



The gendered toll of armed conflict: how the genocide in Gaza is compounding girls' risks of child marriage and gender-based violence

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Introduction

Child and forced marriage are considered serious violations of human rights. They are prohibited and criminalised under United Nations treaties, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRO), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which have been ratified by most states worldwide (Girls Not Brides, 2013). Child marriage disrupts human development, truncates educational and economic opportunities, and significantly increases health risks, particularly during early pregnancy and childbirth (risking the health of both mother and child) (UNICEF 2023). Girls who married before the age of 15 are almost 50% more likely to have experienced gender-based violence compared to those who married after age 18 (Girls Not Brides n.d.).

During armed conflict, these risks are exacerbated as violence is correlated with an increase in child marriages (DiGiuseppe and Haer 2023; Singh and Singh 2022). Once married, girls and young women are at heightened risk of intimate partner violence. A study among several post-conflict African countries showed that close to 50% of refugees and internally displaced women had experienced gender-based violence (Tadesse et al., 2024). Although men are more likely to die in direct combat, research shows that women and children are disproportionately affected by the broader, long-term consequences of war. Indirect causes of death – such as complications related to pregnancy, poor access to reproductive care, and sexual violence – are especially common among populations living within close range of conflict zones. These factors contribute significantly to the elevated indirect mortality rates observed among women (Al Gasseer et al., 2004; Bendavid et al., 2021; Mlambo et al., 2024).

Methods

The ongoing genocide¹ in Gaza has forever altered the lives of those who live there on account of the humanitarian blockade and indiscriminate bombing campaigns. How these impacts are experienced, however, has distinct age and gender dimensions. Whereas boys are at greater risk of extreme violence at the hands of Israeli soldiers (targeted by snipers, abducted, detained, tortured) (Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR), 2024; Sidhwa, 2024; Syed, 2023), the impact of the conflict on girls tends to be more complex and hidden. In this policy brief, we draw on our unique dataset from 2024 covering 1,000 young people in all five governorates of Gaza to show how the war intensifies harmful gender norms, placing adolescent girls at particular risk based on their intersecting identities (gender, age, and in some cases disability). By putting girls' and young women's voices centre stage, we aim to make visible the hidden gendered impacts of armed conflict and call for more targeted protections in humanitarian response.

This brief is based on the findings of a cross-sectional household survey conducted in August and September 2024 and in-depth qualitative research with adolescents and key informant service providers conducted in November and December 2024. The quantitative data involved 1,011 young people (526 girls and young women and 485 boys and young men, aged 10–24 years) who were proportionately sampled from across the five governorates of the Gaza Strip. The qualitative data sample involved 100 young people and 24 key informants. For both the qualitative and quantitative data collection, a two-day training course was held with 10 female enumerators for the survey and 6 female researchers for the qualitative data collection, covering data collection methods, safety precautions, ethical issues and recruitment of participants. For the analysis, quantitative data was organised with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Interviews were transcribed and translated into English (from Arabic) and then coded thematically using MAXQDA, a qualitative software package (see also Abu Hamad et al., 2024; Vintges et al., forthcoming).



¹ We believe there is sufficient evidence to label Israel's destruction of Gaza and its people as genocide (See: Albanese, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024; Asem, 2025; Forensic Architecture, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024; United Nations, 2024).

Findings

Before the deadly Hamas attack on 7 October 2023 and the subsequent invasion of Gaza by Israel, conflict, girls and young women in Gaza already dealt with significant gender-based challenges. Discriminatory social norms and practices that prioritised girls' roles as future wives and mothers often restricted their opportunities for employment, and for personal growth. Even before the war, many girls reported limited mobility, either due to safety concerns (walking on the street alone) or family-imposed restrictions on their movement (Abu Hamad et al., 2017; Pettit et al., 2017). Child marriage had long been a persistent issue in Gaza, driven by conservative traditions, poverty, the desire to produce children, and limited alternatives for girls, especially for those who are not enrolled in education (Pettit et al., 2017).

