider between us is a thin, loosely fixed fabric that barely offers any privacy. I constantly worry that at any moment, we might be exposed."**

9- PCHR received the testimony on March 9, 2025, at Al-Daraj School in Gaza City.

Many forcibly displaced women report being forced to wear their hijabs and full clothing around the clock, even while sleeping, due to the lack of privacy. This exacerbates health issues, particularly with limited access to hygiene facilities and the spread of skin diseases. The situation is even worse in tents, where strong winds can easily blow open the entrance in winter, while in summer, opening the tent for ventilation leaves women exposed as if they were sitting outdoors.

Awatef Al-Ar'eer, 35, told PCHR's team: **"Since the war began, I lost my home and was forced to take refuge in a tent at Al-Daraj School—a makeshift shelter my husband constructed from simple fabric. All day long, I remain fully dressed with my hijab on, as we must keep the tent's entrance open due to the lack of lighting. If we close it, we are plunged into complete darkness. Wearing these clothes constantly has caused me to develop skin irritation and blisters. Even at night, I do not dare remove them for fear that someone might intrude at any moment. When the tent's entrance is open, I feel completely exposed, with nothing shielding us from the eyes of others. I cannot bathe or even change my clothes inside, as the fabric covering the tent is torn, leaving us completely vulnerable. Because of this, I am forced to go to my sister's house just to maintain basic hygiene."**¹⁰

S.S., 38, also shared her experience with PCHR's team: **"I left my home—my safe haven, where I once moved freely and securely—only to find myself crammed into a tiny tent, shared with my husband's brother's family. We are piled on top of one another, with no space, no comfort, no sleep... and not even a shred of dignity. I never remove my hijab or my clothes, day or night, as if clinging to the last thread of modesty in a place that offers neither privacy nor security. On top of this, I have to wait ten days just to take a single shower due to the overcrowding and lack of private facilities. During this time, I developed lice, and the constant feeling of disgust with myself has become unbearable."**¹¹



10- PCHR received the testimony on March 9, 2025, at Al-Daraj School in Gaza City.

11- PCHR received the testimony on March 3, 2025, at the Turkish Camp in Khan Younis.

2. No Privacy in Sanitary Facilities:

The severe lack of proper sanitary facilities is one of the biggest challenges facing women in shelters. These facilities are often too few to accommodate the large number of the displaced, forcing women to share communal restrooms with men. This causes significant distress during the day and poses serious risks at night, including harassment and assault, particularly in the absence of security measures.

H.N., 20, shared with the center's team: **"I have diabetes and need to use the bathroom frequently, but this has become a source of embarrassment for me. I feel ashamed of the way people look at me, as I have to go every hour or two. When someone knocks on the door while I'm inside, I feel anxious and uneasy. This situation is taking a toll on my mental health. It's something beyond my control—an illness I have to live with. During the day, I sometimes ask my husband to accompany me to the bathroom, but at night, I am terrified. I fear harassment, and the presence of stray dogs everywhere makes using the bathroom even more difficult."**¹²

The distance to some of these facilities further complicates the situation, requiring women to travel unsafe paths to relieve themselves. Many facilities also lack secure doors and adequate lighting, making their use fraught with danger especially at night.

R.S., 37, shared with the center's team: **"I found myself in a cramped tent, barely suitable for a day's outing, yet it was the only refuge available. I don't dare go to the bathroom—the area is exposed, the facilities are shared, and men and young boys are always around. I now limit myself to using it only twice a day, at dawn and after sunset, taking my children with me for safety. The bathroom is set up in the middle of the road, as if it were part of the street, and its door is nothing more than a tattered piece of fabric that provides no real privacy. I couldn't even bathe after my menstrual cycle—fear consumed me. Days passed before I finally, and hesitantly, decided to take my little daughter with me to stand guard while I washed myself. To avoid facing this ordeal daily, I stopped drinking water, but it has taken a toll on my health. Now, I suffer from urinary retention and severe infections, and I see no end to this nightmare."**¹³

Some women resort to makeshift solutions, such as creating primitive bathrooms near their tents or using plastic containers inside them, to maintain privacy and avoid threats. However, these desperate measures compromise their dignity and expose them to health risks.

