

REPORT

MARCH 2024

STORIES FROM GAZA

**ADDRESSING WOMEN'S SEXUAL AND
REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS
IN GAZA**



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ABOUT POLITICS4HER



Politics4Her is a global intersectional feminist platform and youth-led movement advocating for the inclusive participation of young women and girls in politics, civil society and other decision-making bodies.

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TRIGGER WARNING

This report includes words and phrases that should be avoided as it discusses sensitive topics related to women's health during genocide, famine, miscarriage and sexual assault. You may come across some that you consider discriminatory, or that have been used historically to oppress certain people or groups. These may cause distress to people who have experienced discrimination based on their identity. Given the nature of this report, we understand that many of the issues discussed are personal and emotive for many people. While naming oppressions is necessary to deconstruct them, we recognize that this can take a toll on those who are directly affected. Please take care in the reading of the report and prioritize your well-being.

This report primarily discusses the experiences and challenges faced by Palestinian women during the ongoing war on Gaza since October 7th. However, we want to expressly acknowledge the diverse spectrum of gender identities beyond the binary. Throughout this report, we strive to use inclusive language that respects and acknowledges various gender identities and expressions. We understand the importance of recognizing and affirming the rights and experiences of everyone, regardless of gender identity.



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CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Since 1967, Israel has maintained control over the Gaza Strip, subjecting its more than two million Palestinian citizens to severe oppression. In 2007, Israel imposed a blockade on Gaza, as described by Antonio Guterres Gaza has become an open-air prison. Under Israeli rule, Palestinian women have endured grave human rights violations spanning decades. This includes targeted violence, sexual harassment, and arbitrary arrests, particularly against activists and journalists who dare to criticize Israeli occupation practices. Since the First Intifada, reports have emerged of systematic sexual violence perpetrated against Palestinian women, notably in Israeli prisons.

According to The United Nations Human Rights Council special rapporteur on violence against women, settlement expansion, and the increase in settlers' violence against Palestinian women, have exacerbated the situation. Checkpoints scattered throughout the West Bank have routinely impeded pregnant Palestinian women's access to essential healthcare. In Gaza, the Israeli blockade has severely constrained healthcare access, with permits for medical travel frequently delayed or denied. In 2016, 1,726 permits were denied and 8,242 were delayed and did not receive a response in time for their medical appointments.

The situation has only worsened after the armed resistance attack in October, on February 19, 2024, UN experts expressed deep concern over reports of egregious human rights violations against Palestinian women and girls. Instances of sexual assault, with detainees subjected to various forms of abuse, including being stripped naked and searched by male Israeli army officers were documented. Additionally, there are reports of at least two female Palestinian detainees being raped, while others have been threatened with sexual violence. Furthermore, detainees, including human rights defenders and journalists, have been denied essential items such as menstruation pads, food, and medicine, and subjected to severe beatings.



INTRODUCTION

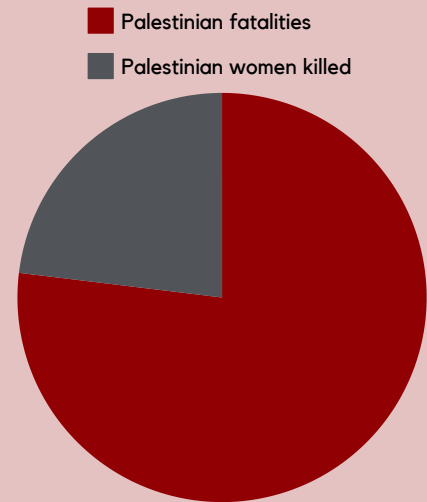
Amidst the relentless bombardment on Gazans, the plight of women and girls stands as a harrowing testament to the devastating impact of violence on vulnerable populations. The humanitarian crisis unfolding in Gaza has reached alarming rates, particularly affecting the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of women and girls. Against the backdrop of ongoing genocide, access to essential SRHR services has rapidly deteriorated, leaving over a million women and girls without critical care. This report delves into the urgent need for concerted action to safeguard the SRHR of women and girls in Gaza, shedding light on the inherent hypocrisy of Western governments, the complexities of selective feminism, and the voices of resilience echoing from Gaza's streets. Recommendations are provided to address this crisis, underscoring the indispensable requirement for an immediate and permanent ceasefire to enable effective implementation of solutions.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this report facilitated a comprehensive investigation into the SRHR of women in Gaza during genocide. By combining insights from in-depth narrative interviews with women in Gaza strip and data from secondary sources, the report aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges and barriers faced by women in accessing sexual and reproductive healthcare services and exercising their reproductive rights in the context of genocide and humanitarian crisis.

