
Now and the Future

Gender Equality, Peace and Security in a COVID-19 World

Palestine Briefing

1. Introduction

This report is part of the 'Now and the Future: Gender Equality, Peace and Security in a COVID-19 World' project launched by Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS). Mercy Corps worked with the Association of International Development Agencies (AIDA) and the Women Centre for Legal Aid Counselling (WCLAC) to produce a **country report** for Palestine that was launched in January 2021, covering the period between March and November 2020. The report outlines the impact of COVID-19 on gender equality, peace and security and makes recommendations for responses to the pandemic, as well as future crises.

AIDA and WCLAC interviewed 22 organisations working across the Occupied Palestinian Territories (oPt) to assess the immediate and long-term impacts of COVID-19 on women's and girls' rights, peace and security. The interviews, along with an in-depth desk review of published assessments and reports, showed that women and girls have been highly impacted by the pandemic, specifically during the imposed lockdowns and movement restrictions. The analysis showed that the needs of women and girls were not a priority in the Palestinian Authority's (PA's) response plan, which intensified existing inequalities.

Following the launch of the report, project partners held several public and private discussion sessions with key stakeholders, including the Palestinian Ministry of Women's Affairs, UN Women, and Palestinian and international NGOs working in the oPt. The discussions included questions on the six recommendations in the report, as well as possible additional recommendations based on changes in the emergency situation in Palestine.

2. Update

COVID-19 updates

The first state of emergency to limit the spread of COVID-19 was announced in the oPt and Israel on 5 March 2020 and 19 March 2020 respectively. Since March, all areas have been in and out of lockdowns at different times depending on the increase in cases. The Palestinian Ministry of Health (PA MoH) **reported** a total of 184,999 cases in the oPt from 5 March 2020 until 10 February 2021. This is an increase of 102,219 cases compared to the number in the original Palestine country brief that reflected cases up to 21 November 2020. According to PA MoH data, 50 per cent of cases are women and girls. The Israeli Ministry of Health (IS MoH) **reported** a total of 691,111 cases as of 10 February 2021 in Israel, including Jerusalem, and 5,163 deaths.

In late November 2020, as case numbers increased in the oPt and Israel, lockdowns were reimposed. In the West Bank and Gaza Strip partial lockdowns were imposed beginning in early December 2020 that included no movement between governorates, and total night and weekend lockdowns. These lockdowns are still in place in the West Bank as of 24 February 2021 and in Gaza were lifted on 4 February 2021. Israeli authorities imposed a general lockdown in Israel and East Jerusalem between 27 December 2020 and 7 February 2021.

Israel began the vaccination process for its citizens in December 2020 and leads the world in per-capita vaccination, with 30.7 per cent of the population receiving both doses of the Pfizer vaccine by 19 February 2021. Meanwhile the oPt aims to start its vaccination campaign by mid-February, relying primarily on the Sputnik-V vaccine and a supply from the COVAX facility. Despite international pressure, Israel has so far refused to extend its vaccination campaign to Palestinians, beyond a humanitarian transfer of a few thousand doses. Thus the oPt is facing an extended period of COVID-19-driven crisis, with no timeframe for moving beyond it.

The international community must continue to publicly assert that responses to the COVID-19 pandemic should be grounded on the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health services, without discrimination.

Occupying power responsibilities

Between November 2020 and February 2021, Israeli violations continued, and even increased, against Palestinians. In particular, there was an increase in the demolition of structures and threats of forcible transfer for key communities in the West Bank. On 3 November 2020, the largest mass demolition incident since the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) established the demolition database in 2009 was reported in Humsa al Baqi'a in the Jordan Valley. This resulted in the displacement of 73 individuals, including 41 children. The same community was targeted again with a series of raids in early February 2021, resulting in the displacement of at least 55 people, including 32 children.

The international community must ensure that Israel, as the occupying power, upholds the rules of International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law, which includes providing unimpeded access to humanitarian aid and services and guaranteeing that all people under occupation have unrestricted access to healthcare.

Women's participation

Women's participation in decision making is still a priority in Palestine. In the previous reporting period, organisations reported that women's participation in decision making did not improve during the preparation and implementation of the COVID-19 response. Most of the organisations interviewed stated that in the first three months of the COVID-19 emergency they were not approached to engage in response planning and implementation. After the first three months, some organisations took the initiative themselves and advocated for their involvement. Upon the decision of the Ministry of Local Government to establish local response committees, the overall participation of women in these committees reached up to 16 per cent, while in the Gaza Strip women's participation remained very low. Women's participation in national and high-level committees also remained very low.

The PA must ensure the equal participation of women in decision making based on its internal laws and international law. The PA ratified the [UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW) in 2014. By doing so, the PA has agreed to take all appropriate measures to “ensure women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life – including the right to vote and to stand for election – as well as education, health and employment”.

Since the Palestine country brief was published, the PA announced national elections for the Legislature in May 2021 and for President in July 2021. If held as planned, these will be the first national elections since 2006. Recent discussions with key stakeholders highlighted **the importance of focusing on women's participation in the upcoming elections and ensuring a large number of female candidates**. Based on [recent amendments](#) to the Palestinian elections law, the quota for women's participation in candidate lists was raised from 20 per cent to 26 per cent.

