

Policy pointers

There is a strong link between exposure to acute humanitarian crises and the heightened prevalence of violence, particularly domestic violence, against women and girls in Gaza.

The link stems from increased economic, health and family stress factors amidst destruction, displacement and a wider disruption of services and security.

Protection and support efforts are severely undermined by mobility restrictions and bouts of acute violence, lack of recognition of violence against women and girls as a priority issue, limited resources and capacity of local organisations, and lack of consistency due to a divide between humanitarian and development actions.

Enabling robust data collection, working more closely to support local actors, and building emergency systems within the 'normal' development framework would help address violence against women and girls more effectively in humanitarian crises.

Tackling violence against women and girls in urban humanitarian crises: the case of Gaza

Gaza, a mostly urban and densely populated area, chronically experiences complex emergencies, with bouts of acute violence. Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is aggravated by the exposure to ongoing and acute political violence. VAWG protection and support services are mainly delivered by local non-state actors, and better information on the vulnerabilities of women and girls and the dynamics of violence against them would help to improve their services. The knowledge of local actors should be leveraged in the design and provision of services in chronic and acute humanitarian crises; and better communication and data exchange among service providers should be encouraged.

This briefing is based on research undertaken by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in 2016, in partnership with UNFPA in Palestine and with the support of the Women's Affairs Centre in Gaza. The aim of the research was to examine the challenges of protection and service provision around violence against women and girls (VAWG) in humanitarian settings, using the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) (particularly Gaza) as a case study.

There is currently little evidence about 'what works' to prevent or respond to VAWG in conflict or humanitarian settings, and what there is usually focuses on rural populations or refugee camps. Yet around 60 per cent of refugees worldwide live in urban environments, mostly in conflict-affected and/or low-income countries.¹ Understanding how services are provided in such fluid and rapidly changing contexts is therefore vital. Specifically the research aimed to:

1. Examine the link between political violence and VAWG, with a focus on domestic violence as the most frequently observed type of VAWG. 'Political violence' is taken to mean the chronic ongoing violence (such as restrictions on movement or the impact of the blockade in Gaza) associated with the occupation of Palestinian territories and sporadic Israeli military operations in Gaza.

2. Examine the interventions undertaken to prevent and address VAWG in densely populated settlements subject to frequent emergencies, and explore how these could be made more effective.

The research consisted of:

- A literature review exploring the link between political violence and VAWG
- An empirical test of the link between political violence and domestic violence using Palestinian Census Bureau Survey data

Women living in households directly exposed to political violence were more likely to experience intimate partner violence

(2011), as well as new qualitative and quantitative survey data from fieldwork conducted in Gaza in 2015²

- Two participatory workshops held with organisations and key stakeholders in VAWG and gender-based violence (GBV) service provision in Gaza.

The context. Almost three-quarters of the population in Gaza lives in urban spaces and the population density has been estimated at 14,500 people per km², which puts it 104th out of 1,022 built-up urban areas

worldwide. Gaza's Jabalya and Ash Shati refugee camps are estimated to accommodate more than 50,000 inhabitants per km² and have the highest population density in the world, ahead even of Dhaka (44,100 per km²). The confinement of the growing population within a geographically restricted area, and the frequent destruction of infrastructure and homes, leads to acute overcrowding and a complex housing crisis.^{3,4}

Gaza is subject to numerous sources of stress, having experienced three large military operations since 2008,⁵ in addition to an economy weakened by the ongoing blockade, restrictions on freedom of movement, disrupted access to basic services, political stalemate, and high rates of unemployment and poverty.⁶

Findings: political violence and violence against women and girls

The combination of stress factors found in OPT generates different vulnerabilities for women and men, and boys and girls. The research showed that while men are more vulnerable to violence from the Israeli military or Israeli settlers (being more likely to be arrested or subject to violence in the street), women are more vulnerable to domestic violence, particularly in times of crisis such as active military operations (Box 1).

Analysis of the survey data revealed that domestic violence affects women of all backgrounds, regardless of age, education level, and marital or working status. This resonated with focus group discussions, which indicated that the risk of violence against women does not change with age, although the 'reasons' for the violence and the perpetrator of the violence does change. Whereas younger women and girls are at more risk of violence from fathers and brothers, married women are more likely to be abused by their spouses.

Greater decision-making power within the household and larger social networks were found to be associated with a reduced risk of domestic violence. However, overcrowding (a common feature of urban areas) is associated with a higher risk of violence, especially domestic violence against young, unmarried women. At the same time, these women tend to be better protected from violence because of their social networks, indicating that more attention should be paid to understanding the different dynamics affecting the risk of violence to women and girls at different stages of their lives, in order to provide better services and protection.