PALESTINIAN WOMEN'S CURRENT SITUATION

Before October 2023, 94,000 women and girls lacked access to sexual and reproductive health services in Gaza, as reported by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Shockingly, this number has skyrocketed to over 1 million in less than five months, underscoring the dire humanitarian crisis exacerbated by ongoing genocide. The latest UN data grimly reveals that at least 9,000 women have been killed, 2,100 are missing, 23,000 have been wounded and over half a million are displaced in Gaza since the commencement of Israel's offensive. This harrowing statistic reflects the tragic reality that the war on Gaza is not only a war on its people but also a war specifically targeting women.



Death toll in Gaza since October 7th
-SLINGSHOT



9 in 10 women report finding it harder to access food than men
-UN Women

As the genocide persists unabated, the toll on women and girls in Gaza intensifies with each passing day. According to the UN, an average of 63 women, including 37 mothers, continue to lose their lives daily. The impact of food insecurity is particularly severe for women, with over 4 out of 5 reporting that their families now consume half or less of their pre-war meals. Acute food shortages disproportionately affect women, who prioritize feeding their children and other family members over themselves. This dire situation places pregnant and lactating women at heightened risk of malnutrition, posing grave threats to maternal and infant health.



There are currently 50,000 pregnant women in Gaza



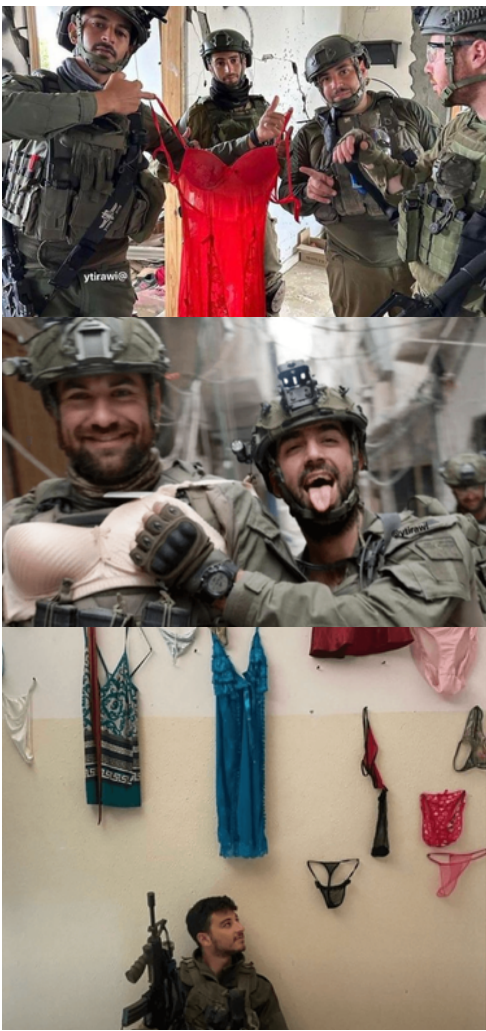
Over a hundred give birth every day amidst the chaos



300% surge in miscarriages among women in Gaza

-UNFPA and UN women

The plight of pregnant women in Gaza is compounded by the scarcity of essential medical resources and the brutality of the genocide. Despite an estimated 50,000 pregnant women residing in Gaza at the onset of the siege, access to adequate prenatal care remains severely restricted. Reports emerge of pregnant women suffering from malnutrition and dehydration and enduring childbirth without medical assistance, including instances of forced C-sections without anaesthesia. The incessant bombings, fleeing for safety, and fear are also taking the heaviest toll on many, resulting in premature birth due to terror and anxiety. This exacerbates an already challenging situation, with health organizations reporting a 300% surge in miscarriages among women in Gaza since Israel's bombing campaign on the besieged Palestinian enclave began on October 7.



-IOF soldiers sexually humiliating Gazans women after destroying their houses by posing with their lingerie and posting it on Social media

Moreover, the disturbing accounts of gender-based violence, including rape and sexual assault, perpetrated by Israeli militants against Palestinian women further exacerbate the trauma and suffering inflicted upon the population. The lack of menstrual hygiene products exacerbates the already dire situation for women and girls in Gaza. With more than 690,000 menstruating individuals facing limited access to supplies and privacy, the risk of infection and discomfort is heightened. Many resort to unsanitary makeshift solutions, such as using torn pieces of cloth or fabric, placing their health at risk and perpetuating cycles of poverty and vulnerability.

