gaza

how does she cope?

women pushed to new limits in the gaza strip

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About UNRWA

UNRWA is a United Nations agency established by the General Assembly in 1949, mandated to provide assistance and protection to a population of over 5.5 million registered Palestine refugees. Its mission is to help Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank and the Gaza Strip achieve their full human development potential pending a just solution to their plight. The Agency's services encompass education, health care, relief and social services, camp infrastructure and improvement, microfinance and emergency assistance. UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions.

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executive summary

In 2019, UNRWA commissioned a study into how women experience today's conditions in the Gaza Strip, intending to strengthen people's understanding of today's situation. How does a local woman cope with enduring conflict, a 52 per cent unemployment rate, a 69 per cent food insecurity rate and a 53 per cent poverty rate[1]? Over a hundred women were consulted from different areas and across the social spectrum, in discussion forums, interviews and home visits. This report captures findings of those consultations, and as much as possible includes perspectives of local women themselves[2].

Gaza today is a unique context for women. More than ever they support their families while men are absent or jobless. Many live with extended families and struggle to make an income because of economic limits but also due to rigid ideas about what is appropriate for women. Community assistance is stretched too thin, and a high level of education rarely translates into valued employment. Yet with mouths to feed and often debts to pay, women find ways to cope.

Day to day, women strain to keep the family going. They prepare less and cheaper food, borrow money, sell assets, and exchange food and other items if they can. Many cook with collected firewood, wake in the night to do housework while power is on, forego medical and other costs, and split rooms or homes to look after more people under one roof. They often seek help from parents and accept assistance from welfare and aid agencies. And they try, each time, to maintain their dignity and that of their children and their family.

Medium term, women devise dynamic, creative strategies to make an income.

• Enterprises 'suitable for women' are preferred where possible. These are home-based, linked to food production, petty retail, child care and education, beauty or fashion. Projects are often multiple, often unsustainable, and done in addition to caring for children plus extended family.

• Enterprises 'unsuitable for women' are done if necessary, against community and family resistance. These are public-facing e.g. at market stalls or shops, or culturally frowned upon e.g. care work in private homes. They require tenacity and willingness to resist pressure or stress. Creative strategies include giving the enterprise a 'male front' with a husband or son, or trading online to avoid entering a hostile male space.

• 'New enterprises' might be adopted by a younger generation, e.g. IT roles and mobile phone fixing. Yet the market is fickle even for traditional enterprises, people's spending is constrained, and men are often preferred in the marketplace.

• Working the welfare or aid system has become a livelihood in itself, with women networking and navigating their way to food, cash, legal and livelihood support. Complex eligibility criteria or legal frameworks that favour men make this a bureaucratic labyrinth. Material benefits to be gained must be weighed against possible stigmatisation as divorced or inappropriate or 'begging'. But this is a space where women can have agency, realise their rights, and potentially transform their situation at least for a while.

Long term, women rarely dare to plan. Experience has taught people to look only so far ahead. For many women, thinking of the future means dreaming of escape or drawing on spiritual reserves of patience and strength. They lower children's expectations, urging them to find job-safe vocations and reminding them of family obligations. This could mean deferring academic or travel opportunities, and delaying marriage. Daughters are cautioned about the years ahead. They are told to protect themselves with education, choose a partner wisely, and always show strength even if it's just a disguise. There is everyday happiness to have, and ideas to nurture, but as a young woman of Gaza it is wise not to expect or plan for a secure future.

1 PCBS 2018, FSS & PCBS 2018, PCBS (ii)
2 Unless otherwise stated, all quotes are from Gazan women consulted for this study (see Methodology)

sana – 39-years-old, mother of eight children

My husband said he was going to Egypt for a week. He even left food and money for the week. That was 11 years ago. First I sold the furniture. I received a portion of his salary until the PA realised he was out of Gaza and cut it. Things got worse and I knew I had to find a job. I worked in homes caring for elderly people, even changing their diapers. It was hard and disapproved of. The wives of my brothers challenged their husbands on why I was doing it, and insulted me. I said to my brothers, 'Ok I'll stop, if you support me'. Obviously I continued. I worked all the time, even during Eid, to make money. I realised I needed a divorce to apply for government assistance. I had to face the stigma of a divorced woman and ask if it was worth it. I decided it was. In our mother's time men might abandon their wives and family, but not as much as now. Youth have a hard time too. After studying for years at university they don't find jobs. The situation has destroyed the dreams of mothers and their children. My daughter dreamt of being a lawyer but I couldn't afford it and knew she wouldn't get a job afterwards. My eldest son dreamt of being a journalist but I encouraged him to be a hairdresser. I've supported his business a lot and it's doing well. We used to want our children to study arts and be professionals. Now I teach my children to be workers and that's it.

jameela – 24-years-old, single

My mother spends months in hospital receiving treatment and my sister needs medication for a condition that hasn't been diagnosed. I had to think hard about supporting my family. I studied IT which was supposed to lead to good job opportunities, but now there are so many IT graduates and so few jobs they've stopped offering it as a course. I give private tutoring to children in my home. I used to have a lot of students but now many parents can't afford extra tutoring. I have three students left. With support from an NGO I opened a small stationery shop close to the house. I would have opened it in the house but we live with extended family and my uncle refused, saying his children deserved that chance. It's complicated when you live with relatives. I named the shop after a popular children's show and it sells handicrafts, toys, stationery and school materials. I'm 24 and single. After hearing women's experiences of marriage today, I decided not to marry. The bad stories affected me, and so did my family responsibilities here. My mother dreams that I will get married and have a beautiful family. But my dream is to get a job! I tell myself to be patient and strong.

salam – 32-years-old, mother of seven children

My husband had an accident while working on a dangerous transport job. He knew the job was dangerous but with five children he had to do something. When the accident happened the three other men with him all died. After the accident he was nervous and violent because he felt useless. He has permanently damaged legs so I am responsible for everything. I've learnt to be resourceful. I buy frozen meat which is cheaper, spoiled vegetables from the market, no fruit. I collect firewood to cook and heat water for washing. This is not how I grew up, but these are the conditions I am now in. To make an income I started selling goods on a table outside my house. UNRWA helped me set up a small shop in a room of my house. I sell pre-made couscous and flatbread, basic food, toys, and cleaning materials I make myself. My husband works there, it's perfect for him with his legs. I'm scrupulous about earnings and spending. Many people start projects and fail, because they don't manage things properly but also because the economic situation is very difficult. People are more desperate, and there is more fear. Maybe the coming days are worse than what we're enduring now. We don't know. We relax when we sit and eat together. I feel comfortable when I see all of them around me. I hope to feel free one day, for my children to live like other children in the world.

introduction

The Gaza Strip has been under blockade since 2007. This has had severe repercussions on the Gaza economy which is dependent on one official entry and exit point for all goods, the Karm Abu Salim crossing. All movement of goods and people in and out of Gaza is highly restricted. The estimated population in Gaza is around 1.9 million of which 1.57 are registered as Palestine refugees with UNRWA. The unemployment rate is considered to be one of the highest in the world at 44 per cent. The Gaza strip has been subject to recurrent violence and conflict.

Poverty in the Gaza Strip increased from 39 per cent in 2011 to 53 per cent in 2017. In contrast, the poverty rate decreased in the West Bank from 18 per cent to 14 per cent over the same period. Similarly, food insecurity levels are estimated at 69 per cent in Gaza in 2018 – compared to 12 per cent in the West Bank. The proportion of household food consumption is 36 per cent of the total household consumption[3].

While these figures describe a dire situation and deteriorating living standard trends in the Gaza Strip, they are mute on the actual meaning in relation to daily lives of the population, including Palestine refugees living in the Gaza Strip. They do not, for example, explain what happens when a majority of the population moves from being employed and food secure into poverty or even deep poverty (the latter of which affects 34 per cent of the Gaza population[4]). They do not explain what it means when household spending on food increases to over a third of total spending, crowding out the affordability of other items, or what happens when electricity is available for only four hours a day over prolonged periods. They do not provide understanding of what it means when children are growing up without the possibility of getting to know anything but the limited square kilometres of the Gaza Strip – with close to no prospect of travel or employment – unless dangerous exit routes offered by human traffickers are sought out. Finally, they do not shed light on how situations differ between types or locations of households.

This study looks at coping mechanisms of people in Gaza, asking how they make ends meet in the extraordinary circumstances they live in. Rather than relying on indicators of the economies of deprivation, it is a largely qualitative enquiry into the daily trade-offs that have to be made to secure basic needs, and the physical, psychological and social impacts of these choices. This includes asking how intra-household power dynamics, gender roles and social lives are affected by such discussions and decisions, and how differently the situation is experienced by different individuals and families.

In particular, the study asks how Gaza's humanitarian situation is experienced by women. During a 2018 field data collection process for UNRWA's study on social transfer options in the Gaza Strip, many participants in focus groups, especially women, spoke about how the crisis was affecting their daily lives. They reflected on issues including: power cuts and lack of transport impacting the structure of their day; food insecurity changing how they prepare and serve family meals; unemployment and depression affecting family relations; the need for assistance from friends and family changing how they view social relationships; and the conflict's violence, destruction, death and trauma affecting their physical and psychological selves.

As a result, this study sets out to document, through oral narratives of affected Palestine refugee populations, the impact of the current crisis on daily lives. It focuses particularly on the situation of women, who are considered the pillar of families and are tasked with daily chores sustaining immediate needs.

The study seeks to understand key questions including: At what cost to women does the crisis come? What means are women applying to cope with a living environment characterised by severe resource constraints, extreme restrictions on personal freedom, a distorted economy, and frequent exposure to acts of violence including gender based violence? How do the expectations and norms that govern and structure women's lives support or inhibit the roles they have to fulfil? And how do their decisions and struggle to 'make ends meet' in times of crisis impact their physical and psychological wellbeing as well as their status within the family as well as broader society?

As much as possible, the study seeks to understand the impact of the crisis on women through their lived experiences and in their own words, translating statistics into relatable human stories.

It is hoped that the outcomes of this study can contribute to ongoing advocacy efforts on behalf of Palestine refugees and humanitarian assistance in the Gaza Strip, and also help re-humanise a population largely talked about in terms of numbers and statistics through a gendered approach to the study. Findings may also influence a change in programme policies and implementation with regards to the distinct needs of women.

3 PCBS 2018 (ii)
4 ibid

methodology

overview

An external consultant worked with the Gaza Field Office to carry out this study. A mixed methods approach was applied through integrating qualitative and quantitative data, with primary data largely qualitative in the form of discussions and interviews with a diverse sample of women in the Gaza Strip. Quantitative data complementing this came from existing research, in particular a recent PCBS survey[5] and a short, targeted survey on coping deployed in person by UNRWA social workers in six locations. The study was carried out between May and August 2019, with data collection during the month of May 2019 – not long after an outbreak of conflict hostilities and coinciding with Great March of Return protests. Key limitations were the limited time spent in the Gaza Strip for data collection and the potential over-representation of more vulnerable women engaged with commissioning agency UNRWA, whose staff were integral to the community data collection phase.

study questions

Study questions were formed by the original brief, by a literature review, and by inputs from the study team at the start and then throughout the process. They were also adapted as findings emerged during the fieldwork phase. Key questions were:

- How is the current situation in Gaza affecting women's daily lives?
- How are women coping, or making ends meet, in the short, medium and long term?
- What are the costs and impacts of the choices women are compelled to make?
- How do women's forms of coping affect household dynamics and tensions, social status, and gender roles?
- How do family or social expectations and norms support or inhibit women's coping choices?
- As a result of women's new forms of coping, what changes are underway at household, community, social and economic levels?
- How is women's physical and psychological wellbeing affected by the current situation and the roles they find themselves in?
- How are different women experiencing the situation (and responding) differently?

sample

To achieve both breadth and depth the study encompassed the perspectives of a diversity of women through a geographically and socioeconomically broad sample, and gathered in-depth experiences through detailed individual case studies.

The sample spanned different regions and locations of the Gaza Strip as follows: Gaza City, Nusirate, Khan Younis, Rafah, Jabalia, and Beit Hanoun. In each location, different types of women were included in the sample – in particular, women of different ages, marital status and socioeconomic security. Selection was done through UNRWA's Gaza team, with women invited to participate by social workers or other staff local to each location.

After the first discussions it was clear that much of women's experiences was determined by husbands or male relatives, and the extent to which they were supported or challenged by them. The sample therefore also included men's perspectives on women's experiences, through men-only group discussions.

mixed methods approach

Overall the study adopts a mixed methods approach. It integrates qualitative evidence (from discussions, interviews, home visits) and quantitative evidence (from results of existing surveys and a survey commissioned for the study).

Within a mixed methods approach, the study sought to prioritise the perspectives of Gaza's women themselves, with their lived experience the primary source of insights and data. It also sought to draw meaningfully on the vast experience and knowledge of UNRWA staff especially those working in Gaza. For this reason qualitative methods formed the basis of the methodology, as follows:

5 FSS & PCBS 20184

1. **Focused group discussions** - These were facilitated by the external consultant, the study co-lead from the UNRWA Gaza field office, and UNRWA social workers or local staff in each location. A number of groups of 10-14 women (and two groups of men) were gathered in spaces considered communal and appropriate, typically UNRWA women's programme centres or relief and social services offices. Discussions lasted 60-120 minutes each, with facilitation and translation into English provided by the study co-lead and supported by local UNRWA colleagues. In total 92 people were consulted in focused group discussions.

2. **Interviews** - These were held with women identified in group discussions and willing to share their experience in further detail, as well as with non-community representatives with relevant professional experience. Interviews with women typically took place in the same locations as the focused group discussions, or in smaller rooms on the same premises. Those with non-community representatives, both women and men, took place in a range of locations. Interviews were typically 30-120 minutes in duration. In total 20 people were interviewed from the six locations, including local women and non-community representatives from a range of development and relief agencies.

3. **Household visits** - These were held to inform more detailed case studies of women, exploring their lived experience and drawing on participant observation. Women were identified from the discussion and interview cohorts and their permission sought after clear briefing on the process and its objectives. Household visits took place in the company of an UNRWA social worker familiar to the woman in question and were held over the course of a morning or afternoon. Typically they included the participants and their families explaining or demonstrating key aspects of their everyday routine, and usually also involved a visit to places of work. Visits were several hours in duration. In total five household visits took place with five women and their families.

4. **Photo storytelling** - This was used as a method to prioritise local women's perspectives on their own lives. With disposable cameras or smart phones (where owned) women described with photos the key aspects of their everyday personal, family and vocational lives. Photos were then explained and used to complement transcribed interviews. In total five photo stories were collected, from the five women involved in household visits.

Quantitative data collection, largely to complement qualitative findings, involved the following:

5. **Structured survey** - This was designed at the midway point of the fieldwork phase, based on emerging findings on key forms of coping and their impacts. Written in Arabic on one sheet of paper, copies of the survey were distributed to women attending UNRWA women's programme centres or relief and social services offices in six sampled locations across the Gaza Strip. The survey contained 19 structured (closed) questions on demographics, coping and wellbeing, as follows:

   - demographics

     Six questions designed by the UNRWA colleagues in the Gaza field office familiar with local demography. The purpose of these was to understand differences in forms of coping adopted by women of different life stages, locations or circumstances. While survey responses were anonymous (no names were provided) the questions asked women to disclose the following information about themselves: location of residence, age group, marital status, education status, working status, and housing status.

   - coping strategies

     Eight questions shaped by the first phase of qualitative data collection, where themes had emerged on women's forms of coping. The purpose of these was to give some indication of the prevalence of forms of coping (including those that were new, emerging or risky) that were being described in the qualitative discussions, interviews and home visits. The questions asked whether the following forms of coping had been deployed by respondents in the last year: held a role not usually done by a woman, set up a new enterprise, held a role involving family or community resistance, held a role dangerous for self or family, held a role beneath own education or skills, sought new

forms of assistance or welfare, or sought more education and training. A final question asked if the respondent had, in the last year, felt able to make long-term plans.

- wellbeing
  Five questions that make up the WHO-5 Wellbeing index[6], a globally recognised tool for assessing subjective psychosocial wellbeing on a standardised scale used by health practitioners. The purpose of this was to indicate the burden of the current situation on women in a way that could be compared with other contexts. In the five-part question, a Likert scale was provided for respondents to agree with statements about how they felt in the last 2 weeks, including whether they felt: cheerful and in good spirits, calm and rested, active and vigorous, fresh and rested on waking up, and that their daily life was filled with things that interested them.

In total 155 surveys were completed. These were inputted into a digital survey management program for analysis, with findings disaggregated according to the demographic data.

