



Islamic Relief Worldwide

DREAMS ON HOLD

Acknowledgements

This report was produced by the Global Advocacy team at Islamic Relief Worldwide in collaboration with Islamic Relief Palestine. Special thanks to all researchers and contributors, particularly Shahin Ashraf, Martin Cottingham, Najma Abukar, Richard McLaverty, Muneeb abu Ghazaleh, Heba AbuJarbou and Bodour Abu-Kwaik who provided nuanced analysis and coordinated the findings that underpin the key themes of this report.

Islamic Relief thanks The Training and Management Institute for supporting in the data collection process in the Gaza Strip. Special thanks to all the UN agencies, international non-governmental organisations, local civil societies, youth organisations and private sector actors for the data and information they provided.

We also pay tribute to all the courageous young people who have shared their lived experiences and told us about the challenges associated with navigating youth unemployment in Gaza. Thank you to those who were also brave and bold enough to share their vision and solutions for overcoming those challenges.

Finally, we extend our gratitude to Islamic Relief UK, Islamic Relief Canada, Islamic Relief Switzerland and the Swiss Development Cooperation for funding the Islamic Relief projects highlighted in this report.

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Executive Summary

Toward a sustainable, inclusive and participatory society

This report comes as the world faces the greatest health crisis in a generation, and as ever, the most vulnerable are the hardest hit. Covid-19 is deepening suffering in Gaza Strip, where years of occupation, blockade and recurring conflict have brought about endemic poverty and aid dependency and made mental health challenges commonplace.

The pandemic is having a huge effect on young Palestinians, for whom rising levels of hostility and polarization is closely linked to the political crisis. This generation was already grappling with a youth unemployment rate of 70% and is now finding it harder than ever to find work amid restrictions imposed to curb the spread of coronavirus.

To better understand such dynamics, Islamic Relief commissioned research within the Gaza Strip to investigate the key factors contributing to youth unemployment, and the multi-layered impact of youth unemployment on Palestinian youth.

The research highlights striking similarities in young people's experience of socio-economic barriers. The situation is even more dire for young graduates: they make up the greatest proportion of unemployed youth, and female graduates have a lower labour participation rate than that of young men.

Faced with profound challenges, young people are unable to fulfil their aspirations. Their lives on hold, a generation is at risk of falling into despair. Reigniting the hope for a brighter future requires significant and urgent action.

The focus on skills development must be better matched to the needs of the labour market. Greater investment is needed in youth entrepreneurship and technical and vocational education and training and – with specific focus on spaces for young women and on eliminating gender-based barriers.

The profound difficulties of everyday life and along with the weakened sense of social cohesion has contributed to the mental health crisis in

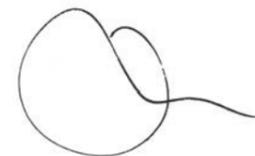
the Gaza Strip. Many young people feel they only have two options: to migrate or commit suicide. Suicide is much more prevalent among young men compared to young women, especially since social stigma makes young men less likely to access mental health services.

Such barriers are preventing young people from participating equally in society affects their fundamental identity and damages their sense of security. Active intervention is required to build an inclusive youth community in which young people can learn and understand each other and forge lasting alliances that contribute positively to the Palestinian community in Gaza Strip. Young people are agents of change and experts in their own experience, as such they must play an equal part in developing the solution. To that end, it is essential to increase their political participation.

Only when the needs of young people are centred will a sustainable, inclusive, and participatory society be achieved in Gaza Strip.



Shahin Ashraf
Head of Global Advocacy
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Introduction

Young Palestinians, like many young people across the globe, have frequently been depicted in negative terms – often as a threat to peace and security. Such dismissive stereotypes fail to see the dignity, humility and sense of social responsibility among Palestinian young people – as well as their huge, largely untapped, potential.

Young Palestinians living in Gaza are presented with a multitude of unique challenges that have a tangible and significant impact on their daily lives. Young people (aged 15-29) make up more than a third (38 per cent) of the total Palestinian population.¹ Yet, despite representing a significant and growing segment of the population, young people remain largely disempowered, disenfranchised and disenchanted in Palestinian society.

Islamic Relief produced this report to examine the prospects of young people in Gaza more closely. The report highlights some of the negative consequences and impacts of high youth unemployment in the Gaza Strip, with a specific focus on socio-economic factors, education and mental health.

Young people in Gaza are navigating many challenges, including steep unemployment, poverty and humanitarian and political crisis. Poverty is widespread and the humanitarian situation is acute, with more than 80 per cent of the population (2.1 million people) relying on humanitarian aid to survive.

“We’re a people under occupation. We feel failure while hunger and unemployment rise.”
–Abdallah*

**Name changed to protect their identity*

There has been a sharp deterioration in the humanitarian, human rights, security and political situation in the Gaza Strip in recent years. The health system, on the verge of collapse following years of blockade and neglect, is under-resourced and overburdened. The economy is in ‘free fall’

poverty, unemployment and food insecurity are increasing, as are other drivers of humanitarian need. People here are living in political and physical isolation from communities in the rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including West Bank and East Jerusalem. The longstanding policy of separation pursued by Israel was scaled up in 2005 and resulted in Palestinians becoming even more isolated from each other and from their ancestral lands. Young people are paying a particularly high price.

The crisis in Gaza is exacerbated by the blockade imposed on the Gaza Strip, which impedes the movement of people, severely restricts imports and exports, and limits access to essential goods and services. The negative effects of the blockade have been compounded by poor governance and the intra-Palestinian political divide. Young people face a devastating combination of very tight restrictions on the movement of people and goods, and significant political division and uncertainty, leading to very bleak socio-economic prospects.

“I got a job at a company in Turkey in the PR department, but unfortunately because of the closure of the crossings and the permanent siege on the Gaza Strip, I lost my job.”
– Reham

Private investment in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is very low – and far below the level needed to fuel strong economic growth and reduce unemployment. Ongoing conflict and the lack of a comprehensive peace agreement are undermining investor confidence. The cycle of conflict and economic decline casts a long shadow over the Palestinian investment climate, fragmenting markets and creating increased costs for businesses, chronic uncertainty for investors and very high unemployment, particularly for young people.

Impact of Covid-19 on youth unemployment



The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the already dire situation for young people in the Gaza Strip. As the pandemic spread across the globe, the first cases were confirmed in Gaza in early March, prompting the Palestinian Prime Minister to declare a state of emergency to contain further spread of the virus. As the pandemic continues to take hold, measures to curb it are likely to increase existing challenges. Gaza has a dense population, a struggling healthcare system and very limited supplies of electricity and clean water, making it significantly more difficult to implement World Health Organization (WHO) advice on Covid-19.

The country is already facing an economic crisis with high rates of poverty and unemployment. According to figures from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, the unemployment rate in Gaza increased by 3.6 per cent in the second quarter of 2020 compared to the previous quarter.² This further placed pressure on an already struggling economy, and as a result the overall unemployment rate in Gaza Strip in the third quarter of 2020 rose to 49 per cent - almost half the population.

The pandemic has also had a severe impact on daily wage workers. About seven in every 10 employed individuals were wage employees. More than half (54 per cent) of these employees were working in the private sector with no

contract. In a context where 35 per cent of young people interviewed for this research indicated that they had a lack of awareness of their labour rights, the lack of contractual safety net presents a significant risk of wage exploitation and limited avenues for justice. Gaps in labour laws and policies have left daily wage workers without financial safety nets or pathways to enforce their rights.

“I am a kindergarten teacher and I am the main breadwinner for my family. I have two children who have a lot of daily expenses but due to school closures I lost my only source of income. What am I going to do? How will I tell my children that I cannot bring the food they need?”
–Salma*, 26

As the pandemic and its associated measures continue to take hold, the unemployment rate will likely continue to rise, impacting on young people, particularly young women. Along with the socio-economic impact, the health impact will be equally as grave, given the limited capacity and huge healthcare demand that will result from the pandemic.

Research objective

Severe poverty and high unemployment affect the lives of young people negatively in several ways: preventing them from attaining access to education, hampering their employment prospects, preventing them from establishing independent households, and ultimately blocking their full participation in broader society.

This report aims to investigate:

- The key factors that contribute to youth unemployment in the Gaza Strip
- The impact of youth unemployment on Palestinian youth in Gaza.



Methodology



The research study that underpins this report, carried out by Islamic Relief and the Training and Management Institute (TAMI), used a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. To collect this data the study team undertook field visits to various governorates (including Gaza City, Rafah, Khan Younis, Deir El Balah and North Gaza) in the Gaza Strip, to conduct interviews and focus group discussions with a wide range of stakeholders including young people, government ministers, United Nations (UN) agencies, local civil society organisations, technical and vocational education training (TVET) centres, and universities.

The research team undertook several questionnaires and interviews with various focus groups on several areas and themes, including economic, social, legal and political. There

were 260 key informant interviews and focus group discussions with young people, using a questionnaire guide exploring specific themes. There were also 38 other key informant interviews with a wide range of governmental, non-governmental and private sector actors working with young people.

A literature review was also an integral part of the process. This included reviewing governmental and non-governmental documents including from the Ministry of Health, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics and Gaza Mental Health Programme among others. This was done through an online library search, and discussion with relevant bodies.

Profile of survey respondents

Figure 1: General Information on survey respondents

	Governorate	Count	Percentage %
Governorate	North	29	11.2
	Gaza	65	25.0
	Deir El Balah	63	24.2
	Khan Younis	47	18.1
	Rafah	56	21.5
Gender	Male	122	46.9
	Female	138	53.1
Disability	Yes	10	3.8
	No	250	96.2
Educational level	Primary	18	6.9
	Secondary school	32	12.3
	Vocational secondary	13	5.0
	Intermediate education	54	20.8
	Bachelor's degree	138	53.1
	Master's degree	5	1.9
Age	15-18	7	2.7
	19-22	46	17.7
	23-24	66	25.4
	25-26	141	54.2
Marital status	Single	142	54.6
	Married	100	38.5
	Widowed	7	2.7
	Divorced	11	4.2
Work type	Self-employed or freelance	35	13.5
	Full-time employment	23	8.8
	Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)	9	3.5
	Unemployed	193	74.2
Working hours	40 hours a week or more	141	54.2
	Less than 40 hours a week	119	45.8
Monthly income	Less than 1,000 NIS	141	54.2
	1,000 – 2,000 NIS	119	45.8
Type of job	Non-profit sector	58	22.3
	Private sector	58	22.3
	Public sector	75	28.8
	Other	69	26.6

Key findings on youth unemployment in Gaza

Our research found that high youth unemployment in Gaza is rooted in the challenges and barriers young people face in the following six key areas: the economy, education, social deprivation, health and psychosocial factors, legal constraints and the political sphere. In this section of the report we summarise the main concerns and challenges in each of these areas.