Girls often have little say in important decisions around education or marriage. Although boys are more likely to drop out of school, girls often have limited freedom in selecting their field of study, with their choices typically steered toward subjects considered culturally appropriate for them but also with high levels of unemployment (e.g., nursing, medicine, social sciences) (Hamad et al., 2017). Data collected by the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research programme and the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) shows a reduction in child marriages in recent years, but rates in Gaza were still significantly higher compared to the West Bank (PCBS, 2022a; Pettit et al., 2017). Among ever-married women (aged 15–64 years), 70% reported experiencing some form of violence from their husbands in the past 12 months. Psychological violence was most commonly reported, affecting 68% of respondents, while 28% experienced physical violence, and 11% reported being subjected to sexual assault during the same period (PCBS, 2022b). The war has only intensified these vulnerabilities, further narrowing girls' life choices and exposing them to heightened risks of early marriage and abuse. Child marriage as a coping strategy.

Child marriage as a coping strategy

With societal structures collapsing and daily life now reduced to a struggle to meet survival needs, 71% of the participants in our 2024 research sample reported increased pressure on girls to marry as children, compared to 56% of boys. Due to the suspension of marriage ceremonies and festivities, marriage has become cheaper, lowering the barriers for adolescent boys and young men to initiate marriage proposals and for girls' parents to accept at increasingly young ages. Other traditional requirements for establishing a

household (such as securing a flat, furnishing it, and obtaining essential household items) are no longer possible and therefore no longer expected. As the manager of a shelter in South Gaza reported:

Young girls are getting married inside a tent!... At the shelter people say, bring a tent and then you get married... The bride goes from her tent to her husband's tent, without even buying a single blouse.²

Whereas before the war, embarking on marriage required significant financial capital, marriage has now become cheap, and can provide relief for struggling households. A 19-year-old young man in the north of Gaza reported: 'It's an opportunity... You save yourself expenses.' A senior staff member of a non-governmental organisation (NGO) working on health noted that:

Honestly, before the war, child marriage was decreasing. But unfortunately, during the aggression... When you link this issue to the economic and social reality... It has increased, and alarmingly so. Families, in difficult economic and social conditions, want to reduce the number of mouths to feed, so they say, 'Goodbye' [to their daughter].

According to a senior official within Gaza's education system, marriage in these circumstances is not:

exactly what we call marriage. It was more like a very simple protocol, where the marriage took place in a tent or a small room, with no privacy and no proper qualifications or preparations.

Many Gazans have found refuge in overcrowded shelters, where close quarters and close contact between the sexes are often unavoidable, meaning that boys and girls from different families must sometimes share living spaces – an especially sensitive issue for households that had previously upheld conservative norms. In some instances, families resort to marrying off their daughters to avoid potential shame in the future, as a 14-year-old girl explained:

In the shelters, I know of several cases, where young people live on the same floor... For example, on one floor, there were three weddings at the same time. They liked each other, and their rooms were next to one another... It was almost forced, like it had to happen... They liked each other, got engaged, and within a week, they were married.

In some cases, marriage also offers access to additional aid or safer shelter, which could mean the difference between life and death, with one female community leader commenting that 'If someone is married, they receive flour, while a single person does not.' According to a female senior official in a protection centre, young people are:

...tired of the mixing and the high population density in the area. They feel they don't have privacy, and they don't feel

² Purchasing clothes for the bride is part of the traditional obligations of the groom in Arab marriage payments (see Hassan, 2025), but these are no longer possible to adhere to in the context of the economic devastation in Gaza on account of the war.

like they have an identity. In these conditions, parents are also oppressive and do not consider the needs of this generation. So, all young people care about is what's available, what's there. They don't have dreams. They just want a small room. Although, they realise that we are in a state of war, they don't fully understand that the lack of needs is linked to the war itself.

Key informants felt that young people are marrying out of desperation as a negative coping strategy. As a shelter manager attested: *'I don't like any decisions to be taken during the war, especially decisions around marriage.'*

Nevertheless, given the rapid decline in living conditions, some young people are hesitant to marry, as the current circumstances are far from suitable. For girls and young women in particular, the prospect of having children under such conditions is especially frightening. A 15-year-old girl from the south of Gaza reported that:

Before the war, I felt that marriage and having children were easy. But during the war, I saw how people lived, how they got married, and how they had children. I felt that this was very difficult. Marriage is difficult, and people must not only think about themselves, but also about their families. A person must bear the responsibility of many people.