6. **Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) Consumption and Expenditure Survey 2017**[7] - The findings of this 2017 government-commissioned survey on Living Standards were published in 2018 and give rich detail on household characteristics, consumption and expenditure, and poverty in Palestine. In the Gaza Strip, a statistically significant sample of 1,328 households was surveyed. Findings were used to qualify and validate data collected over the course of this study, with disaggregated statistics included throughout this report. Other recent PCBS surveys were also used, with findings disaggregated for Gaza unless otherwise stated.

In an iterative process, themes emerging from the data collected were checked informally with the study team, UNRWA colleagues and other stakeholders throughout the process. At the midpoint of the fieldwork phase, a formal review of emerging themes was held with UNRWA social workers, who are closest to the realities for women living in Gaza, and other UNRWA representatives. Interviews throughout with non-community representatives, i.e. those working in development and welfare agencies in Gaza, gave an additional opportunity for emerging themes to be validated and new insights to be explored.

All illustrations throughout the report were based on key themes that emerged as part of the study.

context and timing

The study was carried out in 2019, with fieldwork in Gaza occurring in the month of May. Shortly before the fieldwork phase, in the early days of May, a Gaza–Israel conflict escalation was triggered when two Israeli soldiers were injured by sniper fire during the weekly Great March of Return protests at the Gaza–Israel border. Sniper fire, rocket attacks and airstrikes saw over 20 people killed and several hundred wounded on both sides, as well as extensive damage to property in Gaza. While a ceasefire had taken hold by the time the study fieldwork was underway, these circumstances undoubtedly affected the mood of the population in Gaza and the way study participants reflected on their circumstances. At the same time conflict is an enduring condition in Gaza and, illustrative of the degree to which people are accustomed to it, the hostilities were barely mentioned in discussions and interviews.

Another feature of the study's timing was its coincidence with the holy month of Ramadan, when observant Muslims fast during daylight hours. People tend to be less available to socialise, spend fewer hours at work, and adopt new patterns and priorities in their daily lives. This may have affected the availability and energy levels of study participants, although the biggest implication was on scheduling i.e. interviews and discussions were held in the morning or post-iftar (evening breaking of the fast).

6 WHO-5 Wellbeing Index; and see Methodology
7 PCBS 2018

limitations

The most significant limitation of the approach was the restricted time for data collection and, related, the breadth of the sample. Access to the Gaza Strip is not straightforward and the window of fieldwork availability for the study team (in particular the non-Gaza-based lead consultant) was limited. To mitigate this, a sample was designed to be as representative as possible: qualitative data was collected from around a hundred women in six locations who represented a diversity of situations and experience; this was complemented by quantitative data collected (via a structured survey) from 155 women across the six locations who again represented a diversity of situations and experience; and this in turn was complemented by quantitative data from a government living standards survey spanning 1,328 households.

An additional study limitation is the representative bias that arose from the sample not only being largely self-selecting but also based on women who were typically more vulnerable. The sample was mostly drawn from women who presented themselves to UNRWA locations where social or relief services are distributed, or were known to the social workers and other UNRWA employees in those locations. It therefore excluded women who were not refugees, who were socioeconomically better off, or who were engaged in formal employment that made them unavailable at times when discussions and interviews were held. To mitigate this, 'non community' interviews were held with a broader span of women including those who were better educated, formally employed and less vulnerable. An extensive literature review also brought in a diversity of perspectives. While attempts were made to achieve balanced representation in this way, a focus on more vulnerable women was not considered a methodological flaw given that the study questions central to the study focused on forms of coping in the context of deepening or changing vulnerability.

The data collected for this study does not claim to be representative nor statistically significant but findings have been triangulated as much as possible, including with valid external sources. Both qualitative and quantitative data serve to illustrate different forms of coping among women in Gaza, and the impacts and prevalence of these. Importantly, the study's qualitative focus on participant voice and oral narrative is offered as a faithful record of the perspectives and experiences of a selection of women in Gaza in 2019.

context

"those with routes out are the lucky ones. everyone else is stuck in the world's largest prison"

This section gives an overview of the context of Gaza as the backdrop to women's lives and coping. It briefly touches on conflict and blockade, unemployment affecting over half the population, and so-called 'de-development'. It looks at the acute poverty, food insecurity, debt and overcrowding that have arisen from these conditions, as well as at aid dependency, stress and trauma. Finally, the section looks at a 'double oppression' for women faced with both the occupation and restrictive gender norms – two factors which many believe exist in a vicious cycle and which is compounded by women's lack of rights.

The unique vulnerability of Gazan women is not evenly distributed, and some see optimistic signs of it changing with a new generation, but it remains a profound challenge against which many women of Gaza are pushing to cope.

gaza in numbers

52 % of people are unemployed[8]

69 % of people are food insecure[9]

53 % of people live in poverty[10]

49 % of adults experience poor well-being[11]

51 % of married women in Gaza have experienced at least one form of violence by their husbands[12]

8 PCBS 2018
9 FSS & PCBS 2018
10 PCBS 2018 (ii)
11 UN OCHA 2018
12 UN HRC 2017

Figure 1. Barrier Wall © 2019 UNRWA photo by Eugenie Reidy

gaza's unique predicament – a state of 'de-development'

> *"Despite the warnings issued by the UN in 2012, Gaza has continued on its trajectory of de-development, in many cases even faster than the UN had originally projected. Ongoing humanitarian assistance and international service delivery, especially through UNRWA's services, are helping slow this descent, but the downward direction remains clear."* [13]

Gaza's humanitarian situation is the subject of a long-term blockade and ongoing hostilities. The blockade has been ongoing since 2007, imposed by Israel for security reasons after the takeover by Hamas. A cycle of conflict persists: the most recent episode of hostilities, in May 2019, left over 20 dead and several hundred wounded on both sides as well as extensive damage to property in Gaza; prior to that the conflict of 2014 killed over 2,000 people and left widows, orphans, displaced persons and destroyed infrastructure. By 2019, the 'Great March of Return' demonstrations had become a weekly site of protest and tension at the border wall with Israel, expressing a population's frustration at their seemingly intractable entrapment and socioeconomic decline.

Gaza's economy has been in steady decline since the Oslo accords of 1993[14]. Economic insecurity affects the entire territory and all its population, but particularly impacts smaller cities and rural areas. Agriculture, manufacturing, food processing, and most other industries – including smaller ones like fashion, retail and beauty that women previously held significant roles in – have all declined. Imports have dropped and trade outside Gaza is extremely difficult. Gazans are thought to be 25 per cent poorer now than they were at the time of the Oslo Accords, with a standard of living, based on GDP, comparable to Congo-Brazzaville.[15]

Mass unemployment affects Gaza's men, women and youth, and is a driver of poverty. The blockade inhibits trade, the private sector is frail, and key industries including agriculture have collapsed. Over half the population (52 per cent) is unemployed[16]. The situation is particularly bleak for young people, regardless of their education: 60 per cent of youth and 55 per cent of young graduates are unemployed[17]. Unsurprisingly, lack of employment correlates with poverty in Gaza: individuals whose head of household is unemployed have a much higher incidence of poverty (60 per cent) than those whose head of household is employed (24 per cent)[18].

As a result, Gaza is considered in a state of 'de-development'. Socioeconomic and humanitarian decline has resulted from conflict, blockade, economic collapse and the intensification of the internal divide between the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority (PA) and the de facto Hamas authorities. Government employees in Gaza have had their salaries progressively cut in recent years, to a fraction of their original value, as a result of differences between PA and Hamas. Public infrastructure is devastated, there is restricted access to health care both within and beyond Gaza, and there are limits on access to education as well as clean water and electricity. With a trapped yet growing population, and with the economy progressively more strained, this scenario saw Gaza in 2012 predicted to be 'unlivable' by 2020, a scenario that has not been revised since.

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13 UNCT oPt 2017

14 The Oslo Accords are a set of agreements signed in 1993 and 1995 between the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization, marking the start of a peace process aimed at peace and fulfilment of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination. They created a Palestinian Authority (PA) tasked with limited self-governance of part of the West Bank and Gaza Strip

15 UN OCHA 2018

16 PCBS 2018

17 UNFPA 2017

18 PCBS 2018 (ii)

vulnerability on many fronts

"Maybe the coming days are worse than what we're enduring now. We don't know." [19]

Gaza's poverty level has increased in recent years, with over half the population (53 per cent) estimated to live in poverty. This is equivalent to over one million people and over 400,000 children, and shows a concerning increase in recent years: the poverty percentage in Gaza in 2011 was 39 per cent. Over a third of the population (34 per cent) lives in 'deep poverty', that is survives on less than the minimum amount ($3.6 a day) to cover just shelter, clothing and food needs, and over half (54 per cent) earn an income less than the deep poverty line[20]. Complementing these national (PCBS) statistics on living standards, a 2018 multi-agency food security survey asked households how long they could withstand financially: 43 per cent said they 'could barely make it', 19 per cent said they 'didn't know how they could make it', and 8 per cent felt they 'could make it for a few months only'[21]. This situation is despite routine social assistance and transfers – without those, the breadth and depth of poverty in Gaza would undoubtedly be much worse.

Food insecurity affects over two thirds of the population[22]. Gaza's 69 per cent food insecurity rate is believed to be driven largely by poverty rather than lack of food availability, i.e. many people simply cannot afford the price of food[23]. The proportion of consumption on food bears this out: 36 per cent of all household expenditure, on average, is on food , which indicates reduced spending on service access, living standards and recreation. In response UNRWA provides essential food assistance to around a million people in Gaza, or half the population, who do not have the financial means to cover their basic food needs. A further 245,000 food insecure non-refugees, all falling below the deep poverty line, are targeted by WFP with food and cash-based transfers[24].

A rising population and overcrowding creates competition for resources and tension. Population density is exceptionally high in Gaza, at over 5,000 persons per square kilometer. The average household size in Gaza is large at 6.1 persons, and fertility rates are also high at 4.5 births for every woman ever married[25]. Many people live with their extended families, splitting or adding rooms in a shared home as the family size increases over time. Families can be strongly cohesive and steadfast but also crowded sites of tension and violence. With no room for expansion, Gaza's urbanisation is rapid and unplanned, bringing new poverty as well as diminishing land available for agriculture[26].

Household debt levels are high, with debts frequently taken to cover routine costs of rent, utilities, food, healthcare, transport, education, or one-off costs of building extra rooms to accommodate growing families. Levels of debt are understood to have increased in recent years given the decline in people's income and purchasing power. In a recent UNRWA survey to understand social transfers, 98 per cent of the population sampled reported having no savings[27]. Lack of savings and indebtedness is a source of stress for many individuals and families.

Aid coverage and aid dependency is extreme in Gaza. Well over half the population (around 1.2 million people) receive some type of food aid[28], a quarter (25 per cent) of the population is assisted by the Ministry of Social Development, and 10 per cent of families are supported by religious and NGO organisations[29]. External assistance has become normalised and inherent to coping for many, which is concerning given the fragility of funding of both international organisations and the Ministry of Social Development in Gaza that depends on the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah. Forms of community assistance that sustained people in the past still exist – 4 per cent of people report recently being helped by relatives, 4 per cent by Zakat committees, and 3 per cent by friends, neighbours or good Samaritans[30] – but they are heavily constrained by a collective depletion of resources that sees most households operating in 'survival mode' and unable to support vulnerable others.

Psychosocial wellbeing is low in Gaza, with almost half of adults believed to experience poor well-being, and 63 per cent of these warranting further screening for depression. Nearly 30 per cent of children experience serious difficulties, including nearly 300,000 requiring some sort of mental health support or psychosocial intervention[31].

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19 Interviewee, 'How Does She Cope?' study May 2019
20 PCBS 2018 (ii)
21 FSS 2018
22 FSS & PCBS 2018
23 PCBS 2018 (ii)
24 UN OCHA 2018 (ii)
25 PCBS 2018 (ii)
26 FSS 2019
27 UNRWA 2018
28 WFP 2017
29 FSS & PCBS 2018
30 FSS & PCBS 2018
31 UN OCHA 2018

Gaza's occupation and conflict is known to cause anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder among many, through grief and loss but also a sense of insecurity, fear and hopelessness. Hopelessness in particular is often highlighted as a psychological burden for people in Gaza, young and old, given the years of ambiguity around political solutions to the ongoing blockade and conflict.

Youth carry a unique burden of conflict, impacted in various degrees by direct injury or trauma, imprisonment, high unemployment, and parents' or families' reliance on them. There is relatively little access to youth friendly health services and few safe or healthy recreational choices. Unlimited and fairly accessible internet means most youth are acutely aware of how their situation compares to that of youth elsewhere in the world, and this is believed to contribute to mental health concerns.

Household stress is commonly linked to poverty, unemployment and debt. A recent UNRWA survey highlighted the extent of household tension: only 22 per cent of abject poor households (over half the population) and 15 per cent of absolute poor households reported never having arguments within the household on food-related purchases; 75-80 per cent reported feeling stressed always because of household debts, in both poor and non-poor groups[32]; 96 per cent of both men and women reported being worried about their future and their family's future[33]. High, unmet family health needs including chronic conditions and disabilities, conflict injuries or mental health issues are also known to lead to stress. Overcrowding and separation of families between Gaza and West Bank are compounding factors for many households.

Different surveys have explored the level of stress or anxiety faced by men who lack work or income, or have been directly or indirectly affected by the conflict in Gaza. They are known to be less likely than women to seek help, and to have more access to alcohol, smoking and drugs as coping mechanisms. Use of the opioid Tramadol, for stress, trauma or pain relief, is believed to have increased following the 2014 conflict[34]. It has been estimated that 2 per cent of men are users, some spending a high proportion of the household income on this[35]. However this number is much higher in media reports including one indicating that over half the adult population may use Tramadol[36]. The issue of Tramadol was frequently raised in discussions with women as part of this study, indicating its spread across geographic and social contexts.

Poverty, unemployment and stress are believed to be driving a decrease in marriage rates in Gaza, which have been falling in recent years: between 2015 and 2016 for example, a single year, there was an eight per cent decrease in the number of registered marriages[37].

32 UNRWA 2018
33 UN Women et al 2017
34 UNRWA 2018
35 UNODC 2017
36 UNFPA 2017
37 Middle East Monitor 2017

Figure 2. The site of an apartment block destroyed in a missile strike during May 2019 hostilities. © 2019 UNRWA photo by Eugenie Reidy

Figure 3. UNRWA food aid ready for collection.
© 2019 UNRWA photo by Eugenie Reidy

'double oppression – the situation for women in Gaza'

> *"Violence against women occurs both in private and public spheres, with women suffering multiple sources of discrimination and violence: they suffer the violence of the Israeli occupation, whether directly or indirectly, but they also suffer from a system of violence emanating from the tradition and culture, with embedded patriarchal social norms and multiple outdated legal frameworks."* [38]

Women are increasingly carrying the household burden, with a rising absence of men in family life in Gaza. Almost one tenth of households in Gaza (9 per cent) are officially headed by women[39], with a larger proportion effectively headed by women who have become the primary breadwinner out of necessity or the absence of men. Widowhood, abandonment, and rising divorce rates[40] (which do not capture informal divorce or separation) are increasingly causing men to be physically absent from families in Gaza, while joblessness, trauma or addiction can cause men to be effectively or economically absent.

Women are considerably more likely to be unemployed, with 78 per cent of women in Gaza unemployed compared to 46 per cent of men[41], Despite the increase in participation of women in the labour force in previous years, this remains very low compared to men: in Palestine in general (both Gaza and West Bank), women's rate of participation in the labour force is 21 per cent of the total women at work age (up from 10 per cent in 2001), while men's participation rate is 72 per cent[42].

In addition, women in Gaza are more likely to be 'educated unemployed' than men. The rate of unemployment among women with over 13 years of education increased from 44 per cent in 2007 (pre-blockade imposition) to 69 per cent in 2017[43]. There are numerous factors behind this, including that women are more likely to have a university degree than men: 13 per cent hold a university degree compared to 9 per cent of men. In addition, women's education qualifications (and corresponding job prospects) tend to be limited to certain domains including teaching, health, arts, humanities.

Large family sizes and a household labour burden considerably higher for women than men can also inhibit educated women's chances of employment in Gaza. The rise of more urban, nuclear families where child care is less readily available also makes employment (or studying) and motherhood less compatible[44]. Added to this, in many sectors there is reportedly a 'systemic preference towards men' when it comes to job placement[45]. Finally, as for men, economic migration relied on in the past for employment, as well as development and training, is near-impossible under the conditions of the blockade. This can be compounded for women by social expectations that constrain them from traveling independently, whether to access training or seek employment opportunities.

