

Position Paper (2)

A War without Human Rights

Conditions of Persons with Disability in Shelters in Light of the Forced Displacement

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The Gaza Strip has been suffering from the ongoing Israeli Occupation siege since 2007, as it has imposed major restrictions on the movement of people and goods. The siege was a major obstacle to reconstruction, providing accommodations to buildings, or providing the basic needs and requirements of persons with disabilities before the war. Between the years 2008 and 2023, the Israeli Occupation launched five aggressive wars on the Gaza Strip, that has led to great losses of lives and properties. The imposed siege, in addition to these continuous wars, resulted in many humanitarian tragedies and wide scope destruction of infrastructure.

In its latest aggression against the Gaza Strip, which started on the 7th of October, the Occupation has committed genocide, accompanied by systematic forced displacement of Palestinians, the severity of which was more in the northern regions. This has resulted in the martyrdom of tens of thousands of Palestinians, most of whom are women and children, and the displacement of more than a million people under extremely difficult circumstances, the severity of which is intensified on marginalized groups in general, including people with disabilities.

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, the number of persons with disabilities in the Gaza Strip in 2017 reached 48,140. It is worth mentioning that the number of persons with disabilities has rapidly increased between the years 2007 and 2017 as a result of the recurring wars on the Strip¹. The statistics of the Bureau also reveal that the percentage of people who have at least one disability is the highest in the north of Gaza, with a rate of 3.2% of the total population.

The destructive war with all of its difficult and tragic impacts in which the entire population in the Gaza Strip live has led to duplicating the pressure and suffering of the marginalized and most affected groups such as women, children, and persons with disabilities, although the international humanitarian law calls for their protection in armed conflicts, and as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities stresses on the

¹ The War on Gaza: Everyone is Neglected, a report issued by the UN's "ESCWA", November 2023. Website: <https://cutt.us/oY8aR>.

need to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities during situations of armed conflict and humanitarian emergencies, and this Convention was ratified by the Occupation in 2012².

A report issued by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia “ESCWA” in November of 2023 indicated that persons with disabilities are exposed to more risks than ever before in light of this war, and they suffer more than others from deteriorating living conditions during sieges and wars, as their conditions have worsened after the ground invasion of the Strip, especially those who have resorted to shelters, including UNRWA schools³. The same applies to those who are forced to flee from the sudden bombing of houses and buildings. Emina Ćerimović a researcher on the rights of persons with disability, says: *“Persons with disabilities face extreme difficulties in finding shelter or obtaining water, food, medicines and medical devices”*.⁴

The Tragic Conditions of Persons with Disability in Shelters

The number of displaced people is still constantly increasing inside UNRWA shelters due to the continued Israeli aggression and bombing and the displacement of residents from the northern regions to the central and southern regions in an attempt to escape the Occupation bombing of their homes. These shelters have become very overcrowded and unable to accommodate the newly displaced residents. They have also even become unsafe, as one of the UNRWA schools, for example, in Al-Maghazi refugee camp was bombed.

According to report number 40 issued by UNRWA, around 1.8 million people from the different areas of the Gaza Strip were displaced from the 7th of October until the 27th of November. This means that there are over one million people who currently live in 156 UNRWA facilities in all five governorates of the Gaza Strip⁵, including the northern region. Furthermore, around 927,000 people, until the 26th of November, resided in 99 facilities located in the middle region, Khan Younis and Rafah, and until the 12th of October 2023, around

² The Devastating Impact of Attacks and Siege by Israel on Persons with Disabilities, (Human Rights Watch), a report published on 1 November 2023. Website: <https://cutt.us/NGC1b>.

³ Previous resource, The War on Gaza: Everyone is Neglected.

⁴ Previous resource, The Devastating Impact of Attacks and Siege by Israel on Persons with Disabilities.

⁵ UNRWA Situation Report NO. 40 on the Situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank including East Jerusalem. 27 November 2023. Website: <https://n9.cl/uw6su>.

160,000 people resided in 57 UNRWA schools in the northern region and Gaza. This was before the Occupation issued evacuation orders, and UNRWA stated in its report that it was unable to reach these shelters to assist or protect the displaced and had no information about their requirements and conditions⁶.

