

**SECURITY COUNCIL INFORMAL EXPERT GROUP ON**

**WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY**

**Summary of the meeting on** **the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question, held on November 22th 2023**

On 22 November 2023, the Informal Expert Group on Women, Peace and Security (IEG) convened a meeting on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question. The members were briefed by the Chief of Staff of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, Ben Majekodunmi, and UN Women’s Deputy Executive Director ad interim Sarah Hendriks, as well as other UN colleagues.

**Questions from Council Members:**

Security Council Members asked questions about the role of the Security Council in ensuring that women from civil society are consulted and contributed to any meeting taking place to resolve the current crisis, the impact that Security Council resolution could have in the UN’s operations on the ground and their efforts to help women and girls, and what measures are needed to ensure that UNRWA shelters are safe. Members also asked about the impact that the recent escalation is having on women in the West Bank, the role of women-led civil society organizations in humanitarian planning and coordination, and efforts to address the heightened risk of gender-based violence with the dramatic increase of population displacement, the additional challenges to provide sexual and reproductive healthcare in the current context, and the special needs of women and children with disabilities or unaccompanied girls.

**Main points raised in the meeting:**

* Thousands of women and girls have been killed in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory in recent weeks. There were reportedly many women among the 1200 killed by Hamas on October 7th, including women peace activists, and among the hostages taken that day. The only four hostages released as of November 20th were women. The last estimate of casualties in Gaza, which has not been updated in several days because of the collapse of services and communications in the north of Gaza, is that more than 3,000 women had been killed as of November 10th. Using those figures, UN Women estimates that there are more than 2,000 new female-headed households in Gaza since October 7th, that more than 3,200 children may have lost their mothers, and that two mothers are being killed every hour. There is no sex-disaggregated data for the nearly 6,000 reported missing, likely under the rubble, but many of them are believed to be women and children, partly because in many locations men have been sleeping outside to make room for women and children inside shelters.
* Before October 7th, the UN had registered 6,542 Palestinian civilians and 308 Israelis killed in hostilities since 2008. 67 percent of them were men. Less than 14 percent of them were women and girls. Since October 7th, the number of civilians killed has doubled the total for the previous 15 years, and the percentage has been reversed: 67 percent of civilians killed in Gaza are estimated to be women and children.
* Before the current escalation, there were 650,000 women and girls in dire need of humanitarian assistance in Gaza. Now that estimate has been revised up to 1.1 million women and girls. A staggering 817,000 people are sheltering in UNRWA facilities as of November 18th.
* In the current conditions, UNRWA staff look for fuel for their vehicles so that they can distribute the aid that makes it through the Rafah border crossing and bring it to their shelters, keep those shelters clean and organized, and try to provide some space and privacy for women and their children, but the overcrowding is so severe that this is not possible. Relaying testimony from a woman manager of an UNRWA facility sheltering 35,000 people and who had just witnessed yet another traumatic situation, aid distribution was made impossible by a lack of space so extreme that one could not open or close any doors in the facility, or find space to make a fire and turn the flour and water into bread. UNRWA’s women staff themselves are displaced and do not have enough water or food for their own families, and have shared some of the daily questions asked by their children: Will we die tonight? Is it painful to die? When will this stop? What are we going to eat? Why cannot we go somewhere else?
* As of November 20th, 108 UNRWA staff have been killed in the current hostilities. Some of the names and jobs of the women staff killed in recent days were shared with the group.
* More than 100 people have been killed while sheltering inside UNRWA facilities, including women and children. More than 60 of UNRWA’s facilities have been damaged by munitions, some of them by direct hits. Every single UNWRA premise has GPS coordinates that are communicated repeatedly to the parties to the conflict and are marked with UN flags, UN insignia, and UN paint.
* It is estimated that there were more than 50,000 pregnant women in Gaza before the latest escalation, that 15 percent of them will likely experience pregnancy or birth-related complications, and that 180 women are delivering babies every day, without painkillers, without anaesthesia for C-sections, without medical supplies for any of their normal needs, and without hot water, or any water at times. Some of the first aid deliveries through the Rafah border crossing included anaesthetics and Oxytocin for women giving birth, but the amount is still insufficient, and the situation is too overwhelming to distribute or use it effectively. Only 11 out of 36 hospitals, where women would normally give birth, are even partially functioning. UNRWA manages 16 health centers that provide primary care, but all the centers in northern Gaza are not functioning and those in the southern half do so only on an ad hoc basis, dependent on fuel, electricity, bombing patterns, or the number of staff able to work that particular day. Furthermore, communications with hospitals is very haphazard because of the frequent cuts in communication, either through technical jamming or the lack of fuel for generators, and women often cannot make it to a health center or hospital. In this context, many women are giving birth in the overcrowded shelters, or in homes without any medical personnel or midwives, or even in the streets, amid rubble.
* Without access to clean water, and barely any food, women are caring for their children, the sick, the elderly, mixing baby formula with contaminated water, going without food for many days so that their children can live another day, living in constant fear amid bombardments and worrying about how to keep their children fed and alive. There are serious concerns about gender-based violence and the mental health of women and children, both because of the extreme risks brought about by the current conflict and by the enormous limitations for the humanitarian system to address these in any way in the current circumstances. Apart from a lack of hygiene kits, dignity kits, or other supplies, the overcrowding itself increases not just the risk of diseases, but the risk of gender-based violence, as there is one shower for every 700 people and 1 toilet for every 150 people in UNRWA shelters. There is also no communication, which makes it impossible to maintain the referral pathways for gender-based violence survivors, even if any of the services to respond to gender-based violence are able to function. An initial minimum estimate of 15 percent of people in UNRWA shelters having a disability, but this percentage is likely growing and there is no sex-disaggregated data. While shelter managers try to make accommodations for pregnant women, women with disabilities, or unaccompanied children, the situation is so untenable that it is impossible to put in place any systematic approach to address these special needs. More findings are available in UNRWA’s rapid gender analysis, published on October 23rd.[[1]](#footnote-1)