Where women are formally employed, a gender pay gap is evident in the average daily wages between men and women: the average daily wage for women in 2017 was 92 NIS compared to 129 NIS for men[46].

A shrinking formal sector has forced many women into the 'informal economy', where jobs are less secure. As for men, women's participation in the informal economy is understood to have increased in Gaza since conditions worsened and both private and public sector positions became more scarce. Yet employment in the informal economy rarely comes with contracts, entitlements or protection however, is often exploitative, and rarely offers a way out of poverty[47]. Women running their own enterprises in the informal economy can be additionally disadvantaged by a relative lack of access to credit and assets, since property entitlements in Gaza tend to favour men and assets are typically owned by men.

38 UN HRC 2017
39 PCBS 2018
40 Middle East Monitor 2017
41 UN OCHA 2019
42 PCBS 2018
43 Gisha 2018
44 UN Women & MoWA 2013
45 Gisha 2018
46 PCBS 2018
47 UN Women 2013

Constraints on women's economic participation are underpinned or exacerbated by women's limited participation in public life compared with men. For Palestine in general (both Gaza and West Bank) 82 per cent of judges, 73 per cent of registered lawyers and 80 per cent of prosecutors are men, as are 75 per cent of registered engineers. Roles are more evenly distributed in the public sector, where traditionally women have taken up a greater number of roles: women comprise 43 per cent of civil public sector employees and 12 per cent of general director or higher roles.[48] Yet overall, with a 15 per cent participation rate in the formal labour force (despite relatively high levels of education) and minimal representation in public politics, Gaza has one of the lowest participation rates for women in the world, including across the MENA region[49].

The agency or influence of women in the socio-political sphere is also seen as low and on a downward trend: women played a key role in the First Intifada of 1987, but a combination of societal conservatism and poor quality education is thought to have limited that role since[50]. It is also the case that many women who were well educated, influential and good communicators found ways to emigrate and leave Gaza, driving down the visible participation of women in public life. This has left a younger generation of women in Gaza not only inheriting a male-dominated context, but also displaying a concerning level of "socialised diffidence"[51].

Legally, women are less likely to have access to rights and protection than men in Gaza as a result of laws or legal processes that have historically favoured men. Often-cited evidence that laws are outdated include marital rape not being criminalised, abortion being illegal, and a man being able to be absolved of the crime of rape if he marries his victim[52]. Legal processes are considered to favour men because of social mechanisms undermining the rights that do exist for women, whether in constitutional, religious or customary laws. Women's rights to divorce, inheritance, child custody or alimony for example might be legally enshrined but not realised, because ideas of individual or family honour, stigma and social sanction, or threat of violence and actual violence dissuade women from making claims. The dominance of men in police, legal and courtroom roles further alienates women from rights that exist to protect them. In the case of violence against women by their husbands, it has been shown that 65 per cent of women prefer to stay silent and less that 1 per cent would seek help from a social worker, shelter, community organisation or the police due to "social norms that shame women who report abuse to the police", who are mostly male[53]. It is also reported that where women do seek help, perpetrators rarely face legal, criminal or social penalties for gender-based violence due to both legal limits and dominant social norms[54].

In addition, many women are unaware of their rights regarding gender-based violence, divorce, alimony, child custody, inheritance, or property and asset ownership. Women's limited legal literacy, socioeconomic mobility and financial resources restrict access to available legal services.

Violence against women is high in Gaza, and linked to external political and economic factors. The most recent PCBS study on violence found that 51 per cent of women ever married had been exposed to at least one form of violence by their husbands[55], matching other more recent studies that found over half (58 per cent) of women have experienced domestic violence and a quarter (25 per cent) sexual harassment[56]. Another indicator of violence against women is early marriage, or marriage under the age of 18: while there has been a decline in the proportion of early marriages, the number is still high at 21 per cent of all females' registered marriages[57]. Some estimates are higher, stating that 40 per cent of women aged 20-24 were married and 20 per cent had given birth to a child before the age of 18[58]. Finally polygyny (the practice of a man taking more than one wife) is cited as an indicator of violence against women, since women in polygynous households are typically at greater risk of different forms of abuse: 6 per cent of women in Gaza are in polygynous marriages[59] and popular media reports indicate the rate is rising in line with religious conservatism.

48 UN HRC 2017
49 PCBS 2018
50 Middle East Monitor 2017
51 UN OCHA 2019
52 PCBS 2018
53 Gisha 2018
54 UN Women & MoWA 2013
55 Gisha 2018
56 PCBS 2018
57 UN Women 2013
58 UN Women 2013
59 UN Women 2013

A range of studies have explored the correlation between political and gender-based violence in Gaza. Research in 2017 looked at surges in violence against women and girls during times of direct military operations and found significant positive correlation: during the 2014 hostilities there was a reported 22 per cent rise in domestic violence experienced by married women, and a 30 per cent increase for non-married women. The research also found the displacement caused by military operations increase the likelihood of experiencing domestic violence[60].

At a more local level, connections between poverty and unemployment and violence against women in Gaza are frequently articulated. The economic crisis has left many men unable to fulfil their traditional role as breadwinner, leading to stress, anxiety and addiction. Women can be left to bear the brunt of men's frustrations in the home and community; and as they move more into the workforce to make up the household income shortfall, they risk further inflaming tensions by threatening traditional male identities. In this way it has been asserted that in Gaza, "structural violence initiated and perpetuated by militarism enhances violence in all its forms"[61].

At the same time, such claims have been rejected as inappropriate 'cover' for unjust treatment of women, whether by individual perpetrators of gender-based violence or by a state that fails to provide adequate legal protection for women. As the United Nations Human Rights Commissioner articulated, "the occupation does not exonerate the State of Palestine from its due human rights obligation to prevent, investigate, punish and provide remedies for acts of gender-based violence"[62].

60 IIED 2017
61 UN Women et al 2017
62 UN HRC 2017

Figure 4. Urban street art in Gaza. © 2019 UNRWA photo by Eugenie Reidy

distribution of vulnerability – different experiences and emerging change

The humanitarian context in Gaza is unique, and so too is the experience of individual women. A woman's vulnerability is affected by a range of factors including geography, social status and age.

In refugee camps (which tend to have larger families and higher dependency ratios) poverty is typically higher than in other location types, at a level of 45 per cent or almost half of all households. Deep poverty in camps affects 29 per cent, or almost one in three households. Households in urban areas tend to be slightly better off (with a poverty level of 29 per cent, and a deep poverty level of 17 per cent) while rural areas experience the lowest relative poverty (with a poverty level of 19 per cent, and a deep poverty level of 10 per cent)[63].

Socioeconomic norms and constraints for women vary by geographic area. More urban areas tend to be more permissive, most notably Gaza City which is home to many non-refugee Gazans and known for being less conservative including when it comes to women's roles. Within or near urban areas however, camps tend to be more conservative (as well as impoverished), with more vulnerability experienced by households in general and women in particular. In access-restricted border areas, up to 300m from the perimeter fence, limited agriculture and mobility plus more direct exposure to conflict compounds vulnerability for all, including women.

Social and family status can also determine women's vulnerability. Female-headed households, which make up around a tenth of the population, are more likely to be impoverished, with an average poverty level of 54 per cent. This is nearly twice as high as that of male-headed households. Deep poverty (where a household is unable to meet minimum requirements for food, clothing and housing) is thought to affect around one in five female-headed households (again, at a higher proportion than that of male-headed households) and PCBS data shows that this situation has worsened since 2011.

Figure 6. Graffiti at Gaza port is used to convey wishes for love and freedom. © 2019 UNRWA photo by Eugenie Reidy

Women living in families with more members and larger numbers of children experience more poverty and vulnerability than where family sizes are smaller – the highest poverty level (by size of household) of 61 per cent is experienced for individuals in the largest households with 10 or more members, described by PCBS as 'the poorest of the poor'[64]. Women who are younger, not the first wife in a polygamous household, without sons or children, or living with their husband's parents and relatives, are typically considered more vulnerable to oppression or violence. By contrast those from more middle class, educated households, with the backing of male relatives, are regarded as less so.

There is diversity in men's attitudes towards women, including some championing of women's rights by men. Men with greater wealth and position, with more education, or with more empowered mothers and less gender-conservative fathers, tend to hold more equitable attitudes[65]. It is also the case that women's disempowerment is not purely at the hands of men – female members of the household or community may also inhibit a woman's rights and freedoms.

Finally, in today's Gaza there are women in all locations and contexts with a strong sense of agency and rights, and many who actively bargain with and challenge patriarchy. Within homes, humanitarian organisations, government departments, private businesses and Gaza's cultural and arts scene, there are women taking up the mantle of change. Whether role modelling or directly agitating, they are using their active social and economic roles to push for a more progressive future for Gaza's women. Signs of change and transformation exist as a result of these women, education, and local women's rights movements[66].

Some optimism notwithstanding, Gaza is a uniquely difficult context for all, and in particular for women. Theirs is a situation of limited mobility and opportunity in every sense – physical, political, social and economic. The following report explores the uniqueness of women's coping against that backdrop.

63 PCBS 2018 (ii)
64 PCBS 2018 (ii)
65 UN Women et al 2017
66 UN Women et al 2017

Figure 5. Poster for UNRWA campaign against violence against children. © 2019 UNRWA photo by Eugenie Reidy

Figure 7. Gaza City seen from the port. © 2019 UNRWA photo by Eugenie Reidy

how does she cope?

"we're stranded but we have our lives to continue"

This section looks at the different ways women cope, and the outcomes of each. It is structured in three parts – day to day (or short-term) coping, months ahead (or medium-term) coping, and years ahead (or long-term) coping. Each part explores how different women cope within these time horizons, and what the outcomes or impacts of their coping might be. An initial section on quantitative survey results is also included, intended as a complement to the mainly qualitative findings that follow and that form the basis of this report.

The section's findings and insights are based on group discussions, interviews, home visits and survey responses. Wherever possible the direct voices or experiences of women in Gaza are evidenced.

survey results

As described in the earlier methodology section, the study included a structured survey of women in Gaza, having first identified in focus group discussions and interviews several key themes about coping in the short, medium and long term. Nineteen closed questions covered basic demographic data, coping and wellbeing[67]. The objective was to gain an illustrative sense of the prevalence and distribution of forms of coping among women in Gaza.

A total of 155 women returned completed copies of surveys to UNRWA offices in six locations, and their anonymous responses were inputted into a digital survey management program for analysis.

demographics

- The majority of women surveyed, around four in ten, are ***secondary educated***
- The majority of women surveyed, around four in ten, are ***aged between 25 and 34 years old.***
- The majority of women surveyed, over two thirds, describe themselves as ***not working;***
- The majority of women surveyed, around two thirds, are ***married***; more than one in ten are either ***divorced*** or ***widowed***, one in twenty describes herself as '***abandoned***', and very few are ***single***
- The majority of women surveyed, around six in ten, live in a ***separate home,*** while four in ten live in a ***shared home***

coping through enterprise or income-generating roles

- One in three women, in the past year, ***held a role not usually done by a woman***
- One in three women, in the past year, ***held a role involving family or community resistance***
- One in three women, in the past year, ***held a role beneath their education or skills***
- One in five women, in the past year, ***set up a new project, enterprise, business***
- Almost one in five women, in the past year, ***held a role dangerous for themselves or their family***

The results show dynamic coping and high levels of risky coping strategies being adopted by women of all demographics, even those that bring community resistance or personal danger. Perhaps unsurprisingly, disaggregated survey results show younger women are more likely to take on roles involving family or community resistance, and more educated women are more likely to set up a new project or business. Abandoned, single or divorced women are more likely to hold a role not usually done by a woman. Women who are the main household earner and who live in shared homes are more likely to adopt multiple forms of enterprise-related coping, seemingly pushing hardest to cope; while by contrast, older women adopt fewer forms of enterprise-related coping in general.

coping through seeking education, training and assistance

- Over eight in ten women, in the past year, ***sought assistance from government, UN, NGOs, community***
- Six in ten women, in the past year, ***sought more education or training***

67 Using the WHO-5 Wellbeing Index

The survey sample size is not statistically significant given the total number of responses, nor representative given the self-selection of women who chose to complete it and their bias as visitors to an UNRWA facility. Results are illustrative only and intended to be triangulated with the qualitative data that forms the bulk of this report as well as with external quantitative sources.

Notwithstanding the limits stated, the results of the survey carried out for this study are as follows:

The results show the normalisation of assistance-seeking behaviour, and aid coverage, with nearly all women surveyed having recently sought out government, non-government or community assistance. For older women (aged 65 and over) seeking external assistance was typically the only form of coping adopted. The findings also show the appetite among women for education and training, with more than half seeking some form of education or training recently, and the proportion greater among women already educated to a higher level. Detail is not given on the forms of education and training sought and their relevance to the local market opportunities however.

ability to make long-term plans

- Half of women, in the past year, ***felt unable to make long-term plans***

The results demonstrate starkly the extent to which women feel unable to make long-term plans and instead choose to focus on short and medium term plans and forms of coping. More educated women feel more able to make long-term plans, as do women under the age of 24. By contrast, after the age of 24 women's sense of inability to make long-term plans drops off steeply.

emotional wellbeing

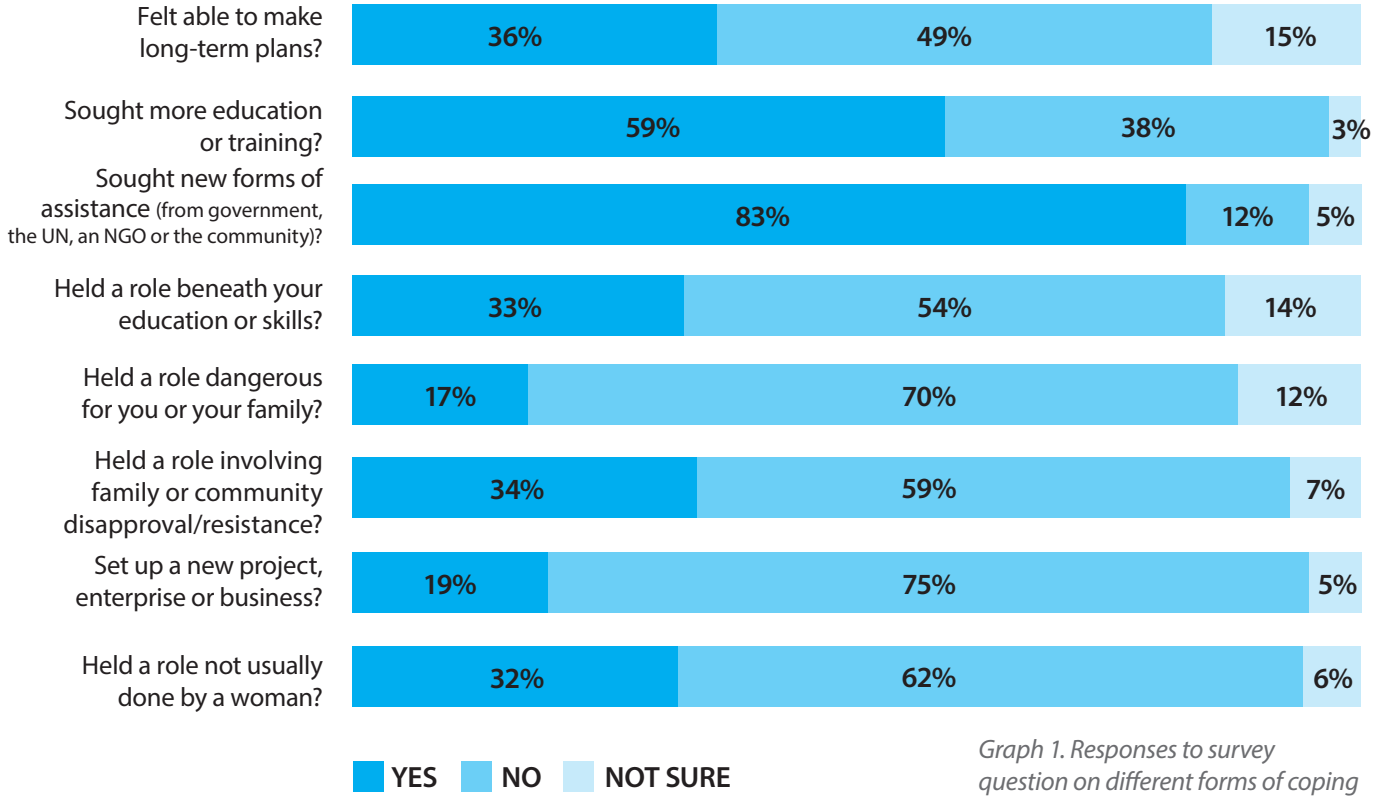
- The mean wellbeing score for this sample of women in Gaza is ***39 out of a possible 100***

The results indicate a very poor level of wellbeing among women, using one of the most widely adopted questionnaires for assessing subjective psychological well-being worldwide. The level is not much higher than the threshold for depression (28) and well below the level suggestive of poor emotional wellbeing that indicates further testing is required (50). By comparison, the mean score in Denmark was calculated at 70[68].

