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## **Witness: How one woman with a disability builds a life in Gaza**

***People with disabilities find strength despite discrimination.***

By Paul Aufiero

HRW (03.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3gn4RYS> - "I think I wouldn't have achieved so much in my life without my disability," said Doaa Qashlan, a university graduate and disability rights activist living in Gaza. Doaa, who was born with a physical disability and uses a wheelchair or an electric mobility scooter to move around, has a supportive family. She even became the first in her family to travel abroad. But back home in Gaza, life has been increasingly difficult.

Doaa uses her mobility scooter to get around the inaccessible streets of Gaza. "They're my legs," she says of her assistive devices. A few months ago, Doaa's scooter was damaged. She has still not been able to fix it, she says, as many necessary parts can't be found in Gaza and there's a lack of expertise to repair damaged devices. In part this stems from sweeping Israeli restrictions on the movement of goods and people into and out of Gaza. Today, Doaa says, she feels trapped at home.

Doaa nonetheless maintains a sense of humor, resiliency, and a hope to see things change. She is a member of the Public Relations and Media Board of the Palestinian General Union for People with Disabilities and has collaborated with international and local organizations in Gaza to raise awareness on disability rights. Her work is a testament to her perseverance. Still, life in Gaza can be hard.

New research released on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities describes how Israel's 13-year closure and Hamas authorities' lack of services or efforts to make public spaces accessible contribute to making life extraordinarily difficult for tens of thousands of Palestinians with disabilities in Gaza. "The situation [in Gaza] is already dire," Doaa said. "You see how people in Gaza suffer? People with disabilities suffer double."

Electricity outages are Doaa's biggest daily worry. She must keep her mobility scooter charged. But Gaza's chronic power outages, a product of restrictive Israeli policies and squabbles between Palestinian authorities, leave residents with as little as five hours of electricity per day and up to 15 hours on the best days. For Doaa and other people in Gaza with disabilities, these electricity cuts present serious obstacles to daily life –

especially for those who rely on equipment powered by electricity, such as elevators and electric mobility scooters.

Even when she can leave home, Doaa struggles with living in a relatively inaccessible area where it can be difficult for her to move about, and many in her community do not understand her needs. "Our neighbor built a speedbump in our area to slow cars down. He wasn't aware that this could injure us."

Doaa, like others with disabilities in Gaza, particularly women, faces deeply entrenched stigma. There are little to no job prospects and their social circles run small. Even things society places high value on, like marriage, are largely out of reach. For Doaa, this stigma is a constant source of frustration. "One day, a group of girls were speaking about marriage. They mentioned that a girl with a disability got married. One of them jokingly asked, 'I wonder how she got married?' I got angry and asked her, 'Has anyone asked you how you would get married?' The girl did not reply."

Even getting an education presented challenges for Doaa, each step of the way. By grade five, Doaa's muscles had begun to severely weaken and walking became challenging. She recalls an incident in grade six, when she used a walker. "I wanted to go to the bathroom. In order to reach the toilet, I had to walk a long distance on an unpaved, rocky path. Some students pushed me while I was walking, and I fell down and wet myself." When her father came to get her, he took her out of school. It was only at her mother's insistence – her mother even left the house until her father relented – that Doaa returned to school.

Doaa's mother is a constant source of strength for her and her younger sister Abeer, who also has a physical disability and uses a mobility scooter. When Doaa went back to school, she would arrive early to change from her mobility scooter to her wheelchair, and sometimes her mother would go over schoolwork with her while they waited for class to begin. One day, a group of people saw them, and one of them said to Doaa's mother, "Why are you teaching her, you think she will succeed? She's half human, go and give birth to a complete human." Doaa says that when she used to feel depressed and didn't want to go to school at all, sometimes counselors would visit her for psychosocial support. Later Doaa found out her mother had been arranging for that herself.

Doaa received an opportunity to attend a training program in the United Arab Emirates through a United Nations program for young people with disabilities. But after two years, Doaa made the difficult decision to return home. She was distraught coming back to Gaza but enrolled in a university program in office administration. At one point, Doaa had to leave university for a year because she and Abeer had to share one mobility scooter between them, and Abeer needed it to finish secondary school.

