



# Adolescent girls in Gaza

## The state of the evidence

Jennifer Pettit, Elizabeth Presler-Marshall  
and Bassam Abu Hamad

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# Acronyms

ARA	Access Restricted Area
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CFTA	Culture and Free Thought Association
CMHP	Community Mental Health Programme
DfID	Department for International Development
ECHO	European Commission's humanitarian aid department
EU	European Union
GNI	Gross national income
HDI	Human Development Index
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PA	Palestinian Authority
PCBS	Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics
PCDCR	Palestinian Centre for Democratic Conflict Resolution
PLC	Palestinian Legislative Council
PNCTP	Palestinian National Cash Transfer Programme
PRCS	Palestinian Red Crescent Society
PWWSD	Palestinian Working Woman Society for Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WHO	World Health Organisation
WCLAC	Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling

# Executive Summary

Uncovering the experiences of adolescent girls living in Gaza is a challenging endeavour. Girls from Gaza are largely 'invisible' in the literature and absent from policy frameworks. Demographic data, which highlights the size of Gaza's child population (more than 45% is under the age of 15), most often fails to disaggregate girls as a distinct group. They are typically subsumed into the categories of female children, female youth, adolescent Palestinians between the ages of 15 and 17, or dwellers of specific localities. Similarly, adolescent girls' needs are lumped together with those of families, siblings or mothers.

Gazan adolescent girls' collective experiences, attitudes and opportunities are shaped by a patriarchal culture, by Palestine's protracted conflict with Israel and infighting between Palestine's political parties. Whether girls live in urban or rural areas or in one of the crowded refugee camps, they suffer from the effects of Palestine's lack of political autonomy, the destruction of the region's economy and the collapse of its material and cultural infrastructures. Tight restrictions on the movement of goods, fuel and people have suppressed economic growth, created a humanitarian crisis and prevented the rebuilding of an infrastructure devastated by the three military conflicts in only five years.

Efforts to identify adolescent girls' needs, ameliorate their depressed standard of living and secure their social and political rights are thus inseparable from this broader context. To understand how adolescent girls in Gaza live, this situation analysis delves into Gaza's history, political economy and the gendered relations of power that structure the lives of adult women.

This analysis maps out the evidence available on adolescent girls' abilities by the capability domains laid out in the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research programme's conceptual framework: education and learning, bodily integrity and freedom from violence, sexual and reproductive health and nutrition,

psychosocial wellbeing, voice and agency, and economic empowerment. Where there is no evidence about girls, we use what is known about adult women or the youth cohort to contextualise the space where girls live. This analysis also maps out the numerous actors who are working in Gaza to improve girls' outcomes and our assessment will conclude with a brief discussion of the strategies they have developed to meet this objective.

## Education

- Regardless of their refugee status, adolescent girls in Gaza are more likely to attend secondary school than their male peers. Some 93% of girls in Palestine complete lower secondary school and 73% complete upper secondary school (vs. 80% and 52% respectively for boys).<sup>1</sup>
- At the university level, in the 2015/16 academic year, the Gender Parity Index was 1.57 – meaning that young women are far more likely to attend university than young men.<sup>2</sup>
- Adolescent girls report particular dissatisfaction with the instructional and managerial methods used in Gaza's overcrowded classrooms and with the lack of preparation they receive for gainful employment.<sup>3</sup>

## Physical health and nutrition

- Adolescent girls are contributing to the rapid expansion of Gaza's population. Of Gazan women between the ages of 20 and 24, one quarter gave birth before the age of 18.<sup>4</sup>
- Given the food insecurity that affects almost half of Gazan households, adolescent girls have deficiencies in micronutrients – especially iron and vitamin A – that potentially impact their health, academic performance and work productivity as they approach childbearing years.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See <https://data.unicef.org/topic/education/secondary-education>

<sup>2</sup> PCBS 2016e: 33

<sup>3</sup> PCBS, 2016a

<sup>4</sup> PCBS 2015a

<sup>5</sup> B. Hamad, 2010; WHO, 2013

- A surplus of empty calories and a deficit of physical activity have led to increasing rates of obesity and diabetes among Gazans. In 2017, over 40% of university students were overweight or obese, with females more affected than males.<sup>6</sup>

## Bodily integrity and freedom from violence

- Driven by a confluence of poverty and social norms which emphasise family honour, in 2015, just over 40% of all marriages in Gaza were to girls between the ages of 15 and 19<sup>7</sup>. Most girls were married to men at least five years their senior.
- Surveys indicating that women are increasingly likely to be exposed to violence from their husbands (37% in 2011 vs. 32% in 2006<sup>8</sup>) have prompted humanitarian agencies and organisations to focus attention on this issue. However, data indicate that less than 1% of women who experience violence seek help from a women's centre or organisation.<sup>9</sup>
- The violence that adolescents experience and witness in their households extends to schools and to public spaces.<sup>10</sup>
- Girls are however less likely to experience conflict-related violence. Of children killed in the 2014 war, about two-thirds were boys.<sup>11</sup>

## Psychosocial wellbeing

- Living in a war zone has created an epidemic of post-traumatic stress and adolescent girls are among the most at risk. While services are broadly available, with most schools having counselling services, their quality is poor because they tend to react to emergency need rather than promote better mental health and psychosocial wellbeing.

- As they grow up, adolescent girls' wellbeing is increasingly jeopardised by social isolation, with many kept strictly confined to home.<sup>12</sup>
- Social stigma keeps girls from seeking support services, as mental health issues are seen to preclude their marital prospects.<sup>13</sup>

## Voice and agency

- The patriarchal norms and institutions that are prevalent across the MENA region impact the activities and opportunities of adolescent girls living in Gaza – especially when combined with extreme poverty and blockade-driven mobility restrictions.
- While girls in Gaza report that they are largely in charge of their own educational trajectories, with 87% reporting that they chose their own school, they also report that most of the decisions they make about their own lives are made jointly with others.<sup>14</sup>
- Girls are less likely than boys to participate in clubs and activities<sup>15</sup> and have little access to civic and political engagement, particularly that which promotes feminist objectives.<sup>16</sup> For example, 78% of older adolescent boys have their own phones, compared to only 38% of girls, and Gazan female youths are less than half as likely as their male peers to participate in volunteer activities (13% vs. 30%).

## Economic empowerment

- Adolescent girls in Gaza are largely attending school rather than participating in the labour market.
- In Gaza, 39% of women aged 25-34 are in the labour force, compared to 92% of men.<sup>17</sup> The unemployment rate for women the same age is 70%, compared to 35% for men.
- While the most educated women are the most likely to join the labour force, they are also comparatively more likely to be unemployed. Among those with more than

<sup>6</sup> S. Hamad, 2017

<sup>7</sup> PCBS 2016b

<sup>8</sup> PCBS 2011

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> PCBS, 2016a

<sup>11</sup> UNOCHA, 2014 Hamad et al., 2015

<sup>12</sup> Hamad et al., 2015

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> PCBS 2016a

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Jones and Hamad, 2016

<sup>17</sup> PCBS 2017c

13 years of education, the 2016 unemployment rate for women was more than twice that of men (63.4% vs 28.5%). The gap for those with only a primary education was smaller (rates of 60% and 40% respectively).<sup>18</sup>

- Because many avenues for economic development have been closed by the Israeli blockade, humanitarian organisations have emphasised information and technology training, entrepreneurship, and job placements in community rehabilitation projects. However, young women – rather than girls – are the primary beneficiaries of these programmes.

## Actors for change

Outside of the government – which in Gaza is controlled by Hamas – the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is the primary actor working both directly and indirectly to improve the lives and enhance the capabilities of adolescent girls. Indeed, UNRWA's role in Gaza is unique. Driven by the high proportion of Gaza's population that is registered as refugees (about two-thirds), UNRWA effectively operates as a quasi-government institution, providing services to approximately half of the population (e.g. it educates 270,000<sup>19</sup> out of 525,000<sup>20</sup> students). The agency's activities in the areas of education, health, child protection, cash transfers, food aid, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure function analogously to those sponsored by the Ministries of Health, Education, Social Services and Women's Affairs. These are provided with the caveat that UNRWA is focused on primary education and primary health care, rather than providing secondary and tertiary services.

Gazans – and sometimes specifically the youth – also receive support from other UN agencies, including the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UN Women, although only a handful of programmes are specifically aimed at adolescent girls. Hundreds of NGOs and community-based organisations work alongside the

government and the UN to provide a wide range of services that include educational enrichment, psychosocial support and recreational opportunities.

## Evidence gaps

In terms of capability domains, the picture of adolescent girls living in Gaza is relatively clear despite the lack of focused research. Girls in Gaza stay in school longer than their male peers – and perform better while there. Girls are still threatened by child marriage and gender-based violence, though the former is becoming less common over time and the latter potentially more so as political and economic tensions amplify stress. Adolescent pregnancy remains common and largely 'wanted', at least on some level, and malnutrition is a growing concern even as hunger is not. Girls have little access to voice and agency, with even their physical mobility often restricted by their families, which is reflected in high rates of anxiety.

Finally, while the youngest and most educated women are joining the labour force in unprecedented numbers, in part due to economic necessity, unemployment rates remain high and social norms restrict career pathways. That said, many uncertainties and contradictions remain. We do not understand, for example, why married girls report being happy in their marriages despite high rates of violence.

Most critically, despite the high number of development actors working in Gaza, we have a poor understanding of how to effect change in this fragile, conflict-affected location. Programming outcomes are rarely disaggregated by gender and age and rigorous evaluations remain uncommon. In addition, progress towards more measurable development goals, such as school enrolment, child marriage and employment, does not appear to have been matched by broader shifts in the social norms that marginalise girls and women. This is reflected in the fact that girls are choosing their own schools but remain unable to make decisions about when and whom they will marry.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> UNRWA, 2017d

<sup>20</sup> PCBS, 2017 b



# 1 Introduction: Locating girls in Gaza

Uncovering the experiences of adolescent girls living in Gaza is a challenging endeavour. Girls from Gaza are largely ‘invisible’ in the literature and absent from policy frameworks. Demographic data, which highlights the size of Gaza’s child population (more than 45% is under the age of 15), most often fails to disaggregate girls as a distinct group. They are typically subsumed into the categories of female children, female youth, adolescent Palestinians between the ages of 15 and 17, or dwellers of specific localities. Similarly, adolescent girls’ needs are lumped together with those of families, siblings or mothers.

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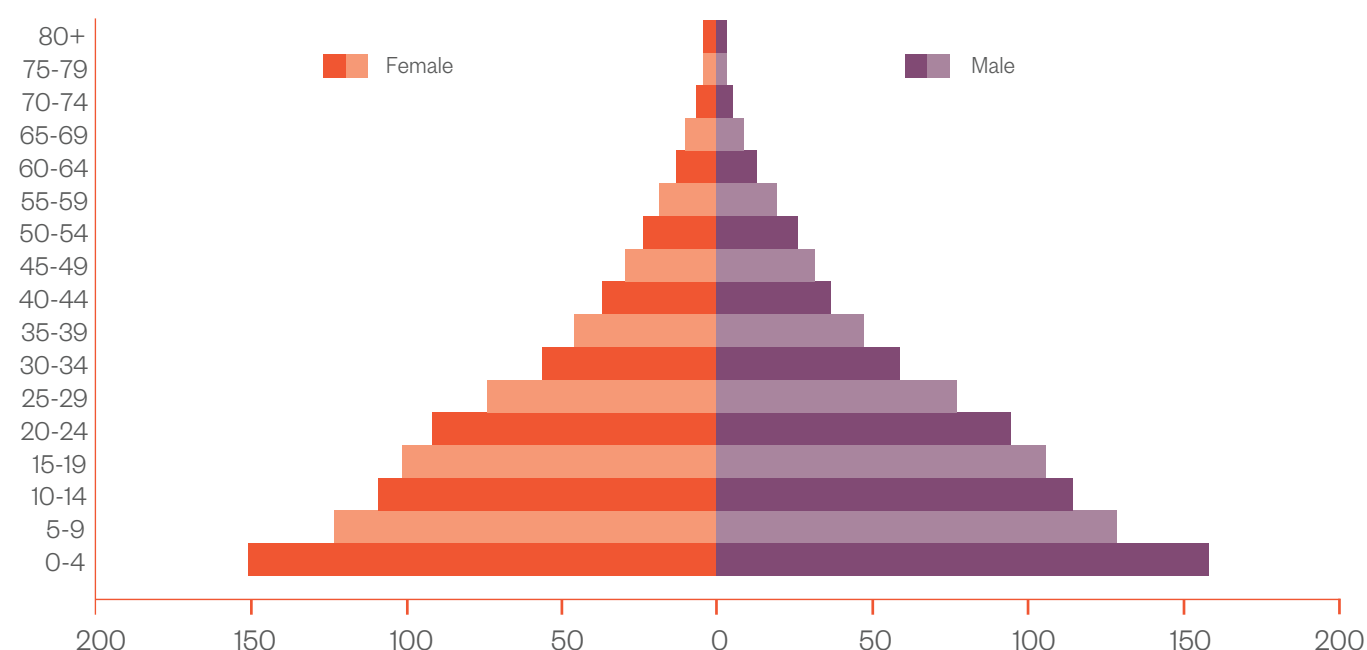
also maps out the numerous actors who are working in Gaza to improve girls’ outcomes and our assessment will conclude with a brief discussion of the strategies they have developed to meet this objective.