Based on the individual dimensions that make up the 5-part index, the statements most negatively answered (according to Likert scale statements on frequency in the last two weeks i.e. from 'all the time' to 'at no time') were: "I have felt calm and rested" and 'My daily life has been filled with things that interest me". This indicates not just a heightened sense of alert or anxiety but also a diminished sense of enjoyment and interest in daily life.

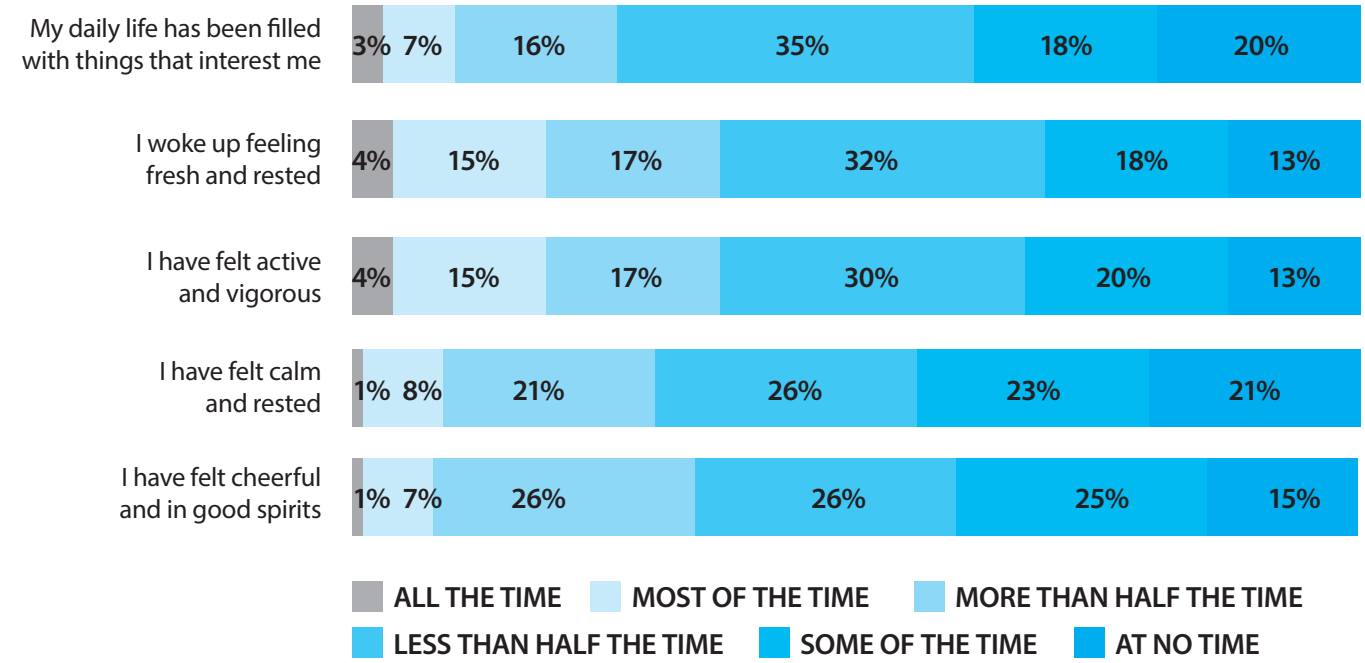
68 https://www.karger.com/Article/FullText/376585#ref23

in the past year, have you...



Graph 1. Responses to survey question on different forms of coping

over the last 2 weeks...



Graph 2. Responses to survey question on components of wellbeing (WHO-5 wellbeing index)

coping in the short term

"i lie awake thinking about what i'll cook for my children in the morning. It's tiring and stressful"

This section depicts short-term coping methods by women in Gaza, exploring how they make ends meet and face challenges on a daily basis. Food, cash, and aid-based coping mechanisms are briefly described, along with other forms of resourcefulness deployed by women to support themselves and their families.

Overall, a picture emerges of women frantically striving to cope on a daily basis, a frenetic juggling act to get food on the table. For vulnerable women, this seems to be at any cost – taking loans, depleting assets, overlooking utility bills and not paying health costs. Families crowd together to pool resources, continually splitting rooms and homes as the only way to accommodate a growing but trapped population. Women strain not only to feed their family and meet basic costs, but also to cope with other aspects of their situation like long power outages and lack of access to cash and services.

The strategies presented here offer short-term relief to women and the families they support, but can have negative impacts too. While many women describe being 'too busy surviving' to stop and reflect, others articulate costs in terms of physical or psychological health.

Illustration 2. Day-to-day survival through sacrifice
© 2019 UNRWA illustration by Majdal Nateel

At its most basic, coping on a day-to-day basis in Gaza revolves around securing food, paying rent and utility bills, and meeting necessary costs of education, healthcare and other essential services. It also involves dealing with shocks that might occur, from water and electricity shortages to market shortages of cash or other goods and the unexpected costs of conflict on property, health and lives.

For vulnerable women in Gaza, daily coping increasingly involves several key strategies: making changes to food consumption and spending, seeking external assistance, and engaging in exchange.

reducing food consumption

The most common way households cope with poverty and hardship is by reducing and modifying food consumption. A recent survey into food security in Gaza found that 66 per cent of households had bought cheaper food in the last week while 57 per cent had bought market leftovers. Other common strategies were reducing meal servings and the daily meal number (44 per cent), reducing adult meals to be able to feed children (38 per cent), and borrowing food (33 per cent)[69].

Women in discussions and interviews for this study[70] described the multitude of ways they deployed these strategies, typically more than one at a time, and the impacts that had.

A routine strategy for many women is reducing spending on food by buying cheaper ingredients: less fresh produce, less protein, and less diverse or quality items. For some women this involves buying leftover or spoiled food, such as the last vegetables left in the market or baked goods that are no longer fresh. Demonstrating how strategies are combined, one woman summarised her recent food spending by saying,

> *"I bought frozen meat which is cheaper, I bought spoiled vegetables from the market, I didn't buy fruit at all."*

Resourcefulness is key, and women described exchanging information on food price and availability, or special offers (e.g. available coupons) in supermarkets. They also exchange food types among themselves, and eat in larger family groups where it brings down meal costs. In extreme cases, women may borrow food or buy food on credit. Another vital strategy is the receipt and exchange of food aid assistance (see below).

At mealtimes, portion sizes are commonly reduced to make food go further. As the composition, size and sometimes even frequency of meals is altered to make ends meet or absorb additional non-food costs, children are prioritised over adults, guests over family, and men over women. Women place themselves last as they ensure children, husbands, and other relatives or guests eat. Their sacrifice in this regard is often something they bear with pride, pointing to a future where children will be grateful for what their mother did for them, or to religious ideals of suffering and patience being rewarded in time.

At the same time, a common impact for women is the everyday anxiety of trying to feed their family and household, and the sense of bearing that burden alone. While a common perception was that women are 'too busy surviving' to stop and reflect on the costs to their own physical or psychological health, one woman spoke for many others when she shared,

> *"I lie awake at night thinking about what to cook for my children in the morning. It's tiring and stressful."*

Over the long term, this reliance on food-based coping through a reduced quantity and quality of food also has health impacts. Eating less fresh or diverse food, and less nutritious food including so-called 'cheap calories' with less nutrients and protein, has become a common if not routine strategy for households enduring long-term poverty and privation under the conditions of the blockade. Yet many in Gaza today also see connections between this and chronic health conditions. Women explained the rising levels of overweight or obese children and young people as a consequence of the 'empty calories' they consume as well as their lack of opportunities for exercise. They also associated the climbing rates of cancer they saw, in many forms, with the population's reliance on canned food since the decline in local agriculture and the imposition of the blockade restricted access to fresh produce. Such perspectives reflect the very real health consequences of relying, long term, on less and lesser quality food in order to make ends meet, but also a general preoccupation among the population with their declining health and wellbeing. Women's anxiety over family health issues was very evident in discussions

69 FSS & PCBS 2018

70 For ease of writing, unless otherwise stated future references to the reflections or inputs of 'women' imply 'women consulted as part of this study'

and interviews, from simple frustration over inability to afford medication for common ailments to a more abstract sense of being stranded, undiagnosed and untreated, with health issues that they linked to the political context they lived in. In this lay another indication of the wide-ranging physical as well as psychological effects of living under blockade.

borrowing money, selling assets and not paying bills

Borrowing money and using savings or selling assets is perhaps the second most typical form of coping. The 2018 PCBS food security survey found that in the last week 32 per cent of households had borrowed money and 11 per cent had sold assets.

Many women who found themselves needing to provide single-handedly for their children – either because their husband was absent or incapacitated – described selling assets as an immediate means of raising cash in order to survive. Jewellery and furniture were items commonly exchanged for cash as a first resort. While this might have little knock-on effect in terms of family health or livelihood, it represents the end of a future safety net and thus a deepening of household and individual vulnerability. Sale of high-value furniture and jewellery is also a dent to the confidence or dignity of a woman accustomed to demonstrating her social status through the visible material possessions in her home or on her person.

Borrowing money and using savings are clearly short-term coping strategies which deepen a woman's longer-term vulnerability and that of her household, yet both are relatively common for women in Gaza. Some women described how erosion of personal and family savings or high-value assets was taking place – either gradually over time as conditions failed to improve, or suddenly as shocks hit. This made individual or family savings and assets less available as a coping strategy, and in some cases forced vulnerable women to turn to non-family money lenders to raise cash (with the additional risks involved).

Where cash cannot be raised, short-term coping involves simply not paying bills or necessary services. The most vulnerable women spoke of withholding children from education on account of the unaffordable associated costs of lunch money and a return bus fare. Many described denying the costs of healthcare for themselves or members of the family, due largely to lack of money but also (as with education) due to lack of access. As described in the previous section, ill health – whether routine or complex, chronic or acute – places a heavy burden on vulnerable households in Gaza. The failure to understand and treat it not only risks worsening health and wellbeing but also adds an additional anxiety for individuals, even to symbolise their despair. As one woman shared,

> *"I have trouble affording medicines, not just for me but also my mother who is a diabetic. I can't even afford the transport to take her to the hospital!"*

food assistance

In Gaza, food assistance is a normalised form of short-term coping: UNRWA and WFP provide some type of food aid, whether in-kind or in voucher form, to over half the population (over 1.2 million people)[71]. On a day to day basis, the use of food assistance is an essential form of coping for most households. Community assistance exists but has diminished as the population's vulnerability deepens and people are less able to look after vulnerable others. As one woman put it,

> *"People used to help and love each other, when the situation was better. With the blockade, the situation gets harder and now the whole community is in need. Vulnerable people can't be helped like they were in the past."*

Many women, especially the more vulnerable, would be at a loss without aid from government, United Nations agencies and NGOs. Some described UNRWA food assistance as the only food they receive yet still struggling to make ends meet, going without food when the ration runs out or borrowing money to buy additional items. As Gaza's rising poverty figures indicate (see Context), external assistance may be assisting from day to day but it is not alleviating poverty or sparing women from the day-to-day burden or trying to make ends meet. It is little wonder that vulnerable women described an endless cycle of worry over putting food on the table, and speak of 'surviving from one distribution to the next'. Women also described how efficiently they use the assistance they receive, including exchanging and transforming it to get the greatest gain for their household (see below). In this, women quite understandably seemed to be not only depicting the reality of their coping, but also (in a forum facilitated by UNRWA) positioning the external assistance they receive as indispensable, much valued, and efficiently used.

71 WFP 2017

exchange

With a damaged economy and lack of employment making household cash scarce for many, exchange is a critical means of coping. Women draw on their local networks – neighbours, friends and relatives – to find exchange partners for food, clothes and other goods, thus avoiding spending scarce cash. Some traders even accommodate exchange in their businesses, adapting to the cash-poor reality. As one woman explained, exchange is a critical part of daily life:

> *"Exchange is a big part of how we cope here. Even in the shop we exchange oil for food for example. And between women we exchange children's clothes. This has become more common now there is little cash in the economy."*

Many women described being so conditioned in this mode of coping that they saw exchange opportunities all around them. Considering the exchange potential of goods, even gifts, is now a reflex – as this woman's anecdote illustrates:

> *"The other day I saw a woman who'd been gifted a pot of honey by her parents. She loved it and wanted to take it home but went straight to the market to exchange it for food for her children."*

External food assistance, a staple household asset for many, is commonly subject to sale, exchange or 'upcycling' by women. It is usual for aid to be re-distributed or re-purposed to make it go further, and women in Gaza have multiple and creative ways of re-processing food assistance items for market (in addition to directly selling or exchanging them). They make bread from flour, cheese from milk, sweet pastries from multiple ingredients, and more. This enterprise is a simple, short-term way to make extra income for individual or household needs, and many women spoke with pride at their resourcefulness in transforming food assistance into goods for sale locally. As one woman shared,

> *"I made a clay oven and baked bread from the UNRWA flour to sell to the neighbours. And with the milk I get I make cheese to sell in the market."*

resourceful opportunism

Gaza is a challenging and fluid environment where short-term coping strategies need to be multiple and adaptive. One day the greatest issue a woman might face is lack of electricity, the next it may be a water shortage, the next an unexpected health cost or the absence of the family breadwinner. Women spoke at great length at what they had endured, from daily inconveniences to acute shocks and losses. They also spoke about how they coped and seized opportunities on a daily basis through their agile resourcefulness. Some described collecting and scavenging items for sale or exchange, for example used construction materials from old building sites, scrap metals with resale value, or leftover food that could be used to make animal feed. Others explained how they do housework in the middle of the night when the power is on, and collect firewood for cooking when gas is unavailable. As shared by one woman,

> *"When the gas runs out I collect firewood from the street to cook with, to prepare warm milk, to heat water for washing."*

Overall women presented a myriad of creative and resourceful ways of trying to make ends meet each day. The following sections explore longer-term strategies for this, including through enterprise and income generation.

coping in the medium term

"today women do whatever they can. they have to bear the responsibilities of both a mother and a father"

This section depicts key strategies employed by women in Gaza to cope in the medium term. Beyond the daily routine, these are the ways women provide for themselves and their family for the weeks and months ahead, often because of loss or dramatic decline in male breadwinner income.

With formal sector employment low, most livelihood or vocational strategies fall into the category of informal self-employment. They reveal an irrepressible and often creative entrepreneurialism among Gaza's women, with small enterprises carried out at home or in the community in ways that maximise opportunity and circumvent resistance. Yet many of these enterprises are limited in scope or come at a cost, whether to social or family status, personal dignity, or physical and emotional health. They reflect the so-called 'double oppression' of women in Gaza, where the economic and other effects of the conflict and blockade go hand-in hand with social conservatism that impacts their rights and freedoms.

In additional to enterprise, coping through reliance on different forms of welfare, formal or informal, has become almost a livelihood option in itself for women. Many apply considerable effort to networking and navigating their way to food, cash, legal or livelihood support from government, United Nations, non-governmental and religious organisations. As a strategy it offers women greater agency and the chance to realise their rights and potentially transform their situation for a while. Yet it also brings bureaucratic hurdles and the risk of stigma, is subject to change, and is rarely a solution beyond the immediately foreseeable future.

Despite considerable effort, dynamism and innovation, most coping strategies presented here are unlikely to be sustainable beyond a period of months. In addition, many come with associated risks and costs that mean women face difficult trade-offs. This section explores popular strategies and their impacts for the women driving them.

Illustration 3. Working 'like a father and a mother' © 2019 UNRWA illustration by Majdal Nateel

For many women, the income they make through vocational and livelihood strategies allows them to cope in the weeks or months ahead. While unemployment for women stands at 78 per cent[72], many are participating in the informal economy to make ends meet and women's overall participation in the labour force (while still low at 21 per cent) is estimated to have doubled since 2001[73] (see Context).

One in five women surveyed as part of this study had, in the last year, set up a new project, enterprise, or business. Formal employment with a reliable salary and other forms of protection might be preferred, but given the decline and fragility of both public and private sectors in today's Gaza it is little surprise that many women (like men) are resorting to self-employment and individual enterprises.