* Women have also been killed in Southern Lebanon and the West Bank. In the West Bank, the demolitions of public infrastructure, the revocation of work permits, the increase in settler violence, mass arrests, and other movement restrictions have significantly impacted the livelihoods of women. While the three women’s shelters in the West Bank remain open, they have already been affected by the insecurity and restrictions. There have also been reports of torture in detention, forced stripping, and inappropriate touching during searches of women. 73,000 women are currently pregnant in the West Bank and more than 8,000 are expected to give birth in the next month.
* UN Women has been working in the Occupied Palestinian Territory since 1997. As of November 20th, all UN Women staff are accounted for, but some have lost close relatives. UN Women produced a rapid gender analysis and needs assessments within the first two weeks of the current hostilities,[[2]](#footnote-2) and is working to produce new data and assessments through its leadership of the national level working group on Gender in Humanitarian Action. UN Women, in collaboration with the World Food Programme, will support the provision of immediate life-saving assistance to nearly 15,000 women-headed households in the Gaza Strip, representing nearly a third of all women-headed households in Gaza, and flexible financial support to women’s organizations in both Gaza and the West Bank, including to scale up gender-based violence and mental health and psychosocial support services, or provide unconditional cash to women whose livelihoods have been affected.
* Women’s organizations have deep-rooted trust within marginalized communities and are well equipped to identify the hardest-to-reach populations in need of life-saving gender-specific aid. Women-led organizations continue to operate in both the West Bank and Gaza, yet with limited capacity. The physical offices and facilities of many of UN Women’s partners are now damaged. Gaza’s only two women’s shelters, both in Gaza City, are now closed. The women’s rights organizations that are still operational continue to respond directly to women’s needs, while many of their staff are forcibly displaced themselves. For example, five of the eight recipients of grants by the Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund are not operational at the moment, while the other three have been able to continue for now, including sourcing and distributing emergency items, using their networks of volunteers, documenting and responding to protection concerns, and addressing the needs of the most vulnerable.
* Between November 6th and November 12th, UN Women conducted a rapid online survey for women’s organizations in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Thirteen women’s organizations, employing almost 800 people and nearly 900 volunteers, participated in the survey. Some of them are no longer operational, but most are at least partially operational, even though several reported damages to their offices or had to leave and do not know the status of their physical infrastructure. 76 percent of reporting organizations reported that they are actively engaging in decision-making and coordination mechanisms in relation to the humanitarian response, including the Palestinian Non-Governmental Organizations Network, the GBV sub-cluster, and the National Committee for Resolution 1325. The people working in these organizations report that they do not just fear the bombs or starvation, but losing their funds because of new restrictions imposed by donors.
* Since Security Council resolution 1325 was adopted in October 2000, none of the 12 resolutions adopted on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question, have made any reference to women or gender-related issues. This has no parallels in any other conflict on the agenda of the Security Council. While the Security Council holds monthly meetings on this matter, only five Palestinian and five Israeli women from civil society have been invited to brief the Security Council, and none before 2018. In addition, while the Palestinian Authority has adopted two National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security, Israel has integrated elements of resolution 1325 into its national legislation, and both Israeli and Palestinian women have been very active in grassroots peacebuilding initiatives, very few women have participated in formal peace talks and negotiations. Instead, the voices of women have been almost entirely ignored for decades. Women’s rights organizations have been excluded, under-funded, and in several cases criminalized, and even the women-led cross-line peace activism has been pushed aside and weakened in recent years.
* Participants called repeatedly and most urgently for a ceasefire as the only option going forward. In addition, they asked for the unconditional release of all hostages, unrestricted humanitarian access, the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure, and accountability for all violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law, and support for the Commission of Inquiry and the International Criminal Court, which will look into all allegations of atrocities against women and girls by all conflict parties, including sexual violence.
* Participants also called for a return to negotiations for a lasting peace for both Palestinians and Israelis, and for the voices of women to be included and heard. In future decisions, the Security Council could add, at a minimum, a call for women’s participation in any efforts to negotiate peace or a ceasefire, including any diplomatic initiatives in the region, as well as in the planning and delivery of humanitarian aid, and any decisions that will shape the future of Gaza. Security Council members should also request gender analysis in all briefings and reports by the UN and invite Palestinian and Israeli women from civil society to brief, provided that their independence is respected, the risks are properly understood and communicated, and there are measures in place, including in cooperation with the United Nations, to mitigate risks or respond to reprisals. Similarly, protection measures must be in place to ensure that women, and women from civil society, can participate in peace and security discussions or negotiations, or contribute to the investigations by international human rights and accountability mechanisms, such as the Commission of Inquiry and the International Criminal Court.
* Finally, participants also called for funding for women’s organizations, including through the 10-million-dollar appeal launched by the Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund, as well as for flexibility with the funding already disbursed and a lifting of newly-imposed restrictions, and full funding, protection, and support for UNRWA, including to increase their long-term shelter capacity because of the mass destruction of homes and buildings in the Gaza Strip.

1. See <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/rapid-gender-analysis-gendered-impacts-october-2023-escalation-gaza>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/un-women-rapid-assessment-and-humanitarian-response-in-the-occupied-palestinian-territory-en.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)