## 1.1 Gazan context

Gaza is a relatively small territory – less than a quarter of the size of London – bordered by Israel, Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea (see Figure 1). In 2017, nearly 2 million people called home this narrow, 45-kilometre-long strip of land that is divided into five administrative districts, with the urban protectorate of Gaza being the most densely populated (UN, 2017). Males slightly outnumber females among Gaza’s inhabitants, and because Gaza’s population continues to increase annually at a rate of over 3%, young people aged 0-19 account for over 50% of the Gazan population (see Figure 2) (PCBS, 2016b). In 2017, the UN reported a population density of 5,479 people per square kilometre. Comparing Gaza’s density to that of other

Figure 1: Gaza



**Figure 2: Gaza Population Pyramid**

Source: PCBS 2016e

localities is difficult because Gaza is neither a city nor a state and, because its inhabitants are largely crowded into urban areas and refugee camps, the territory contains a significant amount of uninhabited or sparsely inhabited space. If Gaza's cities and camps are crowded, so too are its homes. The typical Gazan household is composed of 5.7 people, and 87.9% of Gaza's large families live in a housing unit with four or fewer rooms (PCBS, 2016b).<sup>21</sup>

Once a thriving centre of culture, education and tourism, over the past decades Gaza has witnessed a cycle of military incursions and international violations by Israel and violent uprisings or intifadas by Palestinians intent on gaining their political autonomy. While the first intifada ended with the Oslo Accords, the second (2000-2005) concluded with the Israeli withdrawal of troops and settlements from the Gaza Strip. With this redeployment, Israel renounced its status as an occupying power; however, Israel maintained control of Gaza's airspace and territorial waters, continued to police six of Gaza's seven border crossings, and imposed a buffer or Access Restricted Area (ARA) zone at the border.

Hostilities further escalated with Hamas's victory in the 2006 Palestinian elections and the militant party's renunciation of all international agreements between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation. Hamas's

ascendancy also initiated a parliamentary and armed battle with the Palestinian Authority (PA), with Hamas claiming dominion over Gaza and the PA maintaining authority in the West Bank. The UN (2017) observes that 10 years of division 'has had deep repercussions on the "social contract" between the citizens and the state' – and has resulted in not only divergent legal systems, but also increasingly jeopardised the delivery of every basic service on which Gazans depend. The division has also created geopolitical ripples that have spread throughout the region and around the world.

The economic impacts of Israeli restrictions and Palestinian infighting, which showed some signs of thawing in late 2017 when Hamas agreed in principle to turn over day-to-day administration to the PA (Beaumont, 2017), cannot be overstated (UN, 2017). Since 2006, Gaza's gross domestic product has been cut by half, with the World Bank estimating that its gross domestic product (GDP) should be four times larger today than it is. Indeed, Gaza's real GDP is only a couple of percentage points higher than it was in 1994 – even though the population has increased by an estimated 230%. Due to this combination of depressed economic growth and rising population, the GDP per capita in Gaza was only \$1,038 in 2017 (UN, 2017), an amount 72% below 1994 levels, and real per

<sup>21</sup> In 2014, Gaza ranked third among densely populated city-states, but the region fell to 46th when compared to major cities including London and Tel Aviv.

**Table 1: Indication for Gaza**

Indicator	2011/12	2016/17 Update	2020 PROJECTION
<b>Gaza Population Size</b>	1.6 Million People	2 Million People	2.2 Million People (up from 2.13 million projected in 2012)
<b>Population Density</b>	4,383 People/ KM2	5,479/ KM2	6,197 People/KM2 (up from 5,835 KM2 projected in 2012)
<b>Real GDP per capita</b>	US\$ 1,165	\$ 1,038	\$1,058
<b>Unemployment Rate</b>	29%	42%	44.4%
<b>Energy - % of demand met</b>	60%	26-46%	25-71%
<b>Water -% of aquifer safe for drinking</b>	10%	3.8%	0%
<b>Year Aquifer will be unusable</b>	Projected in 2016	Projected in 2017	The aquifer will be irreversibly damaged
<b>Health-hospital beds per 1,000 people</b>	1.8	1.58	over 1,000 additional hospital beds needed
<b>Health-doctors per 1,000 people</b>	1.68	1.42	over 1,000 additional doctors needed

Source : UN 2017

capita income in Gaza has fallen by 31% (PCBS, 2016b; Humanitarian Country Team and Partners, 2015)(see Table 1). In addition to restrictions on the importation of raw materials, limitations on fishing rights and access to 35% of Gaza's arable land in the restricted access zone have further destroyed the territory's traditional industries, and its manufacturing sector has shrunk by 60%. Gaza consequently exports only 17% of the amount that it did before 2006.

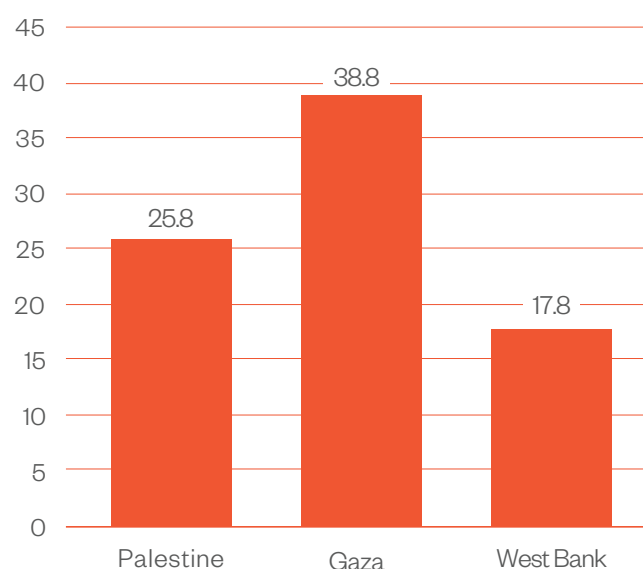
Unable to rebuild its infrastructure or attract private investment, Gaza now has one of the slowest rates of economic growth and highest unemployment rates in the world (World Bank, 2015). While the inability to find work affected 41.7% of Gaza's inhabitants in the second quarter of 2016, this lack of opportunity is even more concentrated among registered refugees (43.7%), the youth (57.6%) and women (65.3%) (PCBS, 2017)<sup>22</sup>. Given these figures, the State of Palestine has a Human Development Index (HDI) that is higher than one might expect due to relatively long life expectancy and higher mean levels of education. An HDI of .677 in 2015 placed Palestine at 113 out of 188 countries and territories. The region's lower Gross National Income per capita (GNI) nevertheless caused Palestine to rank lowest among the Arab States.

These figures help to emphasise that the daily lives of Gaza's inhabitants are often a struggle for subsistence. Over one-third (38.8%) of Gaza's inhabitants subsist below the poverty line and 21.1% are categorised as living in 'deep poverty' (see Figure 3). Nearly half (47%) of Gaza's

households experienced food insecurity in 2016 (Jansson, 2017; UNRWA, 2016) and – because 97% of municipal water wells in Gaza produce water that does not meet World Health Organisation (WHO) standards for human consumption (WHO, 2013) – only 10% of Gaza's residents have affordable access to an improved water source. This is down from 98% in 2000 (UN, 2017) (in the West Bank access to potable water is nearly universal) (PCBS, 2015). A chronic shortage of electricity – from 12 to 22 hours of daily rolling blackouts – prevents the region's three desalination plants from meeting demand, and it drastically reduces the capacity of sewage treatment plants. Consequently, 95 million litres of partially treated or untreated sewage are discharged into the Mediterranean Sea daily (Humanitarian Country Team and Partners, 2015). The United Nations has predicted that Gaza may be uninhabitable by 2020.

Humanitarian assistance has become essential for approximately 80% of Gaza's population. Given Gaza's poverty and lack of economic development, the region contributes only 13% of the Palestinian government's revenues while accounting for 43% of its expenditures (World Bank, 2015). Operated through the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Palestinian National Cash Transfer Programme (PNCTP) helps the most impoverished Palestinians – about 75,000 households in Gaza and 38,000 households in the West Bank – access nutritious food, education and health care. Gazan families also derive assistance from the UNRWA Relief and Social Services

<sup>22</sup> In the third quarter, these figures increased to a 43.2% unemployment rate and a 68.6% unemployment rate for women. See UNRWA (2017c).

**Figure 3: Poverty rates**

Source: PCBS 2015d

Programme. In 2016, the programme provided emergency food and non-food items – on an ad hoc basis – to about 1 million extremely poor beneficiaries (UNRWA, 2017a). UNRWA's more regular assistance reaches about 22,000 beneficiaries.

Compounding the effects of its economic blockade, Israel launched a military assault in 2014 that has further impeded Gaza's economic development and intensified both the material and psychological insecurity of its inhabitants. Operation Protective Edge was the third major military operation launched by Israel in six years, and over the course of its 51 days, 1,462 Palestinian civilians were killed, including 551 children (two-thirds of whom were boys) (UNOCHA, 2014). Moreover, 11,231 Gazans, including 3,436 children, were either injured or left permanently disabled. Psychological injury proved even more extensive, with assessments conducted by various NGOs indicating that over 50% of Palestinian children need psychosocial counselling (UNICEF, 2014). In addition, according to final reports, an estimated 160,000 homes were damaged in the military operation, displacing more than 500,000 Gazan residents, causing \$1.7 billion of damage and further reducing Gaza's GDP by an estimated \$460 million (World Bank, 2015). Because Israel has largely prohibited building supplies from entering Gaza, due to their potential dual usage for militant purposes, Gaza continues to look like

a war zone, with millions of tons of rubble waiting to be excavated and tens of thousands of structures waiting to be repaired (Fisher, 2017).

## 1.2 A nation of refugees

The displacement of Gaza's citizens by the 2014 military offensive continues a history of dislocation that began with the Jewish state's creation in 1948. Compelled to flee their homes through force or fear, Palestinians began moving to refugee camps administered by UNRWA, which began operations in 1950 to assist the almost 1 million Palestinians displaced by Israel's creation. With a global population estimated to be 7.2 million people (Al-Awda, 2017), the Palestinian diaspora is concentrated in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza. The number of refugees registered with UNRWA is 5.5 million – with one-third of these living in the 58 camps operated by UNRWA and the remainder largely congregated in and around urban areas. In Gaza, the refugee population of almost 1.3 million makes up two-thirds of Gaza's total population (PCBS, 2015b; 2016b). Given the higher fertility rates in Gaza (4.5 births per woman), the refugees of Gaza are slightly younger, with 40.9% of Gazan refugees under the age of 15<sup>23</sup>.

In Gaza, nearly 42% of refugees, some 581,500 people, live in one of the eight camps operated by UNRWA (see Table 2). A host of social, legal, economic and political factors explain the persistence of the refugee camps after five decades. Since the country's inception, Israeli law has prohibited refugees' right of return to familial lands as well as the payment of any reparations that would facilitate resettlement. This expropriation of land has created a condition of dispossession that has further compromised Palestinians' abilities to withstand the punitive economic and military policies that Israel has instituted for the purposes of national security. Created through a lack of both capital and opportunity, economic marginality has foreclosed movement away from the camps, and this poverty renders camp residents even more vulnerable to the deficit of jobs, the unavailability of affordable housing, internal political instability, concerns about physical safety, and Israeli restrictions on Palestinian mobility. Within the camps, however, the re-establishment of social structures and tribal relations has at least helped four generations of Palestinians withstand the hardships and deprivations of their refugee status (Rempel, 2006).

23 On birth rates, see PCBS, 2015a. Rempel (2006) cites a UNRWA 2005 report that tallied youth under the age of eighteen at 48.3% of Gaza's refugee population.

**Table 2: Camp populations**

Camp	Population
Beach	84,000
Bureij	41,000
Deir El-Balah	24,500
Unemployment Rate	29%
Jabalia	119,500
Khan Younis	84,500
Maghazi	30,000
Nuseirat	77,500
Rafah	120,500

Source: UNRWA 2018

Numbers help to illuminate the differences between refugees living in the camps and those settled in the urban and rural areas of Gaza's governorates. Generally, Palestinian refugees living in Gaza experience higher rates of unemployment, lower incomes and larger families than those living in other UNRWA fields, but these conditions are particularly true for camp residents, who also suffer from more overcrowding and poorer living conditions than non-camp residents<sup>24</sup>. Given that jobs are more widely available outside the camps, almost 44% of Gaza's camp residents are unemployed, and this lack of work translates into higher rates of poverty. In 2016, 911,500 Gazan refugees were classified as living in either abject or absolute poverty and depended on UNRWA for emergency food assistance (UNRWA, 2017b<sup>25</sup>). More likely to be poor, refugees also reportedly suffer from higher rates of chronic illness and mental health disorders (Rempel, 2006; PCBS, 2015c).

### 1.3 Gender relations in Gaza

Gaza is a very difficult place to be female. Due to the tribal relations and patriarchal conventions that persist in Gaza, girls and women continue to be subjected by a strictly defined feminine role that restricts their public activities and personal aspirations, limiting them to the sanctioned activities of wives, mothers and caregivers. In addition to the labours associated with social reproduction,

they are responsible for 'preserv[ing] tradition, national heritage, and culture, and its symbols' (Ludsin, 2011). This generative role is regarded as crucially important within Palestinian society, particularly in the midst of a protracted struggle that attacks its national and cultural identity. Alongside religious belief, this perception helps to explain why Palestinian women report a desire to bear numerous children, for despite the economic implications, childbearing is a source of respect and value within a patriarchal power structure. As legal scholar Hallie Ludsin has concluded (2011), this patriarchal relationship between the maternal body, the family, and the nation is a 'powerful instrument of control over women'.