Enterprises are constrained not only by market options but also by social expectations of women's roles which classify them as 'suitable' for women or not. In today's Gaza there are also new or reformulated opportunities that provide women a form of income and a way of coping.

taking on 'suitable' self-employed roles

To provide for themselves and their families, women in Gaza engage most commonly, and where possible, in roles considered typical and acceptable for women. With minimal representation in professional sectors (see Context) and prescriptive social norms around gender, women are most likely to take up roles that are in the private sphere or home-based, and are an extension of women's domestic skills. This also accommodates the demands of their domestic duties, including child rearing, housework and caring for the family, which are significantly greater than those of men.

It is extremely common to hear women describe micro-enterprises in beauty, education, and production of food, clothes and handicrafts. Education and secretarial positions are also common. Perhaps unsurprisingly, vocational training options tend to match these 'suitable' roles, with many courses targeted at women focused on beauty services, production of handicrafts, food or household goods, and domestic micro-enterprise in general. The study heard from many women who had completed short courses in beauty treatments or hairdressing, and food production, and gone on to create small businesses run from their home.

This limited range of opportunities, bound by limited expectations, has limited market viability. Many women find that establishing another micro-enterprise in beauty, fashion or food in their local area does not guarantee them long-term success, not least in the current spending climate. The blockade's negative effects on access to inputs, costs of inputs, and community spending all conspire to make female-led enterprise in the informal economy a challenging prospect. A woman with her own beauty salon reported making as little as 3-5 dollars a day, after several months of training and capital investments in equipment and products. A woman who bought a sewing machine expected to take many months, picking up odd repair or tailoring jobs, to pay off her investment. Micro-enterprises of this nature rarely support a household for those women charged with doing so. They might at best bring supplementary income, while for a few (in the right conditions) there is a success to be made. Some women with popular food production enterprises, or who are collaborating over enterprises, seem to be doing better – for instance a woman who described the relative success she and her neighbour were having making pastries and selling them to the local schools.

Despite the historical importance of women in agriculture or the interest of women to engage in broader markets and emerging industries, few programs seem targeted towards women's skills in these fields.

As with all informal self-employment, the cost of these roles for vulnerable women can be heavy burden of labour, lack of protection or entitlements, and ultimately lack of opportunity to graduate out of poverty. In many cases Gaza's depressed spending climate and fickle market can inhibit or break enterprises. For example the study heard from a single mother commissioned to make embroidered clothes for a fashion trader, which brought good income (enough to bring other local women into the enterprise) until the business collapsed and disappeared. She went on to access UNRWA training in beauty treatments, and set up a mini hairdressing initiative in her home as her main income. While she undercharges to promote loyalty among women from the local camp, she struggles to attract custom because, as she sees it,

> *"Women prioritise spending on children's clothes rather than their own hair and beauty."*

72 UN OCHA 2019
73 PCBS 2018

taking on 'unsuitable' roles despite resistance

To make ends meet, some women in Gaza take on roles considered 'unsuitable' for women, often against resistance. In contrast to the 'suitable' roles described above, these are typically market-based or in the public sphere and run counter to socially conservative ideas of women's place in society. Examples might be a woman working in a public market stall or shop, or providing a cleaning or care service in a private home not their own. The study heard numerous examples of women taking on such roles, against resistance, and its survey indicated the considerable extent to which this happens: one in three women reported having done a role 'not usually done by a woman' in the last year. Similarly, one in three women reported having held a role 'involving family or community resistance' in the last year.

Married women tend to face resistance or opposition from husbands and male relatives, but it may also come from community and neighbours, parents and parents-in-law, siblings and siblings-in-law, or children. Added to this there may be resistance in the marketplace itself linked to competition from other traders. Gaza's economy is stretched tight and unsurprisingly many established traders are not keen on new arrivals in the marketplace, including women. This leads to a sense of resistance on many fronts. One woman who took on a public-facing role as shopkeeper described the challenge of this as follows,

> *"I had a shop that many in the community resented. It was hard, going against people's ideas of what I could or couldn't do."*

Case studies contained in this report give more detail on similar experiences.

Typically women in this position see the option as unappealing but unavoidable, given the burden of their responsibilities and often the absence of a male breadwinner in the household. Many are forced to show impressive tenacity in ignoring family or community judgement. One woman described being left with seven children to feed when her husband got a chance to move abroad, and needing to make money after spending the proceeds of the jewellery and household furniture sold when he first left. The only option she could find was cleaning private homes. Her husband's family objected and challenged her for insulting their honour with an indecent role. She made them an ultimatum: support me and the children and I'll stop, or don't support me but let me continue this work. She still cleans private homes, and takes on other income-generating opportunities she comes across.

With women sharing numerous similar stories, there was agreement around the need to sacrifice reputation and risk judgement for the sake of children or family, despite the difficult choices to be made and the difficult positions this put them in. As one woman put it, *"It hurt my dignity but I had to do it"*.

Another explained,

> *"Women now assume the role of breadwinner. They are forced to become household heads because of the death, absence or unemployment of men, but they are not always equipped for this. This forces them to find opportunities that are not decent. It is an extra social burden."*

Clearly there is tension and anxiety for women put in the position of insisting on certain income-generating roles deemed unsuitable. They face stigmatisation, pressure and sometimes violence from family or community (see next section). Some even believe that persistently resisting gender-based stereotypes affects their sense of identity and reduces the extent to which they feel like a woman. As one woman explained,

> *"Taking on roles not seen as women's changes you. You're seen as less of a woman, and maybe you see yourself as less of a woman. Because it changes how you walk, how you speak. And there's a cycle – the reactions you get only increase the changes in how you behave, look and feel."*

Another woman, a single mother subsisting on a range of micro-enterprises in a refugee camp who has been providing single-handledly for her family for many years, described the emotional costs of her experience more bluntly. She explained,

> *"I feel I look like a woman on the outside, but my feelings inside are different. I don't feel the feelings of a woman. The difficult situations and challenges I've lived have affected my body and my mind."*

Still, conditions dictate that many women continue to take on 'unsuitable' livelihood options despite resistance, and find creative ways to do so, for instance taking their business online or giving it a 'male front' (see below).

Illustration 4. Continuing despite disapproval
© 2019 UNRWA illustration by Majdal Nateel

coping with resistance, household tension and violence

Stories of opposition faced by women compelled to take on 'unsuitable' roles throw into relief the rigid sociocultural constraints of the context for Gazan women. The study heard so frequently from women describing resistance from husbands or male relatives when going against rigid expectations placed on them that the sample was adjusted to provide more inputs from men. One husband described the restrictions on his wife's vocational choices as protection, forbidding her to work in the market where "*the municipality could treat her inappropriately or others could disrespect her*". Another explained, from his perspective, what drives rigid expectations of women and their roles:

> *"Our way is conservative. We prefer to see women not doing the same roles as men because of the image of women in the Koran, and because some jobs aren't suitable for women due to their feelings and emotions."*

Some believe this social conservatism is rising in today's Gaza. It is commonly pointed out that as economic depression makes it harder for men to play the role of primary breadwinner, frustrated men can become anxious, depressed, or resort to violence within the home. Women who enter the workplace out of necessity can inadvertently threaten male identities, adding to tensions and sometimes violence in the home. It becomes a difficult trade-off: a woman wants to find ways to make a living to support the family, but risks challenging men's identities (and provoking their wrath or violence) in the process.

Women who explained this were keen to stress the impact of overcrowding on intra-household tensions and violence. There is extraordinarily high population density in Gaza (over 5,000 persons per square kilometer) and household sizes are large (on average, 6.1 persons live in each household, and larger household sizes correlate directly with increased poverty – see Context). As the population number rises, there is nowhere to expand geographically and coping involves splitting rooms or adding rooms where possible. The skyline of urban Gaza, with its scaffolding and partly constructed higher storeys, describes well the rapid upward expansion as families make room for more members. Nearly half the women surveyed for this study described living with their extended family, i.e. their husband's parents and relatives, and a significant number described the tension associated with this. Many discussions held as part of this study became a site for women to swap experiences and find solidarity in their shared difficulties, and the stress of living with in-laws were a common theme. In one discussion, a woman who had married at 15 prompted much laughter with a dramatic description of how hard it had been to live with her sister-in-law; as she put it, "*She made so many problems for me, it was like seeing the night stars in the middle of the day!*" After five years of this problem, the family built her and her husband (and their children) a home on the top of the house so they could enjoy a separate space. While she could look back with humour – and indeed humour was widely upheld as a coping strategy by people used to decades of hardship – she was describing a common experience where extended, crowded living conditions can be a site of tension as well as cohesion and support.

The closedness of Gazan society is also thought to exacerbate conditions. Movement in and out of the Gaza Strip is close to impossible for a majority of the population, and in such physically restricted and pressured communities there can be more sensitivity around people's roles, behaviours and reputations. This particularly applies to women – those who push the boundaries of socially prescribed gender roles have less room for reinvention, less space to avoid judgement, and less recourse in the event their reputation is called into question. Certainly most would be unable to leave even temporarily. This leads to a feeling of entrapment and scrutiny, as people feel piled on top of each other and living in too-close quarters. As one woman explained,

> *"A woman here feels under surveillance, watched, and aware of doubts or questions about her reputation."*

Finally, there is the role of conflict and politics. Clearly the ongoing and at-times intense conflict stokes tension and anxiety, and as well as highly visible reminders in the physical landscape (and in displaced or grieving families) it is a steady preoccupation in news media and conversation. This creates tension in all contexts, including within households where economic and other worries already bite deep into family wellbeing. Additionally Gaza's political context, in particular the form of political Islam associated with the ruling party Hamas, has a relationship with attitudes towards women. Some regard social conservatism, and in particularly patriarchy as a structure for power and control, as having achieved greater political legitimacy in the current political era where it can be justified as a response to the occupation.

At the same time, many women interviewed for this study were unwilling to blame the conflict and blockade entirely for rigid gender norms or unjust behavior (including violence) by men. They were reluctant to allow the political situation to be used as a 'cover' for unacceptable treatment, pointing instead to longstanding behavioural norms that condone or normalise oppression of women, and to the relative lack of women's rights in this context.

Still others believe that social conservatism is falling, or inevitably must in the near future, due to women's increased economic participation. The rise in women taking on new economic roles and pushing boundaries in order to make ends meet is having the effect of changing acceptability, even if slowly. As one man in a discussion group put it, "*People have started to accept more women in the market – after 13 years of blockade they're forced to*". Another carefully described an example of change in acceptance of new roles for women, including ones previously considered 'unsuitable', when the economic return made it inevitable:

> *"There is a women in this area who is a fisherwoman, the only fisherwoman. At first her uncles and father refused to let her fish, but she was the only breadwinner for her family and she insisted. She's proved herself, she's doing well, and now it's accepted that she does it."*

Regardless of the trajectory of social conservatism, today's Gaza sits in a perfect storm of high unemployment, conflict conditions, and unpredictable access to (or affordability of) key services including water, electricity and health. Households are stressed about debt, food and the future, and men are increasingly unemployed or otherwise affected. For women seeking ways to cope, they are affected not only by anxiety but also resistance to certain livelihood choices driven by social conservatism and patriarchy. It is easy to see how this creates not only household stress but also domestic violence, which in Gaza affects more than half of all women (see Context). Within this study, personal experiences of violence were alarmingly common in discussions among supposedly broad samples of women.

Extraordinary strength is shown by women in response, from those who actively seek to change the context and claim rights to those who find ways to endure in their pursuit of livelihood options with which to support their family. The following sections elaborate on the risks they bear, the creative strategies they employ, and (longer term) the patience they cultivate or draw from spiritual sources.

taking on desperate or dangerous roles

As well as unsuitable roles that invite resistance from family or community, some women in Gaza find ways to cope that are well beneath their skill level or even directly dangerous.

Men might be more likely to take on physically dangerous roles including manual labour (or, previously, work in tunnels) but women too speak of the demeaning and risky work they take in order to make ends meet. A survey for this study showed the extent to which women are taking on dangerous roles as a means of coping: almost one in five women described having held a role they considered 'dangerous for themselves or their family' in the last year.

Media reports include references to increased prostitution as an indicator of economic desperation. Women met directly through this study described taking on difficult manual labour roles where possible, and scavenging for recyclable materials from dangerous building or missile strike sites. This included searching the streets collecting and carting scrap metal, stones and materials useful for construction, and other materials. With the blockade in place, the re-use value of these materials was good, although gathering them was unpleasant and risky – as this woman explained:

> *"I collected cables from the abandoned settlements, placed them in the fire to remove the plastic, and sold the metal. The smell was terrible but I made a little money this way."*

In some cases these roles pose significant physical risks (or, in the case of criminal activities, risk of imprisonment). This can add to existing safety concerns for women, especially single women or mothers who live alone in crowded camps and feel unprotected from risks – the importance of safe shelter was a constant theme in discussions. In addition, there is the reputational risk and the cost of having to go against family or community resistance shaped by expectations of 'suitable' roles for women (see previous section). Other costs of taking on dangerous roles include psychological stress and anxiety.

More commonly, and predictably given the high numbers of educated employed in Gaza – over two thirds of women with more than 13 years of education are unemployed (see Context) – women take on roles beneath their skills level. Formal employment in professional sectors is scarce and skilled roles in the informal economy are hard to come by, especially for women. The survey carried out for this study found one in three women had, in the last year, taken on a role beneath their education or skills.

The plight of Gaza's youth when it comes to unemployment and reduced horizons is well documented , and while this study did not focus on youth in particular it did inevitably hear from mothers or young people themselves about the impacts of this. Younger informants spoke of their desperation, of being willing to take on anything that would provide financial autonomy or just raise some income. As one young woman put it,

> *"I'm a graduate in social work but if I could be paid to clean shoes I'd do it."*

Again, the costs of taking on roles drastically beneath skills levels, especially for young people who have spent years accumulating expertise and ambition at university, includes despair and psychological stress.

new or innovated enterprise

In a challenging landscape of limited livelihood options for women, some find ways to make a living that are new – either in new sectors, or in existing sectors but done in new ways.

Among younger women especially, there is growing engagement in less traditional enterprises including information technology (IT) and telecommunications. These opportunities tend to be less culturally proscribed and to attract people with new skills and a readiness to learn new industries. The study heard how new opportunities in IT, digital or mobile phone services are being picked up by women, and how education or training options in these fields have become more available. Women spoke of being trained in specialist areas of IT, in digital marketing, and in mobile phone repair.

There is optimism about these new opportunities, but currently the availability of roles is limited. Gaza's 'de-development' complex sees both established and emerging industries stagnant or shrinking, and few market opportunities. In addition, there are often too many interested and qualified candidates for those that do exist, particularly in the field of IT. One young woman interviewed for this study had studied an advanced IT degree for five years, urged to choose it because of the likely job opportunities it would lead to. But so far she had held only small, short term positions related to her acquired skills, and had found the market to be saturated with IT graduates relative to limited demand. The lack of opportunities for her degree had become so profound that the university had discontinued the course in an attempt to balance supply with demand.

As with other livelihood options, the usual constraints of conservatism or preference apply to these roles. A number of women who learned mobile phone repair at UNRWA training courses reported struggling to find a business willing to take them on given the public, customer-facing nature of the role.

In addition to new enterprises, some women are taking existing enterprises onto new platforms. Internet-based business presents a range of new opportunities, innovating trading in a way that circumvents norms about suitability of roles for women. Rather than taking a trade into the public marketplace where female traders are less accepted, taking it online effectively retains it in the private sphere. The internet in Gaza is without restriction, and popular social media platforms are widely used. Particularly for women in urban areas, online access is relatively easy through smart phones, a 3G mobile network, daily wifi passwords for sale by local traders, and use of batteries in homes during power outages. This gives connected women the opportunity to market and sell online, without setting foot in the public marketplace and provoking possible family or community resistance. The study heard from those engaged in online sale of handicrafts, food, and other items, either on dedicated websites or simply Facebook pages and Instagram accounts. One who was selling handicrafts on Facebook explained that as well as helping her provide for the needs of her family, the online business allowed her 'to stay in one place'. Another explained how a collective of women had taken to online enterprise by describing,

"Some of us make pastries and sell them on Facebook – that's how we get around not being able to sell in the market."

While limited to women with internet connectivity and the skills and knowledge to establish an online initiative, this is a potentially growing opportunity. Still, it is hampered by the general slump in consumption and trading in Gaza, with the local market relatively flat and opportunities to trade beyond Gaza restricted by the blockade.