The escalation of conflict due to the Israeli military operation in Gaza in summer 2014 led to an increase in the prevalence of domestic violence amongst married women during the operation, and an increase in the number of forms of domestic violence experienced by unmarried women after the military operation (Figure 1).

The research also found that in the West Bank, women living in households directly exposed to political violence stemming from the Israeli occupation (such as house destructions or settler violence) were more likely to experience intimate partner violence (IPV) than those not directly exposed. Those exposed directly to occupation violence are 70 per cent more likely to experience psychological violence, 56 per cent more likely to experience physical violence and 84 per cent more likely to experience IPV than women in households not directly exposed to political violence (based on 2,934 observations from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics Violence Survey dataset).

Box 1. Violence against women and girls in Gaza

Nearly 40 per cent of women aged 17 or older reported having experienced at least one incident of psychological, physical, economic, social or sexual domestic violence between August 2014 (the end of the last Israeli military operation) and July 2015.² Psychological abuse is reported to be the most frequent type of violence, and more than 60 per cent of those experiencing violence experienced more than one form of it.

(Based on a representative survey with 440 women aged 17+).

Violence against women and girls: prevention and support services

For many years, national and international organisations have fought to bring more attention to VAWG, and to design and implement interventions to support survivors and prevent further violence. In Gaza, such work is normally undertaken by local organisations supported by programmes managed by national

and international agencies. The research found that such organisations face a multitude of challenges including: lack of recognition of the issue in Palestinian society, laws that do not protect women from violence or perpetuate violence against them, the political situation within Gaza and the Israeli occupation, and limitations on the resources and capacity of local organisations.

The change of daily realities, priorities and resource levels in acute emergencies further strains and undermines VAWG prevention and service provision. The 2014 military operation overwhelmed the resources of local organisations in terms of staffing, funding and technical capacity, while their ability to operate was severely restricted in times of 'continuous and arbitrary shelling',⁷ making it difficult to reach vulnerable women and girls.

The situation is exacerbated by the fact that services are normally funded, managed and delivered within a 'development' framework supported by national and international agencies, while crisis response (medical aid, response to loss of infrastructure and homes, and so on) tends to be delivered within a separate 'humanitarian' framework, which may be managed by the same or different organisations. The two response frameworks

do not routinely share information, or operate to common standards or procedures, making it even more difficult to deliver effective protection and support services during crises.

Recommendations

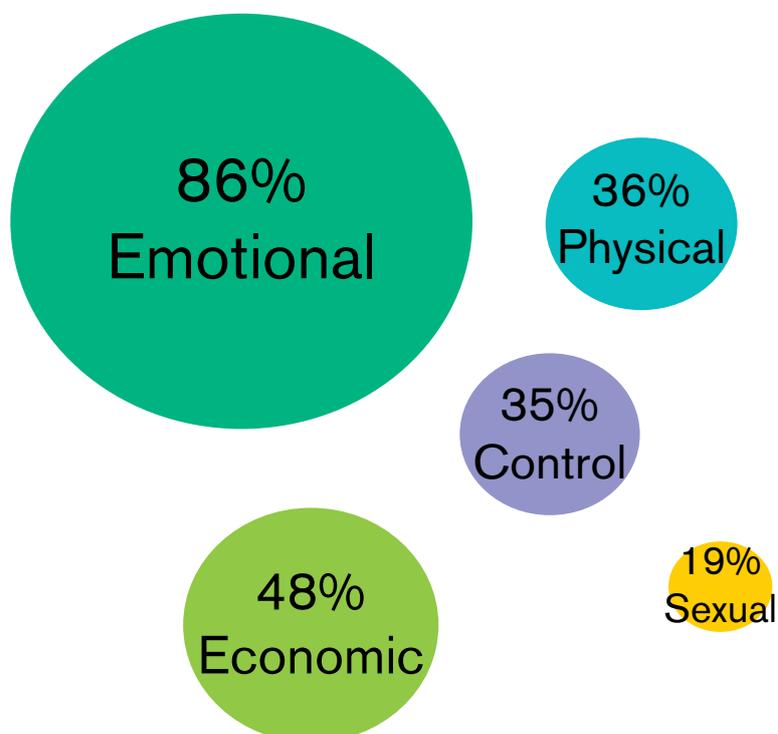
Ensuring VAWG is considered in crisis response plans, and ensuring more coordination between organisations before and during crisis response, could improve the effectiveness of VAWG services.

The following recommendations are based on the desk research, empirical findings, and discussions with local organisations, international donors and agencies around the minimum standards for prevention and response to VAWG in emergencies.⁸ They apply equally in rural and urban contexts, but their implementation must be shaped by the local realities on the ground.