While Palestine's Gender Development Index is reasonably high at .86, due to Palestinian women's longevity and their educational attainments, it ranks relatively low among the Arab states because women earn appreciably less money. Whereas the GNI for men stood at \$7,726 adjusted international dollars in 2014, the figure for women was assessed at only \$1,580. This income disparity is brought into sharper relief by time-use statistics. Between 2012 and 2013, women engaged in 293 minutes of unpaid labour each day compared to the 55 minutes that men contributed (UNDP, 2016).<sup>26</sup> Although not specific to Gaza, these disparities help to illuminate the effects of a patriarchal social structure that prescribes how, where and under what circumstances women work. Women honoured for their childbearing inevitably become subjugated by the demands of their unpaid caretaking obligations.

While 5.7 people make up the average household, 64% of the families living in Gaza claim seven or more members – in part because about one-fifth are multi-generational (PCBS, 2016b). Given that the fertility rate stood at 4.5 births per woman between 2011 and 2013, a large majority of these families, 73.6%, include young children. A significant percentage also include a person with either a disability or a chronic health condition, just as important in determining women's departure from the workforce.<sup>27</sup> In explaining their reasons for remaining outside the labour force, 65.4% of Gazan women reported housekeeping obligations (PCBS, 2016c). This prioritisation of caretaking

<sup>24</sup> For those living in urban areas, the labour force participation rate is 45.5% compared to 44.3% for camp residents (PCBS, 2016c).

<sup>25</sup> According to UNRWA, 487,500 registered refugees are living below the abject poverty line of \$1.74 per day, while another 424,000 of Gaza's refugees subsist daily on less than \$3.87. This rate of poverty compares to 19.4% and 26.1% of non-refugees living in rural and urban areas respectively. See PCBS, 2016d: 23.

<sup>26</sup> In fact, when the average minutes per day of paid and unpaid labour are combined, women performed a total of 329 minutes compared to men's 304 minutes.

<sup>27</sup> The most recent Palestine-wide disability survey, conducted in 2011 using the Washington Group's definitions, found a national prevalence of 2.7% using the 'narrow' definition (a lot of difficulty or cannot at all) and a prevalence of 6.9% using the 'wide' definition (also including some difficulty).



reflects that, both practically and culturally, women's paid employment in Gaza is regarded as acceptable only in situations of extreme economic necessity. That said, given current unemployment and poverty rates, most Gazan families experience that necessity on a daily basis. While a recent study found that the vast majority of Gazans (72.5%) believe it preferable for men to seek additional work than for women to enter the workforce, an even greater

number nevertheless accept that women must often work to improve their families' economic livelihoods (Alpha International for Research, 2009).<sup>28</sup> But any acceptance sits uneasily with the anxiety incited by this imperative, particularly among men, as 43.6% of the Gazans surveyed expressed doubt that an employed woman could raise her children effectively (ibid.).

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28 In the West Bank, only 54.7% believe that men should take a second job to meet household expenses.

## 2 Adolescent girls in Gaza

Exploring the strictly drawn boundaries of adult women's lives and opportunities helps to paint a picture of how young women are socialised to occupy the same parameters. This contextualisation is necessary because many of the constraints that adolescent girls face in realising their capabilities must be inferred from what is better documented about their mothers. The data for adolescent girls in Gaza is rarely disaggregated. Although the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) is to be commended for its provision of age-sensitive data, adolescent girls are most often included in statistical surveys as part of 'youth' between the ages of 15 and 29. This means that girls' needs are typically obscured by the more mature needs and concerns of the wives and mothers who are in their early and mid-twenties. In addition, when the PCBS does separate adolescent girls into a discrete category, it most often combines girls living in Gaza with those living in West Bank. Similarly, statistical measurements for urban areas, rural villages and refugee camps are overly generalised, and the specific experiences and obstacles of the girls in Gaza are lost when either boys or older women are folded into these overviews or the occupied territories are classified as a singular entity. Analysing the capabilities of Gaza's adolescent girls is thus an exercise in inference, for the data often reveals a lack of knowledge and a pressing need for further investigation. The exceptions to this deficit are education, employment and child marriage, as these areas of inquiry have received significant attention in recent years. Despite the crucial importance of these issues, they fail to account entirely for the complexity of girls' experiences, opinions, hopes and fears, all of which simultaneously shape and limit their capabilities.

### 2.1 Education

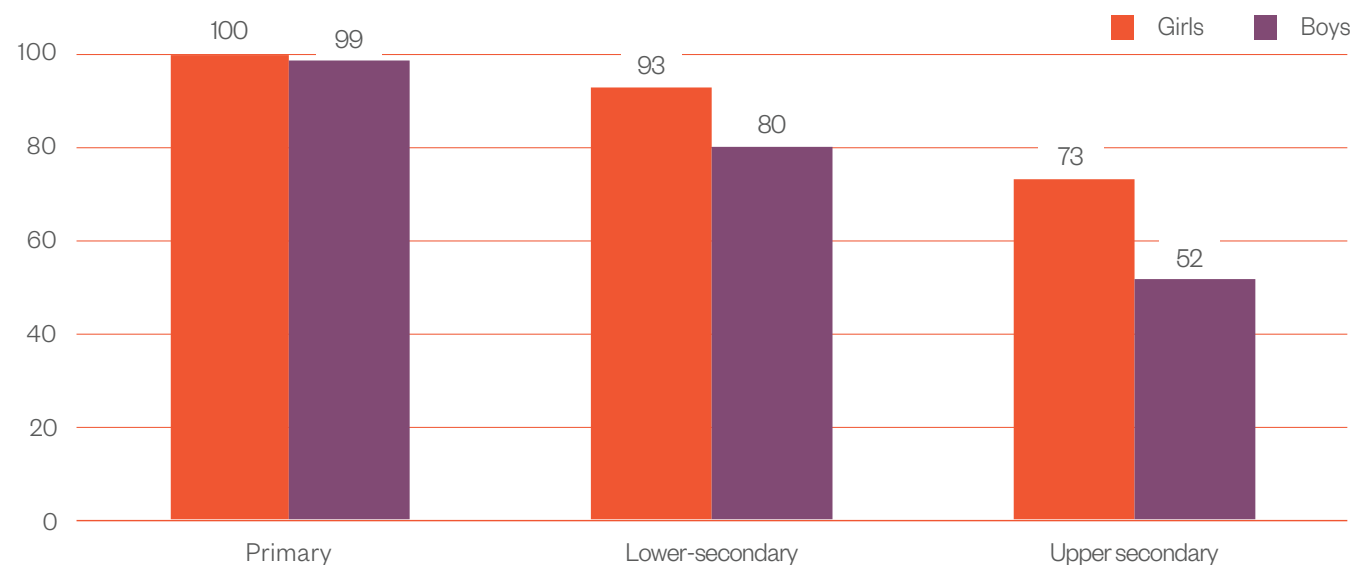
The almost universal access that Gaza's adolescent girls have to public education makes schools a primary site for enhancing girls' capabilities (Affouneh, 2008). Measures of girls' reported satisfaction with their educational

experience nevertheless reveal areas of potential improvement in the delivery of services. While little can be done to reduce overcrowding or extend the school day, which in most schools is only four hours a day because schools are running on double shifts in order to meet need (UN, 2017), instructional techniques and the curriculum could be altered to improve the employability of female graduates.

Schools provide one of the only socially approved external locations where Gaza's girls can begin to imagine lives beyond the restrictive boundaries of the household. In Palestine, basic school begins at the age of six and continues for 10 grades until adolescents enter secondary school, typically at 16 years of age, for two last years of formal schooling, which unlike the first 10 are not compulsory. The school year spans September to June, and a combination of population growth and the destruction of facilities due to Israeli military assaults have created crowded classrooms and abbreviated school hours (PCBS, 2015a). During the 2015/16 school year, 720 basic and secondary schools operated within Gaza, a number that included 395 schools operated by the Palestinian National Authority's Ministry of Education and 252 supported and staffed by UNRWA.

Girls were well-represented among student populations in Gaza, accounting for 49.5% of basic students and 54.2% of students in secondary schools (PCBS, 2016), where this majority created a gender parity index of 1.2 in favour of girls (see Figure 4)<sup>29</sup>. Children living in UNRWA camps attended school at an almost comparable rate to Gazan students residing outside the camps (PCBS, 2015a). Due to the high percentage of girls enrolled in school, those between the ages of 15 and 19 enjoy a literacy rate of 99.3%. Despite a traditional tendency to prioritise the education of boys as an investment in a family's economic future, this feminine numerical advantage in persists in Palestine as a whole at the university level, where the Gender Parity Index in the 2015/16 school year was 1.57 in favour of females (PCBS 2016e).

<sup>29</sup> In the beginning of February 2017, over 262,000 refugee children returned to 267 UNRWA schools to start the second semester of the 2016/17 school year (UNRWA, 2017a).

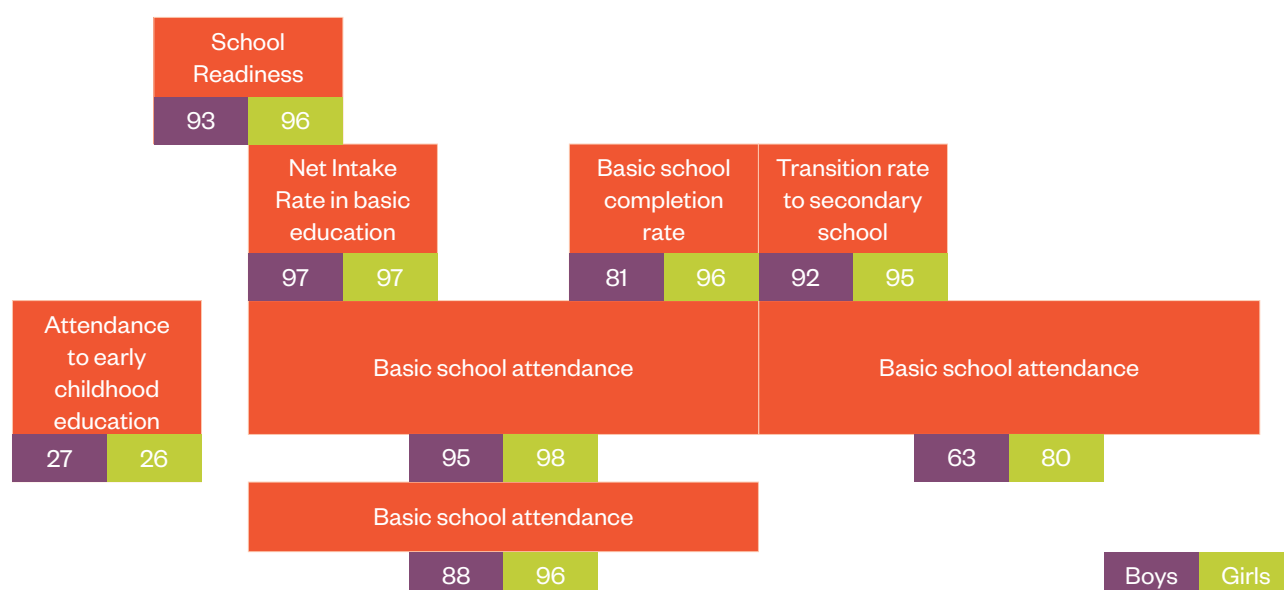
**Figure 4: Completion rates by level and sex**

Source: <https://data.unicef.org>

Girls' comparatively higher school attendance, particularly at the secondary level, seemingly contradicts the numerous reports arguing that, within Gaza's patriarchal culture, education for boys is more highly valued and, therefore, prioritised by Palestinian families. Indeed, the most recent Palestinian Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) found that boys are disadvantaged compared to girls at every educational juncture – ranging from school readiness at the age of five (96% of girls to 93% of boys) to secondary school attendance (80% of girls to 63% of boys) (see Figure 5). Boys are more likely to drop out

of school due either to low academic achievement, to a lack of extra-curricular engagement or to pressure to contribute to their families' economic support. The last is evidenced by child labour figures. Of those aged five to 14, more boys than girls are classified as child labourers (7% vs. 4%) – with child labour especially prevalent in the more agricultural West Bank than Gaza (by 8% to 3% – PCBS, 2013b).

In biannual national exams administered to fourth and 10th-graders between 2007 and 2012, Palestinian students delivered a relatively poor performance, but girls

**Figure 5: Educational attainment and transition, by sex**

Note: All indicator values are in percent

Source: PCBS 2015a

appreciably outperformed their male peers. Tenth-grade girls averaged scores that were 10 percentage points higher in the Arabic languages, three in mathematics and seven in science (PCBS, 2013). Contrary to the low rates of participation in civic and social activities enjoyed by female youth in general, female secondary students were also more likely to be engaged in musical, cultural, social and athletic activities that supplemented their education. In 2015, 92.9% of girls attending Palestinian secondary schools participated in these extra-curricular offerings compared to 85.7% of their male peers. Girls' better engagement and higher performance comes despite the fact that they are more likely than boys to contribute to household chores (75% of girls 15-17 vs 48.6% of boys the same age) (PCBS, 2013b).