Finally, 'male-fronted' enterprises are a common, innovative form of coping by women seeking to take an enterprise to market but avoid community or family objections to them doing so. As above, Gaza's social conservatism defines acceptable gender roles and women engaging in roles considered 'unsuitable' can face resistance from their family or the community. This study heard numerous examples of women who, aware of this yet determined to run an enterprise to support their family, circumvent the challenge by creating a 'male front' for their initiative.

This involves a male relative in front, while the woman designs and manages the enterprise from a back seat. Whether it is a shop, stall or service, the planning and day-to-day running of the enterprise is driven by the woman while a man takes on the public facing role. Women engaged in these 'male fronted' enterprises deploy considerable emotional as well as business intelligence. They actively manage the feelings of their husband, son or other involved person, often keeping their own name, pride and reputation at a necessary distance. One woman spoke proudly of the well-known strategy of 'male fronting' female-led enterprises by saying,

> *"Women here have a lot of emotional intelligence. They know how to make a man think an idea is his."*

Many examples were encountered during this study, at different scales and in different sectors. Frequently they involved husbands at the front of women's enterprises. One woman interviewed described how, after her husband suffered a work injury that left his legs permanently damaged, she set up a shop with support from UNRWA in the spare room of her house that opens onto the street. Her husband sits at the counter and sells the produce that she makes, while she looks after stock, accounts and other details. Another woman described her impossible dream of being a taxi driver – despite knowing she could never achieve this given social and gender norms, the idea symbolised freedom and empowerment – and how she channelled this into a tuk tuk taxi business fronted by her husband. He drives but it was her who applied for the loan and chose the tuk tuk, and it is her who lovingly maintains the tuk tuk and runs the business. As she proudly explained,

> *"I encouraged my husband to do this tuk tuk business – but it was my dream and I am the coordinator and supervisor."*

For women with older sons, they too can be the business front. An older woman described how her home-based pastry business had taken off, attracting the interest of hotels and restaurants. She employed a son to take care of deliveries and then another to be responsible for marketing and business growth. Now all six of her sons are involved in the business that she continues to run from her home. Another woman interviewed was abandoned by her husband when he had the chance to move abroad, and got a loan from UNRWA to set up a market stall. Yet the opposition was so great that she felt forced to take her children with her to work – as she saw it, "*people were not so disrespectful if I had my children with me*". With her stall eventually doing well and some additional investment, she went on to set up a small neighbourhood shop selling basic food items. She runs every aspect with meticulous care but she makes sure it is her eldest son present at the counter, "*for the acceptance – because if people saw a women sitting in the shop they would walk out*". She has named the grocery after her son to give him a sense of pride.

There were many more examples of this form of coping, and some are given in more detail in the case studies included in this report.

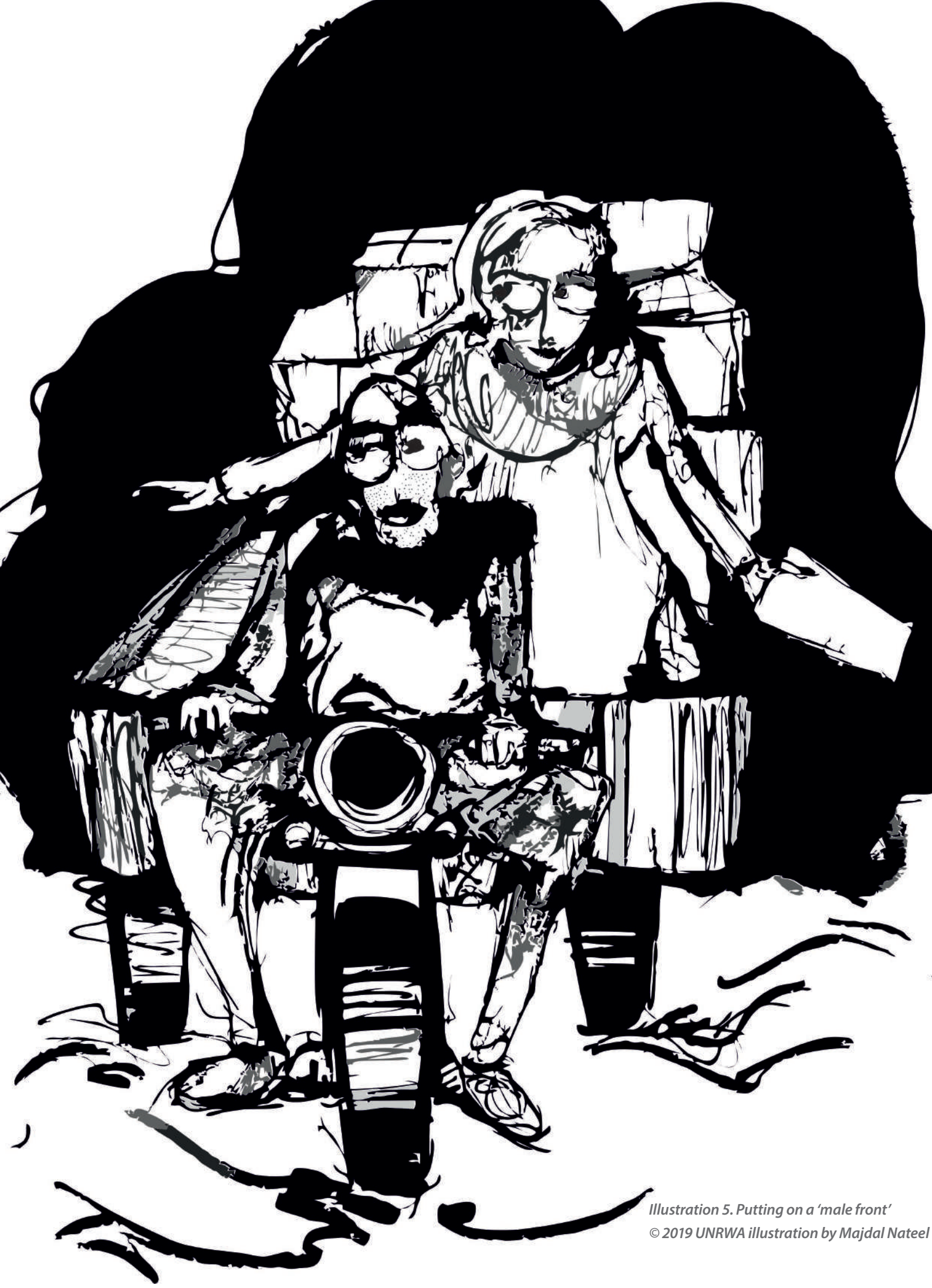


Illustration 5. Putting on a 'male front'
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leveraging the aid system

As well as economic roles and enterprises of different forms, access to welfare is the other key means by which women in Gaza cope in the medium term.

Levels of aid in Gaza are extremely high, with well over half the population accessing some support from UN, government, NGO or community welfare agencies: UNRWA and WFP assist more than 1.2 million people with some type of food aid[74] (see Context). Thirteen years into an economic blockade and decades into a persistent conflict, aid is a key presence and industry in contemporary Gaza, and is embedded in the political, social and market realities of daily life. Unsurprisingly, women have become very proficient at navigating the welfare or aid system to support themselves and their families, learning about and leveraging opportunities through proactive networking and access strategies.

Men seem to be less adept at navigating and accessing aid and welfare opportunities, and in discussions for this study were quick to note the achievements of women in this area. They shared their wives' energies and successes in getting external assistance, with some referencing their own lack of vigour or results by comparison – and several commenting that it made them feel as if they were begging. One man praised it as a 'strength of women' that they can elicit food and assistance from relatives, neighbours and NGOS. Another remarked on the networking and entrepreneurial skills applied by women to leverage the aid sector by saying,

> *"Ladies are willing to start businesses, and to start relationships through networking with NGOs to get their businesses started."*

Indeed, for many women in Gaza leveraging aid has almost become a vocation in itself, spanning opportunities for food, cash, legal assistance, enterprise training and seed funding. Yet it takes considerable time and effort to navigate a multi-layered system where opportunities continually emerge and change. External assistance is subject to external conditions beyond women's control, and is precarious in the context of political factors affecting the funding or governance of government as well as non-government assistance.

Additionally, complex eligibility criteria can make aid opportunities a bureaucratic labyrinth. The most commonly raised example of this relates to government welfare for abused or abandoned women, with many women in discussions held for this study describing their angst at criteria for this. As an example, a vulnerable woman needs to be officially divorced to qualify for Ministry of Social Development welfare, requiring her to take on a legal system that favours men as well as accept the social status of divorce. Some women described the difficulty of weighing up the benefits of the regular assistance with the disadvantages of the social stigma of being divorced. Others were set on becoming divorced in order to qualify for assistance, but couldn't get their absent or unwilling husband to play his necessary role in the process – as this woman explained,

> *"My husband divorced me verbally rather than in court because he has debts he doesn't want to pay. That was two years ago. I want to be approved with the government as a divorced woman so I can get welfare to help support my children. But I can't get my husband to legally approve the divorce which would give me the documents. I don't even know where he is now."*

Another example given was that a divorced woman, to qualify for government assistance, must be living alone and not share a kitchen with other adults in order to qualify. A single, abandoned woman interviewed for this study was living with her widowed mother, and because they shared a kitchen they could not qualify for assistance. Such criteria have been set up as necessary protocols for a complex welfare system covering hundreds of thousands of people in a vulnerable context. Yet from the user perspective they can clearly be challenging, and make for difficult choices for vulnerable women.

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74 WFP 2017

As well as the effort and bureaucracy required, accessing aid can also be humiliating. During discussions for this study women talked frequently about which aid options are better or worse in terms of dignity, and about navigating feelings of pride, both theirs and their families. There was strong agreement across ages, locations and other differences on the need for assistance to be provided with dignity. Some challenge welfare agencies when they feel humiliated to ask for help. Others routinely disguise assistance for the sake of their family's pride, to avoid the impression that they are begging. As one mother explained,

> *"My children refused a donation of secondhand clothes. So I prepared a package of their old clothes, nicely folded and wrapped, and said it was an exchange. They were happy with that. They don't want to beg."*

Perhaps most significantly, accessing aid and welfare rarely eradicates a woman's vulnerability. Assistance of cash and food allows her to subsist day to day, and to provide for her family. Longer-term support of vocational training or start-up capital for enterprises can be transformative in terms of enabling her to generate some income as well as confidence, yet opportunities are often limited by market opportunities and social norms (see previous section). There is little to suggest that significant socioeconomic change is possible through external assistance, however proactive and energetic a woman is at leveraging this.

Despite the caveats, political conditions and the demise of industry and private sector mean that leveraging external assistance remains a significant coping strategy for many women and their families in in today's Gaza. Aid and welfare offers women agency, can be materially transformative in the medium-term, and helps them realise their material and legal rights. It is not a route out of vulnerability, but for many it is a crucial means of alleviating it and of coping in the weeks and months ahead.

The following and final section looks at women's longer-term planning, coping and prospects in Gaza.

Illustration 6. Working the welfare system
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coping in the long term

"you daren't think outside the box or you realise your imprisonment"

This section explores coping strategies of women in Gaza that can be considered longer-term, providing for women and their families for more than just the months that lie ahead.

While understanding women's long-term coping strategies was a key objective, it was hard to achieve this. Most women consulted found the concept of long-term strategies hard to relate to, and instead explained feeling relatively unable to consider the future.

The section explores the sobering reasons behind many women's lack of realistic long-term plans: they are absorbed in a day-to-day 'survival mode' that leaves little energy for long-term planning; and they have seen the futility of long-term planning.

It explores the disempowerment resulting from lack of long-term planning for many women.

Finally, the section looks at the so-called strategies that are in place among women in Gaza. These include adapting children's expectations to the lower horizons of life in Gaza, pursuing higher education as an insurance policy, and in some cases deferring marriage. Beyond that, abstract but important strategies include dreaming of escape, and drawing on reserves of patience, spirituality, and faith.

In Gaza today, many women appear not to have long-term coping strategies in place. A survey for this study found that as many as one in two women feel unable to make long-term plans. Instead they feel that they are 'too busy getting by' in a context where making a living and dealing with shocks is all-consuming. In addition many have become conditioned by experience in the futility of making plans that can so easily be swept away.

unable or unwilling to plan

Living in Gaza implies a frenetic pace for the many women trying to feed a number of children, generate household income, deal with shocks and chase limited opportunities. They move between domestic demands, income-generating enterprises and other forms of labour, while trying to navigate limited access to water and electricity plus episodes of conflict, ill health or other issues.

In day to day terms, the poverty affecting more than half the population and the ever-present backdrop of conflict means many women are constantly busy, their resources and energies consumed with everyday coping and survival. When asked about long-term plans, many women wanted to be sure it was understood that they simply couldn't give energy to making any. Their capacity to organise and strategise beyond the immediate horizon was limited in a world where they were 'too busy surviving'. As one woman put it,

> *"People live day to day, mainly thinking of the next aid distribution."*

Half of women surveyed for this study reported feeling unable to make long-term plans, and one in five had at no time in the last two weeks felt calm and rested.

Simply putting one foot in front of the other, rather than looking to a further horizon, also indicates a sense of disempowerment when it comes to making plans. For many in today's Gaza, experience has proved that plans are easily thrown aside, and women remind themselves (and each other) that it's not wise to make a long-term plan. Many talked of the losses they'd endured or witnessed, and how this cautions them not to invest too much expectation in the future. As one woman explained,

> *"Everything is fragile here. People don't make long-term plans because they've seen lives and houses here one minute and gone the next."*

Indeed there are plenty of visible reminders of how fickle the situation of Gaza is today. With services and infrastructure limited, the landscape is punctuated by the uncleared rubble of homes and businesses destroyed in recent conflict or missile strikes – leaving people in little doubt as to the political and economic situation they inhabit. A young woman interviewed insisted that she would not buy a house even if she had the money for one, explaining, "*I might buy land as an investment, but not a house, because I've seen too much destruction*". Another described her daily reminder of Gaza's fragility:

> *"Every day I pass a street of rubble where shops used to be. They weren't small shops, they were high end shops. Every day the sight reminds me how fragile life is here."*

In addition to feeling conditioned by the environment and context to avoid making long-term plans, many women feel their ability to make long-term plans is limited by a relative lack of decision-making power in the family. Especially with regard to decisions about children and home, women in traditional families often defer decision-making authority to male family members or older female family members.

As explored in previous sections, the energy and coping strategies of many women in Gaza is dynamic, creative, and determined. But it is clear that for a large proportion, their ability to strategise long-term is significantly inhibited in a context where day-to-day demands are high and their ability to plan for the long-term future is low.

The daily existence of people in Gaza, particularly women, has been termed resilience. It is certainly true that few women are willing to let their children go hungry, and most commit every effort to make ends meet. As one mother insisted, "*We're stranded but we have our lives to continue*". Yet many women also feel pushed to their limits, and avoid reflecting on the future as a result. For some with awareness of aid narratives, there is discomfort at the idea that their routine of short-term coping shows 'resilience' or 'grit' that might be admired. Instead, they feel it reflects their disempowerment – as this woman explained,

> *"I hate the term resilience. I know the international community loves it. But it's not about resilience, it's about having to continue and finding a way to survive day after day."*

Conditioning yourself to avoid planning for the future takes its toll. A wellbeing survey for this study, using a globally recognised wellbeing index[75], showed the mean wellbeing score of women in Gaza was 39 per cent. This reflects a very poor level of emotional wellbeing; by comparison, the mean score in Denmark was 70[76].

Some women admit that an additional cost is fear of the future. In discussions and interviews, a common theme was the importance women attached to not showing the fear they feel, and instead maintaining an impression of strength in front of their community, family and children. This takes effort but is highly valued. One single mother interviewed, a confident and independent woman with her own home and several micro-enterprises, came across as stridingly fearless. But when asked if there was anything she was afraid of, her response was quick: "*The future*". This was a confidential disclosure however, as when asked what she is teaching her daughter she said she prioritised the importance of looking strong *"even if you don't feel it"*. Just as she carefully hides her own fear from the world, she wants her daughter to learn to do the same. Other women shared her emphasis not only on the importance of hiding their own fear, but on guiding their daughters to do the same.