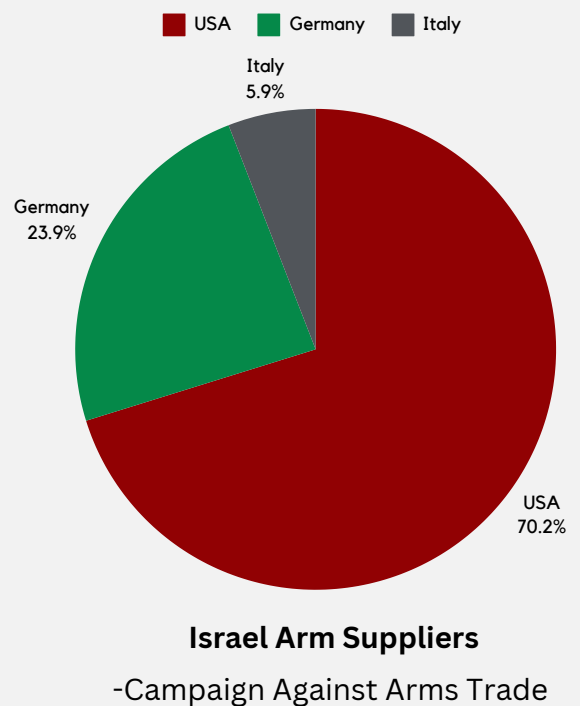
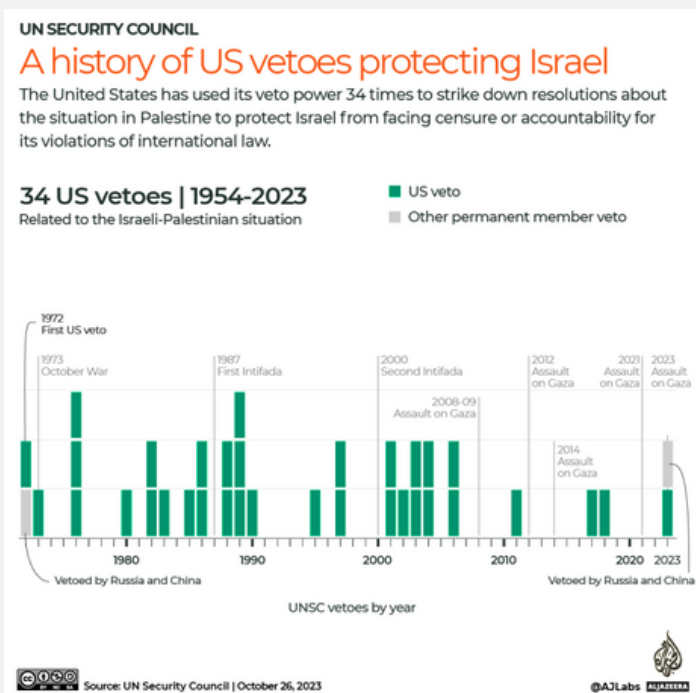
The UN has stated that “the war on Gaza is also a war on women.”

Amidst the rubble of homes and livelihoods, the toll of war on women's health and rights in Gaza is devastatingly apparent. The absence of basic necessities, including clean water and adequate sanitation facilities, compounds the challenges faced by women and girls, leaving them vulnerable to illness and infection. As the international community grapples with the crisis in Gaza, the urgent need to prioritize the protection and well-being of women cannot be overstated.



WESTERN GOVERNMENTS' HYPOCRISY

The glaring disparity in the application of fundamental norms of protection for women reflects a concerning trend, particularly evident in the realm of international relations. While there is a vocal invocation of norms aimed at ending sexual violence in armed genocide, this same level of commitment is noticeably absent when it comes to addressing the plight of women in Palestine. This inconsistency is striking, especially among states that tout themselves as champions of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda or promote their "sexy" feminist foreign policies.



A prime example of this hypocrisy is seen in the actions of countries like Germany, which recently unveiled a new "feminist foreign policy" purportedly aimed at amplifying women's concerns globally. However, despite these lofty proclamations, Germany and other western states continue to support Israel's war crimes. This unconditional backing of Israel, in the face of mounting evidence of human rights violations and violence against Palestinian women and children, underscores the stark double standards and selectivity within the WPS arena.

SELECTIVE FEMINISM AND DOUBLE STANDARDS

Western governments claim to promote gender equality and women's rights at the centre of their feminist foreign policies while aiding Israel in ethnically cleansing Palestinians. This blatant support for genocide has been met with dangerous silence from "imperial feminists." When allegations made by The New York Times regarding sexual assaults of Israeli women by Hamas soldiers, despite lacking concrete evidence, were met with unwavering empathy from several Western activists and feminists, fueling the Israeli agenda of dehumanising Palestinians. The Israeli government have been clearly and systematically exploiting and weaponising women's right to peddle their propaganda and justify their ethnic cleansing of Palestinians for over seven decades. Although all of the allegations were later debunked and proven false several times, white feminists persist in using these lies to justify violence against Palestinian women. The dire situation faced by Palestinian women over the past 75 years, marked by colonialism and violence and sexual assault and rape by IOF (Israeli Occupation Forces), has not received the same level of passionate advocacy.