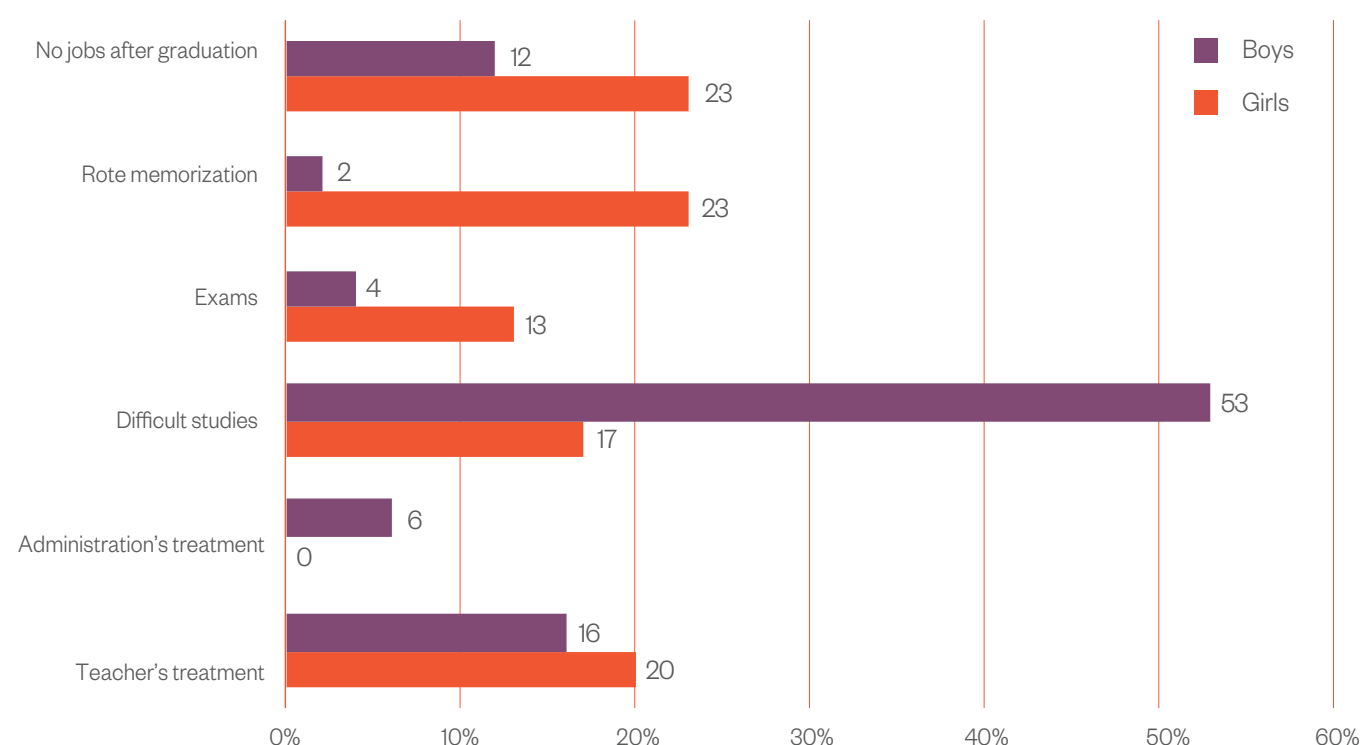
Like their attendance and performance, girls' educational aspirations are high. A PCBS survey of Palestinian youth found, for example, that among Gazan adolescents and women aged 15-29, 48.1% of participants hoped to pursue a bachelor's degree, and 52.9% expressed a desire to earn a graduate degree (PCBS, 2016a).

Realising the capabilities of girls starts both with making schools more hospitable places and with preparing girls more effectively for rewarding occupations. The classrooms in Palestinian schools are crowded due to the

deficit of facilities created by recent military attacks, a lack of construction materials and rapid population growth. In 2015/16 school year, basic school classrooms typically contained 37.8 students per class, while an average of 35.1 students were packed into secondary classrooms (PCBS, 2016d).

These conditions contribute to the violence that adolescent girls reportedly experience at school. In 2015, 71.2% of girls enrolled in Palestinian government's secondary schools were exposed to violence, although this figure represents an 11% decline from the previous year when girls experienced violence at school at an even higher rate than their male peers. Responding to crowded conditions, teachers have resorted to punitive disciplinary measures, as the Ministry of Education has consequently included scolding in its broad definition of the violence that students experience at school (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2016). The PCBS 2015 survey of Palestinian youth bears out the impact of this aggression, as 20% of girls between the ages of 15 and 17 objected to teachers' classroom management techniques (see Figure 6). Palestinian teachers have also coped with large class sizes by relying upon rote memorisation and directive instructional techniques. A study conducted by the Ministry of Education found, for example, that in Palestinian

**Figure 6: Reasons for school dissatisfaction, by sex, for teenagers 15-17**



Source: PCBS 2016a

basic schools, students spent 83% of their classroom time in 2015 responding to teachers' instructions. Secondary teachers similarly reserve only 12% of instructional minutes for participatory activities that encourage student initiative (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2016). This methodology accounts for another source of dissatisfaction with the academic experience expressed by Palestinian girls enrolled in secondary schools – 23% of whom objected to teachers' reliance on rote memorisation.

Making schools more accountable to violence and adolescent-friendly will require delving further into the attitudes of current and former students. Survey responses for Gazan youth aged 15-29 were distinguished by gender rather than age and, remarkably, the responses of male and female participants in this age cohort reveal little statistical variation. In contrast, Palestinian girls in the youngest cohort (15-17) expressed stronger opinions than their male peers about their dissatisfaction with rote memorisation and the unavailability of jobs after graduation. Interestingly, the 22.6% of female secondary students in the occupied territories who complained about a lack of employment opportunities was higher than the 16% of Gazan female youth who reported these concerns.

To address this source of dissatisfaction, the type of instruction that girls receive requires evaluation. Of the young women questioned in the PCBS 2015 Youth Survey, 66.1% of the Gazan respondents failed to receive practical training in Gaza's schools, although this figure was lower than the 80% of male youth who noted this deficiency (PCBS, 2016a). Boys are nevertheless the primary beneficiaries of the vocational training offered in government schools, even though only 4.2% of male 11th-graders pursued a vocational stream in comparison to 0.6% of Palestinian adolescent girls. An assessment by the Ministry of Education attributed this small enrolment to the inaccessibility of vocational education facilities, the general lack of programmes tailored to the needs of the labour market, and a lack of specialisations suitable for girls (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2016). However, a report by the State of Palestine and UNFPA (2016) observes that a bigger issue is probably the perception of vocational programmes as significantly less prestigious than a university education.

## 2.2 Physical health and nutrition

Adolescent pregnancy is common in Gaza, with girls who are married as children pushed by social norms into demonstrating their fertility soon after marriage. Girls also face nutritional challenges. Primarily poor, living in densely populated urban areas, and often facing parental restrictions on their mobility, adolescent girls are increasingly likely to be both malnourished, because they cannot afford diverse diets, and overweight, because they consume largely empty calories and have too few opportunities for physical activity. Outside of childbearing and nutrition, little is known about Gazan girls' health.

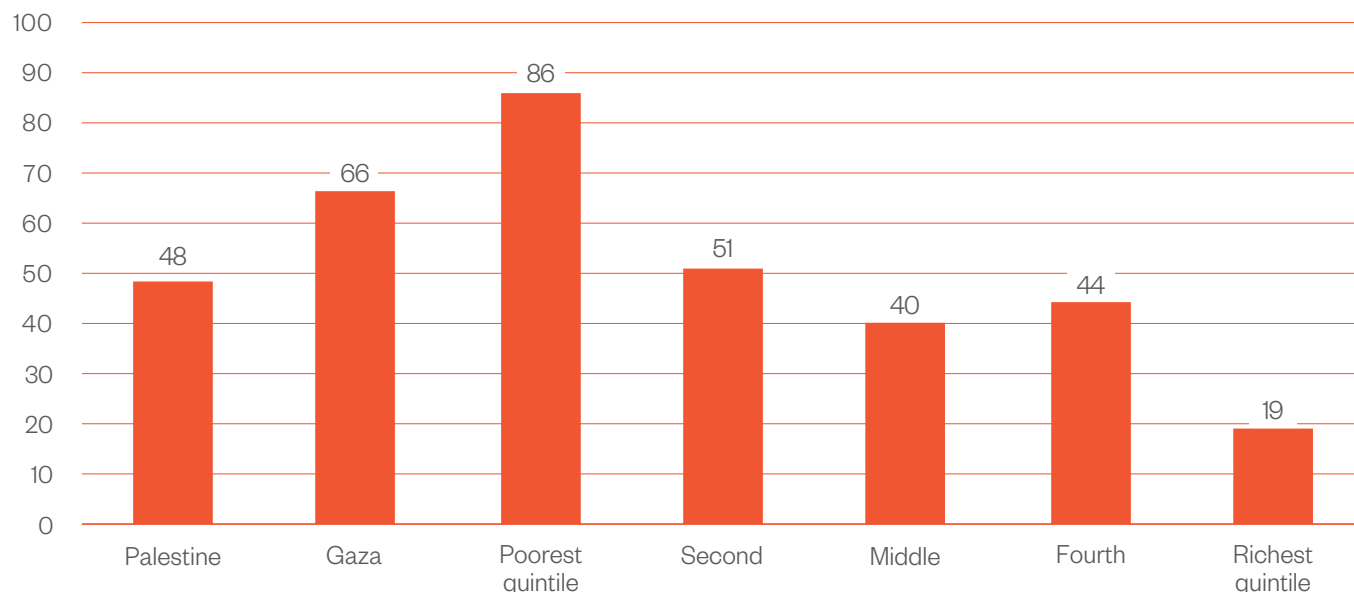
Childbearing begins at an early age for women in Gaza. According to the 2014 MICS, the adolescent birth rate in Gaza is 66 births per 1,000 young women between the ages of 15 and 19 (see Figure 7). This number is substantially higher than adolescent births recorded in the West Bank (35/1,000). As is common throughout the world, girls from the poorest households are the most likely to become adolescent mothers. Among Gazan girls aged 15-19, 9.6% of those sampled in the survey had begun childbearing. Live births before the age of 15 were relatively uncommon, occurring among only 2.8% of respondents; however, 25.1% of women ages 20-24 reported giving birth before the age of 18 (PCBS, 2015a).

This relatively high percentage of late adolescent pregnancy reflects the pressure of societal norms, as young women in Gaza have extensive access to contraception (PCBS, 2015a) – albeit within the broader context of no access to comprehensive sex education (MITFAH, ICHR and UNFPA, 2015). Surveys of sexual behaviour among older, married youth suggest that a desire for children prevents many couples from using contraception during the first years of marriage despite widespread knowledge about the prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Indeed, the most recent MICS found that of married girls aged 15-19, 84% were not using contraception, compared to 62% of married women aged 20-24.

The demonstrable effects of early childbearing are both personal and social for Gaza's young women. The deaths of young women are most often caused by complications related to pregnancy and childbirth; motherhood generally precludes women's participation in the workforce; and early childbearing raises the total fertility rate, increasing the burdens on both individual families and an economically depressed Palestinian state (UNFPA, 2016). Notably, girls'



**Figure 7: Adolescent fertility rates by sub-population (births to girls 15-19/1000)**



Source: PCBS 2015a

high fertility is also driven by a desire for large families. Of girls aged 15-17, the mean ideal number of children is five (PCBS, 2016a).

Food insecurity is a growing concern for Gazan teens and their families. Originating with the Israeli blockade and the protracted conflict's devastating impact on Gaza's agricultural sector, food insecurity afflicts 47% of Gaza's households. Indeed, the rate of malnutrition increased by 60% in Gaza between 2000 and 2010 (Rau, 2015; see also PCBS, 2013c). One result of this is that many Gazan adolescents are micronutrient deficient, which affects all areas of their development, including cognitive capacity (Abudayya et al., 2011). A 2014 UNICEF study, for example, found that of Gazan teens aged 15-18, 30% of boys and 24% of girls had serum iron levels that are considered too low (UNICEF and the PA, 2014). Zinc levels were even lower: 68% of Gazan boys and 79% of girls tested as deficient. Furthermore, only 59% of boys and 69% of girls had adequate stores of vitamin B12, and no teens from Gaza had levels of  $\beta$ -carotene that were considered adequate (ibid.). Research from the PCBS highlights growing malnutrition as well. It found that 72% of adolescent girls suffer from a vitamin D deficiency, due to lack of sun exposure along with a diet low in pre-formed vitamin D and high in phytic acid. Another 62% tested positive for a deficit of vitamin A (UNRWA, 2017b; Ministry of Health, 2005).

Girls' micronutrient deficiencies tend to worsen over time, as the number of pregnancies they experience climbs.

While 'only' 22% of Gazan girls between the ages of 15 and 18 were anaemic, nearly 40% of pregnant Gazan women between the ages of 18 and 43 were (UNICEF and the PA, 2014). The consequences of this for women – and their children – can be extreme.

Rates of obesity are also high among Gazan girls and, like anaemia, climb with age. The 2014 UNICEF micronutrient study found that of Gazan girls between the ages of 15 and 17, 16% were overweight and 4% were obese. A study of university students found that 22.5% of women were overweight and 20.5% were obese (Hamad, 2017). Just as the nutritional deficiencies that accompany poverty paradoxically help to explain this weight gain, alterations in the traditional Palestinian diet have also led to a disturbing increase in cases of type two diabetes.