Economic

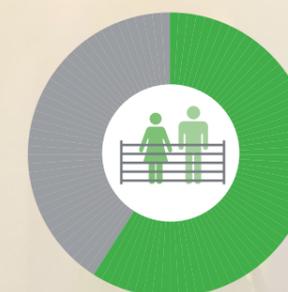
Socio-economic barriers and youth unemployment

The study conducted as part of this report revealed several socio-economic barriers young people in Gaza had to overcome in order to secure employment and actively participate in the labour market. There are several economic, political and social factors that hinder access to job opportunities for young people. One of the consistent barriers that young people revealed in key informant interviews and focus group discussions was the skills gap of young graduates who had few of the soft skills and career-based skills that would give them a competitive edge in an already saturated labour market. In a rapidly changing labour market that requires adaptability and up-to-date skills, young graduates are often studying outdated academic curricula that do not adequately prepare them for the labour market. The disconnect between education institutions and employers has placed young graduates in a position where they are unable to access the few employment opportunities that are available.

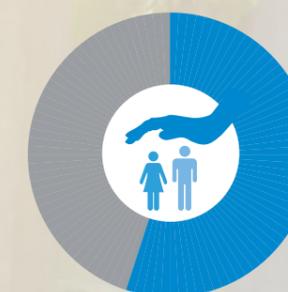
A third of those interviewed as part of this study indicated that they live in financial crisis, accessing loans from banks and other financial institutions to make ends meet. Fifty-seven per cent of young people interviewed felt that the blockade is one of the main barriers preventing them from getting access to employment. Due to political sensitivity and fear, 20 per cent of respondents did not answer this question, whilst 25 per cent said they felt that the blockade did not significantly affect their access to employment. In addition, the lack of financial resources and social stability is having a significant impact on family relationships, with young couples choosing to get married much later than they otherwise would.

Mismatched skills, capacity building and technical and vocational education training (TVET)

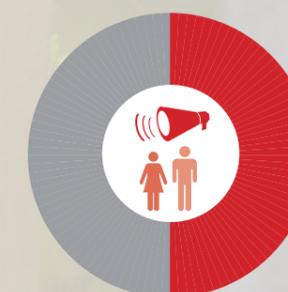
One of the key findings from this study indicated a mismatch in skills supply and the demands of the labour market. Of the young people interviewed, 45 per cent feel the labour market requires skills they do not possess. Young people are not currently being well equipped with the necessary skills (life skills, administrative skills and practical/technical skills) to meet the needs of the labour market. This presents a unique opportunity for TVET to fill this gap and ensure that young graduates have the skills they need to secure employment.



57% of young people feel that the Gaza blockade hinders their access to work opportunities



55% of young people feel that the occupation has affected their access to work opportunities



50% of young people feel political polarisation affects their access to work opportunities



Economic gender gap and constraints to women's economic empowerment

Limited labour participation for young women and a lack of implementation of legal rules and regulations are additional barriers that limit access to work opportunities and economic prosperity for young people. Gender-based barriers are particularly a challenge for young women, meaning they enter the labour market and secure employment at a much slower rate than young men. **About 7 in 10 males participated in the labour force, compared to about 2 in 10 females.**³ In an attempt to overcome instability, more young people have been taking a more entrepreneurial approach and setting up small businesses for profit. However, securing financial support to kickstart this process has proven to be very challenging. Over 80 per cent of young people interviewed felt that the government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and donor agencies do not support youth entrepreneurship as a priority. The pool of funding available for young women is even smaller. Young women face additional gender-based barriers in accessing employment and setting up small businesses - barriers often rooted in and reinforced by social norms. Forty-three per cent of young people interviewed feel that public and private sector policies do not decrease gender bias in the processes necessary to start and expand a business, including formal registration, licensing and permits.

Financial literacy

Another key finding from the key informant interviews and focus group discussions is the lack of awareness around the availability of financial support services and programmes for young people. Sixty per cent of young people indicated they were unaware of programmes available to support young people through NGOs, financial institutions or the governmental agencies. This lack of awareness often results in missed opportunities for young people, particularly young entrepreneurs who lack the financial management tools to make financial and business decisions.

This has a tangible impact on the accessibility of financial services for young people. For instance, young people often access high interest loans that they will be unable to pay back, meaning they fall further into poverty. This accumulation of debt will have wider ramifications in terms of young people's access to financial services in the long term. In addition, some young people are also borrowing high-interest loans to survive. Thirty-seven per cent of young people surveyed had to borrow from banks or lending institutions to meet essential needs including food, water and shelter.

There is a lack of financial literacy among young people that has not been adequately addressed by education institutions and youth groups. Forty-two per cent of young people indicated that the education system can help them manage their own financial savings and plays a positive role in making personal financial decisions. There needs to be a significant amount of capacity-building with youth groups and education institutions in terms of providing training on financial literacy.

Education



Education and socio-economic policies

Whilst the Occupied Palestinian Territories has one of the most literate populations in the world, the education system is in crisis and failing, due largely to the effects of the Israeli occupation: insufficient infrastructure, lack of adequately trained teachers and a lack of access to schooling in marginalised areas. Despite these challenges, the youth literacy rate is 99 per cent. One of the key findings from this study pointed to a disconnect between education qualifications and job market demands, meaning that these qualifications do not typically translate into job opportunities for young people. Fifty-seven per cent of young people interviewed believe that universities and youth organisations do not adequately help them gain the skills they need to bridge the gap to the labour market. In addition, 53 per cent feel that current education and employment policies do not adequately address the problem of youth unemployment. Due to this disconnect, high education attainment does not typically guarantee employment opportunities.

"I graduated from the Public Information and Communication department four years ago and I still have not found a job."
– Yousef*

TVET courses present an opportunity to bridge that skills gap, as these courses provide skills-based training that would allow young people to gain a competitive edge in the labour market. Sixty per cent of young people surveyed indicated that vocational training under current conditions can be more responsive to labour market requirements than a university education. However, there is stigma attached to TVET, and young people are encouraged to pursue a more traditional academic route. Due to this social pressure, young people are choosing to go to university even if it does not adequately equip them for the demands of the labour market. Of the young people interviewed, 39 per cent do not believe that the plans of governments and local organisations include jobs related to their education and TVET background. Meanwhile, 42 per cent feel that there is a lack of community support for leadership development training programmes for young people, including high school students and young adults.

Interestingly, just over 60 per cent of young people felt that the quality of education in local universities is influenced by the political climate – over which they had little to no influence. Many young people feel that university courses such as business studies and other entrepreneurial courses in higher education do not significantly influence youth employability or adequately prepare young people to meet the expectations of either local or international labour markets.

Social

Social relationships and community cohesion

Young people in Gaza face various social constraints and barriers in their relationships with their peers, family and more broadly when it comes to elements of community cohesion. In the survey question that focused on social perspectives and attitudes, 57 per cent of young people felt that their everyday social environment is not safe and stable, while 46 per cent have experienced increased tensions with family members directly as a result of their socio-economic situation. These tensions often manifest themselves in the form of intimate partner, familial or gender-based violence or other forms of abuse. The social pressure felt by young men to play the provider role adds to their frustrations. For young men, the provider role is closely linked to their sense of masculinity and self-worth. In circumstances where they are unable to fulfil that role, those frustrations can build and show up as conflict within the family.

“My older brother started beating me regularly after he lost his job and his engagement fell apart because he couldn’t afford to get married.”

– Amal

Over 50 per cent of young people felt that their socio-economic situation is a threat to their family’s safety and security, while just over 52 per cent of those interviewed felt that they were unable to participate in social events with their own family and friends as a result of being unemployed. This has led to increased social isolation for young people, who are unable to be part of the community and socialise. In some cases, unemployment has had some detrimental social outcomes for young people who had a desire to get married in their early 20s. In fact, 45 per cent of interviewees aged 18-29 stated that they have delayed marriage as a result of the socio-economic situation. Meanwhile 38 per cent of those who had married have divorced or separated as a result of being unemployed.



Mental health



Mental health impact of youth unemployment

A key finding from this study was the overwhelming lack of hope among young people in Gaza, who feel isolated, silenced and underrepresented in formal political structures. Due to the political and socio-economic situation, a generation is in limbo and unable to dream of a future and realises their full potential. Young people in Gaza not only harbour the mental trauma that comes from growing up in a conflict zone, they are also presented with the continuous challenge of survival, finding employment in order to secure their needs as well as those of their family.

Studies show that over 68 per cent of adolescents who were exposed to Israeli-Palestine conflict and the violent events in Gaza have developed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 40 per cent of them with moderate to severe PTSD.⁴ Over 95 per cent of adolescents suffer from severe anxiety.⁵ PTSD, anxiety and depression is most prevalent among young people, many of whom have turned to suicide as a means of escape. Thirty-eight per cent of young people in Gaza have considered suicide at least once.⁶ The suicide rate in Gaza

has been steadily increasing over the past 10 years, and is most common among young men. In 2019, there were 30 recorded suicide deaths in Gaza, of which 25 were male and five were females.⁷

This research found that 55 per cent of young people in Gaza are suffering from mental health problems, while 58 per cent regularly experience anxiety as a result of their social and economic surroundings. Whilst young men and young women both experience mental health challenges, young men are far less likely to access support services due to social stigma and hyper-masculinity.

In addition, 56 per cent of those interviewed felt that they are unable to access mental health support services for themselves and their families. These figures indicate the direct impact that the socio-economic environment and psychosocial factors are having on young people across Gaza.

Legal

Rights and policies

“I am unemployed, and I don't recognise what labour rights are, and if I get a job, I do not know what my rights are.”

– Hani

Another key finding from the interviews and focus group discussions with young people was the lack of awareness around legal rights, particularly those in relation to labour rights. This leaves young people without any safety nets, exposing them to different forms of exploitation. The minimum monthly wage in the Gaza Strip is 1,450 shekels (£330). The average monthly expenditure for an average household (6.1 persons) is over £600. Consequently, even the minimum monthly wage is not enough to sustain the average family in the Gaza Strip.

The non-application of minimum wage policy has led to circumstances in which employers pay far below the national minimum wage, placing young people in a compromising position even when they do secure employment. Sixty-two per cent of young people interviewed feel that the non-application or implementation of the labour law on the minimum wage has contributed to the high youth unemployment rate, while 61 per cent feel that the non-application and implementation of labour laws regarding the duplication of work has contributed to the increase of youth unemployment.

In addition to the lack of awareness, there is also a lack of legal protection (under contract) and protection for human rights, such as the right to privacy and the right to a fair hearing in circumstances where there are employment disputes.

Political

Lack of political participation for young people

Young Palestinians are among the most politically aware young people in the world.⁸ Despite organising and protesting for change, this has not typically translated into political influence or meaningful participation. The result is a generation of disempowered young people who are not part of national or local governance or political structures. In recent years, the civic space for Palestinian youth has been shrinking further. Young people who were once politically engaged and active are now thinking twice before expressing any political views.

“Youth prefer to keep silent and avoid expressing their political views and their opinions about current events.”

– Fatima

Almost 60 per cent of young people interviewed feel that political divisions and lack of social cohesion have directly contributed to the marginalisation of young people in Gaza. Sixty-one per cent also indicated that their exclusion from decision-making processes in political parties increases their desire to leave the country. Young people in Gaza have no meaningful participation in key decision-making spaces, they are often not recognised as valuable partners, as such their opinions are overlooked even on issues that significantly affect their lives.

Further findings and analysis

Socio-economic impact of youth unemployment

In this section, we look at some of the barriers young people face in greater depth, adding further analysis to the key findings of our study. This section also includes case studies to illustrate the plight of young Palestinians, together with examples of Islamic Relief projects that are focused on building resilience and supporting young people and their communities to tackle those challenges

Unemployed and under-represented

In the context of declining economic growth and the unstable political situation (occupation and blockade), unemployment in the Occupied Palestinian Territories has been on a steep incline for over two decades. With high unemployment rates and low political representation, young people often do not feel that their voices are heard or that they have much of a say in decision-making at any level. As a result, they have increasingly become disengaged from civic participation.

Young people are underrepresented in formal political structures across the world, yet political decisions can affect their lives profoundly and shape their future. In Gaza, young people play a marginal role in local governance structures. They have often been perceived as a homogenous group that poses a threat to existing political structures and even to peace and harmony.

High youth unemployment rate

The Occupied Palestinian Territories have one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world, with a rate of 70 per cent in the first quarter of 2020. There are also significant disparities in youth unemployment between the Gaza Strip and West Bank, with the Gaza Strip bearing the brunt of youth unemployment (70 per cent versus 27 per cent in West Bank).⁹ These disparities are even more significant for women, young graduates and those with disabilities. Women also face lower rates of labour participation (a measure of the economy's active workforce), whilst also experiencing higher rates of intimate partner and familial violence due to socio-economic insecurities.



Figure 2: Overall unemployment rate in Occupied Palestinian Territories (2010-2020)

Unemployment rate in Gaza Strip and West Bank (2010-2020)

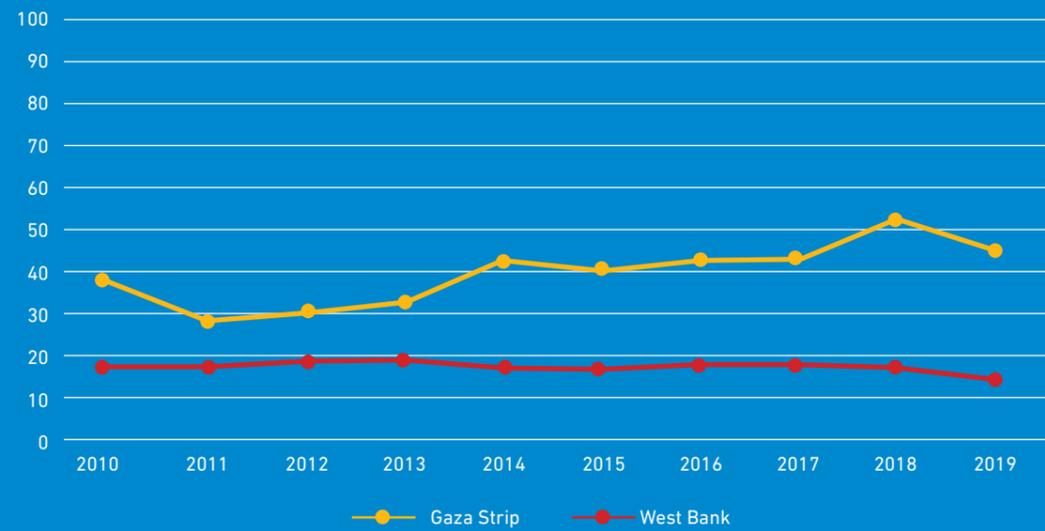
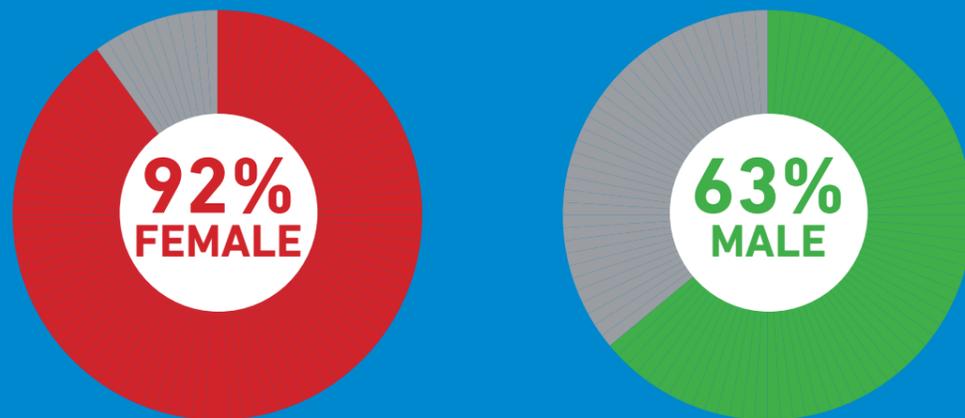


Figure 3: Gender and geographical breakdown of youth unemployment

GENDER BREAKDOWN:



GEOGRAPHICAL BREAKDOWN:

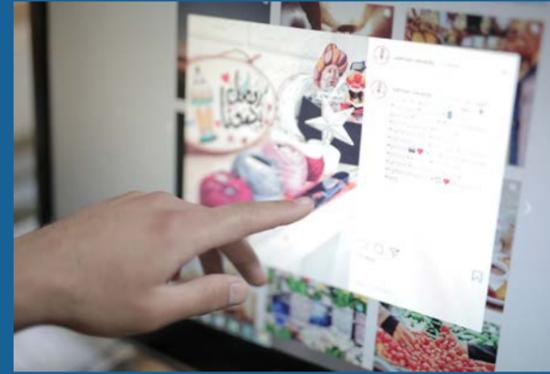


Gender norms and youth unemployment

Youth unemployed is particularly high among female graduates in the Gaza Strip. Women with higher education qualifications are more likely to enter the labour market, although education plays less of a role in men's decision to enter the labour force.¹⁰ There is a large gap in the labour force participation rate between males and females. About seven in 10 males participated in the labour force, compared with about two in 10 females.¹¹ Due to the gap in labour participation, young women are more likely to be unemployed for a longer period.¹² The transition into the labour market is significantly longer for skilled women, thus young women are often unemployed for longer periods compared to young men.

There are also geographical disparities: young women in the Gaza Strip are more likely to be unemployed than their counterparts in West Bank. Whilst youth unemployment in the Strip is higher, young women make up a large proportion of unemployed young people. For instance, the unemployment rate for young women is 92 per cent compared to 63 per cent for young men. The high rate of youth unemployment in the Gaza Strip occurs against a backdrop of Israeli occupation and a struggling economic situation. The full blockade policy sealed the Strip from the rest of the world, crippling the economy and trapping residents – including a generation of young people who have no hope of prospects for development.¹³ As a result of the illegal blockade young people in the Gaza Strip face additional restrictions on movement, making it significantly more difficult for them to secure employment.





Case study: youth entrepreneurship – defying all odds

Salman, a 26-year-old graduate from Gaza, is turning his hobby into a small business. Defying all the prevailing norms that embroidery art is a preserved of girls, and unemployed since graduating from university six years ago, with mastery and patience Salman holds a thread, a needle and a piece of cloth to embroider various artifacts.

Since Salman graduated from university, he has had only one temporary job opportunity and one internship for less than a year. "I studied design and montage at university and already applied for many jobs, but unfortunately I did not get any of them.

"I resorted to embroidery, which was mainly a hobby for me to produce handicrafts but now I sell what I produce in order to secure the money I need to buy clothes, food, etc. I am also trying to maintain the Palestinian heritage with what I produce," he says. "I sell my products at a very cheap price, because I understand the difficult economic situation of families in Gaza, and also I want to win new customers."

Salman does not have a store to display his products, so he relies heavily on social media to display and market his work. He says, "through my page on social media, especially Facebook and Instagram, I receive customer orders and market what I do."

He added, "I resorted to social media because it is fast and widespread, and it's the appropriate means because it is inexpensive. I hope to have a small business in which I offer my products, but setting up a store requires money to pay for rent and equipment, and this is not available to me.

"My sister also works to produce and sell accessories from home. If we find someone to support us, we will work together in this project. All my future dreams depend on obtaining a job opportunity in order to achieve them, so all my dreams are suspended now.

"Me and other young people who have various hobbies are able to overcome unemployment by relying on our talent to start small businesses: support and opportunities are all we need."

Gender norms also play a significant role in contributing to youth unemployment rates within the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Women and girls live in a patriarchal society that often influences their employability, particularly in relation to the type of work they're likely to be engaged in. Many of the 'good jobs' often go to men, despite there being many highly skilled young women available to take up such positions. Gender roles, particularly the perception of men as providers within their families, also contributes to these inequalities. For instance, limited job opportunities in the formal sector has resulted in highly skilled women competing directly with highly skilled men in the labour market, but males are often the preferred choice due to their perceived role as breadwinners.¹⁴ Young women are overwhelmingly employed in the service sector; 65 per cent compared to 17 per cent for young men.¹⁵ In addition, highly skilled young women are less likely to take up jobs in lowskilled labour intensive industries that are often male-dominated.

Patriarchal norms often deny women decision-making powers in relation to employment. This is largely due to the cultural perception that women's places are limited to the private sphere, often fulfilling domestic and reproductive roles. This

deprivation of decision-making power places additional restrictions on young women's socio-economic and educational opportunities. For instance, family members may deny or disapprove of a job opportunity for women due to concerns over safety and security. Similarly, employers may also be less likely to employ young women due to the perception that they are less likely to be flexible due to family pressure and social expectations. In addition, gender-based violence within the family is particularly acute in circumstances where there is a reversal of traditional gender roles. Social tensions often emerge or are exacerbated as economic challenges grow. For example, young men may be viewed as – and criticized for – being unable to provide for their families in line with traditionally imposed gender roles and expectations. They may become socially withdrawn or antagonistic as a result, with the potential for negative consequences in dysfunctional marital and family relationships. This often manifests itself in the form of physical, emotional, sexual and psychological abuse. Women and girls in such circumstances are less likely to report such abuses due to the social stigma attached to reporting family members to the authorities, along with the perceived futility of seeking justice.⁶

Case study: gender-based violence in the family

People in Gaza live under the constant threat of further conflict and deepening economic hardship, with little opportunity for relief. The ongoing instability has left many Gazans with a deep sense of insecurity, fear and hopelessness, but some also face the added challenge of gender-based violence within their families.