In some form, strategies are put in place by women to equip themselves and their families for the future. These include adapting the expectations of children to Gaza's horizon of prospects and opportunities, and looking to education or escape.

adapting children's expectations and prospects

For many mothers, adapting children's expectations and prospects to better suit the reality includes urging them to be more vocational in their ambitions, and to prepare for the limited opportunities on offer. The study heard mothers urging their children to make more pragmatic and less intellectual education choices, like studying mechanics instead of social sciences or secretarial skills instead of law, given the dismal employment prospects in Gaza. Bringing to life the statistics on youth unemployment (which stands at 60 per cent – see Context) mothers shared stories of their older children's unemployment and their attempts to divert younger children from the same disappointment. This starts early for many, with one mother explaining how she urges her six-year old to become a car mechanic so he will be sure of work in the future. Another who was supporting her frustrated older children who were unable to get jobs, was clear on what future advice she would give her younger ones:

> *"Now I teach my children to be workers and that's it."*

A cost of this is clearly the unmet potential of youth in today's Gaza. Many also see a profound sense of unfulfillment and lost ambitions being experienced among the younger generations, and among their parents too. Women described this disappointment, including one who concluded, "*The situation has destroyed the dreams of mothers and their children*". Women in more urban areas where internet connectivity is high were quick to point out that part of the injustice lies in the fact that children and young people are aware of what they can't have: with an unrestricted internet, with relatives abroad, and by following foreign celebrities, influencers, soaps and films, they see how unbounded the opportunities of childhood and youth elsewhere in the world can be. Mothers of digitally connected and more ambitious children feel this worst – as the following woman explained:

> *"It's more tiring when you see your children being smart and energetic – because you have no guarantee you can fulfil their lives. Our children are stranded in their dreams."*

Many families, especially larger ones or those where the mother is the sole breadwinner, rely on income from older children for support. While it's seen as a form of reciprocal pay-back for sacrifices made in bringing children up, it can also restrict the next generation's independence. One woman interviewed for this study, a single mother of seven, described how her oldest son had wanted to be a journalist but she had encouraged him to pursue hairdressing instead given the market opportunities. He now runs a local salon which she heavily supports, and the proceeds are used to pay for family costs. Another described a similar situation of reducing her son's prospects as follows:

> *"My son got a scholarship to Sweden but we refused to let him go because he's an important breadwinner for the family. He has a small mobile cart to sell vegetables."*

A possible consequence of adapting children's expectations to suit Gaza's limited context in this way is tension between generations. This was not articulated in discussions however, where women raised the issue as one way in which they actively try to cope and shore up their family's prospects in the longer-term.

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75 WHO-5 Wellbeing Index; and see Methodology

76 https://www.karger.com/Article/FullText/376585#ref23

Illustration 7. Adjusting children's dreams
© 2019 UNRWA illustration by Majdal Nateel

Given their own experiences as women in today's Gaza, many mothers adapt their daughters' expectations and prospects in a particular direction by way of response. They anticipate that their daughters will have significant economic as well as family responsibilities, and fear they too may find themselves abandoned physically or economically in a marriage with children to look after. Mothers counsel daughters to be prepared to have to cope alone, to always show strength even if it's just a disguise, and to weigh up both marriage and education carefully.

As described above, some mothers guide their daughter's education to be vocational in the hope it will better secure a future income. By contrast others insist on longer, further forms of education for their daughters, in the hope this will provide them with a higher social standing and better marriage prospects. Or, as several were careful to point out, in the hope this will help them if their marriage does not last. One woman explained this simply by saying,

> *"If she is divorced or loses her husband, she is better protected if she's educated."*

Young women themselves, aware of their possible future burdens, seek education as an economic shield. Seeking higher education is not only in response to the current situation, for there is a longstanding value placed on education in Palestinian society in general (for both women and men) and literacy and education levels reflect this. But for younger women in Gaza today, they are alert to what older women are experiencing – the frenzied juggling act to make ends meet, and the risk of physical or economic abandonment by husbands that will leave them the major breadwinner – and choose to further their education as a form of insurance. The proverb 'education is my weapon' was cited by several young women explaining how they hoped their higher education would protect them by leading to secure and well-paid jobs. Indeed today, women in Gaza are more highly educated than men (13 per cent hold a university degree compared to 9 per cent of men – see Context). A survey undertaken for this study, although it reflected different forms and levels of education and was answered by women of all ages, showed that more than half of the women had in the last year sought more education and training, reflecting a thirst for new knowledge and skills.

In many cases, choosing to pursue higher forms of education means a young woman deferring marriage. Marriage and childbearing place heavy demands on a woman in terms of domestic labour (significantly the realm of women not men), a prohibitive prospect for a young woman determined to complete higher level studies. This is particularly the case for women who are part of an increasingly urbanised Gaza, likely to live in nuclear families where child care is less readily available. Over half the women surveyed for this study lived in 'separate' homes, making them unlikely to be able to draw on extended family support for childcare if they chose to pursue intensive studying. The falling marriage rate in Gaza (for example an 8 per cent decrease from 2015-2016 – see Context) is usually attributed to rising poverty and unemployment, but it is feasible that it also reflects the rise in young people 'opting out' of marriage that was discussed by many women in discussions and interviews. As one woman concluded,

> *"The way women see marriage is changing."*

One woman interviewed, in her early twenties, described delaying her marriage to both shore up her chances of being able to support a family and delay what she saw as an inevitable and additional hardship. She already feels the burden of caring for her parents, including a sick mother whose medical bills are large, and described feeling daunted by the hardship of young married women she knows so prefers to stay single for as long as she can. Another woman, older and married, was aware that her challenges had impacted the choices of her younger sisters. As she explained,

> *"I have two sisters, one 30 and the other 34. When they saw my experience with marriage, they said they wouldn't get married. They are still single today."*

The consequence or cost of deferring marriage can include the stigma of going against social expectations. It is not just parents who expect girls to marry at an appropriate time, but also extended family and the community who plays a role in matchmaking for men seeking wives (or vice versa). In traditional contexts, young women are reminded to focus on their marriageability from a young age.

As well as disapproval for their choice, women who choose to equip themselves with education can face a new vulnerability where their social standing and even freedom gets reduced. The study heard from women who faced scorn from their family or community for being unmarried, and others whose status as single had led to heavy restrictions on their movements. As a young professional woman in Gaza City explained,

"A woman who decides not to marry may be resented by her family and pitied by the community – even if she's making money and driving a car."

What is especially problematic is that this strategy of education over marriage is far from guaranteed to actually protect or shore up opportunities for women. In Gaza, higher forms of education do not necessarily translate into gainful employment, least of all for women whose participation in the formal labour force (at 19 per cent – see Context) is among the lowest in the world. Faith in education as a pathway to empowerment therefore risks becoming another dashed hope for many young women. Aware of this reality, women were sober but undeterred. They also reminded themselves, and each other, of the value of education as something that can nurture an individual (and society), if not provide an economic shield against hardship. As one woman articulated it,

"Still we continue going to university, because we have hope, like every generation, that it will lead to a job. And it's about securing yourself, raising your dignity and status and being in a position to change culture and attitudes."

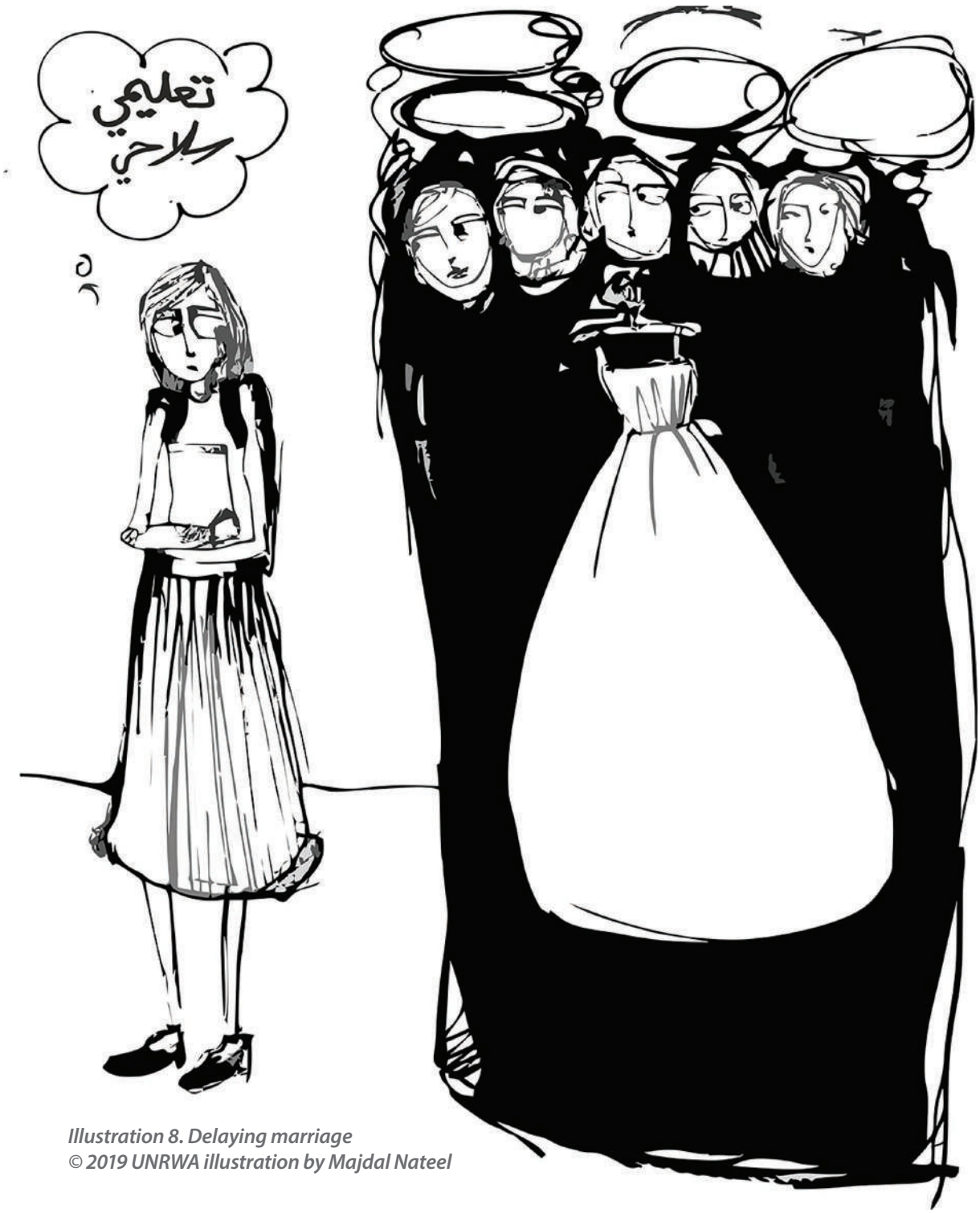

Illustration 8. Delaying marriage
© 2019 UNRWA illustration by Majdal Nateel

Finally, many women in Gaza cope with the extraordinary circumstances by simply turning to the abstract: hope, dreaming, and spirituality. This includes dreaming of routes out of Gaza, and seeking refuge in religion or spirituality.

actual or spiritual escape

Most of the two million Palestinians in Gaza remain unable to access the rest of the occupied Palestinian territories and the outside world, with only a minority eligible for exit permits via Israel (primarily patients, business people and the staff of international organisations). Outmigration does happen, mainly for those with foreign citizenship residency papers and occasionally through visas, and indeed a number of women met throughout this study had been left behind by husbands who had found opportunities to migrate abroad. Yet for the majority of Gazan residents, outmigration is an unlikely prospect. As one woman put it,

> *"Those with routes out are the lucky ones. Everyone else is stuck in the world's largest prison."*

Still, plans are made to leave Gaza where possible for study, treatment, work and other reasons. Particularly among younger people, considerable time is spent researching opportunities online, submitting applications, and following them through lengthy bureaucracies. Many young women shared stories of their quest for education or training abroad, describing extraordinary persistence and painful frustrations. Fantastic chances to join degree programs or fellowships in everything from fine art to medicine, or to be part of exhibitions and conferences, had been tirelessly pursued but in many cases thwarted by the border and travel permit restrictions of both Israel and Egypt. While most bravely shrugged at what they saw as 'their lot', the pain and frustration of this situation is inevitable and can be reasonably linked to statistics on youth wellbeing that indicate levels of despair and hopelessness. Mothers, too, feel the weight of their children's predicament. As one woman put it,

> *"I hope the blockade will end and my children can live like other children in the world."*

With actual, physical escape impossible for most, many seek refuge in religion or spirituality. It was very common during the study to hear women (especially, but not exclusively, older women) say their patience or religious faith was what they relied on to cope, and to cite this as their greatest strength. One woman urged the discussion group to "*heed Koranic lessons about patience and sacrifice*" when times are hard. Another proudly shared,

> *"My strength comes from God. Allah protects me. Thanks to God I have patience."*

This sentiment was typically a final reflection in interviews and discussions, a women's answer to how she would face the future and how she would cope. It demonstrated a kind of spiritual anchor, an individual's way of reassuring themselves and remaining steadfast in the face of crisis – whether that be violence in the home, stress in the community, or general anxiety and despair about the external economic and conflict situation. Again this showed the so-called 'resilience' of women in Gaza, their ability to cope in ways that are elevating and inspiring – while also indicating the very real limits of their plans and opportunities in today's reality.

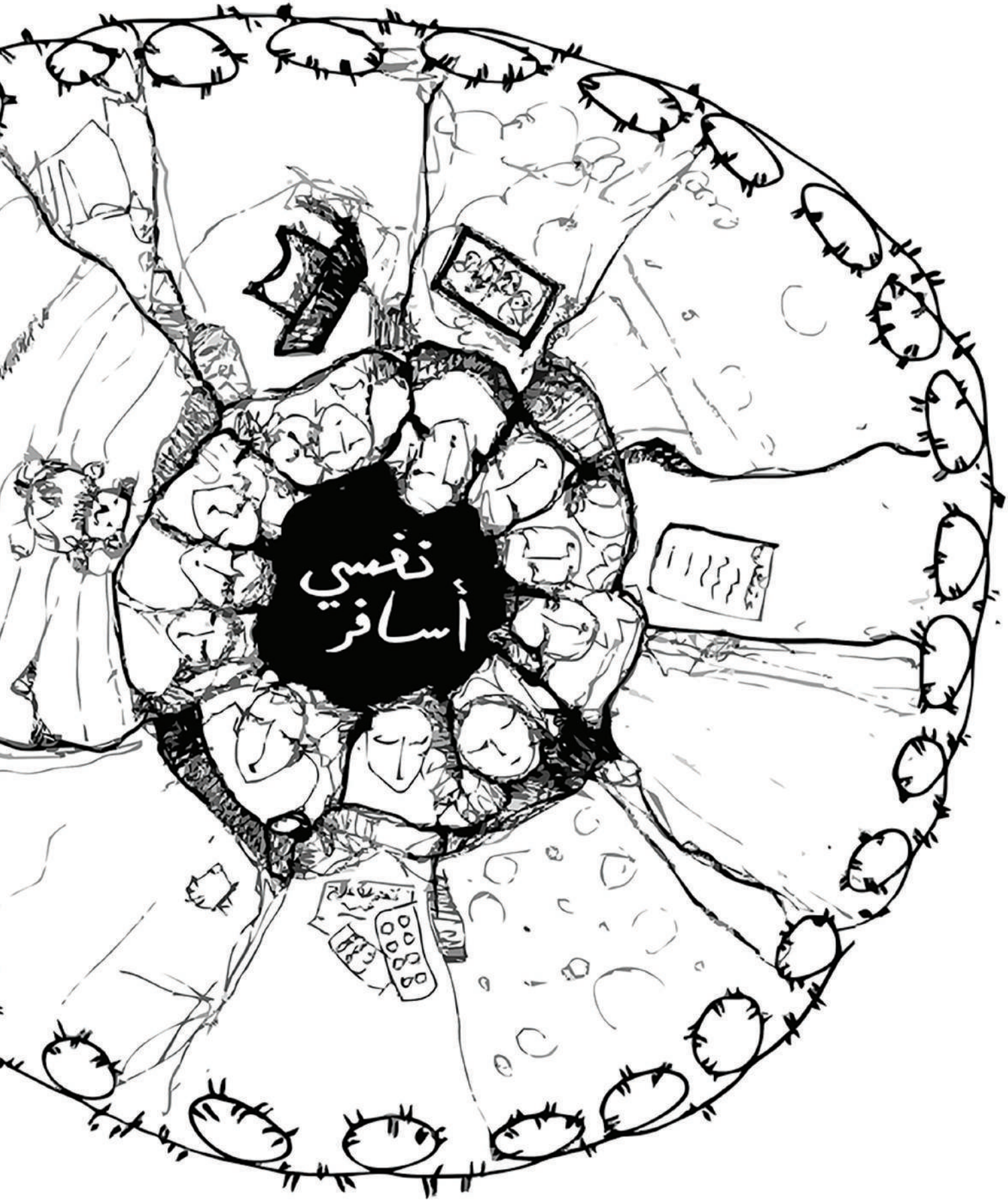

Illustration 9. Dreaming and enduring
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conclusion

Women in Gaza experience the same macro-conditions of privation and insecurity as men. They live with the daily realities of conflict, poverty, food insecurity, unemployment and stress, all of which are at extraordinary levels in a region beset by a longstanding humanitarian crisis. But increasingly, many women in Gaza bear the brunt of supporting large households, despite shrinking market and employment opportunities. Men may be absent physically, having fled or been killed or imprisoned, or absent in a practical and economic sense through injury, trauma, addiction or disempowerment by salary cuts and unemployment.