An excess number of nutritionally deficient calories cannot be exclusively blamed, however, for the rise of diabetes and the obesity that causes it. Given their highly restricted mobility, only 19.6% of young women aged 15-29 practised sports daily in 2015 as compared to 45.1% of the male cohort (PCBS, 2016a). This percentage represents a slight decline from the 22.7% of young women who reported participating in regular physical activity – an average of 20 minutes for three to four days each week – in a 2010 PCBS survey of Palestinian youth (PCBS, 2013b). Even more telling, the vast majority of these girls, 86.9%, engaged in physical activity at home, while only 4.9% and 3.8% of respondents exercised through a club or at school,

respectively (PCBS, 2013b). Most adolescent girls spend much of their time watching television.

The little we know about girls' health outside of childbearing and nutrition comes from the PCBS youth survey. That survey found that 85.9% of young women aged 15-29 believed themselves to be in either excellent or very good health. This figure reached almost 90% among all Palestinian girls between the ages of 15 and 17 (PCBS, 2016a). It also found that 3.4% of female youth between the ages of 15 and 29 have a disability (vs. 3.9% for male youth) and that males are far more likely to smoke than girls (27% vs. 1%).

Adolescents' access to SRH information and care appears to be particularly limited. Of teens aged 15-17, 40% had not heard about sexually transmitted infections (outside of HIV) and 20% had not heard of HIV (PCBS, 2016a). While HIV is extremely rare in Palestine, lack of knowledge highlights broader concerns about discussing sexuality and ultimately limits adolescents' knowledge of their right to protect themselves from sexual harassment and violence (MIFTAH, ICHR and UNFPA, 2015). Indeed, evidence suggests that gendered social norms largely preclude girls' and young women's access to non-maternity related care. When asked why they did not seek care, women reported that they are not able to go alone (38%), lack the financial resources to pay for care (37%), do not have access to a female care provider (33%), or cannot get their husband's approval (18%) (ibid.).

Interestingly, while teens overwhelmingly report that they are in good health, they are not blind to the ways in which their lifestyles are unhealthy. Of those aged 15-27, 53% of girls and 56% of boys reported that addiction and unhealthy lifestyles are their largest health challenge (PCBS, 2016a).

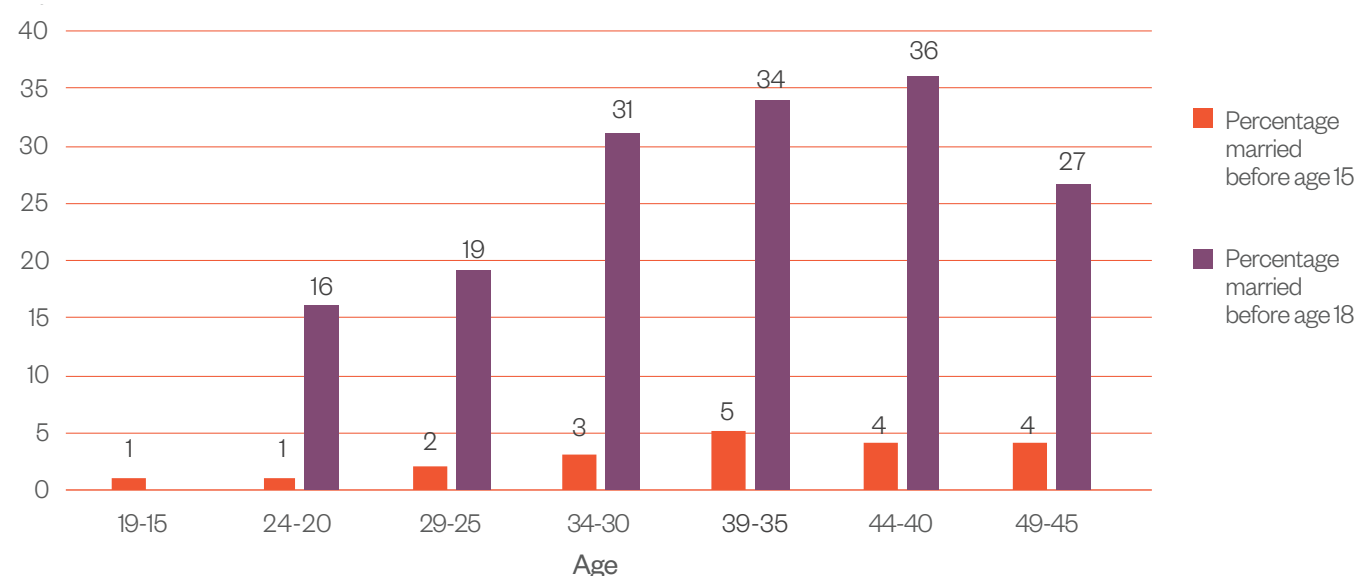
## 2.3 Bodily integrity and freedom from violence

While stressors related to the Israeli occupation have impacted the physical health of girls in Gaza, they have also attenuated the safety and security that girls feel not just in public spaces but also in their homes. Realising the capabilities of adolescent girls consequently requires a significant emphasis on preserving their rights to bodily integrity and securing their freedom from early marriage, abuse and gender-based violence.

### 2.3.1 Child marriage

A desire to produce more children to promote the Palestinian cause, anxieties about poverty, girls' physical safety and the family's reputation perpetuate a tradition of early marriage (Ludsin, 2011). This practice continues to cause girls significant stress even as it declines over time (see Figure 8). Compared to the oldest cohort of women (those aged 45-49), today's girls and young women are far less likely to marry before the age of 15 (1% vs. 4%) (PCBS, 2015a). They are also less likely to marry before

**Figure 8: Percentage of different cohorts married as children**



Source: PCBS 2015a

the age of 18 (16% vs. 27%). Girls in Gaza are, however, significantly more likely to marry as children than their peers in the West Bank (6.8% vs. 12.8%) (ibid.). While child marriage is showing a big decline, a large proportion of girls continue to marry in late adolescence. In 2015, girls aged 15-19 accounted for 41.3% of all marriages registered in the occupied territories (PCBS, 2016b).

The majority of these young brides were married to older men (PCBS, 2015a). Of married girls aged 15-19, nearly 60% were married to a man at least five years their senior, while 13% were married to a man at least 10 years their senior (ibid.). The study also found that lower levels of education and poverty were most significant in determining the age at which the female respondents married, even more so than a girl's place of residence. In the occupied territories, the rates of early marriage among girls aged 15-19 were comparable in camps and urban areas at 11% and 10% respectively, while only 5% of girls in this demographic group who live in rural areas were married. In Palestine generally, 25.3% of female camp residents between the ages of 15 and 49 reported marrying before the age of 18, but this statistic climbed to 28.6% among respondents in Gaza, where a greater percentage of the population resides in camps. Early marriages occurred even more frequently in the specific governorates of Gaza and North Gaza. There, 36% of the female respondents were married before 18, a figure significantly greater than the 24% of Palestinian women in the occupied territories as a whole who participated in the PCBS survey (ibid.). This outlying number was, however, slightly less than the 38% of women married before 18 who participated in a 2010 survey (PCBS, 2013b).<sup>30</sup>

While early marriage and its impact on girls' health and agency raise concerns among government officials and humanitarian organisations, marrying in late adolescence is consistent with the attitudes expressed by Gaza's female youth. For these young women, the median age of marriage for young women is 20.2 (PCBS, 2016b). This marker differs only marginally from the 21.3 years that Gazan women between the ages of 15 and 29 recently indicated as the ideal time for women to marry, an age predictably younger than the 25.8 years that they specified for men (PCBS, 2016a).

Surveys of young adults' and adolescents' perceptions of their marriages yield insight into girls' attitudes about these early unions that are strikingly different from global data – and highlight a need for further research, especially given

evidence on gender-based violence (below). A PCBS survey of Palestinian youth found, for example, that 16.9% of Gazan females between the ages of 15 and 29 described their marriages as 'very happy', while another 51.7% categorised their marriages as 'happy', and 30.6% expressed moderate happiness. Disaggregated by age for the general population of Palestinian youth, 37.4% of the youngest girls surveyed (ages 15-17) were very happy in their marriages; however, this perception declined as girls got older, as only 20.2% of young women between the ages of 23 and 29 described their marriages as very happy and the number expressing only moderate happiness doubled (PCBS, 2016a).

### 2.3.2 Broader violence against children and women

Numerous studies have shown that violence within the home has escalated alongside unemployment, poverty, overcrowding and the militarisation of Palestinian men. In Gaza particularly, a traditional imperative of childhood deference to adult authority has caused discipline to become increasingly punitive with the depletion of caretakers' economic and emotional resources (PCBS, 2016a; Ouis and Myhrman, 2007). A MICS published by the PCBS in 2015 reveals that Gazan parents almost universally use violent methods of discipline, particularly psychological aggression. Facing poverty and overcrowded conditions, the Gazan parents surveyed resorted to more extreme forms of discipline at almost twice the rate of those living in the West Bank (PCBS, 2015a). Although boys are more commonly the victims of physical abuse, girls either experience or witness physical and psychological aggression that creates expectations about their own prospects as adult women.

According to the 2011 Violence Survey, 51% of ever-married women in Gaza had been victimised by their husband during the last 12 months (compared to 30% in West Bank). About 76% had been psychologically abused, 35% had experienced physical violence and nearly 15% had been sexually assaulted. Evidence indicates that violence against women is increasing over time, probably due to the impact of economic and personal insecurity on familial and social relations of power. While in 2006, 32% of ever-married Palestinian women had experienced violence, by 2011 the average had climbed to nearly 37%. In a recent survey conducted in two of Gaza's governorates, 73% of households reported a perceived increase in

<sup>30</sup> For a cultural analysis of early marriage, see Shehada (2008).

gender-based violence (Humanitarian Country Team and Partners, 2015). Two-thirds of abused women never tell anyone of their abuse and only 0.7% seek help from a women's centre or organisation (PCBS, 2011).

The punitive forms of discipline and gender-based violence that young women experience in their homes are inseparable from the various forms of harassment they experience in their communities' public spaces, the workplace and educational institutions. According to one report, threats to girls' safety include, 'verbal, physical and sexual harassment, the spread of rumours and gossip, and the threat of kidnapping' (Chaban et al., 2010: 23). A recent survey of Gazan youth revealed that 25.7% of female respondents between the ages of 15 and 29 reported harassment in comparison to 13.8% of those living in the West Bank (PCBS, 2016a). The majority of these incidents (92%) entailed being the recipient of 'ridiculous' or harassing comments in public spaces, although 7.6% reported embarrassing, inappropriate or abusive physical contact.

Official statistics under-report both private and public violence against women because these crimes fall under the purview of customary law rather than the domain of the Palestinian civil courts. Pre-dating Shari'a law, customary law is a process of mediation that serves to resolve property disputes between families and clans on issues such as contract, labour, land and trespass. It often

extends, however, to crimes that range from personal injury to rape and murder. Because customary law privileges the interests of the family and its male leaders, it heavily discriminates against women and adolescent girls in crimes pertaining to honour and particularly in those involving sexual transgression (see Box 1). Prevented from advocating for themselves, the victims of honour crimes are too often placed on trial for inciting gender-based violence through either a lack of obedience or sexual provocation.<sup>31</sup> This legal inequality has reinforced women's and girls' expressed fears of sexual harassment and abuse while also forcing their silence and their complicity in a project of surveillance (Ludsin, 2011).

## 2.4 Psychosocial wellbeing

Contradictory evidence complicates efforts to assess the psychosocial wellbeing of adolescents in Gaza. Numerous studies have found rates of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder as high as 70% (Hamad et al., 2015; Ministry of Health, 2014; Dimitry, 2011; Colliard and Hamad, 2010) – with poverty and war being drivers of ill-being for both girls and boys. Other studies have found that while girls and young women are less stressed by economic hardship than their male peers (State of Palestine and UNFPA, 2016), they are considerably more disadvantaged by the mobility constraints – which also serve to preclude access to social support – and by the necessity of upholding family honour (Hamad et al., 2015). On the other hand, driven by community expectations, on surveys adolescent girls report high levels of happiness and satisfaction with the quality of their lives.

In part because the government is working to push back against the stigma surrounding mental health issues, psychosocial services for Gazan children and adolescents are broadly available (ibid.). The Ministry of Health is integrating mental health services into all 54 primary health care centres and, since 2002, UNRWA and government schools have scaled up support for children's psychosocial needs (ibid.). Concerns remain, however, about girls' practical access – and the quality of services. A recent assessment found that of the 162 organisations providing psychosocial services, only two provide genuinely specialised psychiatric services. It also found that adolescents tend to be ignored in favour of younger children (with less than 1% of the programmes

### Box 1: Honour Crimes in Palestine

The murder of a girl or woman whose behaviour is considered to have brought shame on her family is known as an 'honour killing'. Throughout the MENA region – and the diaspora of its population – girls and women can be killed for falling in love with the wrong person – or for being raped (State of Palestine and UNFPA, 2016).

Honour killing appears rare in Palestine but is also under-reported. Police documents indicate that 46 women were killed in honour crimes between 2000 and 2005, although according to women's groups and human rights activists, these murders are often not reported to authorities (Ouis and Myhrman, 2007). The Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling found evidence that 27 Palestinian women were the victims of femicide in 2013 (O'Connor, 2014).