Addressing knowledge gaps. Better information is needed about the incidence of VAWG in humanitarian crises, and how to prevent and support those who experience violence.

Forced displacement, separation of families, disruption of community and institutional protection services, and lack of access to justice systems mean that more women and

Figure 1. Types of violence experienced by women who are affected by domestic violence



Source: Müller & Barhoum (2015),² based on 174 women aged 17+ across Gaza who experienced domestic violence since the Israeli military operation in 2014.

girls will experience violence during humanitarian crises. These experiences vary depending on the age, personal circumstance and location of women, among other factors. We need to increase our understanding of the relationship between political violence (physical and nonphysical) and VAWG, both inside and outside of the domestic sphere.

Specifically, data on VAWG should be collected whenever possible before emergencies occur, and include information on: prevalence rates, underlying causes and consequences, dynamics across the different stages of women's lives, supply and demand of services and challenges to access, and the experience of service users. Research should also be conducted on the effectiveness of VAWG interventions in conflict and humanitarian contexts, particularly in urban and non-camp settings.

Enabling and working with local actors.

Individuals and local organisations in crisis situations have excellent knowledge of the power relationships between the population and formal and informal institutions, and this local knowledge should be used in the design of programmes and interventions to address VAWG. This would ensure services are appropriate and meet local needs, and avoid developing parallel systems. Getting buy-in from local organisations and populations would also make service provision more effective and sustainable.

An active exchange of information is also vital, both between local actors, and between local actors and national and international agencies. At times, local actors are not aware of key information relating to their work, and they are not always involved in generating the evidence used by national and international agencies. Effective information exchange between organisations should be established, as well as mechanisms to ensure that evidence, conclusions and action points are drawn together and communicated to all staff and researchers on the ground.

Vulnerable populations and survivors of violence should also be involved in designing programmes and interventions. Survivors receiving services are best placed to shed light on service needs and how to ensure effective access for women and girls. The wider community should be more closely engaged in programming efforts to create awareness and understanding of VAWG, in order to promote change in perceptions about gender roles and support effective service provision.

Making normal services 'emergency ready'.

The design of services and systems should take account of population movements and (potential) disruption to service provision during humanitarian crises. Many organisations have their own referral systems and cooperate with other service providers on an ad hoc basis through personal relationships and bilateral agreements. In order to ensure services continue during acute emergencies, common definitions, standards, indicators and information should be collected and shared across organisations involved in VAWG provision.

All organisations providing services to the population should establish a common database, or work on ways to cross-reference across databases, to allow the information exchange needed for a functioning unified referral system. Even if organisations are, for instance, dealing with issues of displacement, they may be aware of individuals requiring VAWG services and therefore able to refer them on.

Communities can help agencies identify and reach vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups and areas, and can support or replace services during emergencies, and therefore should be included in emergency planning and response delivery.

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Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges.

The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) is a leading global institution for research, teaching and learning, and impact and communications, based at the University of Sussex.

UNFPA promote delivering a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled.

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Notes

¹ IRC (2016) Humanitarian action in an urban world: the IRC's role in improving urban crisis response. International Rescue Committee, New York, USA. / ² Müller and Barhoum (2015) Violence Against Women in the Gaza Strip: After the Israeli Military Operation Protective Edge 2014. Alianza por la Solidaridad and Action Aid. / ³ Demographia (2016) Demographia World Urban Areas (Built Up Urban Areas or World Agglomerations). 12th Annual Edition. www.demographia.com/db-worldua.pdf / ⁴ UN Habitat (2014) Gaza Urban Profile. Gaza Crisis. / ⁵ (1) Operation 'Cast Lead' (the 'Gaza War') in 2008–09, where an estimated 1,167 Palestinians died (<http://pchrgaza.org/en/?p=1846>); (2) Operation 'Pillar of Defence' November 2012, which killed 171 Palestinians, of which 102 were civilians (<http://pchrgaza.org/en/?p=5538>); (3) Operation 'Protective Edge' in Summer 2014, in which 2,251 Palestinians, including 1,462 civilians (551 children and 299 women) were killed. United Nations Human Rights Council (2015) Human Rights Situation in Palestine and Other Occupied Arab Territories. Report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry Established Pursuant to Human Rights Council Resolution S-21/1, A/HRC/29/52. / ⁶ Kuttub *et al.* (2011) Gender-Based Violence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Bisan Center for Research and Development. p. 22. / ⁷ UNFPA (2014) Victims in the Shadow: Gaza Post-Crisis Reproductive Health Assessment. United Nations Population Fund in Partnership with the World Health Organization and the Palestinian Ministry of Health. p. 23. / ⁸ United Nations Population Fund (2015) Minimum Standards for Prevention and Response to Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies.