

Patterning, enablers and barriers to adolescents' participation in protracted crises

A case study of adolescents'
mobility and safe access
to public spaces
in the Gaza Strip

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INTRODUCTION

Participation is about being adequately informed, actively engaged and having a say in decisions that affect one's life – in the private and public spheres (UNICEF, 2022). Exploring participation during adolescence is critical because this life stage is characterised by the emergence of a sense of identity, acquisition of new responsibilities (including exercising one's rights)

and exposure to emerging opportunities and risks (*ibid.*). This is particularly important in protracted conflict-affected contexts like Gaza, due to the greater risks and multi-faceted vulnerabilities facing adolescents in these contexts during such a pivotal transition in lifecycle. However, evidence on the capabilities of adolescents in Gaza – where they comprise 22% of the population (UNFPA, 2016) – is limited, especially on girls' participation (Pettit et al., 2017). There is also limited understanding of the patterning of adolescents' participation in stateless, protracted conflict-affected contexts like Gaza, where adolescents face multi-faceted challenges. An in-depth analysis of the patterning of adolescents' participation in Gaza is therefore long overdue.

This chapter explores the patterning of adolescents' ability to exercise their agency to participate, particularly their ability to move freely and access public spaces, and explores the enablers and barriers to participation. Through exploring adolescents' lived experiences, we provide insights that can help duty-bearers, analysts, policy-makers and social actors consider how policies and programmes in fragile and conflict-affected contexts can better support adolescent girls and boys to maximise their participation and agency.

BACKGROUND

Gaza is a unique place to study young people's participation. It has long experienced conflict and blockades that severely restrict the free movement of people and goods, with episodes of more acute violence exacerbating the impacts on adolescents and young people and exposing them to repeated physical and psychological trauma. Adolescents in Gaza are regularly confronted with politically rooted physical and psychological violence, in a place where there are no safe spaces, no bomb shelters, no alarms or warning systems and no place to flee to, as all borders are sealed.

As a result of the ongoing conflict, since 2014, 766 children and 541 women were killed and around 18,165 were injured or left permanently disabled (Ministry of Health, 2020). In the most recent aggression towards Gaza (in 2021), 66 children and 41 women were killed and 685 children and 480 women were injured (Ministry of Health, 2021). Almost all households in Gaza (95%) reported having been directly exposed to political violence during the Israeli occupation (Abu Hamad, 2021). Mostly attributed to political-related violence and sexual violence, 45% of girls in Gaza aged 15–19 years reported feeling unsafe walking alone after dark (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics [PCBS], 2021) and 26% reported never walking alone after dark. This feeling of insecurity extends to their homes, as 24%

of girls aged 15–19 feel unsafe being alone at home after dark (ibid.). The PCBS youth survey (2016) flagged that, in the past 12 months, 26% of girls in Gaza reported experiencing harassment. Boys are also exposed to sexual harassment – 4% of male youth reported having experiencing sexual harassment when they were children (PCBS, 2019). The same source indicates that in the past 12 months, 32% of adolescents in Gaza experienced violence in the streets and 34% experienced violence at schools.

Gaza is also an interesting research context from a gender perspective. The strongly conservative culture, with strict tribal and patriarchal norms, controls the roles ascribed to males and females, with young people, women and girls typically excluded from participating in public activities (UNFPA, 2016). Prevailing socio-cultural norms severely constrain adolescents' (and especially girls') ability to move freely, engage in productive activities outside their homes and to exercise agency to make decisions about key life choices (Jones and Abu-Hamad, 2016). This lack of voice and agency intersects with other vulnerabilities such as psychosocial, economic and health challenges (UNICEF, 2018; GAGE consortium, 2019).

Due to these compound challenges, young people have very little opportunity to participate in civic activities. The PCBS youth (15–29 years old) survey (2016) shows that only 6% of male youth and 2% of female youth reported involvement in civil or cultural organisations, only 4% of male youth and 1.6% of female youth were involved in unions/syndicates and only 14% of male youth and 0.8% of female youth were involved in sports clubs. Moreover, only 4.2% of male youth and 0.6% of female youth reported being affiliated to a political party or coalition (PCBS, 2016). Although 30% of male respondents took part in volunteer activities, only 13.3% of female youth did so. In terms of digital access, among internet users, 22% of male youth and only 1% of female youth reported accessing the internet at a café (ibid.).