In addition, while honour killings are rare, fear of honour killings is not – and restricts girls and women from exercising agency.

31 A study on attitudes about women's employment found that almost 75% of Gazans believe that women are responsible for sexual harassment in the workplace due to immodest dress or behaviour (Alpha International for Research, 2009).

implemented after the last conflict period aimed at young people aged 15-29) and that services tend to be more focused on providing reactive emergency care than on supporting longer-term resiliency and broader wellbeing (ibid.). Other research has found that girls often avoid consulting with a school-based counsellor due to the social stigma attached to reporting family turmoil and fears about confidentiality (Chaban, 2010). These concerns perhaps explain why only 34.8% of young women in the PCBS Youth Survey reported satisfaction with the school counselling services that met the expectations of 52.2% of their male counterparts. More information is needed about the specific sources of girls' dissatisfaction.

With the focus on trauma and the attainment of a vaguely defined resiliency, questions also arise about the training that counsellors in schools and health clinics receive in attending to adolescent girls' specific needs. The psychosocial stressors that girls experience are situated within Gaza's worsening humanitarian and political crisis. However, they also arise from the distinctly feminine challenge of conforming to the dictates of a patriarchal culture while also pursuing more individualistic forms of personal development and self-empowerment.

Girls' self-reported happiness is, however, high overall. Of Palestinians between the ages of 15 and 17, about one-quarter of both girls and boys report that they are 'very happy' and another 60% report that they are 'happy' (PCBS, 2016a). Furthermore, of Gazans between the ages of 15 and 29, females are overall happier than males. 15% versus 14% are 'very happy' and 67% versus 60% are 'happy'. These figures beg for further investigation given that almost 60% of female youths believe that life in Gaza has either worsened or stayed the same – and nearly one-third of male youths believe that the quality of life has definitively declined (PCBS, 2016a).

The sources of this gendered difference in perceived happiness must be interrogated, however, as studies have demonstrated that girls are even more susceptible to stress-related disorders given their relative lack of personal autonomy and economic independence. Their reported levels of happiness seem to reflect an acceptance of women's marginalisation – and their low expectations. Additional questioning reveals that just as females are subsumed within their families, their rights are considered, even among young women, to be secondary to the struggle for national autonomy and statehood (Anderson, 2015). When asked about their priorities for

social and political change, for example, 87.3% of male respondents in Gaza listed statehood as their primary concern, a figure significantly higher than that reported among men in the West Bank. A similarly high number of Gazan women, 78.6%, aged 15-29 also prioritised political autonomy. Yet, unlike their male counterparts, almost 13% of Gaza's young women cited poverty as a key issue, and raising the standard of living became more important to the female respondents as they aged (PCBS, 2016a).

When compared to these questions about personal happiness and political priorities, self-reporting on health reveals both more contradictions and a failure to understand personal struggles as political issues. When asked to identify the most important health issue they faced, 26.1% of young women aged 15-29 reported psychological problems. The effects of stress apparently increase with age, as only 16.6% of all Palestinian girls aged 15-17 living in both Gaza and the West Bank reported psychological distress as a factor impacting their overall health. Gazan male youths who participated in the PCBS's youth survey reported higher rates of psychological problems than their female counterparts, and Palestinian young men generally confessed to higher rates of psychological issues across all age cohorts. This discrepancy requires further investigation given that male youths generally perceive girls as more susceptible to stress, although the more socially acceptable coping mechanisms that girls devise and their lower expectations might help to explain these gendered perceptions (Affouneh, 2008; Hamad et al., 2015) – as might the fact that boys tend to have more fraught relationships with their parents.

## 2.5 Voice and agency

As indicated in previous sections, the intersection of patriarchal norms, militarisation, economic depression and social instability has intensified parental efforts to protect girls' physical safety and the family's reputation. The real and perceived imperatives of protection have limited girls' mobility and heightened the surveillance of their conduct. The voices of girls and women are thus muted, and while some studies find that they perceive that they exercise a significant amount of control in making educational and familial decisions, their independent participation in communal and political activities remains limited.

Laws governing adult women's access to voice and agency shape the space open to adolescent girls. Unfortunately, most of the laws that govern Palestinian



women's lives are deeply discriminatory (UN, 2017). The OECD's (2017) Social Institutions and Gender Index ranks Palestine's discriminatory family code and son bias as 'very high' and considers the restrictions placed on Palestinian women's access to civil liberties, resources and assets to be 'high' (OECD, 2017; also see Jones and Hamad, 2016; MIFTAH, ICHR and UNFPA, 2015). Mothers are seen as physical custodians of their children, whereas fathers are considered the legal guardians. In the event of divorce, which men can initiate at will but women can only rarely obtain, mothers typically lose custody of their sons at the age of 10 and their daughters at the age of 12. Women who remarry forfeit their custody rights entirely. The OECD further notes that the concept of shared property is not recognised by law and that women lose access to marital assets after divorce unless they are able to document their contribution. MITFAH and UNFPA (2015) observe that the legislative framework that addresses violence against women falls under four different systems, Egyptian, Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian, depending on geographic location within Palestine – and that while many more equitable laws have been drafted in recent years, none has been passed. Indeed, given the split between Hamas and the PA, legislative action of any sort seems increasingly unlikely (UN, 2017).

Gazan adolescents' access to voice and agency is also shaped by the strict age hierarchies common across the MENA region. As highlighted in a recent report, there is little 'room for younger generations to participate in family decisions' (State of Palestine and UNFPA, 2016). Constrained by both age and gender, adolescent girls are particularly left out of decision-making. In Gaza, of young people aged 15-29, only 20% of females report that they make decisions about their own lives by themselves. Nearly 60% report joint decision-making with others in their household. This is stark contrast to their male peers – 62% of whom report making their own decisions and only 17% of whom report shared decision-making (State of Palestine and UNFPA, 2016). In addition, adolescent girls in a recent study observed that there are trade-offs to be made between decision-making and mobility as they grow up. As they get older they are allowed more input into some decisions, particularly those related to household maintenance given that the home is seen as women's purview – but at the same time, as their parents' fears for their sexual purity grow, girls are allowed less freedom of movement outside of the home. This, notes the UN (2017), also restricts their access to information.

While they are confined to home and often unable to interact with their peers or the broader community in person, a significant percentage of girls spend some portion of their leisure time using ITC devices and communicating with friends via social media (State of Palestine and UNFPA, 2016). Even in the camps and rural areas, almost 70% of Gazan families benefit from the possession of a computer, laptop or tablet, and another 36.9% of families benefit from an internet connection (PCBS, 2016a; PCBS, 2016b; PCBS, 2014b). In the occupied territories, both computer and internet use is higher in the West Bank and slightly lower in rural localities. Among all Palestinian women, youths aged 18-22 are more likely than other age cohorts to use each – as are unmarried and more educated women (PCBS, 2016a). However, as might be expected given the region's patriarchal norms, girls' and young women's access to technology is more limited than that of boys and young men. For example, while 78% of boys between the ages of 15 and 17 own their own phones, only 38% of girls the same age report phone ownership (PCBS, 2016a). Girls' versus boys' internet use is similarly shaped, with even girls who use the internet far more likely to do so only at home compared to their male peers. Of teens aged 15-17, 88% of girls versus 33% of boys go online only at home. Indeed, while 22% of male youths access the internet at a café, only 1% of female youths report using cafés to get online. Many Gazan parents reportedly believe that technology exposes girls to additional dangers, and justifying their fears, 8% of the young women have admitted in a recent survey to either engaging in or receiving flirtatious banter through social media. This percentage increased to 16.7% among Palestinian youths aged 18-22 (PCBS, 2016a). Parental fears related to technological devices and the internet prompt many mothers to restrict their daughters' use of television, mobile phones and computers, which ultimately limits girls' access to information, social interaction and virtual communities.

The imperative of marriage and Gaza's economic decline have combined to limit female youth's desire to migrate either permanently or temporarily, a longing that is significantly more pronounced in Gaza than in the West Bank, unsurprising given the former's unemployment rate. Shaped by social norms which make women's migration less acceptable than men's, it is also a wish held far more by men than women – 46.7% of young men between the ages of 15 and 29 expressed a desire to migrate compared to 26.9% of young women. While a hope to improve living

conditions compelled an almost comparable number of male and female respondents, the desire to migrate was also affected by age, place of residence, education, employment and marital status (PCBS, 2016a).

Once married, older adolescents and young women in Gaza are far less likely to exercise agency in their marriages than their husbands or even their female counterparts in the West Bank. According to the PCBS Youth Survey (2015), among Gazan women between the ages of 15 and 29, only 20.2% of those surveyed categorised themselves as responsible for making household decisions compared to the 62% of young men who claimed this role. While the survey suggests that husbands and wives competed for authority in West Bank households, it indicates that Gazan women are more likely in their late teens and twenties to defer to husband, fathers and parents (PCBS, 2016a). Tellingly, 58.1% of the young women reported that they share decision-making responsibilities with their husband, but only 17.2% of the husbands surveyed agreed with this perception of mutual authority. Self-reported perceptions of agency further reflect the greater liberty that young women experience in the West Bank even when the female population is disaggregated by age. Among those adolescents entering an early marriage, 35% regarded themselves as exercising authority, and this figure is remarkably consistent with the opinions expressed by women of each age group (PCBS, 2016a).

Any authority that women exercise within their marriages is seemingly limited to the household, where Gazan women and their daughters spend the majority of their time (Hamad et al., 2015). Helping to illustrate this relative confinement is the lack of civic and political engagement among Gaza's female youth. In its 2015 survey of Gazans between the ages of 15 and 29, the PCBS found that only 13.3% of female youths participated in volunteer activities in the year prior to the survey. In contrast, 30% of male respondents had engaged in volunteer activities. Rates were comparable for teens between the ages of 15 and 17. While young men and women participated in educational development activities at an almost identical rate, they diverged most in community development, with 11.6% of young men volunteering in this area as compared to only 1.8% of the female youth surveyed. Notably, Gazan youth as a whole volunteer more frequently than their peers in the West Bank, and older adolescents – particularly those who are unmarried, unemployed and residing in camps – are more likely than young adults to contribute

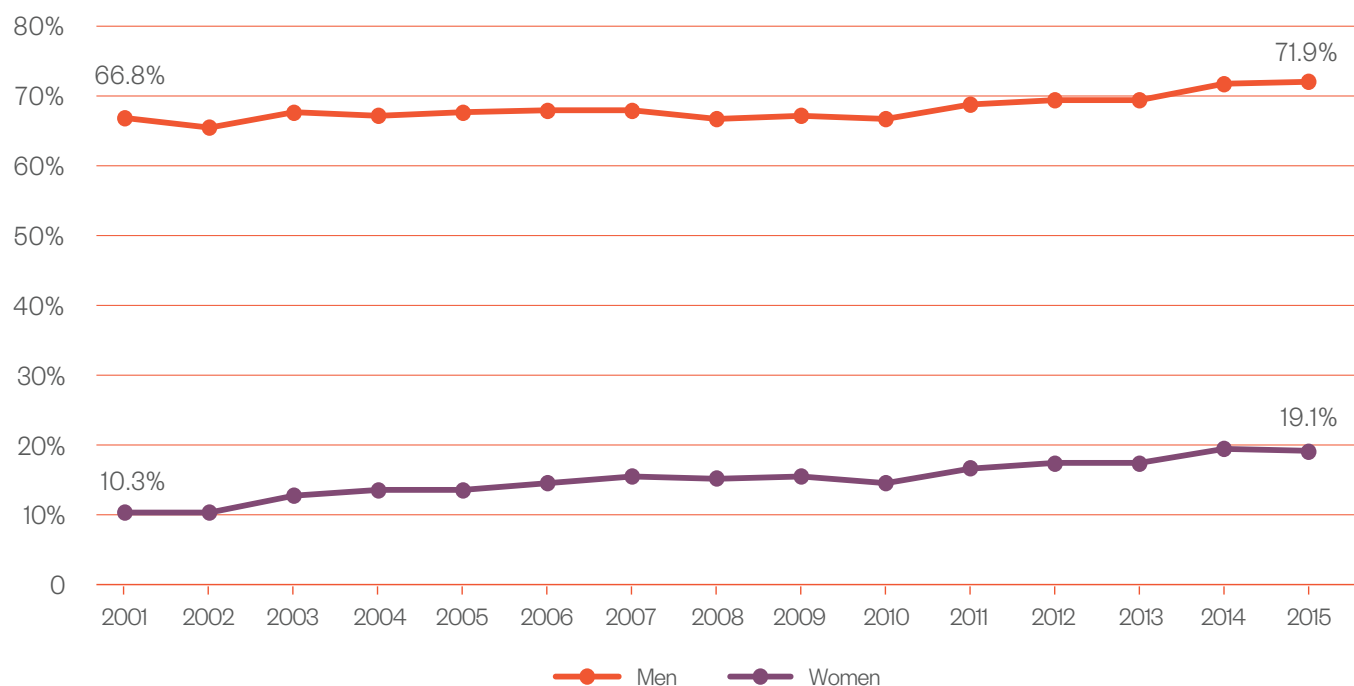
to their communities. In the absence of employment opportunities, involving girls more actively in their communities represents a source of untapped potential for enhancing their voice and agency. Of the Gazan female youths surveyed, only 7.3% had sought an opportunity to volunteer and only a marginal percentage (2.4%) reported involvement in civil or cultural organisations.