W.W., 37, shared with PCHR's team: **"One of the biggest challenges we face in the camp is the severe shortage of bathrooms. There are over fifty tents, but only four bathrooms, meaning that each restroom is shared by ten families. This acute lack of basic facilities is exacerbated by the absence of women-only bathrooms, forcing us to wait in long, overcrowded lines—an extremely humiliating experience. At night, the situation becomes even worse. I am left with no choice but to relieve myself in a bucket inside my tent, as the camp is entirely dark and going to the bathrooms is unsafe. I know this is unhealthy, but it is my only option. Bathing is another ordeal. I have to bathe inside my tent, constantly fearing that someone might see me. The tent walls provide little protection—they are nothing more than thin fabric."**¹⁴

12- PCHR received the testimony on March 12, 2025, at the Turkish camp in Khan Younis.

13- PCHR received the testimony on February 28, 2025, at a camp in the Asdaa area of Khan Younis.

14- PCHR received the testimony on February 2, 2025, at Al-Shuja'iya camp in Gaza City.

Due to the scarcity of water and lack of privacy, many women are forced to refrain from using the bathrooms for long hours, leading to serious health complications. The situation is even more dire as they can only bathe once every two or three weeks. These inhumane conditions not only affect their physical well-being but also take a deep psychological toll, stripping them of their dignity and sense of security in even their most basic needs.

Nimaa' Barbahk, 46, shared: **"I used to live safely in my home, but today, I find myself in a tent in the middle of a barren wasteland—an area once overrun by stray dogs. My daily routine has completely changed; I now have to schedule my bathroom visits, limiting them to twice a day and always accompanied by my daughter, fearing harassment. The bathroom offers no privacy or dignity. I have already had my privacy violated twice—men opened the bathroom door on me while I was showering. The experience was terrifying. I screamed and cried for hours afterward, and now, out of fear, I barely bathe once or twice a month. Even then, I make sure my daughter stands guard at the door."**¹⁵

In the absence of a safe environment that meets women's basic needs with dignity, postpartum women and girls requiring special care during menstruation face even greater challenges. The shelters lack the most fundamental arrangements for changing clothes or maintaining hygiene. This exacerbates their distress, making them feel constantly exposed and embarrassed.

In a desperate attempt to cope with the lack of privacy and clean water, some women have resorted to taking birth control pills continuously to suppress their menstrual cycles. However, this has led to severe side effects, which have worsened due to the absence of medical care, further deepening their suffering and impacting their physical and mental well-being.

Kifaya Salem, 42, shared: **"I once lived in an apartment where I had complete privacy. Today, I live in a tent with none. To avoid embarrassment during my menstrual cycle, I had to start taking birth control pills, as the camp's bathrooms are shared between men and women, making it extremely awkward to go there with my sanitary supplies. I continued taking the pills for four months, hoping they would regulate my cycle, but instead, they caused continuous bleeding. This has only increased my physical and emotional suffering."**



15- PCHR received the testimony on March 4, 2025, at Al-Rahma camp in Khan Younis.

16- PCHR received the testimony on March 6, 2025, at the Turkish camp in Khan Younis..

3. The Struggle of Women with Household Chores in Public Spaces:_____

Women in displacement camps endure an almost total lack of privacy while carrying out daily household chores, adding another layer of hardship beyond simply adapting to the difficult conditions. These makeshift shelters were set up as temporary solutions during crises, but they were not designed with women's needs in mind. With no designated spaces for women, they are forced to spend most of their time in mixed-gender areas, even while performing essential daily tasks. Cooking, washing dishes, and doing laundry often take place in open or overcrowded spaces that lack even the most basic level of privacy. Beyond the physical exhaustion from these tasks, women also suffer immense psychological stress, as they are constantly exposed to the eyes of strangers, leading to feelings of embarrassment and discomfort.

M.Q., 46, shared: **“I wash my family’s clothes right in front of my tent, in a completely exposed space with no privacy whatsoever. I use a large basin to hand-wash everything and then hang the clothes outside to dry. It’s deeply humiliating, especially when I have to hang our personal garments in plain view of everyone. It doesn’t stop there. I also cook in front of the tent, using an open fire, spending hours under the constant gaze of others. I have no personal space, no comfort. This reality drains me emotionally, making me feel powerless and constantly on edge, as if I am always being watched.”**¹⁷



17- PCHR received the testimony on February 28, 2025, at Al-Shuja'iya camp in Gaza City.

4. Breastfeeding Mothers and Pregnant Women: A Double Burden: _____

Breastfeeding mothers face particularly harsh conditions, as they lack designated spaces that ensure their comfort and provide a safe environment to care for their infants away from prying eyes. Many are forced to breastfeed in mixed-gender areas, leading to extreme discomfort or compelling them to forgo breastfeeding altogether. This has a profound impact on the mother's well-being, as well as the child's health and development.

Doha Al-Assi, 24, shared with the PCHR's team: **"I am a breastfeeding mother, and my baby, Youssef, still relies on natural feeding. However, the complete lack of privacy has made it extremely difficult for me. The only way I can breastfeed is by closing the tent, but the suffocating heat during the day makes this unbearable. I had no choice but to switch to formula milk because I simply cannot breastfeed him in these conditions. The tent offers no privacy whatsoever, and passersby can easily see inside, making breastfeeding nearly impossible. It kills me that my baby is no longer fully dependent on natural feeding. I know the immense health benefits of breastfeeding, and I fear that formula milk might negatively affect his health. I feel trapped between my desire to give him the best and the helplessness that overwhelms me. I endure this struggle every day, hoping for the moment when this suffocating reality finally ends."**¹⁸

Pregnant women, on the other hand, endure hardships that go beyond physical pain. The overcrowded living conditions leave them unable to rest comfortably, with no separate spaces to accommodate their needs. Their suffering is exacerbated by the frequent need to use the bathroom, yet the lack of adequate facilities forces them to endure long waits or walk long, exhausting distances—often accompanied by feelings of shame and discomfort. This relentless struggle takes a psychological toll, further increasing the health risks that threaten both their well-being and that of their unborn children.

Amna Al-Sawwaf, 39, told PCHR's team: **"One of the most difficult challenges I face as a pregnant woman in the camp is the lack of privacy while bathing. While some use the shared bathroom, I refuse to do so; the space is cramped, exposed, and does not provide any sense of security. As a result, I am forced to travel to my parents' house every time I need to shower, despite the long distance and the physical strain of commuting. This situation weighs heavily on me and causes immense distress. Additionally, the overcrowding in the shared bathroom, which is used by both men and women, forces me to wait in long lines, further increasing my embarrassment—especially since pregnancy necessitates frequent restroom use. At times, I find myself using the facility only once a day, despite the severe pain it causes in my side, which exacerbates my suffering and makes the pregnancy even more exhausting."**¹⁹

Similarly, M.S., 19, shared her experience: **"I am married and eight months pregnant. Out of embarrassment over using the shared bathroom in the camp, I stopped drinking water and eating properly, which led to anemia, severe infections, and intense abdominal pain. When my condition worsened, I had to go to the hospital, where the doctor warned me of the serious risks I was facing, emphasizing that malnutrition and dehydration directly affect my baby's health and growth. At night, my suffering worsens due to the lack of proper lighting, making me fearful of harassment when going to the bathroom—not to mention the stray dogs roaming everywhere, further heightening my sense of insecurity. During the day, I feel extremely ashamed of my frequent need to use the shared bathroom and often have to wait over an hour for my turn."**²⁰



18- PCHR received the testimony on March 3, 2025, at Al-Shuja'iya Displacement Camp in Gaza City.

19- PCHR received the testimony on March 5, 2025, at Al-Shuja'iya Displacement [makeshift Camps] in Gaza City.

20- PCHR received the testimony on March 6, 2025, at Al-Salam Camp in Khan Younis.

The Psychological and Social Impact on Women:_____

Nimaa' Barbakh told the PCHR's team: **"Due to the lack of privacy, I only sleep two hours a day and have suffered a mild stroke from the constant stress and anxiety. To cope, I have started taking psychiatric medication, but the suffering persists."**

The absence of privacy in the displacement makeshift camps does not only affect women's daily lives but also takes a significant toll on their mental and social well-being. Living in overcrowded and unsafe environments for prolonged periods creates constant stress and can lead to issues such as anxiety, depression, and a persistent sense of suffocation. Women who have already lost their homes feel a deep sense of instability, and the lack of privacy exacerbates their feelings of helplessness. This deprivation can also cause severe sleep disturbances and heightened depression, particularly as it erodes their sense of security and stability. Additionally, living in conditions where privacy is non-existent imposes new social restrictions on women, forcing them to adopt specific behaviors to avoid embarrassment or social scrutiny. Many women isolate themselves, choosing to stay in their tents or shelters for as long as possible—even at the expense of their physical and mental well-being.

Noor Al-Najjar, 22, described her struggle: **"We women fight a daily battle parallel to the war everyone else is enduring—a brutal war caused by the lack of privacy. I feel immense psychological pressure, constant tension, and overwhelming depression. Insomnia haunts me most nights, to the point where I can no longer endure even a single moment of my life."**²¹

Beyond these struggles, the lack of privacy also exposes women to increased risks of gender-based violence, including verbal and physical harassment, in the absence of clear protection mechanisms or reporting channels. The lack of secure doors or barriers between sleeping areas and common corridors heightens women's fears of intrusion or sudden breaches of their personal spaces—especially at night—further aggravating their mental distress and deepening their sense of vulnerability.²²



21- PCHR received the testimony on March 18, 2025, at Al-Sabireen Camp in Gaza City.

22- Personal Interview with Samah Mahmoud, Psychologist at the Gaza Mental Health Program.

The Absence of a Gender-Sensitive Approach in _____ Humanitarian Response in Gaza's Displacement Camps:

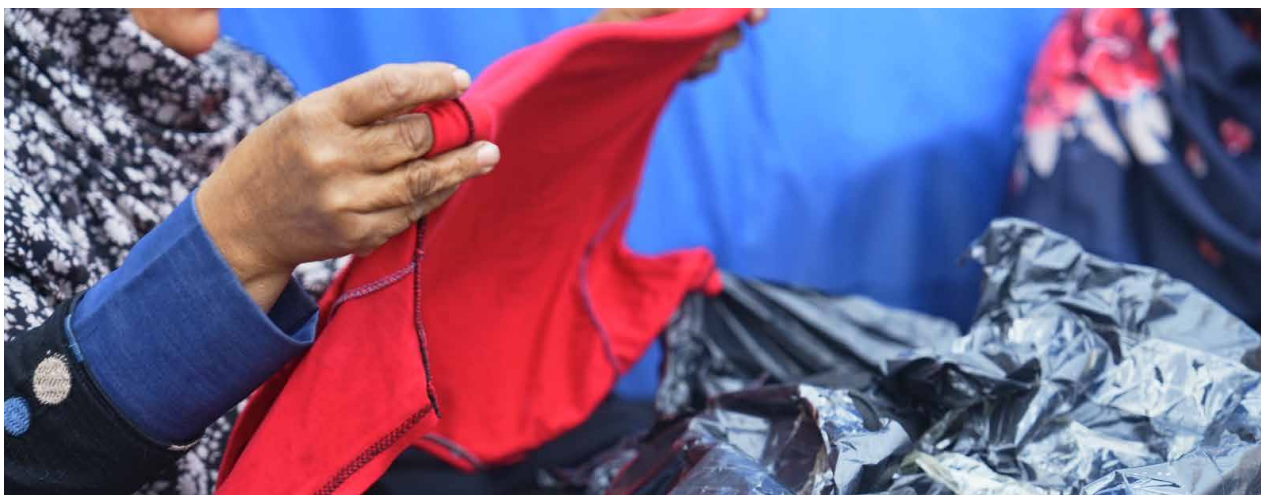
Despite over a year and a half of displacement for thousands of women in makeshift shelters, the authorities responsible for managing these shelters—whether local or international—remain unable to implement effective solutions to address the severe lack of privacy, further worsening the suffering of displaced women.

Humanitarian efforts primarily focus on providing food, water, and medical aid, while issues related to privacy and women's specific needs—such as secure sleeping spaces, separate and well-equipped sanitation facilities, or dedicated areas for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers—are largely overlooked. This highlights a glaring lack of gender sensitivity in humanitarian response efforts, as women's dignity and protection from degrading conditions are not treated as priorities, leaving them even more vulnerable to gender-based violence.

