



THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN GAZA: IMPACTS ON WOMEN AND THE IMPERATIVE OF THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA

by Mary Bridger

The Gaza Strip, home to approximately 2 million people, has endured decades of conflict, economic blockades, and political instability. The current genocide has been built upon an already dire humanitarian situation, with women bearing a disproportionate burden. To understand and build sustainable solutions, we must first examine the gendered impacts of the crisis and the implications of pre-existing occupation. While doing so, we can also explore the relevance of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, highlighting how humanitarian responses aimed at addressing the needs of women are pivotal, but political will must ultimately be at the core.

Gendered Impacts of the Gaza Humanitarian Crisis

1. Loss of Life and Displacement

The ongoing conflict has resulted in significant loss of life. Between October 2023 and July 2025, women and girls were estimated to account for 67% of the 57,680 Palestinians killed. This figure likely underrepresents the true toll, as many women remain unaccounted for under rubble. Additionally, since the collapse of the ceasefire in March 2025, over 1.1 million people have been reported displaced across the Gaza Strip, with a substantial number being women and children, leading to the collapse of family structures and support systems.

2. Food Insecurity and Health Challenges

At least 557,000 women in Gaza are facing severe food insecurity, with many reporting weight loss and frequent dizziness. Over 80% of women rely on food assistance as their primary source of nutrition, yet 87.3% believe that aid distribution is not equitable.



This disparity exacerbates existing gender inequalities, as often the primary family member responsible for food preparation and care-giving within a household are women, who also face the added time burden and mental sense of responsibility for providing for their families when insufficient food is available. Time and time again we see women in crisis often prioritize feeding their families over themselves.

3. Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Sexual Exploitation

The humanitarian crisis has led to an increase in GBV, including domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and abuse. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable in overcrowded shelters and displacement settings, where a lack of privacy and security heightens the risk of violence. In addition, we have seen reports of women being sexually exploited in exchange for food, money, or job promises. These incidents highlight the vulnerabilities women face in accessing humanitarian assistance and the need for stringent safeguards against exploitation.

The Women, Peace and Security Agenda

The WPS agenda emphasizes the importance of women's participation in peace and security efforts, their protection from violence, and the integration of gender perspectives in humanitarian responses. In the context of Gaza, the WPS agenda underscores the necessity of four key components.

- **Participation:** Ensuring women's involvement in decision-making processes related to peacebuilding and humanitarian aid distribution.
- **Protection:** Safeguarding women and girls from violence, including sexual and gender-based violence.
- **Prevention:** Addressing the root causes of conflict and gender inequalities to prevent further violence.
- **Relief and Recovery:** Providing gender-sensitive humanitarian assistance that meets the specific needs of women and girls.



Humanitarian Response and Challenges

Humanitarian organizations have been working tirelessly to address the needs of women in Gaza, not only for the last two years, but for decades, working to respond to this crisis that is both acute and historic. Prior to the blockade of aid by Israeli authorities, CARE and our local partners reached over 930,000 people with water, food, shelter items, protection services and medical support.

Today, despite the challenging conditions, our staff and partners continue to operate healthcare centers and mobile health clinics and distribute clean water. But our supplies in Gaza are quickly running out.

We remain ready to scale up our response to provide life-saving aid—but to do so, we need a permanent ceasefire and full, unhindered access to supplies at a scale that matches needs.

And we are not alone. Organizations in Gaza have been instrumental in providing support, with 83% of them remaining operational despite the challenging environment. These organizations provide critical services, including core health and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) service delivery, as well as counseling, legal aid and advocacy. However, they receive a disproportionately small share of humanitarian funding, with only 0.09% allocated to national or local women's rights organizations in the 2023 Flash Appeal.

Policy Recommendations

To address the unique challenges faced by women in Gaza and to align with the WPS agenda, the following policy recommendations are proposed for both donor governments as well as the organizations they fund:

Increase Funding to Women-Led Organizations

Allocate a significant portion of humanitarian aid to women-led organizations in Gaza to enhance their capacity to provide essential services and support to women and girls.



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Implement Gender-Sensitive Humanitarian Programs

Design and implement humanitarian programs that specifically address the needs of women and girls, including access to reproductive health services, protection from GBV, and economic empowerment initiatives.

Ensure Women's Participation in Decision-Making

Incorporate women's voices in all levels of decision-making related to humanitarian aid distribution and peacebuilding efforts to ensure that their needs and perspectives are adequately represented. Even though women are vital to community resilience, they remain largely excluded from formal peace negotiations and political decision-making. This exclusion undermines the potential for sustainable peace.

Canada's Role

Canada has a proud tradition of defending international humanitarian law and responding to crises with compassion and conviction. And throughout this crisis, we have seen the government routinely speak out, condemning what is happening in speeches and statements. Likewise, they have negotiated progress in boardrooms and UN Assemblies, declaring Palestinian statehood and supporting peace processes. Much of this comes about after sustained advocacy from civil society, including members of the Women, Peace and Security community. But words, without sufficient action, do not bring about progress for those most in need; in fact, they risk emboldening further violations.

It's past time for Canada to uphold our legacy and take action. The Canadian government must leverage every diplomatic avenue to secure an immediate and lasting ceasefire, while also committing to holding all parties accountable for complying with international humanitarian law. In addition, the implementation of sanctions and economic consequences is critical, placing pressure on Israel to secure an unconditional lifting of all restrictions on the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza and its full, safe, and unhindered distribution. And finally, Canada must examine its own complicity, close arms trade loopholes, and halting all direct and indirect arms transfers to Israel.



Conclusion

The genocide and resulting humanitarian crisis in Gaza have had a devastating impact on women, exacerbating existing gender inequalities and creating new vulnerabilities. The implementation of the WPS agenda offers a framework for addressing these challenges and ensuring that women are not only protected but also empowered to contribute to the rebuilding of their communities. By increasing support for women-led organizations, implementing gender-sensitive programs, and ensuring women's participation in decision-making and the peacebuilding process, the international community can help mitigate the impacts of the crisis and promote a more inclusive and sustainable peace.

The recent escalation in violence has further intensified the humanitarian crisis, with over 67,000 deaths reported since October 2023, the majority being civilians. The destruction of infrastructure and limited access to basic necessities have compounded the hardships faced by women and girls.

In this context, the WPS agenda remains a critical framework for ensuring that the needs and rights of women are prioritized in humanitarian responses and peacebuilding efforts. The active involvement of women in these processes is essential for achieving lasting peace and security in Gaza.

The international community must continue to advocate for the protection and humanity of women in Gaza, ensuring that their voices are heard and their rights upheld amidst the ongoing crisis.

By adhering to the principles of the WPS agenda, there is hope for a future where women in Gaza can live free from violence and discrimination and actively participate in the rebuilding of their society.