Having a disability in Gaza can sometimes be life-threatening. During the war in 2014 between Israel and Palestinian armed groups, Doaa was constantly afraid of being unable to escape danger in the event of an Israeli airstrike. "Each time I got into the bathroom, I was afraid if a nearby escalation took place and I needed to flee quickly, I couldn't. I was already slow." Doaa and her sister would sometimes even hear family members say things like, "Your family might flee and forget you at home."

During the war, Doaa's and Abeer's family did have to evacuate from their home. They went to live with their aunt, whose home was not accessible. Doaa was not able to use her wheelchair in the house and had to crawl to move about. But she was embarrassed to do so in front of her male relatives in the house, so would avoid moving when they were home.

And what if she and her sister needed to flee or quickly escape a building that came under attack? The stress of the fighting, compounded with not knowing what would happen to her and Abeer should their family have to evacuate, weighed on her emotionally. "The most difficult thing was when I heard my sister say, 'I don't want to die and leave you on your own. I don't want you to die and leave me on my own.'"

Today, Doaa draws hope from her friends, all of whom also have disabilities, and from her desire to see the situation change in Gaza. Before her scooter was damaged, Doaa would spend her time at the General Union to work on disability rights-related activities or attend training sessions. She is excited about efforts by local organizations that can help people with disabilities, specifically women and girls. "Focus on youth and a double focus on girls. Girls need support because they're incredibly marginalized. They need to get a space to speak out."

One organization has made a huge difference in her life already. Recently, the nongovernmental group Humanity and Inclusion enhanced Doaa's home to make the kitchen and bathroom more accessible. "Now I am able to get into the kitchen and make food for me and my family." This small improvement left an enormously positive mark on Doaa's life, highlighting how such modest efforts to improve accessibility can go a long way to relieving the immense barriers that people with disabilities face just trying to live independent lives.

When asked what Israeli and Palestinian authorities should do for the tens of thousands of people with disabilities in Gaza, Doaa had one simple message: "Remember we are humans."

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## **New report from UN Women brings forth voices of Palestinian women under COVID-19 lockdown**

UN Women (09.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3fC5KLu> - "I always dreamed of taking a long holiday and spend it at home with myself, my children and my husband. Now the dream has turned into a nightmare," shares Rawan\*, a Palestinian woman who works in the public sector in the West Bank. "I have more burden doing home chores, childcare, teaching... while ensuring that my husband who is doing work from home [has] a quiet space to do that."

Early into the COVID-19 crisis, UN Women, in partnership with Arab World for Research and Development, conducted in-depth interviews with Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza for a new [study](#) that sheds new light on the situation and needs of Palestinian women and girls. More than 30 women-led organizations and woman leaders in the area participated in surveys and meetings that gathered data about women's experiences.

In an effort to curb the spread of the new coronavirus in Palestine, a state of emergency was declared in March, followed by lockdown measures across the West Bank and Gaza. Initially, only female employees with children working in the public sector were relieved of their professional duties to care for their children, reinforcing gender stereotypes that expect women to be caregivers and men to be breadwinners. Later, even when all non-essential government employees were asked to stay home, the burden of domestic work and childcare remained with women.

"We must take care of our own homes and take care of the hygiene measures. My husband is under quarantine in our house and I have moved with my kids to a neighbour's house. I take care of all the responsibilities, the children, the cleaning,

budget management, and checking in on my husband's needs," explains Asma\* from the West Bank, another respondent to the UN Women survey.

According to the study, 68 per cent of Palestinian women have reported increased unpaid care work since COVID-19 confinement measures took effect.

The situation is even more stressful for women who are expected to work from home, because they are expected to simultaneously take care of their children and housework. When both male and female partners in a household are working remotely, men's paid work is prioritized more than that of women.

Thirty-eight-year-old Um Ahmad, a mother of three, from Nablus, is also feeling the stress: "I must now care for all aspects of my children's welfare. With the introduction of e-learning, I am the only one who is really following up with the children to do their schoolwork. They are confined and stressed, and I must deal with that, but I am also stressed!" Um Ahmad wants psycho-social support for families as they struggle to cope with the new normal that COVID-19 has ushered in.

