

ACCESS TO SANITARY PRODUCTS AND BASIC HEALTHCARE FOR WOMEN IN GAZA

Sanitation and sanitary products in Gaza

Around a million women and girls have been displaced in Gaza since October 2023.¹ Aid is repeatedly blocked and held for weeks on end. The UN estimates that more than 540,000 women and girls do not have access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), including sanitary products and other items to support their 'hygiene, health, and dignity'.² Just like women all over the world, women in Gaza experiencing menstruation need medication, sanitary products, and good nutrition to be able to manage their symptoms; but in Gaza, these things have become a luxury.

UNRWA has estimated that in its shelters there is one toilet per 486 people,³ whilst Oxfam warned that in Gaza's al-Mawasi's 'evacuation safe zone' there is roughly one toilet per 4,130 people.⁴ Extremely overcrowded conditions have created a suffocating, stressful and unsanitary environment for women experiencing their monthly menstruation.

Women and girls in Gaza have resorted to cutting pieces of tents used for shelter to repurpose as sanitary products, risking infection and other health complications.⁵ These conditions put women and girls at risk of reproductive and urinary tract infections, and protection-related risks. This is compounded by the psychological impact on the mental health and stress levels of women and girls, leaving them forced to resort to demeaning practices, which undermine their dignity, safety and privacy.

Pharmacies and period blocking pills

Most shops and pharmacies were forced out of service, due to either bombardment or shortage of products due to the blockading of aid. This has led to an exacerbation of the crisis, especially in areas with high concentration of forcefully displaced Palestinians.⁶ The scarcity of sanitary products has also resulted in price inflation, making it extremely difficult to obtain these products even if they're available.⁷ Out of desperation, some women resorted to taking norethisterone tablets, pills which would prevent their periods from occurring.⁸ These pills are normally prescribed for conditions such as menstrual bleeding, endometriosis or painful periods. However, they can have harmful or uncomfortable side effects, but many women say they have no choice but to take them.

Not just numbers

Mona, 17 years old, naturally experiences extremely difficult periods, causing her extreme pain, vomiting and other symptoms of menstruation. Mona typically manages those symptoms by taking painkillers, resting, and staying warm. She now shares a house with 45 people with one toilet for all. Mona is considered lucky compared to others in Gaza to still be living in a house and to be sharing a toilet with 'only' 45 other people. "I

¹ United Nations Population Fund (Updated 12th June 2024) [Occupied Palestinian territory](#).

² UN Women. (24th May 2024) [Challenges for menstrual health and hygiene management during crisis](#). United Nations.

³ Action Aid. (18th January 2024) [Women in Gaza resort to using scraps of tent in place of period products and go weeks without showering amid dire humanitarian conditions](#). Action Aid.

⁴ Middle East Eye. (5th June 2024) [One toilet per 4,130 people in Gaza's al-Mawasi](#). Middle East Eye

⁵ Action Aid. (18th January 2024) [Women in Gaza resort to using scraps of tent in place of period products and go weeks without showering amid dire humanitarian conditions](#). Action Aid.

⁶ UNRWA Newsroom. (23rd January 2024) [Bombardment, Displacement and Collapsed Healthcare: A Crisis for Women and Girls in Gaza](#). UNRWA

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lina Alsaafin and Ruwaida Amer. (31st October 2023) [No privacy, no water: Gaza women use period-delaying pills amid Israel war](#). Al Jazeera.

used to have regular periods, but now it comes twice a month,” she says. “I attribute this change to fear and tension.”⁹

Sarah, 27 years old, lives in Egypt and was visiting her aunt when the war on Gaza started and is less fortunate than Mona in that she shares a toilet with over 100 other woman and children. Sarah describes her monthly period as a reoccurring nightmare, now living in a tent and drinking contaminated water which in combination with the cold weather has worsened her menstrual cramps and stomach pain.¹⁰

A war against womanhood

Israel has launched a war against womanhood, which has caused specifically psychological and physical detriments to the woman and girls of Gaza. For some, stress and fear has caused their periods to occur more often.¹¹ The suffering of women goes beyond their menstrual cycle, as even women who are not experiencing the monthly nightmare due to pregnancy are experiencing a different kind of gendered tragedy.

Every month, 5,500 women give birth in Gaza.¹² These women have no access to healthcare. Due to overwhelming delivery rooms, women are having their umbilical cords tied with thread and are often sent away with infections as adequate care cannot be provided.¹³ Some women have had c-sections in tents in dire conditions with no follow-up care. Women are experiencing premature labour due to psychological impacts such as stress and shock, and physiological impacts such as malnutrition and dehydration.¹⁴ This has led to an increase in the birth of premature babies and has also caused an increase in number of stillborn and neo-natal deaths.¹⁵

UN Women have estimated that 10,000 women were killed in Gaza by April 2024, including 6,000 mothers, which led to 19,000 children being orphaned. Many more women have been displaced and widowed by Israeli bombardment.¹⁶

Conclusion

Being a woman in any society and in any part of the world has its own challenges, struggles and discrimination. Being a woman in war, under siege and a sky full of rockets is a different story altogether. Access to sanitary products is not the first point of discussion when talking about Gaza’s humanitarian aid needs – instead, starvation and lack of access to clean water take priority, which affects all Palestinians in Gaza. However, this has led to the neglect of the crucial and natural needs of women,¹⁷ who feel a disproportionate gendered impact from the war in Gaza. Women and girls in Gaza are being robbed of their basic rights and deserve justice and accountability for the gendered crimes perpetrated against them.

⁹ Aseel Mousa. (5th March 2024) [‘My period has become a nightmare’: life in Gaza without sanitary products](#). The Guardian

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Occupied Palestinian Territory. (12th June 2024) [Occupied Palestinian Territory](#). UNFPA

¹³ Blog. (1st March 2024) [Palestinian women endure caesarean sections without aftercare and use rags in place of sanitary products](#). Islamic Relief

¹⁴ International Rescue Committee. (2nd April 2024) [Pregnant women and mothers in Gaza are fighting to keep themselves and their babies alive amidst healthcare collapse, the IRC warns](#).

¹⁵ T.R. (2nd April 2024) [Head of UN Population Fund: Gaza Situation ‘Beyond Catastrophic’](#). Wafa News

¹⁶ UN Women. (2024) [Gender alert: Scarcity and fear: A gender analysis of the impact of the war in Gaza on vital services essential to women’s and girls’ health, safety, and dignity – Water, sanitation, and hygiene \(WASH\)](#).

¹⁷ Aya Batrway, Abu Bakir Bashir. (11th January 2024) [Another layer of misery: Women in Gaza struggle to find menstrual pads, running water](#). NPR