Mona*, a 14-year-old from Gaza, is a survivor of gender-based violence. "I was very terrified when my older brother called me, because he usually beats me every day," says Mona, who started to experience physical and emotional abuse by her brother after he lost his job and his financial situation deteriorated.

"My brother was about to get married, but he was obliged to break up with his fiancée due to lack of money and he couldn't find a job. Since then, he turned very violent with me," she says.

Mona receives education-based support, attending an Islamic Relief school set up to provide basic education for children and young adults. She and her family, including her brother, also received psychosocial support from a local organisation after a referral from Islamic Relief. Mona is no longer experiencing physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her brother.

Education and youth unemployment



Education is highly valued in Palestinian society and is often cited as a key tool for escaping poverty. Yet, young people in Palestine must navigate a complex set of internal and external barriers in order to exercise their right to education. Even if they do overcome some of these barriers, they face the additional challenge of transitioning into the labour market. A disconnect between education qualifications and job market demands means that qualifications do not typically translate into job opportunities for young people.

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education is the primary body responsible for providing education in Gaza and the West Bank. There are also private and international organisations such as United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Primary and secondary education is freely provided by these organisations. Higher education is available to students with a tuition fee.

The current status of education in Palestine shows a mixed bag. Whilst the population is one of the most literate in the world, the education system is in crisis largely due to the effects of the occupation: insufficient infrastructure, lack of adequate funding and trained teachers, and a lack of access to schooling in marginalised areas.

The average years of schooling is 12.8; amongst females the rate is 13.7 and for males it is 12.0. Recent statistics also show that 97 per cent of the population is literate. Literacy rates are some of the highest in the world, with a literate population of 98 per cent in the Gaza Strip and 97 per cent in the West Bank.¹⁸ Despite some regional and gender discrepancies, Palestine has made significant strides in improving the literacy rate for women and girls, with illiteracy falling from 20% to 4% in two decades.¹⁹

Gender disparities in education

School enrolment in Palestine is high. The percentage of children and young people enrolled in primary school is 99%, whilst secondary school enrolment is 89% and tertiary education 44%.²⁰ The gross enrolment ratio (GER) for both females and males in primary education show similar patterns. For instance, in 2018 the GER for females was 98.74 compared to 98.48 for males. Gender disparities slightly widen in secondary and tertiary education. This gap is most noticeable in tertiary education; in 2018 54% of students enrolled in tertiary education were female, compared to 35% male. To a certain degree this may be explained by the school dropout rate, which is higher amongst young males than young females.

In 2019, the school dropout rate among primary and secondary education students across Palestine was 0.6 for females and 1.0 for males.²¹ In the same period there were no variations in school dropout rates between males and females in Gaza, both had a dropout rate of 0.5. However, there was a larger gender-based discrepancy in West Bank, where the

dropout rate for females was 0.7 compared to 1.3 for males in 2019. The dropout rate is influenced by a set of complex personal and socio-economic factors. Some key personal factors include a lack of interest, underachievement and the inability to continue with education. These decisions are often shaped by the overarching political and economic situation in Gaza. For instance, students who regularly miss school due to surrounding political and economic circumstances are either unable or less likely to continue with their education. Absence and school dropout are closely interlinked; if students are regularly absent from school it will have an impact on their educational achievement. In Gaza, if students think they are not going to graduate, they often decided to drop out of school.²² There is also a set of socio-economic factors that influence students' decisions to drop out. For young males, one of the key decisions for dropping out of school was to work to help their families.





Access barriers

The impressive literacy and enrolment statistics in the Gaza Strip masks the real extent of the educational barriers experienced by Palestinian youth. The protracted conflict and violent spikes have significantly contributed to the barriers and challenges in accessing education. Violence has become a regular presence in the lives of young Palestinians.

Constant exposure to conflict, economic hardship and increased poverty all contribute to the acceptance of violence as a social norm, which has adverse effects. This normalisation of violence often expresses itself in the form of intimate partner violence, gender-based violence and other forms of abuse, often within family settings.

The deepening socio-economic crisis in Gaza also has a huge impact on access to education. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, in 2017 over 53 per cent of Palestinians in Gaza had less than US\$4.60 per day to cover necessities including food, rent, clothing, healthcare and education, whilst 33 per cent lived in extreme poverty, subsisting on less than US\$3.60. There is widespread aid dependency in Gaza, with over 80 per cent of the population dependent on aid agencies for food, water, shelter, education and livelihood support. Food insecurity is particularly widespread, with 54 per cent of Gazans being food insecure largely due to the blockade, along with total or partial inaccessibility of fishing waters and farmlands due to restrictions.²³ In light of this, many students choose to discontinue their education in order to work to support their families.

“I finished my education in order to improve the economic situation of my family, but unfortunately I did not find the job with a good salary, so I was compelled to work in a kindergarten for a little salary of less than US\$100 monthly.”
– 26-year-old Sameera

Gender roles also play a role in this context, as young men have socially-assigned roles as providers, placing added pressure on them to secure employment to help alleviate the financial burden on the family. By contrast, young women have no such expectations placed on them, their gender roles are often limited to reproductive and domestic roles within the family. The consequence of this in educational settings is that young women have higher educational attainment in higher education compared to young men. However, young men by contrast enter the labour market at a much more accelerated rate, often securing employment much earlier than their female counterparts.