"While it is nice to have the family together, my husband [has] nothing to do. He is bored and... Boredom is making him edgy and prone to violence," shared Heba\* from the West Bank, signalling the rising threat of domestic violence—the shadow pandemic—that women around the world are facing during COVID-19.

The Palestinian Working Women Society reported more than 510 calls for support, including from victims of domestic violence between 22 March and 4 April. SAWA, another women's organization, has reported 3 cases of suicide attempts due to sexual abuse, incest, harassment and attempted rape within a period of one week ( 9 - 16 April). And these are just the ones that have been reported – reporting of domestic violence is usually lower than the actual rate of incidents, and in times of crisis, many women may not have the opportunity or safety to report violence.

The lockdown measures that are necessary to contain the spread of the virus have created new barriers for women survivors seeking vital services. The restrictions on movement has also normalized the prevalent patriarchal notion that, "a woman's place is at home".

Economically, the crisis is expected to hit women's livelihood harder, since most women work in the informal sector and small businesses. A survey conducted by Arab World for Research and Development showed that 76 per cent of women had lost their income (compared to 65 per cent men). According to a flash survey by UN Women, 95 per cent of women owners of micro, small and medium enterprises said their work had already been impacted by COVID-19. Furthermore, the report found that almost 25 per cent of Palestinian women working in the private sector have no contract or pay protection.

Amal Hamad, Palestinian Minister of Women's Affairs stresses that economic violence and domestic violence are intrinsically linked under present circumstances. "As a result of the economic conditions, loss of jobs, and with the current state of anxiety, there is deterioration in the economic situation of women, and this is leading to economic violence in the home and is also higher rates of domestic violence."

To mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on Palestinians, UN Women's report makes a strong case for prioritizing gender considerations in the country's COVID-19 response plan.

"The pandemic is not showing us new problems; it is worsening known issues," says UN Women Special Representative for Palestine, Maryse Guimond. "We know that crises can worsen the economic, social and political situation of women and girls, deepening

existing inequalities. But this can also be an opportunity to move forward and not go backward.”

To emerge from this crisis with resilience, and to build back better, gender equality must take centre-stage in all aspects of recovery efforts—from ensuring that stimulus plans address the needs of both men and women equally to encouraging and promoting the role of men at home and in childcare as equal partners in the household. For more recommendations, read the full report.

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## **Palestinian men take up cooking in quarantine**

***Forced to stay at home due to precautions against COVID-19, some Palestinian men are learning to cook for the first time in their lives.***

By Sanaa Saida

Al-Monitor (20.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2xn3tDG> - Samar Titi laughs and says her husband, Hassan, has hardly ever stepped into their kitchen throughout 27 years of marriage, not even to pour himself a cup of tea.

One reason was that Hassan, a video journalist, was rarely home. The father of three would have coffee with his wife in the morning, then rush to work most days of the week.

But since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus in the Palestinian territories a month ago, Hassan, like most of his colleagues, is staying home. In April, the Palestinian government declared a state of emergency and shut down public places, including schools, universities and markets.

At home in Nablus in the West Bank, Hassan dabbled in the kitchen and prepared his first dish: msakhan, a Palestinian delicacy of chicken, onions, olive oil and bread.

“It was delicious,” Samar said, explaining she had little to do with the preparations. Her husband had found the recipe online and didn’t consult her.

Hassan said, “I was tired of doing nothing and picking up arguments with my wife because I was restless and on edge. I was surprised to discover that there are a lot of men cooking. At first, I felt shy cooking in front of my wife and daughters.”

But once he discovered that he could, Hassan started working with Samar in the kitchen. Samar said she was “so happy” because the lockdown afforded her some time with her husband.

Then Dina, their youngest daughter, a student of marketing and human resources, filmed her father and posted the videos on Facebook.

“I saw my parents working together on one of our family's favorite dishes that we had not done before, as we did not have time,” she said. “So I decided to record these special moments and share them with my friends. Cooking, baking sweets or coming up with healthy recipes is also a way of spending time together.”

In the Gaza Strip, where the situation is more difficult because of the Israeli blockade, Mohammed al-Ramlawi and his wife Noor also cook together at home in Gaza City.

Mohammed also helps Noor clean the house — which is perhaps even more rare than a Palestinian man cooking, as men, in Palestinian society, typically do not help with domestic affairs.