Some young women feel that their life would have looked much different *'if the war had not happened'*, as a 19-year-old young woman confirmed:

I would have finished high school by now, started my first year of university, maybe even gotten a job, and maybe even started thinking about marriage.

Intimate partner violence exacerbated by conflict-related stressors

But child marriage comes at a high cost to girls' well-being and future. With the pressures of displacement, trauma, financial stressors, and being compelled to live in overcrowded shelters, gendered power imbalances have deepened. Our data indicates a rise in gender-based violence within households (see Table 1), with 68% of the participants agreeing with the statement that during the war, intimate partner violence (IPV) towards wives increased and 57% reported an increase in domestic violence against married girls—often coming from in-laws (table 1). Among those who were married, 67% reported arguing with their husband either sometimes or often, 36% had been subjected to humiliation or verbal abuse, and 30% reported experiencing threats or physical violence from their husband since the onset of the war (table 2). A married 23-year-old man describes *'the pressure'* he experiences:

There is no income, and she asks you for something to eat, but you can't get her anything... She wants to go to her family, but you don't have 20 shekels [4.4 GBP] to get her there... It was going towards divorce... You hate the woman, you hate the marriage, you hate life. This war made us feel like that, you start to doubt yourself, like, where will you get it [the money] from? Things became difficult, which resulted in a lot of screams and discussions.

 *If someone is married they receive flour, while a single person does not.*

(A female community leader)

Table 1: Prevalence of intimate partner violence

During the war, 'Intimate partner violence towards wives increased '	Number (among married sub- sample)	Percentage
Agree	685	67.8
Partially agree	69	6.8
Disagree	155	15.3
During the war, 'Domestic violence towards married girls increased'		
Agree	574	56.8
Partially agree	76	7.5
Disagree	137	13.6

Table 2: Types of intimate partner violence

During the war, how often do you quarrel with your partner?	Number (among married sub- sample)	Percentage
Rarely	51	30.9
Sometimes	36	21.8
Too often	75	45.5
During the war, has your partner said or done anything to humiliate or insult you?		
No	105	63.6
Yes, not in front of others	24	14.5
Yes, in front of others	5	3.0
Yes, in presence and absence of others	31	18.8
During the war, did your partner threaten you or someone close to you?		
During the war, did your partner beat or physically hurt you?	19	11.6
During the war, did your partner sexually harm you?	30	18.2
During the war, did your partner seize your personal property without your consent?	8	4.8
During the war, did your partner force you to do things that put your life at risk?	10	6.1
	1	0.6

An 18-year-old young woman added that the war had created myriad economic and emotional tensions within her marriage:

At the beginning of the marriage, everything was perfect. But when the war started, with all the stress... If I hadn't made food or done something, he would ask, 'Why haven't you done it?' He would get angry. Before, he used to work in a factory, but suddenly, he was just sitting around, so he took it out on us... Before the war, he wasn't like this...

Of the married participants, 5% reported sexual harm by their partners since the war started (see Table 1). A 20-year-old young woman in the north of Gaza described her situation:

When he wanted intimacy, and I told him no, that it wasn't the right time, to wait... He refused. He said it was not my choice, that it had to happen. If I refused, he would beat me until he got what he wanted.

Increased rates of domestic violence by caregivers and male siblings

Before the war, boys were more commonly subjected to violence by others (including relatives), while adolescent girls (aged 12–17) faced higher levels of violence from parents (especially the mother) (PCBS, 2022b). According

to the GAGE survey conducted in August and September 2024, over 90% of participants reported an increase in household violence since the onset of the war. In the two weeks prior to the survey, 52% of young people reported being yelled at and called inappropriate nicknames by family members, while 28% had experienced physical punishment—such as being pushed, beaten, or slapped. These experiences were more commonly reported by males and younger adolescents. A 15-year-old girl in the north explains the increased parental violence:

Because of pressure. We get stressed, I mean...Like, for example, my dad before the war smoked. So sometimes he wouldn't find cigarettes so he could not smoke and relieve his stress.

During the war, however, unmarried girls reported increased bullying and violence from their male siblings (table 3); similarly, before the war, brothers were more frequently identified as the main aggressors (PCBS, 2022b). A 19-year-old young woman from the south described her experience as follows:

My brother hit me when I did not respond to him. He asked me to bring his clothes, and I didn't, so he hit me...Before the war, this never happened, but during the war, it did.