The Palestinian Child Law Articles state that the child shall have the right to obtain, receive, transfer and disseminate all types of information and ideas, provided that this does not contradict with public order and morals' (Palestinian Authority, 2004). Palestine acceded to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2014 (United Nations, 2019), but little has been done to enforce the rights it enshrines. Many Palestinian laws are incompatible with the principles of child protection (for example, physical abuse of children by their parents is permitted) (Abu Eqtaish, 2019). In Gaza, despite the availability of some supportive legal frameworks and sporadic initiatives by civil society organisations (CSOs) to strengthen young people's participation outside the household sphere, their participation remains very limited (Pettit et al., 2017).

METHODS AND SAMPLE

This chapter draws on findings from participatory mixed-methods research conducted in Gaza in 2016 and 2017 as a part of the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) longitudinal study. We drew on findings from a participatory action research project in Khanyounis in 2016, involving 35 adolescents taking part in an empowerment programme implemented at Culture and Free Thought Association, which included life skills activities such as sport, music and arts, psychosocial support and science sessions. Adolescent participants in the action research project conducted peer and intergenerational interviews with family members and did participatory photography. In 2017, we also carried out a service-mapping exercise with 70 key informant interviews (KIIs) and 107 adolescents (using an interactive, tablet-based QuickTapSurvey™ module), complemented by qualitative research with adolescents, their peers and families. This included 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) and 35 in-depth interviews (IDIs). In total, we spoke with 239 adolescents (aged 10–19 years) – 130 girls and 109 boys – in addition to the 35 adolescents involved in the participatory action research project (12 boys and 23 girls aged 15–19 years).

We used purposive sampling to ensure a good mix of participants from different socioeconomic backgrounds, including those in-school and school dropouts, adolescent mothers, adolescents directly affected by the conflict, orphans and adolescents with disabilities. Research was conducted in three diverse localities: Jabalia refugee camp, Shuja'iyya in Gaza governorate and in Khanyounis governorate.

The research team was composed of five local researchers (three males, two females) and adhered to stringent ethical measures during data collection. All interview transcripts were translated and then thematically coded and analysed. To facilitate the coding process, in-depth debriefings were held to discuss emerging findings and key themes. Subsequently, the transcripts were coded using MAXQDA 12 software; findings were first aggregated by instrument, then collectively across all instruments.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Barriers to adolescent participation

Safe access to public spaces helps young people become more independent, feel safe, fulfil their needs for social interaction and self-expression and participate meaningfully in civic activities. Overall, our findings suggest that, despite recent progress, adolescents in Gaza still face enormous restrictions on their mobility due to structural and political factors as well as age and gender hierarchies and discriminatory social norms.

Political-related violence

Our qualitative findings suggest that the Israeli blockade, lack of safety, political violence and ongoing conflict restrict the free movement of all Gazans, including adolescents. Adolescents reported that their parents and older siblings worry about their children's safety and therefore prevent them from going outside: 'Our parents feared for our safety and therefore prevent us from leaving home, they stopped us from going to associations [that provide empowerment programmes]' (FGD participant, older boys, Shajaia). A 19-year-old young woman in Jabalia described the very real threats children and adolescents face: 'My hand was hit in the last conflict when I was playing with the other kids in the neighbourhood and the Israelis bombed our neighbour's house. A big stone fell on my hand and it was broken'. The siege imposed on Gaza was cited as another reason preventing adolescents going outside, as a 19-year-old young woman from Khanyounis explained: 'I am holding a model of the globe. I wrote on my hands "siege" on the left hand and "freedom" on the right. Also, I am wearing a bracelet with the slogan "free Gaza". I did this because I need to tell people that we need liberty, freedom of movement and our right to travel'.

Restrictive social norms based on age and gender hierarchies

Gazan adolescents' participation is also shaped by the strict age and gender hierarchies common across the Middle East and North Africa region, which leave little space for younger people (especially girls) to take autonomous decisions about their lives (UNFPA, 2016). Although boys and girls alike face restrictions on their movement, their experiences vary significantly by gender. Adolescent girls, disadvantaged by strict gender norms, have very little access to free movement and participation; boys are allowed much more freedom, but still face restrictions due to age hierarchies. Girls' free movement outside the household is largely controlled by their parents or older siblings who tend to be 'overprotective' to protect their physical safety and, more importantly, the family's reputation and honour. One 17-year-old girl in Khanyounis said: 'I need permission from both my parents, both must agree, if they do not accept, I will not go out'. Another girl in a focus group in Jabalia stated, 'Our families ask about the details of our friends – their address, phone number and families...'. Echoing her caregiver, a 17-year-old girl said: 'You are now 17 years old and you should not be outside the house' (IDI, adolescent girl, Khanyounis). Our findings also suggest that there is a lack of mutual understanding between adolescents and their caregivers, who rarely consider adolescents' right to participate and their need to interact with their peers. As a result, adolescents reported feeling lonely and