Constrained by the occupation and poverty, an even smaller number (6%) was affiliated with a political party or coalition (PCBS, 2016a). Indeed, while young women in Gaza were more committed to voting in upcoming elections than their peers in the West Bank, given the greater politicisation in the former, they were considerably less committed than their male peers. In Gaza, 46% of young women, but 67% of young men, were planning to vote in the next election (PCBS, 2016a). This is likely in part due to young women's recognition that even when women are elected, they are largely still denied access to any real power. Jones and Hamad (2016), for example, report that while the quotas introduced in the mid-2000s have helped ensure women's representation in formal politics, they are yet to translate into decision-making. Not only have women been side-lined in negotiations between Palestine and Israel, and Hamas and Fatah, but women's rights more generally have been scaled back since Hamas came to power.

## 2.6 Economic empowerment

Palestinian women's labour force participation is among the lowest in the world (UN, 2017). The PCBS (2017c) reports that only 19% of Palestinian females over the age of 15, compared to 72% of males, are participating in the labour force. While women's participation rate has nearly doubled since 2000, is still a fraction of men's (see Figure 9). Their unemployment rate remains approximately double that of men as well (45% vs 22%) (PCBS, 2017c).

That said, focusing only on younger cohorts of women highlights a significant change currently unfolding in the Gazan workforce: the most educated young women are overwhelmingly likely to be in the labour market. While only 14% of Gazan females between aged 15-24 are in the labour force, 39% of those aged 25-34 – who are more likely to have completed their educations – are engaged with paid work (PCBS, 2017c). More tellingly, of females aged 25-34 who have completed at least 13 years of education, 84% are in the labour force, compared to only 3% of females the same age who completed only

**Figure 9: Labour force participation rates, by sex, over time, for those aged 15+**

Source: PCBS 2016e

primary school (PCBS, 2017c). The labour force survey also found that single women were far more likely to work than married women. Of those aged 15-24, 88% of single women sought employment compared to 12% of their married counterparts (PCBS 2017c). Driven in part by UNRWA's policy of hiring women wherever possible, Gazan women are more likely than men to work in the formal labour market. In 2015, 32% of males over the age of 15, but only 15% of females, were employed in the informal sector (PCBS, 2016e).

Despite their educational aspirations and attainments, girls continue to encounter discrimination in an already contracted labour market (Jones and Hamad, 2016). The discrimination that women encounter throughout their education and search for employment takes many subtle and insidious forms. Girls and young women often feel compelled to choose educational subjects and professional fields regarded as suitable for women. They consequently select professions such as teaching, social work or nursing rather than the male-dominated fields of physical science, technology, engineering or business. This gendered division of education not only limits young women's opportunities but can relegate them to jobs that lack status and sufficient compensation (Ludsin, 2011). Among employed Gazan females aged 15-29, 76.5% of those surveyed in 2014 were predominately waged

employees concentrated in traditionally feminine and service-related occupations (PCBS, 2016a). Only 21.7% of journalists in Gaza are women, and just 17.3% of engineers and 15.9% of lawyers (PCBS, 2016e). Only 3% of the most educated women (those with 13 or more years of education and now in employment) held positions as senior officials or managers (PCBS, 2016c).

In part because they are locked out of so many fields and in part because the labour market has been flooded with far more university graduates that it can absorb<sup>32</sup>, even the most educated women continue to have shockingly high unemployment rates – rates that in recent years have diverged considerably from those of men (see Figure 10). Of Palestinians with only a primary education, 27% of men and only 10% of women are unemployed. Of those with at least 13 years of education, on the other hand, 19% of men and 48% of women are unemployed (PCBS, 2016e). Gaza itself has even higher rates. Of those with at least 13 years of education, 61% of women and 23% of men are unemployed (PCBS, 2015d). While young men almost universally cite the unavailability of paid positions, their female counterparts have a more difficult time finding work appropriate for their experience (16.7%), and 12.2% of the young women surveyed pointed to the lack of an adequate employer (PCBS, 2016a). This latter figure reflects prohibitions in Palestinian society against women working far from home,

<sup>32</sup> The UN (2017) notes that that Gaza must create 24,000 new jobs each year merely to keep up with the growing population.

**Figure 10: Unemployment rates, by sex, over time**



Source: PCBS 2016e

at night or in places deemed inappropriate by male family members (Alpha International for Research, 2009; Jones and Hamad, 2016).

As noted above, one potential remedy to girls' and women's high unemployment rates would be to provide them with better access to the technical and vocational training that would open a new set of career options for them. However, past efforts have largely failed to gain traction, especially with more academically successful girls – given that a university education is seen as far more prestigious. A recent report by the government and UNFPA highlights that if Palestine is to reap the demographic dividend offered by its large youth cohort, efforts need to be scaled up to make better career counselling available to adolescent girls and boys enrolled in secondary school and at university (State of Palestine and UNFPA, 2016).

Entrepreneurship has become one means of overcoming the obstacles that women face both in the labour force and as labourers, and empowerment projects focused on young women are attempting to cultivate the knowledge and initiative needed to create entrepreneurial initiatives. However, to date there has been very little attention focused on the youngest cohorts of women. UNRWA's microfinance programme is a case in point. In 1995, women accounted for 87% of all loan recipients in Gaza. This percentage began to decline with the onset of the second intifada in 2000 and reached its lowest point in

2006, although loans to women rebounded to 39.6% in 2015 when women received 1,274 loans. However, women under the age of 30 received only 409 loans valued at \$338,700. Although this figure represents a sizeable increase over the previous year's total, it has prompted UNRWA to redouble its outreach to this age cohort (UNRWA, 2016b). Illustrating this need, only 15.9% of the female youth sampled in the PCBS's 2015 Youth Survey reported interest in establishing an independent project in 2015 (compared to 45% of female youth), while only 6.4% had launched a venture, a percentage notably lower than the 16.7% of male youth who had tried to start an enterprise (PCBS, 2016a).

This relatively low percentage of entrepreneurship among Gaza's female youth is consistent with that reported in all age cohorts among young women living in the occupied territories. In contrast, driven by their need to provide for their families in the face of limited employment options, Palestinian young men become more entrepreneurial as they age with their efforts to launch a business increasing by almost 20 percentage points between the ages of 15 and 29 (PCBS, 2016a). While this area of development appears promising, its actual implementation, particularly among young married women, requires further investigation to ensure that these ventures are a source of profit and empowerment for their female operators rather than yet another means of exploiting women's and girl's labour within the household economy (Muhanna, 2013).

## 3 Actors for change

### 3.1 Main actors

#### 3.1.1 Hamas and the Palestinian Authority

At the government level, Hamas (which has day-to-day control over Gaza – including hiring for some service positions) and the Palestinian Authority (which funds most programmes and some service positions) have addressed the needs of adolescent girls as welfare recipients, students and patients – albeit without offering services aimed specifically at adolescent girls. For example, in 2015, the Ministry of Social Affairs' Palestinian National Cash Transfer Programme (PNCTP) dispensed €130 million in aid to 122,129 households, 75% of whom lived in Gaza, 53% of whom were refugees and 40% of which were headed by women (EU, 2015a; 2015b).<sup>33,34</sup> Similarly, the Ministry of Education, which runs 392 schools in Gaza, including 100% of secondary schools, has focused in recent years on eliminating the violence that both girls and boys experience in Palestinian schools. It has recognised the deficit in vocational training for female students and is taking steps to ameliorate it. As noted above, it has also established a large-scale counselling programme in government schools. The Ministry of Health provides and regulates medical and psychosocial services through 56 primary health care centres and 13 hospitals. It also provides most of the secondary and tertiary level health care available in Gaza.

Any effort to address specifically the equality and development of women and girls is the responsibility of the Palestinian Ministry of Women's Affairs which has spearheaded governmental efforts to empower women economically, socially and psychologically since 2004. The institution of the Palestinian National Authority in 1994 included a quota system for candidates to the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). Due to traditional stereotypes that equate women with domestic roles, however, these quotas have failed both to change the negative perception of politically active women and to achieve female parity within the PLC. The Ministry of Women's Affairs has endeavoured to rectify this deficit and its principal causes, and in addition to promoting women's greater involvement in formal politics, it has also monitored government policies affecting women and drafted legislation to protect their health and improve their economic opportunities. The ministry has focused its attention particularly on issues such as domestic violence, inheritance and femicide. Women are particularly victimised in these areas due to the occupied territories' legal system and, given the intra-Palestinian conflict between Fatah and Hamas, progressive legislation enacted in the West Bank often fails to improve the legal status of women living in Gaza through a lack of implementation (Jalal, 2016). On the issue of gender-based violence, the Ministry of Women's Affairs collaborates with the Ministries of Education, Social Affairs, Internal Affairs and Health.

#### Box 2: The Palestinian Authority and international assistance

The European Union (EU) is an important donor to the PA and an active supporter of an independent Palestinian state. In this role, the EU enables the PA to pay civil servants' salaries and pensions, helps to support the Palestinian National Cash Transfer Programme, and contributes to the programmes within the PA in order to create an autonomous government infrastructure. This support has included financial and technical assistance to ministries responsible for finance, trade, judicial reform, education, health, national security, and gender and culture. Since 2000, the EU has also contributed humanitarian aid to support to support Palestinians' basic needs. Each year, it contributes €82 million to UNRWA to support its work with refugees, and it provides additional aid to the European Commission's humanitarian aid department (ECHO) and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The EU's support for ECHO has enabled the agency to dispense €700 million to Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza since 2000.

<sup>33</sup> This report states that 122,000 households will receive assistance, 70% of which are in Gaza; See also, Devereux (2015).

<sup>34</sup> As an example of how the current political situation in Gaza plays out in programming, the cash provided by the PNCTP comes from the PA. Targeting, on the other hand, is undertaken by employees hired by Hamas.



### 3.1.2 UNRWA

Due to the magnitude of Gaza's refugee population, UNRWA plays a unique role in the Gaza Strip, operating as a quasi-government that employs more than 12,500 people and provides services to about half the population. The agency operates 267 schools, 21 health centres, 16 relief and social service offices, three microfinance offices and 12 food distribution centres.<sup>35</sup> As a result of UNRWA's interventions, there is little distinction statistically between refugees and Gaza's predominately urban population. That said, the assistance provided by UNRWA to adolescent girls in Gaza has been primarily focused on addressing the humanitarian crisis created by the Israeli blockade and military assaults, both of which have led to the virtual collapse of Gaza's infrastructure. Aimed generally at refugees, children, or youth, the programming that serves girls consequently fails to focus on their specific age and gender-related concerns. UNRWA exemplifies this tendency to attend to girls only through generalised categories of service provision focused on humanitarian aid, psychosocial services and job training.

For example, to improve the effectiveness of school-based psychosocial interventions, UNRWA has established a Community Mental Health Programme (CMHP) that has placed 287 counsellors and 82 psychosocial facilitators in the agency's basic and secondary schools (Global Protection Cluster, n.d.; see also UNRWA, 2017b). UNRWA also operates a Child Protection Working Group that has attended to 147,908 children since the 2014 conflict. However, while these psychosocial services are accessible to girls and young women, their exact benefit is impossible to determine given that the UNRWA reports do not disaggregate recipients by gender.

Similarly, only a handful of UNRWA economic initiatives are aimed specifically at (or have set-asides for) adolescent girls or young women. Exceptions include the Summer Fun Weeks programme, which enables 140,000 girls and boys across Gaza to take part in recreational activities and employs approximately 2,500 older adolescents living below the poverty line, including 1,000 girls (UNRWA, 2017b). In addition, last year the Sulfa Project graduated 950 young women from a leadership programme that trained participants in the areas of management, information technology and advanced English. Recognising that Cash for Work programmes often fail to include women and

young people, in 2017 UNRWA has committed to reserving 40% of skilled positions for women and another 40% of openings for youth. Whether this will translate into reserved spots of young women remains to be seen.

While programming specifically aimed at adolescent girls is minimal, UNRWA's commitment to addressing gender inequality is strong overall. Its 'Equality in Action' programme – or the Gender Initiative – has been running since 2008. This promotes refugee women's social and economic empowerment by ensuring that women and girls have access to educational and recreational activities outside the home, increasing their employment opportunities, and learning how to protect themselves against gender-based violence. Since its inception, the Gender Initiative has reached 78,000 women and girls through 101 community-based and many non-governmental organisations, and it frequently surveys its clients to determine how to target their needs and priorities. Along with the UNRWA Relief and Social Services and Education programmes, the Gender Initiative organised a variety of activities that included awareness sessions, training for teachers and students on early marriage, as well as programmes on adolescent health, gender-based violence and women's rights.<sup>36</sup>

### 3.1.3 UNFPA

UNFPA has a variety of programming aimed at physical health and bodily integrity that includes Gazan adolescent girls. It worked, for example, to get Youth-Friendly Health Services on the agenda of the Ministry of Health, which has now agreed to follow World Health Organization standards. In addition, UNFPA provides financial assistance to women's health centres, which also serve girls, in the refugee camps of Bureij and Jabalia. Services provided by these centres include pre-natal and post-partum care, family planning, legal and psychosocial counselling and exercise classes. Community health fairs create opportunities for the centres to dispense both information and medical services to impoverished families. The centres have also created a Male Intervention Unit that conducts a 'man to man' programme that attempts to transform the patriarchal attitudes of Gaza's male-dominated culture.