Moreover, the failure to address this issue reflects a deeper flaw in long-term humanitarian planning, where privacy is not recognized as a fundamental human right but rather treated as a luxury in emergency contexts, despite its protection being enshrined in international law. This neglect exacerbates the psychological and physical suffering of displaced women, undermines their dignity, and hinders their ability to cope with the harsh realities of forced displacement.

Given these dire conditions, urgent measures are needed to ensure women in shelters receive at least a minimum level of privacy. Concrete actions must be taken, including designating separate safe spaces for women, providing segregated sanitation facilities, enhancing lighting, and installing securely locked doors in shared facilities. The presence of female security personnel could also serve as a significant reassurance, fostering a safer environment and empowering women to report violations without fear of repercussions.

Ensuring these measures are implemented is not merely about physical protection; it is about preserving the psychological and social well-being of displaced women—a fundamental right that must not be ignored under any circumstances.



Conclusion and Recommendations:

International humanitarian law obligates parties to a conflict to provide safe shelter centers that ensure the protection and privacy of women. However, the reality in Gaza since the onset of the Israeli military assault reflects unprecedented levels of suffering, with women bearing the heaviest burden due to the absence of a gender-sensitive approach in humanitarian response efforts within displacement sites.

Forced displacement has compelled 90% of the population to live in overcrowded shelters or deteriorating fabric tents that lack even the most basic necessities for a dignified life, including privacy. Women are disproportionately affected, finding themselves in harsh environments devoid of personal space, where they are forced to reside in inhumane collective housing conditions with unsafe and unsanitary shared sanitation facilities that expose them to severe risks, including disease and violence.

The crisis is further exacerbated by women being forced to carry out domestic tasks in exposed environments, with no measures in place to safeguard their dignity. Pregnant women and nursing mothers face even greater hardships, as they are deprived of the minimum level of safety and medical care, directly threatening their health and that of their children. This deadly and coercive environment not only violates their dignity but also has devastating impacts on their physical and mental well-being, especially in the absence of a humanitarian response that addresses their most fundamental needs.

Based on these realities, the Palestinian Center for Human Rights recommends the following:

- Holding the international community accountable for its legal and moral responsibilities by exerting strong pressure on Israel to immediately cease fire and take urgent and effective measures in accordance with the provisional measures ordered by the International Court of Justice.
- Integrating a gender-sensitive approach into humanitarian response efforts: It is essential to prioritize the specific needs of women in shelters by implementing comprehensive planning that ensures privacy, protection from gender-based violence, and the designation of separate spaces for families, women, and children, ensuring they are not housed alongside unrelated men, thereby creating a safer and more private environment.
- Establishing dedicated sanitation facilities for women: These facilities should be separate from those used by men and guarantee full privacy while also providing essential healthcare services, such as routine medical check-ups and access to feminine hygiene products.
- Enhancing security measures within displacement shelters to prevent violations of women's privacy by deploying female security personnel to monitor and regulate entry and exit points, ensuring psychological comfort and a sense of security for displaced women.
- Providing psychological and social support services for affected women to help them cope with the distress of forced displacement and mitigate the psychological impact of losing privacy and personal security.

- Ensuring women's participation in decision-making processes concerning their needs with displacement shelters, allowing them to voice their concerns and advocate for their privacy and safety.
- Strengthening coordination between local and international humanitarian organizations to ensure that women in shelters receive appropriate and secure assistance.
- Raising awareness among shelter management and staff about the importance of respecting and upholding women's privacy by promoting an understanding of why privacy must be prioritized in all policies and services provided.
- Offering confidential psychological support and social assistance by deploying teams of mental health and social work professionals to aid women struggling with trauma, stress, or psychological challenges resulting from conflict and displacement.
- Establishing confidential advisory services within shelters to support women who have experienced violence or exploitation, ensuring that these services are private, safe, and accessible so that survivors feel secure when seeking help.
- Incorporating women's healthcare needs into humanitarian relief plans by ensuring that feminine hygiene products and medical care are included as essential components of any emergency response.



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