UNRWA has abandoned its responsibilities towards the shelters in the north, where the number of displaced people as of the 12th of October was estimated at approximately 160,000 displaced persons. This means that these people are exposed to extremely difficult conditions in terms of access to treatment, food, and water, including persons with disabilities, because many of these shelters are accessible, and were an option for many people with disabilities at the beginning of the war. Failure to update the numbers of displaced people in these shelters indicates the negligence and failure of UNRWA to protect Palestinian civilians in light of the war launched against the Palestinians by the Occupation.

Report number 34 issued by the UNRWA pointed out that the shelters accommodate a much larger number of people than their capacity and are not designed to host this large number of people. The shelters do not have sufficient facilities to provide safe and decent living conditions for the displaced, and the excessive overcrowding leads to a large spread of diseases, including acute respiratory diseases and diarrhea, and raises environmental and health issues and limits the UNRWA's ability to ensure proper service delivery. People in the shelters do not have sufficient food and basic survival supplies⁷. Abu Shaker, who is one of the persons with disabilities, said that he and his family rely on food aids provided by UNRWA. He continued saying that he exerts doubled efforts in buying food: *"Usually, for persons with disabilities, one of their family members goes out to get their needs, however, since I am the father and I am not willing to expose any member of my family to danger, I go by myself to obtain our basic needs despite my disability"*.⁸ Iyad Al-Krunz, Gaza Office Manager of the Stars of Hope Society for the Empowerment of Women with Disabilities, confirms in an interview that the food basket given in the shelters is insufficient and does not provide the minimum basic needs of the displaced: *"The food basket given every day provides a family of six and over either two cans of tuna or two packs of feta cheese, and of course, this is not enough. No meals that meet the health standards are offered,*

⁶ UNRWA Report No. 39 on the Situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), the Forty-ninth day of the war, 26 November 2023. Website: <https://cutt.us/zLOjp>.

⁷ UNRWA Report No. 34 on the Situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), the Forty-fourth day of the war, 21 November 2023. Website: <https://cutt.us/y6KC6>.

⁸ Previous resource, The Devastating Impact of Attacks and Siege by Israel on Persons with Disabilities.

meaning that there are no vegetables, meats, cooked food, or bread, and the flour that the UNRWA received is being distributed to people at their homes because the bakeries do not have the fuel necessary to operate". Moreover, Al-Krunz stressed the scarcity of food saying: "the accessible schools ask organizations for any needs for persons with disabilities, but when I asked around in some schools, they said that they have not received any food for four days. This means that the food sent to schools does not arrive there regularly, and now, all schools, including public schools, are supervised by UNRWA".⁹

As for water, the Occupation has cut off all main water supply from the residents of the Strip since the 11th of October, which made it extremely difficult for citizens to obtain a clean drinking water. According to the Palestinian Water Authority, 96% of the local water resources in the Gaza Strip are not potable¹⁰. Musleh, who is an individual with a visual disability says that he hosts 40 members in his house, and he walks over 3 kilometers per day to reach the location in which water is distributed and gets some water which is not sufficient to cover Musleh's needs or the needs of the people at his home. *"Since I cannot see, I take my daughter with me and walk for 3 kilometers to the water distribution site... the water they give us is not enough for 40 people"*¹¹. This was also confirmed by another interview conducted with a woman with disability as part of a special monitoring conducted by the Social and Economic Policies Monitor (Al Marsad) and Stars of Hope Society for the Empowerment of Women with Disabilities, *"we face extreme difficulty in accessing drinking water. We are currently in a school, solar energy is used to extract water from the well once a day, not all people can reach the well because water is extracted for limited hours only"*.¹²

Obtaining personal hygiene requirements has become extremely difficult for displaced people in shelters. Report number 36 issued by the UNRWA indicated that on average there is one shower unit for every 4,500 people in UNRWA shelters¹³, and according to report number 39 issued by the UNRWA, on average, each

⁹ An interview with Iyad Al-Krunz, Gaza Office Manager of the Stars of Hope Society for the Empowerment of Women with Disabilities, conducted on 26 November 2023.