Gender-based violence (GBV)

There were no major changes on GBV in oPt between November 2020 and February 2021. According to [data published](#) by SAWA organisation, the three main reasons for calls for help during the COVID-19 emergency remain mental health, violence and abuse, and problems with family members. Discussions with stakeholders pointed out that the main issue that needs to be taken into consideration is the availability of services at the times of lockdown and imposition of movement restrictions. This includes having family protection workers in the field to reach victims and provide needed support for individuals unable to use online and phone services.

An additional issue that was discussed is the impact of the closure of courts during lockdowns. Some organisations pointed out that this has indirectly encouraged perpetrators to commit more crimes as the accountability and justice system is paused. And it has left open cases paused, in many cases leaving victims with their abusers for a longer period. Accordingly, **it is of high importance to have plans for the continuity of family court services to women and children at times of closure**, even if virtually.

Discussions with key stakeholders highlighted the importance of training staff providing support services. As reported earlier, the number of online and phone service providers for GBV increased during COVID-19 emergency, leading to new staff being hired without sufficient training. There should be training at all times for emergency staff to be ready to provide high-quality support during crises.

Economic support

Economic support for women and girls and compensation of unpaid work remain a priority in Palestine. Discussions shared insights on the burdens added on women during times of online schooling for their children, which was especially difficult for communities with poor connections to electricity and internet. Home-schooling has also added an economic burden on families to provide electronic devices to their children.

Marginalised groups

Since the release of the Palestine country brief there has been, at best, minimal improvement in support for the most marginalised (namely refugees, people with disabilities, and frontline respondents) from the PA and humanitarian actors.

United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), which is responsible for the provision of services to 2.2 million Palestinian refugees in the oPt, still faces a financial crisis that limits its ability to deliver vital services. UNRWA **appealed** for US\$ 231 million to address the humanitarian priority needs of Palestinian refugees in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

One improvement noted was that since current lockdowns in the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem) and Gaza Strip allow some movement during weekdays, rehabilitation centres were able to open and provide services to people with disabilities. However, healthcare remains a challenge for this population. Starting in October 2020, the Palestinian Disability Coalition led sit-in protests inside the offices of the Palestinian Legislative Council, requesting comprehensive health insurance for people with disabilities. After 63 days of protests, the PA responded to the calls and announced enhanced health insurance plans.

There has been less progress in ensuring frontline respondents get the support they need, particularly mental health services and sufficient time to rest. Additionally, frontline respondents should be a priority to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

3. Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Palestinian Authority must include women and their representing organisations, networks and youth groups in emergency response planning and implementation to ensure women's and girls' rights and needs are met. (Full evidence for this recommendation can be found on page 6 in [the country report](#).)

Recommendation 2: The Palestinian Authority must adopt a comprehensive protection system and ensure the provision of services to prevent GBV and the continuation of referral mechanisms during times of emergency, including movement lockdowns. (Full evidence for this recommendation can be found on page 7 in [the country report](#).)

Recommendation 3: The Palestinian Authority and the donor community must provide economic support for women in times of emergencies and ensure that responses are gender sensitive through financial and other support specific to women and girls, including compensation for unpaid work and investment in women's economic empowerment initiatives. (Full evidence for this recommendation can be found on page 9 in [the country report](#).)

Recommendation 4: The Palestinian Authority and humanitarian actors must ensure the needs of the most marginalised are met during times of emergency (namely refugees, people with disabilities, and frontline respondents), by funding grassroots and local organisations supporting these groups, supporting the most marginalised, and ensuring the continuity of rehabilitation services. (Full evidence for this recommendation can be found on page 10 in [the country report](#).)

Recommendation 5: Following international law, Israel must take full responsibility for the health of Palestinians in the oPt, including providing unimpeded access to humanitarian aid and services and guaranteeing that all people have unrestricted access to healthcare. The international community must publicly assert that responses to the COVID-19 pandemic should be grounded on the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health services, without discrimination, and that the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority must genuinely cooperate to achieve this. (Full evidence for this recommendation can be found on page 12 in [the country report](#).)

Recommendation 6: The donor community must increase funding to address Palestine's financial crisis, prioritising health, including mental health, protection, and economy and ensuring this response is gendered. The support provided should ensure the delivery of a multi-sectoral comprehensive response in the West Bank and Gaza with self-defined priorities. (Full evidence for this recommendation can be found on page 13 in [the country report](#).)

4. Partners

Mercy Corps (MC) works in more than 40 countries to alleviate suffering, poverty and oppression by helping people build secure, productive and just communities. The international non-governmental organisation has implemented humanitarian and development programmes in Palestine for more than 30 years. Mercy Corps Palestine has staff based in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza.

Association of International Development Agencies (AIDA) is a membership body and coordination forum of over 80 international non-governmental and non-profit organisations working in the oPt. Active since 1967, AIDA is one of the longest-standing INGO coordination mechanisms in the world. This coordination, important in any aid/development context, acquires additional significance in the complex political environment of the oPt.

Women's Centre for Legal Aid Counselling (WCLAC) is a Palestinian, feminist, non-governmental organisation that works to protect and promote women's human rights within the framework of international human rights mechanisms and standards. WCLAC aims to address the causes and consequences of GBV within the Palestinian community as well as the gender-specific effects of increasing militarisation associated with the Israeli occupation.

Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) is the UK's women, peace and security (WPS) civil society network. It is a membership organisation of NGOs in the fields of development, human rights, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding. It was founded to promote WPS, including United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325. GAPS promotes and holds the UK government to account on its international commitments to women and girls in conflict areas worldwide.

This is an independent report commissioned and funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK government, however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

This report is funded by:



HM Government