isolated, as one older girl in a focus group in Shajaia summed up: 'There is no one who could understand us in this context, except God, he only could understand us, but humans could not'. Although doing household chores could help girls gain support from their caregivers, this constitutes a forgone opportunity for participation in activities outside the home. A 16-year-old girl in Khanyounis, interviewing her sister, said: 'I must participate in house chores, I have no other choice'.

Sexual harassment

Older adolescent girls in particular face severe restrictions in accessing physical spaces due to harassment on the streets by men and boys, reinforcing parental concerns about their daughters' honour. Harassment restricts girls' movement outside their homes; even if they have not experienced it directly, the stories they hear from others are enough to instil fear – not only of being exposed to sexual harassment but of being blamed and punished for it by their family and community. As one older girl in a focus group in Jabalia said: 'Women always feel insecure to go outside alone, because they want to protect their reputation. Also, they are afraid from being perceived as bad'.

School is among the very few public places girls are allowed to go in Gaza, but they can be prevented from attending due to fears of being harassed on their way to school. Even being looked at by a man can be sufficient cause for parents or older siblings to pull a girl out of school, as one older girl in a focus group in Jabalia explained: 'I talked to my mother about the problems I faced by boys who used to throw messages [that] were written on papers and some students called me "lover girl". She got angry and prevented me from going back... Then I got married directly after I dropped out...'.

Lack of financial resources

Limited financial resources emerged as a key barrier preventing adolescents from going outside their homes and engaging in activities. A 16-year-old boy from Jabalia camp commented: 'You need about NIS [new Israeli shekel] 20 to pay a visit or even go out!' Boys often meet their friends in places that do not require money, such as the local neighbourhood, supermarkets, streets or at home. A 19-year-old girl, in Khanyounis, noted: 'Boys spent much more time outdoors, playing football and visiting friends as these don't require financial resources'. Findings from KIIs are consistent with adolescents' responses and indicate that adolescents from poor families may choose to cut themselves off from others, while adolescents from better-off families can afford to socialise, exchange gifts and celebrate birthdays, as a key informant from a non-governmental organisation (NGO) said: 'People who have

resources can manage by visiting places and cafés, while those who don't tend to isolate themselves'.

Participants also reported that limited financial resources constitute a barrier to staying in school, mentioning fees and the costs of transportation, exams and school materials, as an older boy in a focus group in Shajaia explained: 'They have us buy the school uniform, books... These are expensive. And they only give us three days to buy them or else the teachers will beat us'. The literature highlights that young people in Gaza, particularly those from poor families, do not go out with friends or socialise often: 33% among adolescent boys and 64% among adolescent girls, reflecting the cultural restrictions on girls' mobility (Pereznieta et al., 2014).

Lack of services and spaces

Our service mapping exercise revealed that there are some services available to improve adolescents' participation (organised by CSOs rather than government) but these usually target boys and tend to involve younger adolescents only (such as summer games). A 17-year-old girl from Jabalia said: 'There are no places for us. There are no cafes for female to socialise. Everywhere you find only men, even in the underwear shop... There are only men and we feel shy to buy underwear from those men'. Moreover, many participants did not know about such services, as an older girl from Shajaia said: 'I never participated in such recreation activities... because I don't know about those places'. However, a number of research respondents, and especially girls, reported not being able to access 'trusted spaces' run by CSOs, partly because of limited programme intake and also distance from their home, which exacerbated parental concerns about their safety. Others mentioned that the programmes were often too short and that the quality of training was poor, which prompted their parents to pull them out. Study participants also perceived the school system as inappropriate and focused only on academic performance.

PERMITTED VERSUS FORBIDDEN SPACES

While girls and boys are allowed to go to school, relatives' homes, places of worship and even youth empowerment programmes, their access to these places can still be denied by male adults. Girls' free movement can be controlled by their brothers, regardless of their age, and older boys control free movement of their younger brothers. Discriminatory gender norms prevent girls in Gaza from accessing public spaces like cafes, shopping centres and sport clubs without a chaperone; boys, however, are allowed much more freedom. This leads to negative feelings, as one older girl in a focus group in

Jabalia explained: 'I feel angry and depressed, like it is my fault that I am an adolescent. Everything is forbidden, everything is restricted and always what you do is being supervised because you are an adolescent'. However, restrictions on boys are more to do with where they want to go, what time to come home and who they spend time with, as a 14-year-old boy from Jabalia camp noted: 'My friends offered to take me to a beach resort. My dad refused because there was no one from the family with us, especially at night'.