In response, women deploy a range of dynamic 'never say die' coping strategies. In the short term, women find ways to cope by adjusting the household food basket, reorganising spending and assets, and maximising opportunities including aid. In the medium term they adopt income-generating strategies, largely in the informal economy (despite its lack of protections) and as much as possible in roles deemed 'suitable' for women. Social conservatism and patriarchy, nurtured by the political context and exacerbated by a closed and pressurised society, makes the cost of taking 'unsuitable' roles high. It includes resistance from family and community, indignity, anxiety and even physical risks. Yet with courage and resourcefulness – doing it despite resistance, taking it online, or giving it a 'male front' – women pursue those roles anyway, to make ends meet. In addition, they tackle the welfare or aid system with energy, navigating their way towards opportunities (and around bureaucracies) with a tenacity often admired by men looking on.

Women's means of coping in Gaza are an engine of hope for families. They are a testament to the enormous capacities and strengths of the region's women, and an opportunity for aid agencies to direct their efforts into successful income-generating initiatives based on strategic market analysis and targeted support.

Targeted support for the initiatives women are tirelessly engaged in is critical, because currently many are fragile and vulnerable to collapse.

Women's economic enterprises are subject to a range of shocks. External shocks may be linked to Gaza's political or economic conditions, namely conflict outbreaks and the impacts of the blockade on markets and services. Local-level shocks may include slumps in community spending, market or service access constraints, changes in aid distribution, or business competition. Domestic shocks vary in number, type and severity from one day to the next – for vulnerable women they may include: disappearing, jobless or violent husbands, family health problems that there's no capacity to treat, tensions caused by overcrowding and competition in extended family homes, and more. In this context, and bound by both market and gender constraints, many women's enterprises are unsustainable. They might be safe for the coming weeks or months, depending on which shocks hit and how, but most are on shaky ground.

The women featured in this report's case studies, from a range of ages and experiences, bring to life the simultaneous dynamism and fragility of women's coping. Each is responsible for meeting the needs of their family and has repeatedly started initiatives, failed, picked herself up and started again. Mirroring the slow clearing of the conflict-affected sites they see around them, they too engage in reconstruction and rebuilding.

The consequences for women of repeatedly starting again, of living among the rubble of collapsed initiatives, are difficult to state. It seems plausible that it erodes a person's energy, potentially leading to despair in the form of lack of hopes and dreams for the future.

Like men, many women of Gaza are vocal and assertive about the collective situation of the population,

but they are less inclined to reveal the privations and disempowerment they experience as wives or women. Female strength and patience is valued, often associated with family and community loyalty. But privately, some women admit to masking their fear, to putting on a front of strength and self-confidence that disguises how anxious and frightened they feel.

A WHO wellbeing survey was applied as part of this study, comprised of standardised questions about how people feel on a daily basis. The average result for the sample of women, from a cross-section of backgrounds, locations and ages, was 39 per cent. By WHO standards this reflects a very poor level of emotional wellbeing (and by comparison the Danish population scored 70 per cent).

Long term coping by women in Gaza was a question this study could barely answer. Most women described being 'too busy getting by', or too experienced in the futility of making plans, and offered little response. At most they described lowering children's expectations, preparing the next generation (and in particular their daughters) for hardships they believe will persist.

Targeted support for the conditions women cope in is critical, because currently those conditions are largely inhibiting rather than enabling their empowerment.

Women's tireless rounds of coping may be enabling forms of economic empowerment. Through strength and tenacity, many are increasingly driving income generating activities in an ever-broadening range of sectors, and creating new and niche business models. Yet on the whole, relative to men, women in Gaza continue to lack assets, capabilities, access to information and opportunities, and comprehensive inclusion in society and market. They are mostly limited to informal employment, and where they are in formal employment face a gender pay gap. Despite their increased role in enterprise, there has been little change in access to credit or control over assets. Women met in the course of this study described how their economic contribution has not led to increased rights, including rights to decision making in the family. They might have become the main breadwinner for their household, but their unemployed husband or other male relative remains the household head. There are few signs that the level of women's sociopolitical participation is increasing, or that indicators of violence against women in Gaza are decreasing.

As an educated, professional young woman in Gaza sees it, "*Social change only comes when other kinds of empowerment – social, political, cultural – follow economic empowerment. But I feel like these are going backwards.*"

The result is that many women in Gaza remain victims of double oppression. They suffer from the conflict and blockade, and from restrictive social norms that see them enjoying less agency, ownership, opportunity or personal safety than men.

There is diversity of experience, including women and men whose progressive roles and attitudes support pockets of transformation. Overall however, women's significant contributions to family coping in Gaza are not matched by their social empowerment or realisation of rights. A concern is the degree to which women's vulnerability in Gaza is deepening and reproducing down generations. While overarching political solutions are sought, support for women is needed both in terms of the types of coping they employ and the enabling conditions these operate in.

annex 1
case studies

case study 1: sana[77]

I was 28 when my husband abandoned me. He said he was going to Egypt to visit family for a week, and even left food and money for the week. But that was 11 years ago. Having only ever stayed at home before that, I was suddenly supposed to do everything.

First I sold the furniture. I received a portion of his salary until the PA realised he was out of Gaza and cut it. My sister told me to leave my children with my husband's family but I refused. Things got worse and I knew I had to find a job.

I worked in private homes caring for elderly people, even changing their diapers. It was hard work and it was disapproved of. In our community that job is not accepted. The wives of my brothers challenged their husbands on why their sister was doing it, and insulted me. I said to my brothers, 'Ok I'll stop, but only if you support me. Obviously I continued.

I worked all the time, even during Eid, to make money. At one point I opened a shop but local women were jealous and asked, 'Why do our men come to your shop and buy from you?' It was hard, going against people's ideas of what I could and couldn't do.

After eight years, I realised I needed a divorce, because then I'd be able to apply for government assistance. It was a difficult choice. I had to face the stigma of a divorced woman and ask if the assistance was worth it. I decided it was. I got legal assistance to raise a case and in two months I had a divorce. That was three years ago. Looking back, it was much later than it should have been!

In our mother's time men might abandon their wives and family, but not as much as now. With the blockade and high unemployment, the majority of men are jobless. This puts a high burden on the women of Gaza. They have to think of anything they can to overcome the challenges and find sources of income.

Youth have a hard time too. After studying for years at university, they don't find jobs. This affects them psychologically.

The situation has destroyed the dreams of mothers and their children. I dreamed my children would go to university but I saw how graduates don't find work.

My daughter dreamt of being a lawyer but I couldn't let her go to university, because I couldn't afford the study and transport costs, and I knew she wouldn't get a job afterwards. My eldest son dreamt of being a journalist but I encouraged him to start learning to be a hairdresser while he was still at school. I've supported his business a lot, including with UNRWA assistance, and it's doing well. I'm proud of it and hope it grows.

We used to want our children to study arts and be professionals. Now I teach my children to be workers and that's it.

77 Name changed

case study 2: maryam [78]

At 18 I married my cousin but we divorced after four months because of a problem between my father and my uncle. I became the second wife of an older man. But he thought I was divorced because I couldn't have children, so when I got pregnant he said I could either have an abortion or get divorced because he already had many children.

I moved to my parents' house and had a daughter. My husband refused to support her. My parents said I should send her to him to raise her but I refused.

I used embroidery skills learned at school, making purses and scarves and selling them. Then my brother took a skirt I'd embroidered for my daughter to a local fashion house and the manager was so impressed he commissioned me to make 700 pieces! I gathered women who could sew, bought material from the market, and directed them. We made things all day for five years. It was very hard but we made money. The situation was better then. I saved around $15,000 and bought a small house for me and my daughter. But that was a fashion and it ended. I still make the odd piece but there are no more large orders.

For a while I reunited with my ex-husband, and we had two sons in that time. I was happy to be reunited not just for my daughter's sake but also for me - when I was divorced my parents would say, you can't go out, you must stay home. When I could say I was married, I could go to NGO trainings and look for work.

Then my husband went abroad for two years and again I had to become used to living alone. That was six years ago, and there's been no marital relationship between us since then. But every two weeks I call him to come over just to show the neighbourhood that I have a husband.

I communicated with many NGOs for help. I got training in hairdressing and now have a small business at home. I get one or two customers a week. The situation is difficult, so women prioritise their children over their own beauty. My prices are much cheaper than in a salon. I could raise them but I want to build a strong reputation first. I want this business to last. My previous project was a fashion and it disappeared.

My first goal is to provide a decent life for my children. Everything I do is for their sake. I hope my daughter's life will be very different. I can't remember a single beautiful day in my life. I never found a partner, to live as a woman with her husband. Outside I look like a woman, but inside I don't feel like one.

I'm teaching my girl to be strong, and show confidence even if it's fake. Sometimes people shout and ask me for something, showing they're stronger than me. I stand in front of them and defend myself, show them I'm strong. But inside I'm very weak. I teach my daughter this.

I fear the future. I fear being old. Maybe my children will forget me and neglect me. Thanks to God I have patience. I hope Allah will support me and never forget me.

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78 Name changed

case study 3: israa [79]

I'm 40 years old with three sons and five daughters. My husband abandoned us seven years ago. He was a shoe trader. But he would sell goods for less than he'd bought them for, just to have cash. He accumulated big debts and went to prison for a while. Eventually he fled to Egypt, and then Libya where he is now. We're not in touch and he doesn't support us.

While he was with us, I was already mostly responsible for the family. It was difficult. At first when I got angry with him I would go to my parents' home, but then I realised the victims were my children left with him. So I decided I needed an income. I started working in a school canteen, earning 20 shekels a day, to pay for the needs of my family.

After he left I knew I needed to do more. There were costs, and I was afraid for my children. In this community there are people using and selling the drug Tramadol and I was afraid my son could become involved in the business. It happened once, when he was only 13. Someone told him to take something to someone. He didn't know what it was but I found out it was Tramadol. I was so afraid he'd get involved just because I was poor. That was the main reason I was pushed to find work.

It began with a very simple table in front of my home, selling candies and things. I started to make enough money for daily expenses and even be able to save a little – for transport costs for my children to get to their education, for household costs. I saved carefully, was organised, and made a plan.

I'd heard about UNRWA social workers who help women with projects to make an income. They provided me with a cart to sell goods on in the market.

There was resistance at the beginning. People would annoy me, challenge and taunt me. I used to keep my children around the stall, to get people to shut their mouths. People were not so disrespectful in front of my children.

My children were also uncomfortable about me having a stall in the middle of the main market. But I insisted, and said we would collapse if I didn't.

I found another NGO to invest in my business. They gave me funds to rent a shop in a busy street and stock it with the kind of things locals here buy. I took my eldest son to work in the shop. That was for acceptance. If customers saw a woman sitting in the shop, they would hesitate and go out. To give him a feeling of investment, I named it after him.

My brothers were opposed to me having a shop. I convinced them step by step, not directly challenging them but keeping going patiently and letting the results speak for themselves.

My son is now 20 and he and his brother are in the shop a lot of the time. I might not be there all the time but I manage every detail, control everything from a distance. Every day I prepare the goods, tidy, check stock and takings. I keep all earnings carefully. I tell my children that if they take something from the shop, they have to write it down so we know it's a cost. None of us pay ourselves a salary, we just cover expenses. We want the shop to grow. I think I learned how to run a business tightly from watching my husband mismanage his.

Customers used to come in and if they didn't find a single item they'd leave, wanting to do their whole shop in one place. Every time I wrote down what was missing. I asked for a loan from a friend, a widow, to buy the missing items and buy proper fridges for the cold items people were wanting. Now, a customer finds everything they want – from a big bag of rice to a single pin for fixing a hijab.

When I've paid back the loan and have no debts, I'll feel it's mine. My dream is to expand into the next door shopfront and have a supermarket!

Women have to make an income for their families now. I've seen women moving more and more into Rafah market, selling things. It meets resistance but it's increasing.

When I've paid off the shop loan I want to fix up our house. It's not in good condition and I worry it's bad for our health. It has improved though. For many years I wasn't sleeping. My children were young and there wasn't a proper door, so I spent years lying awake ready to protect my girls. My brother-in-law is an addict and he used to bring his friends to the space next to this room, where they would smoke and take drugs like weed and Tramadol. I asked him to stop, I said I have daughters and am afraid for them when he brings his addict friends. From outside, I was looking very strong! Inside I was very weak, but I didn't show him that. I asked him to either stop or move right away from my home. I ended up having to tell his brother. I said, my girls are your girls, you should protect them. He was good, he responded and the brother causing the problem moved away.

One of my sons is being supported by UNRWA with a temporary job opportunity under the job creation program, packing food assistance for distribution. My oldest daughter has a BA in special education and the other is studying a fashion diploma. My son was studying fundraising and proposal writing, but we have other priorities so I stopped that. He'll resume when we can afford it.

I believe in education and it's my dream for my children to finish theirs. But most of all I hope my children will all have a home to live in, and a source of income. I want them to find partners they can think with, make plans with. My husband was not like that.

My children are the source of my strength. When I see their needs, and think about their suffering, it gives me the strength to keep going. It allows me to struggle and to find ways to support them.

I might be tired now but in future I will rest.

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79 Name changed

case study 4: jameela[80]

I'm 24 and live with my parents and sister. My mother spends months in hospital receiving treatment. My sister needs medication for a condition that hasn't been diagnosed. With all of them not well, I had to think hard about supporting my family.

I wanted to go to university but my family couldn't afford it so I got a scholarship by memorising the Koran. I studied IT. There were still expenses but as a family we prioritised them because we believed IT was a degree leading to good job opportunities.

I graduated with good grades in 2015 and had a few small jobs in private companies. But now there are so many IT graduates and so few jobs they've stopped offering it as a course.

I turned this room into an education centre, so that I can give private tutoring to children in my home. As a single woman it's easier to work from home and the costs are less. I used to have a lot of students but now parents can't afford to spend extra on their children's tutoring. At the moment I have three students who come here for lessons.

But as the family breadwinner, it wasn't enough. With support from an NGO I opened a small stationery shop close to the house. I would have opened it in the house but we live with my extended family and my uncle refused, saying it should be his children who deserve the chance to open a business in the home. It's complicated when you live with relatives.

I named the shop after a popular children's show and it sells handicrafts, toys, stationery and school materials for children. It also has a photocopier that students use, although it's old and tricky and we often have to fix it. I spend the majority of my time at the shop. My sister and sometimes my brother help me.

I want to be able to fill the shelves and have many children coming to buy things here!

I'm 24 and I'm single. After hearing women's experiences of marriage today, I decided not to marry. The bad stories affected me, and so did my family responsibilities here.

I don't disagree with marriage, I'm just delaying it. And when I do get married I want to live close to my mother, to live in this neighbourhood so I can keep supporting her.

I tell myself to be patient and strong. My strength is that I have many ideas of things I want to do.

My mother dreams that I will get married and have a beautiful family. But my dream is to get a job!

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80 Name changed

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biography of artist

"women in gaza derive their strength from their children.
they are the main motivation for women to complete life.
we are trying to create a better reality for them.
hope gives women the ability to improve their family's situation.
despite the difficult political and humanitarian conditions women experience, women continue to hope and to create unique opportunities to live and work.
all of that I wanted to make evident in the drawings."

Majdal Nateel was born in Gaza in 1987 and gained her BA degree in Fine Arts from Al-Aqsa University.

Majdal's work has been exhibited in solo exhibitions worldwide. These include, 'If I wasn't there' (London, 2015), 'The Effect of Light and Glass' (Gaza, 2014) and 'Salt of Memory' (Gaza, 2012). She has also participated in several group exhibitions including the 'Qurban' exhibition at the Women Media Information Center, the 'Canaanite' exhibition at the French Cultural Center in Gaza, and a number of collective exhibitions. Majdal presented '40 Days of My Life' in Germany, and has contributed to exhibitions in Jordan, Belgium and Italy. She has also participated in a number of auctions including the annual Jerusalem auction in 2009 and 'Colors of Hope' in 2010 and 2011.

Majdal created the series of nine illustrations for "How Does She Cope?" based on the themes that emerged during the study.

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