Table 3: Prevalence of violence from male siblings

During the war, 'Girls face more bullying and violence from male siblings'	Number (among married sub- sample)	Percentage
Agree	657	65.0
Partially agree	78	7.7
Disagree	217	21.5

Disrupted protection services


With the collapse of Gaza's institutions, survivors of gender-based violence frequently report that they have no place to turn to for protection, support or justice. Often, the only choice they have is to accept the violence:

Violence was always present... You feel like no matter what you do, they hit you. It's like hitting is just a fundamental part of life. Even now, I still suffer from the harshness of my husband's beatings. He hits me and does not want me to make any sound. You just have to stay silent, not let anyone know you were beaten, and not cry. Just keep quiet. A few days ago, he hit me again. I felt like leaving the tent, but something pulled me back... My daughter... I felt sorry for her. You feel that violence and hitting are ingrained, and the words he says sometimes hurt more than the hitting itself.

Nevertheless, qualitative data shows that not all protective mechanisms have disappeared, and in a minority of cases, survivors found mechanisms to hold perpetrators to account. A 20-year-old married young woman from the north of Gaza, who was frequently harassed by a man in the shelter, was able to file a complaint:

Yes, I reported him to the police. He was saying, 'I'll pay whatever dowry she wants, as long as she divorces her husband and marries me.'... I kept hearing a lot of things, like 'Who does she think she is?' or 'I'll take her by force,' and things like that. So, I went to the police... I don't know, honestly, but he was a young man... I went and filed a report against him. I told the police what happened – that this young man was harassing me, throwing words at me, and constantly staring at me as he went up and down. I sat with the police, and I even brought my relative. My husband was with me too.

However, it is important to note that these protective mechanisms were sought by adolescent girls and women against non-family members, and we found no cases of support seeking outside the family when the perpetrator was a male relative or partner.

 *When he wanted intimacy, and I told him no, that it wasn't the right time, to wait... he refused. He said it was not my choice, that it had to happen. If I refused, he would beat me until he got what he wanted.*

(A 20-year-old young woman in north Gaza)

Conclusion and implications for policy and programming

This research into the lived experiences of girls and young women during the war on Gaza shows how the continuous Israeli bombings and aggression have intensified the risks of child marriage and gender-based violence. Although hunger, thirst and the indiscriminate bombings affect males and females alike, there are hidden and often overlooked gendered effects that disproportionately impact women and girls, notably increased risks of gender-based violence, child marriage, and reproductive health complications. These forms of harm – though less visible than physical injuries and malnutrition – have lifelong consequences, demanding immediate attention from humanitarian efforts. In order to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 (good health and well-being) and SDG 5 (gender equality) by 2030, there must be urgent and evidence-informed targeted interventions to address the root causes of child marriage and gender-based violence to protect the rights and futures of at-risk girls and young women in Gaza. In addition to an immediate ceasefire, other key measures are urgently needed:

- **End the blockade and ensure that sufficient humanitarian aid can enter Gaza**, including food, water, fuel and medical supplies. This is essential to relieve hunger and household stress – factors that exacerbate child marriage and gender-based violence.
- **Rebuild Gaza's education system**, focusing on gender-sensitive learning environments, and creating targeted programmes to re-enrol girls who dropped out due to conflict or child marriage.
- **Invest in Gaza's economy, focusing on the specific needs of young women**, including vocational training, employment initiatives, and social protection for the poorest households. Economic insecurity is a key driver of child marriage; providing economic opportunities for girls and promoting their financial independence can delay marriage.
- **Restore and improve services for preventing and responding to gender-based violence**, including confidential reporting systems, safe spaces and support for survivors (including psychosocial care and legal aid). These services need to be accessible to all survivors, including through outreach, especially for survivors of domestic and intimate partner violence, and need to be safeguarded from gatekeepers (e.g. family members) and outside interference.
- **Implement 'early warning systems' to prevent child marriage**, working closely with service providers that interact with girls, such as teachers, health workers, religious leaders, NGOs and peer networks, to identify risks, make referrals and support interventions.

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