UNFPA has also established the Y-Peer network in Gaza. Y-Peer uses engaging methods such as theatre, role-playing and social media campaigns to help university-aged young

<sup>35</sup> See UNRWA's website: [www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/gaza-strip](http://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/gaza-strip).

<sup>36</sup> See: [www.unrwa.org/tags/gender-initiative](http://www.unrwa.org/tags/gender-initiative).

### Box 3: A new type of blockade

The population of the Gaza Strip depends upon hundreds of CBOs and NGOs. Collectively, these work together and in partnership with numerous international agencies to supply humanitarian assistance, ensure access to basic services, provide health care, sustain educational institutions, preserve cultural artefacts and art forms, create the foundation of a democratic civil society, and endeavour to revive a failing economy. While Israel's control over Gaza's borders has necessitated much of this work, it has begun to impede humanitarian efforts in recent months. Beginning last August, Israel began revoking the travel permits needed by aid workers to enter or exit Gaza. This shift followed the Israeli arrest of the director of World Vision's operation in Gaza, which was based on the widely refuted charge that he had used agency funds to finance Hamas militancy. In the aftermath of this arrest, the UN reported that 30% of its employees had been denied travel permits, a sharp increase over the 3% who had failed to receive permits in the previous year.

people promote healthy life-styles among their slightly younger peers. Working in schools and with community-based organisations (CBOs), over 100 peer educators have delivered short training courses to thousands of adolescents about child and consanguineous marriage, gender-based violence, contraception and HIV prevention.

#### 3.1.4 Other UN Agencies

UNICEF and UN Women are also important actors in improving the lives of adolescent girls in Gaza – albeit with very little genuinely disaggregated attention to the particular age- and gender-related needs that girls have. In addition to providing family centres that provide tens of thousands of children with individual and group counselling, UNICEF also runs training programmes for girls and community development programmes for adolescents. For example, girls living in the impoverished Gaza City neighbourhood of Al Zeitun have received training in developing their creativity, initiative and leadership skills through the 'Badir' programme. Operated by UNICEF and supported by the Japanese government, this programme encourages its participants to think and act innovatively as a means of addressing problems in their communities while also acquiring employment skills (UNICEF, 2016). UNICEF has also expanded its efforts to help the youth of Gaza through the 'Adolescents Make a Difference' initiative. With funding for UNICEF supplied by the Swedish Committee and with the help of Save Youth

Future Society, this programme endeavours to restore hope in Gaza's adolescents by cultivating the individual and interpersonal skills necessary for both personal and community development. Working through CBOs, its implementation is widespread, as 456 instructional groups are organised through 20 CBOs operating in Gaza. After receiving training in critical thinking, problem-solving and non-violent conflict resolution, the initiative's 1,000 adolescent participants were asked to share these lessons with their peers, enabling the programme to reach a reported 10,000 youths between the ages of 10 and 18 (Elmughanni, 2015).

UN Women has a variety of programmes that benefit older adolescent girls – though again in a more ancillary way. In addition to supporting the development of more gender equitable legislation and policy, and working to include women in the peacebuilding process, the agency is also broadly involved in work against violence against women and in economic empowerment programming for women. For example, it helps to support four women's shelters in Palestine, works to train lawyers, and helps survivors access legal, medical, and psychosocial aid. It also provides women – especially the most marginalised – with employment and self-employment opportunities.

## 3.2 NGOs and CBOs

The following organisations represent select examples of the hundreds of NGOs and CBOs that participate in the work of rebuilding Gaza's economy, strengthening its communities and supporting the creation of a more egalitarian society. Like the UN agencies discussed above, these agencies attend to the needs of adolescent girls, largely indirectly, by providing essential humanitarian services and assistance to the Gazans most victimised by poverty and the escalation of violence that has accompanied it.

### 3.2.1 The Culture and Free Thought Association

This NGO partners with organisations such as Oxfam and UNFPA to enhance the educational opportunities of refugee children. The CFTA operates the Al Shroq Wal Amal Children Centre in Gaza's Khan Younis camp that offers children between the ages of six and 12 opportunities for academic and cultural enrichment. For youth work, the CFTA is affiliated with the Wessal Network, sponsors the Youth Initiative Fund and runs several youth cultural centres.

The CFTA also funnels its resources into programmes that support women's economic development, health, psychological well-being and legal protection. This activism includes the establishment of the Al-Bureij Women's Health Centre and the Gaza Women Credit Program that provides loans to impoverished women.

### 3.2.2 Centre for Women's Legal Aid and Counselling

Established in 1991, the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC) combats gender-based violence in Palestinian society and promotes equality and justice for women. The WCLAC believes that achieving women's equality and Palestinian political autonomy are inextricable objectives, and much of the organisation's activism addresses discrimination and gender-based violence as symptomatic of both traditional attitudes and political occupation. The WCLAC consequently not only attends to women's immediate needs under occupation, it also advocates the protection of their rights and works to embed equality for women within the political culture, legal reforms and government infrastructure that must accompany national independence.

### 3.2.3 MA'AN Centre

MA'AN partners with NGOs, OBOs and various grassroots organisations working in the most impoverished and marginalised areas of Palestine. This partnership fulfils the organisation's focus on capacity building, human rights, environmental protection and economic development. MA'AN emphasises that women have an essential role to play in each of these targeted areas, and each project that MA'AN sponsors or facilitates is designed to promote women's participation and an outcome of gender equality. Through its Women's Development Program, MA'AN helps to establish women's centres and offers training courses in career development, computer skills and specialised English. The organisation also arranges and supports home economics classes to help improve the conditions of women's unpaid domestic labour and facilitate the creation of home-based enterprises. Just as MA'AN integrates women and their needs into each sector of its activism, the organisation does the same for young Palestinians. This orientation illustrates a commitment to creating employment opportunities for young people, instilling them with an understanding of their fundamental rights, and encouraging their participation in the political process.

### 3.2.4 Mercy Corps

Founded in 1979, this international organisation focuses its operations in Gaza on improving the lives of women, children, youth and those with disabilities. While the agency responds to the immediate needs that arise in moments of environmental crisis and military conflict, it also sponsors development programmes to create a more just, inclusive and peaceful society. In addition to providing emergency assistance in Gaza, Mercy Corp supports economic development projects that include financing entrepreneurs and teaching youths how to connect to global markets using technology. Additional youth programmes include tutoring, mentoring and counselling. Characteristic of Mercy Corp's assistance was a summer art camp for youth that used art therapy to heal the emotional wounds of the previous year's conflict and to beautify the environment through large-scale murals.

### 3.2.5 The Palestinian Centre for Democratic Conflict Resolution

Similar to many of the Palestinian NGOs founded in the late 1990s, the Palestinian Centre for Democratic Conflict Resolution (PCDCR) defines its mission as transforming Palestine into a more just and participatory society protective of fundamental human rights. Founded by young Gazans, the organisation maintains its outreach to this demographic group by cultivating employment opportunities and encouraging involvement in public life. This objective has expanded to encompass women, children and persons with disabilities, or those who have been disempowered most by the protracted conflict with Israel. Campaigning against violence has led the PCDCR to implement several programmes directed toward child protection. These include resilience workshops for parents and children, as well as individual and group counselling sessions. Together these have benefitted thousands of Palestinian families. A mission to eradicate violence and the inequalities from which it arises has also led the PCDCR to provide advice and representation to women seeking legal recognition of their property rights. Similarly, it has also inspired the organisation to help implement UNRWA's Young Woman Leaders Program. Finally, the PCDCR remains committed to developing young people's leadership skills, and promoting their active engagement in their communities and in the political process through organising workshops, town hall meetings and roundtable discussions.

### 3.2.6 MIFTAH: The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy

Working primarily in the West Bank, MIFTAH focuses its efforts on the creation of a tolerant, inclusive, egalitarian Palestinian state with a government accountable to all of its citizens. To achieve this objective, the organisation promotes policies beneficial to youth, women and other underrepresented groups within Palestinian society, and it encourages and enables these disempowered groups to participate in the political process. By tapping into the 'transformative leadership' of women and youth, MIFTAH hopes to align government activity with the needs of a progressive civil society. The organisation has consequently established the Political and Social Active Palestinian Youth Network. Members of this network have the opportunity to participate in workshops, training activities, roundtables, lectures and volunteer activities.

### 3.2.7 Palestinian Red Crescent Society

The Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PROCS) has been at the forefront of providing medical services to Gaza's inhabitants since its founding in 1968. With the formation of the Palestinian National Authority and the Ministry of Health, the PROCS was charged with supporting public authorities in providing medical care and social welfare services to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in the occupied territories. The PROCS has consequently become one of the primary non-profit providers of medical and psychosocial counselling services in the West Bank and Gaza. For almost two decades, its programming has included a school-based psychosocial support programme designed for children affected by armed conflict. The PROCS has extended this model into its health centres and expanded its outreach to youth, particularly through sponsoring projects that develop leadership skills, encourage volunteerism, provide IT training and create opportunities to participate in sports. From April 2015, support from the Japanese government enabled the PROCS to increase its attention to the reproductive health of women in the occupied territories and to focus on preventing gender-based violence. As a result of these efforts, PROCS has made 16,000 home visits in Gaza and the West Bank that have directly benefited over 12,000 women. This expansion of services beyond the traditional

clinical setting includes the development of outreach activities focused on the elimination of violence against women and children. Organised by trained volunteers, discussions on domestic violence and its social impact reached an estimated 10,800 people by mid-2016. The PROCS continued to receive support from the Japanese government in 2017 and with this funding, strengthened and expanded its network of 150 community volunteers based in nine locations throughout Gaza.

### 3.2.8 Palestinian Working Woman Society for Development

This NGO promotes a broad feminist agenda, calling for an end to the violence and multiple types of discrimination that afflict women and girls within the intersection of Israeli occupation and Palestine's patriarchal culture. The organisation's ultimate goal is 'to raise women's awareness of their political, civic and legal rights, and develop their capacity to defend these rights and embody them in their private and public life'. To achieve this overarching objective, the Palestinian Working Woman Society for Development (PWWSD) supports programming that addresses the immediate threat of gender-based violence, seeks to advise and educate women on their rights and opportunities, supports their employment, and lobbies for legal and political reform.

### 3.2.9 Sawa

Established in 1998, Sawa's mission is to oppose all neglect, abuse and violence against women and children. The organisation targets both victims and service providers in the development of its programmes. Sawa operates helplines for both adult and juvenile victims of domestic violence who need immediate support, crisis counselling, medical assistance or legal advice. Sawa's services also include numerous opportunities for individual counselling. In addition to the traditional format, Sawa has created the 'Let's Talk!' project to facilitate communication between parents and adolescents. It has also organised a mobile clinic that provides psychosocial support to Palestinian families living in remote villages. The second platform in Sawa's mission is to raise awareness about violence, abuse and neglect within the wider community. Lectures and workshops educate the general public about both domestic violence and sex education. Finally, Sawa has helped to train hundreds of professionals and service providers, including doctors, prosecutors and police

officers, who work directly with the victims of domestic and gender-based violence.

### **3.2.10 The Tamer Institute for Community Education**

Founded in 1989, the Tamer Institute for Community Education endeavours to instil a love of reading and creative writing within children and adolescents living in the West Bank and Gaza. In fulfilling its mission to supplement the education of Palestinian children, Tamer

supports multiple projects focused on reading and cultural enrichment. These include a national reading campaign, storytelling and theatre projects, and an annual writing competition. Young people also have opportunities to practise their writing skills by contributing to the youth newspaper Yara'at. Preserving knowledge of Palestinian history and geography is also among the organisation's objectives. Tamer also includes a publishing unit that ensures children's access to books written by and about Palestinians.



## 4 Evidence gaps

In terms of capability domains, the picture of adolescent girls living in Gaza is relatively clear despite the lack of focused research. Girls in Gaza stay in school longer than their male peers – and perform better while there. Girls are still threatened by child marriage and gender-based violence, though the first is becoming less common over time and the latter potentially more so as political and economic tensions amplify stress. Adolescent pregnancy remains common and largely ‘wanted’ – at least on some level – and malnutrition is a growing concern even as hunger is not. Girls have little access to voice and agency, with even their physical mobility is often restricted by their families, which is reflected in high rates of anxiety. Finally, while the youngest and most educated women are joining the labour force in unprecedented numbers, in part due to economic necessity, unemployment rates remain high and social norms restrict career pathways. That said, many contradictions remain. We do not understand, for example,

why married girls report being happy in their marriages despite high rates of violence.

Most critically, despite the high number of development actors working in Gaza, we have a poor understanding of how to effect change in this fragile, conflict-affected location. Programming outcomes are rarely disaggregated by gender and age, and rigorous evaluations remain uncommon. In addition, progress towards more measurable development goals, such as school enrolment, child marriage and employment, does not appear to have been matched by broader shifts in the social norms that marginalise girls and women. This is reflected in the fact that girls are choosing their own schools, but remain unable to make decisions about when and whom they will marry – and by the fact that less than 1% of women who face gender-based violence seek help from a women’s centre or organisation.

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#### **GAGE Programme Office**

Overseas Development Institute  
203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ  
United Kingdom  
Email: [gage@odi.org.uk](mailto:gage@odi.org.uk)  
Web: [www.gage.odi.org](http://www.gage.odi.org)

## **About GAGE**

Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a nine-year longitudinal research programme generating evidence on what works to transform the lives of adolescent girls in the Global South. Visit [www.gage.odi.org.uk](http://www.gage.odi.org.uk) for more information.

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