¹⁰ Abdulqayoum, Ahmad. A Health Crisis in Gaza due Water Cuts by Israel, (Human Rights Watch), 16 November 2023. Website: <https://cutt.us/SV9B0>.

¹¹ Previous resource, The Devastating Impact of Attacks and Siege by Israel on Persons with Disabilities.

¹² An interview with a woman with disability, conducted on 22 November 2023.

¹³ UNRWA Report No. 36 on the Situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), the Forty-sixth day of the war, 22 November 2023. Website: <https://cutt.us/6swG8>.

UNRWA school has 30-50 restrooms, including those dedicated to persons with disability. On average, 220 individuals share one restroom at each school.

As a result of these extremely bad conditions, skin diseases have increased by 35%, and diarrhea cases have increased by 40% in the past two weeks.¹⁴ On this matter, Iyad Al-Krunz adds: *"The UNRWA only provides chlorine and phenol, and someone comes in to spray the floors to kill ants, mosquitoes, and insects. Despite that, there are many cases of illnesses and poisoning. Added to this is the start of winter in light of the extreme shortage of blankets"*¹⁵. He further adds: *"The crisis is related to the fact that the average person goes to the restroom once every four days. When you ask people, they say that we do not eat in the first place so that we do not need to go to the restroom."*¹⁶

The consequences of the lack of inclusion and accessibility, and the severe shortage of hygiene supplies and health requirements, are double for women in general and for women with disabilities in particular, as overcrowding and the inability to access restrooms and showers create major health problems for them. In addition to the long queues at the toilets, the lack of accessibility and unsuitability of these restrooms to the requirements of women with disabilities constitutes another obstacle for women with disabilities. Al-Madhoun, a woman with disabilities, says, *"Using the toilet is my biggest problem, especially since I do not have a wheelchair or a walker. I crawl on the floor to reach the toilet."*¹⁷

The overcrowding in the 150 emergency shelters designed by UNRWA is a growing source of concern, as the average number of displaced people has reached more than two and a half times their capacity, and the report confirmed that the shelters are not equipped to meet the requirements of displaced persons with disabilities, who are estimated to constitute more than 15% of the displaced population.¹⁸

¹⁴ A Press release from the Ministry of Health in the Gaza Strip: A 35% increase in skin disease rates, in addition to a 40% increase in diarrhea cases, Arabiya News 24, report published on 11/23/2023. Website: <https://cutt.us/VhsQn>

¹⁵ Previous resource, with Iyad Al-Krunz, Gaza Office Manager of the Stars of Hope Society for the Empowerment of Women with Disabilities.

¹⁶ Previous resource.

¹⁷ Previous resource, Gaza: The Devastating Impact of Attacks and Siege by Israel on Persons with Disabilities.

¹⁸ Previous resource, Gaza: The Devastating Impact of Attacks and Siege by Israel on Persons with Disabilities.

According to the persons with disabilities who have been displaced to hospitals, schools, and temporary camps, they suffer from severe overcrowding, terrible conditions, severe lack of basic services, and inadequate shelter accommodations to meet their requirements, including few shower units and adapted toilets.

People with disabilities in shelters suffer from the inability to use restrooms in schools and hospitals, due to severe crowding and the lack of adaptation of these facilities to people with disabilities, as well as the difficulty of obtaining personal hygiene supplies such as soap and toilet paper. Iyad Al-Krunz confirmed this saying: *"Most people with disabilities, if they had the choice, would not go to shelters, because their experience during previous wars with shelters is bad. There is a lack of privacy, deprivation of the minimum level of appreciation, a high sense of helplessness, a feeling of marginalization, and a lack of consideration for their needs, and this is what makes them unwilling to go to shelters".*

The director of a NGO network that works in the field of defending the rights of persons with disability in the Gaza Strip indicated that *"A large number of people with disabilities in the northern Gaza Strip refused to be displaced due to their previous experiences regarding displacement and shelters and their lack of readiness and suitability, in addition to the fact that access to the southern Gaza Strip is not easy in light of the destruction of the infrastructure and the absence of a truly safe passage, in addition to the lack of means of transportation and the lack of access to using assistive devices on destroyed roads. They are also aware that the shelter centers in the south will be very crowded, which will make matters more difficult, so these people prefer to stay in the north in places they know rather than face an ambiguous fate in the event of displacement. Some of these people came out and were finally forced to move because their homes were directly bombed"*.¹⁹