Noor said the quarantine has changed the habits of some men, who are putting aside the mentality that real men do not do housework. But she admitted that her husband would rather cook than clean.

Mohammed said he had never helped in the house over six years of marriage because it was neither necessary nor requested. "Most of the time, I was working outside," he said. "When I came home in the evening, everything was done and ready."

Both the Ramlawis and the Titis have found a way to cooperate and help each other during these days of self-isolation. "There have been many reports of violence — both toward women and children — in quarantine in the Palestinian lands," Laila Abu Aisha, a family counselor from Gaza City, told Al-Monitor.

"Many men who are forced to stay home suffer from stress and frustration, particularly if they have lost their income," she said. "Fear, insecurity and stress negatively affect their psychology and they resort to violence — they abuse their wives and children."

She called on the Palestinian government to help alleviate Palestinians' financial difficulties and protect women who are victims of domestic violence.

Women's groups active in the Middle East have warned against a potential increase in domestic violence since the coronavirus outbreak, saying that tight-knit family structures and multigenerational living conditions in confined spaces could increase violence. Stressful situations often lead to physical abuse, which was high in Palestine even before the added stress of the coronavirus.

Though many women's groups have warned of increased domestic violence in the Middle East, no figures have been released since the start of the pandemic in the region.

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## **Women in Palestine face violence and political exclusion, campaigner tells UN**

***First female Palestinian activist to address UN security council speaks out over political marginalisation and domestic abuse***

By Rebecca Ratcliffe

The Guardian (26.10.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2OhylHU> – Women are being shut out of Palestinian politics and excluded from peace talks, according to Randa Siniora, the first female Palestinian campaigner to address the UN security council.

Speaking at the UN on Thursday, she said that while women in the occupied territories often face the greatest violence, they are overlooked in the country's political and humanitarian responses.

"The Israeli occupation and the resulting humanitarian crisis are deeply gendered and exacerbate existing gender inequalities. Women disproportionately endure the violence of occupation borne by all Palestinians, and often with gender-specific consequences," said

Siniora, general director of the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling in Palestine.

Palestinian women face attacks and discrimination by the Israeli military on a daily basis, she explained, adding that spikes in political violence lead to increased violence in the home.

"Domestic violence is shockingly high, and femicide is on the increase," Siniora told the UN security council's debate on women, peace and security. There is a lack of services and little access to justice for women who suffer such abuses.

UN statistics show that, despite international efforts, the representation of women in peace processes has either stalled or declined.

"The ones who do not wage war are being disqualified from making peace. Those who wage war are the preferred occupants for peace tables," said Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, executive director of UN Women, who told the council that women are either vastly under-represented or completely excluded from peace talks and monitoring committees.

"Between 1990 and 2017, under our watch, women constituted only 2% of mediators, 8% of negotiators, and 5% of witnesses and signatories in major peace processes. Only three out of 11 agreements signed in 2017 contained provisions on gender equality, continuing last year's worrisome downward trend. Of 1,500 agreements signed between 2000 and 2016, only 25 raise the role of women's engagement in the implementation phase," she said.

In Yemen, said Mlambo-Ngcuka, current efforts to resume peace talks do not include women, beyond setting up observer bodies to advise the UN special envoy. "Even in a consultative meeting in London this summer organised by the UN, convening 22 prominent Yemeni leaders to discuss the peace talks, there were only three Yemeni women invited."

In Palestine, Siniora, who has documented human rights violations in the occupied Palestinian territories for three decades, said women are excluded from key positions despite evidence that they have been critical to working across political divides, building grassroots support for peace, and providing essential expertise on human rights.

"Representation of women in key decision-making positions, including in Palestinian Authority institutions, is barely 5%," she said.

"Little space has been made to integrate Palestinian women's concerns into key political processes, including for achieving Palestinian statehood or for national reconciliation."

While international efforts to increase female representation are failing, the share of aid channeled through NGOs focused on women has also stalled, said Mlambo-Ngcuka.

In conflict settings, girls are one and a half times more likely to be out of primary school, and more vulnerable to child marriage. Maternal mortality rates are almost twice the global ratio in conflict and post-conflict countries.