Restrictions on girls' movement even deny them access to essential health services. Young women face great challenges in accessing sexual and reproductive health services without their parents' or husband's permission, as one girl in a focus group in Shajaia noted: 'Even if the girls have severe infections [genital infections] they won't let her go to the doctors and would just treat her with home remedies'. Our survey also indicated that only 22% of adolescents reported that they speak to a health care provider about puberty-related issues. Due to the stigma around mental ill health, participants mentioned that adolescents (particularly girls) with psychosocial or mental health issues are less likely to be allowed to access these services. These findings are consistent with other evidence, indicating that girls in particular are denied access to mental health services in Gaza because of prevailing cultural norms (Samuels et al., 2017).

ENABLERS FOR ADOLESCENTS' FREE MOVEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Our findings suggest that enablers for adolescent participation vary by gender. For instance, girls' participation is driven by intrinsic motivation and high aspirations, and their high investment in education opens opportunities for greater participation. Girls in Gaza consider education as key for their independence, development and career, as the following quote demonstrates: 'There will be no future for us without education' (IDI, 13-year-old girl, Shajaia).

Our findings also suggest that family support plays a role in encouraging girls' participation. A 17-year-old girl from Khanyounis noted: 'My father listens to me and thinks about my concerns'. Girls' resilience, good relationships with parents, use of smart negotiation techniques with caregivers and access to social media also minimise the impact of restrictions on girls' movement.

The greater freedom of movement afforded to boys benefits their participation as they are more able to interact with peers in their neighbourhood. They also have much more freedom to engage in economic activities outside the household. Some boys were more likely to rebel against their parents' wishes – an option not generally available to girls. As an 18-year-old boy in

Jabalia camp said, ‘Sometimes my father does not give me permission, but I still go out anyway’.

Adolescent boys and girls who joined empowerment programmes spoke highly of their benefits. Those involved in empowerment activities and who took part in the GAGE survey indicated that a key advantage of participation was being connected with adults (61.4%). However, it is worth underscoring that, during the post-pilot evaluation, almost all the participants of the participatory research pilot in Gaza valued the programme highly and felt that participation in this participatory research had empowered them.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, our findings emphasise that adolescents in Gaza face intersecting challenges that hinder their participation in activities beyond their homes. Those barriers are multi-layered. At the macro level, the ongoing conflict, Israeli blockade, economic depression and weak social protection systems combine to intensify cultural restrictions on the free and safe movement of young people (particularly girls). At the meso and micro levels, household poverty, discriminatory social norms and age and gender hierarchies significantly constrain adolescents’ participation in the public sphere. The root causes of these barriers should be addressed through integrated multisectoral programmes governed by the public sector, which currently does very little in this regard. It is essential to reform multisectoral linkages to promote adolescents’ proactive engagement in the community through adopting an integrated approach that cuts across relevant sectors – particularly education, social protection, media and information, labour and religious institutions.

The study highlighted the interlinked barriers to adolescents’ participation in Gaza and the critical role of political turbulence, as well as structural and context-specific gendered norms and practices in constraining adolescents’ civic engagement. Although humanitarian and other actors understandably focus on meeting Gazans’ urgent survival needs, it is vital that they also address adolescents’ rights to participation.

To address the barriers to adolescents’ participation, there is a need to:

- work towards gradual and progressive social change to address adolescents’ unique needs, promoting more egalitarian age and gender norms that create a more conducive environment for adolescents to participate positively in their family and community life;
- develop initiatives to increase support for adolescents from caregivers (including fathers/brothers), especially around positive parenting practices, children’s rights and protection, and intergenerational dialogue;

- scale up successful empowerment initiatives such as the Y-peer network (supported by UNFPA), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) adolescent-friendly spaces and GAGE's adolescent-led participatory action research;
- actively involve adolescents and their caregivers in designing and implementing the peer-to-peer approach for young people's participation;
- use a range of communication channels, particularly social and mass media, to increase awareness about the available services for young people and
- work with schools to support extra-curricular activities such as school parliaments, summer camps, recreational and social activities and educational trips.

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