Reports issued by the UNRWA indicate that there is a disruption of medical services as well as psychosocial interventions in its clinics and shelters in the north, which means that many sick people with disabilities and pregnant women with disabilities have not received the necessary medical care for long periods, specifically after the Occupation attacked Palestinian hospitals. Furthermore, they suffered from the effects of shock, intimidation, and psychological and social pressure like others, without being able to get any outside help.

¹⁹An interview with Tharif Al-Ghurra, Director of the Disabilities Representative Persons Network, conducted on 19 November 2023.

The Difficulty in Movement during the War

The ground invasion and the massive destruction caused by the Israeli bombing worsened the tragedy of persons with disabilities in mobility and movement. There is a general shortage of assistive devices for persons with disabilities, such as wheelchairs, prosthetic limbs, crutches, and hearing aids, as a result of the restrictions associated with the siege imposed by the Occupation on Gaza for 17 years. People with disabilities need longer than others to carry out the Occupation's evacuation orders, that is if they are able to carry them out at all. Persons with mobility disabilities, for example, may need escorts to help them move, especially since some of them lost their assistive devices due to their destruction or their inability to use them due to the destruction of infrastructure.

The expert Heba Hagra stressed that aid must reach all persons with disabilities in Gaza. saying: *"The population in this region is witnessing a rapid rise in disability rates due to its exposure to repeated armed conflicts in addition to the current bombing of the Gaza Strip".* She stressed *"the need for all relief teams and international bodies to take this into account, and that persons with disabilities face great difficulties in reaching safe places. Furthermore, the deprivation of vital services such as electricity, water, and food exposes them to increased risks, including the risk of loss of life"*²⁰.

The lack of safe passage roads that guarantee movement from one place to another or safe access to shelters doubles the difficulty of movement for people with disabilities, and this is what some people with disabilities confirmed about the difficulties they faced in fleeing the Occupation attacks with the absence of any prior warnings. The destruction, electricity cuts and the stopping of elevators from working made it very difficult for persons with disabilities to escape using their wheelchairs and other assistive devices Furthermore,

Talking about the displaced people cannot be limited to shelters, especially in the context of talking about persons with disabilities. Many of them have been displaced to relatives' homes or streets, especially since they face great difficulty in evacuating and moving for long distances. They also face difficulties in obtaining aid since the agencies working in this field focus on schools and their shelters, while the people who remained in their homes and those who were displaced to the homes of their relatives suffer from a lack of all basic needs

²⁰ Heba Hagra, an Independent UN Expert. A published article titled "A UN Expert calls for unconditional humanitarian aid and relief for people with disabilities in Gaza", November 20th 2023. Website: <https://cutt.us/epmkC>.

as well as overcrowding. *“Do you know what it means to be displaced in a place where there are more than 15 displaced individuals? To the point that we sleep on the floor. We do not know how to manage our affairs. There is no food or water to prevent us from dying from hunger. There is no money as well. We do not receive any aid because we were not displaced to a school or other shelters”.*²¹

In light of the difficult conditions that persons with disabilities have been experiencing since the beginning of the recent aggression against the Gaza Strip, it is important to urgently strengthen and combine efforts to extend the humanitarian truce and to ultimately stop the whole aggression against the Gaza Strip and lift the siege in a way that ensures the continued entry of humanitarian aid, such as food, water, medicine, health supplies, and fuel into all governorates of the Gaza Strip, in addition to providing the requirements of persons with disabilities and working to mobilize efforts on urgent reconstruction once the war stops.

The aforementioned requires the intervention of all concerned parties to ensure the continued provision of medical services and basic items to all citizens in the Gaza Strip during the current period, providing safe passages for civilians, especially people with disabilities, and working to provide accessible shelters that provide all the elements of inclusion, in addition to providing persons with disabilities with special attention by the supervising authorities in the shelters, specifically the UNRWA.

²¹ An interview with a woman with disability, conducted on 13 November 2023.