This lack of activism and empathy are often attributed to the fact that Palestinian women's rights do not align with the Western narrative of liberation. Despite documented instances, by the UN, of violence, mistreatment, deprivation of basic rights, torture, and sexual assault against Palestinian women by the IOF over 75 years, there has been little to no attention or action from Western feminists.

Maryam Aldossari, Senior Lecturer at University of London, points out that in Palestine, history is repeating itself as Western imperialism and colonialism perpetuate the narrative that Palestinian women need "rescuing" from Palestinian men. This narrative mirrors similar ones found in Muslim-majority countries, where the focus is on liberating "brown women from brown men." However, the true cause of the ongoing suffering of Palestinian women lies not within their community, but in the occupation and apartheid policies enforced by Israel, USA and UK.

Politics4her and Bent Darhoum have denounced Israel's manipulation of women's suffering for propaganda, highlighting the dangerous trend of using women's rights as mere tools for fearmongering and selfish political agendas.



STORIES FROM GAZA



My examination with the doctor has become a risk. In order to go and check on the baby's condition and mine, I have to go to a far place and wait in a long line.

-Sara, 27 years old

The doctor told me that my birth is approaching and that I will become a mother for the first time in two weeks. Every day I pray for a ceasefire. I don't want my son to take his first breath here.

-Arwa, 29 years old



I was ashamed to tell my mother that I had my period. The money we had was no longer enough to eat and drink. I don't want to pressure my family more.

-Jenin, 20 years old

For me, menstruation has become a source of exhaustion. I am afraid that it will come and I cannot find water to go to the bathroom or find sanitary pads.

-Dalia, 23 years old

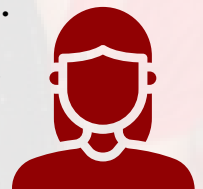


When I was in our house before the war, we had a bathroom and privacy, but now I live in an apartment with thirty people, and entering the bathroom has become difficult and requires waiting. The menstruation in these conditions is a burden on me.

-Amani, 23 years old

Menstruation is hell for me, I cannot live without pain killers. My medicine is running out and the pharmacies are empty. I don't know what to do.

Tina, 22 years old



I will name my daughter Amal (Hope), because she has been my source of hope all this time. Every day I say to her: Be patient, Amal, until we return to Gaza and give birth to you there. I hope Amal will be patient.

-Layla, 31 years old

OUR URGENT DEMANDS

1

Immediate and Permanent Ceasefire: Prioritize and advocate for an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza to halt the ongoing violence and protect the lives of women and girls and every Palestinian.

2

Humanitarian Aid Access: Ensure unhindered access to humanitarian aid, including medical supplies, food, and hygiene products, to address the urgent needs of women and girls affected by the genocide in Gaza and the establishment of additional aid routes to ensure equitable access to humanitarian aid for all Gaza citizens from the north to the south.

3

Accountability for Human Rights Violations: Call for comprehensive investigations into the reports of sexual abuse suffered by Palestinian women in Israeli prisons for 75 years, as documented by the United Nations. Hold the Israeli government accountable for these egregious violations of human rights, ensuring that perpetrators are brought to justice in accordance with international law.

4

Recognition of Palestine: Western countries should formally recognize Palestine as a sovereign state, with Jerusalem as its capital, affirming the rights of Palestinians to dignity and freedom. This action is imperative to acknowledge Palestinian rights for self-determination and independence.

5

Change in Security Council Policies: Reform the United Nations Security Council policies to ensure that ultimate power is not vested in a single country, particularly the United States, which is ruled by a white supremacist and imperialist government and publically and proudly complicit in funding the ongoing genocide in Gaza. The veto power should be revised to prevent one nation from unilaterally blocking decisions supported by the majority of member states and most permanent members of the Security Council. Dependence on a single country's veto power undermines justice and the protection of the lives of 2.2 million Palestinians living under occupation and apartheid.

It's important to emphasize that without an immediate and permanent ceasefire, the implementation of these recommendations will be significantly hindered, as the safety and well-being of women and girls in Gaza are paramount concerns that must be addressed urgently.

CONCLUSION

The crisis facing women and girls in Gaza demands urgent attention and action from the international community. The ongoing genocide has exacerbated existing challenges, leaving over a million women and girls without access to essential sexual and reproductive health services. The hypocrisy of Western governments and the phenomenon of selective feminism have further marginalized the SRHR of women and girls in Gaza, underscoring the urgent need for a shift in priorities and a commitment to meaningful action. As this report highlights, without an immediate and permanent ceasefire, efforts to address the crisis and protect the rights of women and girls in Gaza will be severely hampered. It is imperative that all stakeholders prioritize the safety and well-being of women and girls in Gaza and take concrete steps to address the humanitarian crisis unfolding against Palestinians.

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