People with disabilities experience additional barriers to accessing education. In Gaza, they experience multiple institutional, attitudinal, environmental and informational barriers in exercising their rights. Conflict, poverty and disability are tightly interlinked, with dire living conditions for the general population compounded for people with disabilities, including through limited access to basic services such as education.

Mismatch in skills and job market demands

One of the primary concerns for young people in relation to unemployment is the mismatch in skills and job market demands. Forty-five per cent of young people surveyed felt there was a mismatch between their skillset and labour market needs. Meanwhile 57 per cent of young people believe that universities and youth organisations do not adequately help them gain the skills they need to bridge the gap to the labour market. The disconnect between private sector employers and educational institutions carries a burden that is mostly shouldered by young people. For instance, university curriculums are rarely updated to reflect labour market demands. Whilst universities financially struggle to keep up with a huge influx of students, little attention is paid to career development and building relationships with private sector employers.

The result is a huge number of graduates who have no skills to match labour market demands.

“There are large numbers of jobless graduates who apply for announced jobs but yet they are very few, so competition is high.”
– Salman

In addition to these structural impediments, there are also variety of multi-faceted factors that limit access to job opportunities. For instance, nepotism is considered one of the key factors limiting employment opportunities, followed by an inability to access outside markets (due to the blockade in Gaza), education gaps in specialisms, limited mobility and gaps in on-the-job training.

Social factors were also recognised as significant. There is recognition that women often face institutional discrimination, reported most strongly by women themselves. Women are expected to seek education, training and employment in traditional sectors, such as services and teaching, as well as to accept pay at lower levels than their equally educated or qualified male counterparts. This is often rooted in restrictive understandings of gender norms. Young women’s decisions to study education and service-centred degrees is often shaped by family and societal decisions. For instance, currently most kindergarten teachers in Gaza are female. Another key factor behind this is that educational and service sector degrees have much lower tuition fees than financial and science-based degrees. This often results in women being employed in public service sectors with low paid jobs and few safety nets. This latter is due to several factors, but a lack of stringent application of labour laws is a primary concern for many young people. This concern was reflected in this study, with 63 per cent of young people agreeing that the non-application of the labour law on the minimum wage has contributed to high youth unemployment rates.

In the context of Gaza, women’s socio-economic challenges were even more acute during the Covid19 pandemic; they were disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

“I live in very difficult circumstances; other kindergarten teachers have been directly affected by the corona pandemic.”
– Samira, who lost her only source of income when schools were closed under lockdown measures.



Technical and vocational education and training (TVET)

TVET is increasingly being looked at as an alternative route to entering the labour market. It can give students a competitive edge in job searches, since they are receiving practical skills and knowledge they need to enter the labour market. Despite the positive outlook, TVET is still highly stigmatised in Gaza, and young people are often discouraged from pursuing TVET courses by their family and friends. As such, students in Gaza disproportionately choose the traditional academic route of university, even though academic education is not positively correlated with skill compatibility to private sector needs.

Along with the stigma, there are also very limited TVET providers – and they are increasingly under pressure. Many of the courses require the use of up-to-date equipment and resources, which have been severely limited due to restrictions on imports of electrical goods as a result of the blockade. The result is that TVET graduates are increasingly finding it difficult to acquire all the skills they need to successfully secure employment. As part of the survey conducted by Islamic Relief, 39 per cent of young people reported that they do not believe that the hiring plans of government and local organisations include jobs related to their education and TVET backgrounds.

In addition, TVET courses are often male-dominated, with little female participation. To a certain degree, this may be shaped by the fact that many of the courses on offer are for male-dominated sectors such as agriculture and construction, which are rarely open to young women. When young women do apply for TVET courses, they tend to be more service-centric. These factors, along with overriding gender norms, may also shape young women's decisions to opt for the more traditional academic route. In order to increase young women's participation in TVET, there needs to be a wider range of courses available, whilst also advocating and opening up spaces for women in male-dominated sectors.

Whilst many young people seek training courses to enhance their employability, there are not enough graduates seeking those opportunities to fill the gaps created by the private sector and educational institutions. Many of the surveyed respondents say they are not actively seeking training to enhance their employment opportunities, with even fewer reporting that they use the online courses to develop their skills. Reluctance to seek outside training is caused by a variety of factors, including lack of knowledge and access, scepticism of quality and discrimination/nepotism in selection processes.

When assessing results by gender, males show more confidence in their skills, and more drive in finding employment opportunities. In contrast, females are seeking self-improvement at greater rates than males, and logically report greater knowledge of new TVET providers, a promising sign. There is a variety of explanations for this finding. Women may be seeking additional training to make themselves more competitive in the labour market, as they recognise they face additional obstacles as a result of gender discrimination. It may also be that women are seeking to gain skills that were denied to them in their education, as they were steered into traditional courses, departments and institutions, preventing them from gaining skills and competencies for pursuing employment.

The gender gap is starkest in entrepreneurship, where males report owning personal businesses at noticeably greater rates. Young women face additional obstacles while setting up businesses, such as receiving loans or registering for licensing. In our survey, 43 per cent of young people in Gaza felt that public and private sector policies do not decrease gender bias in processes necessary to start and expand a business, including formal registration, licensing and permitting.

There are several challenges facing the TVET sector that inevitably have an impact on the quality of TVET courses available to young people. In the Gaza Strip, TVET is provided through a variety of providers at different

levels including ministries of education, labour and social affairs, community colleges and NGOs including UNRWA. There are no strategies or clear division of tasks between TVET providers, resulting in uncoordinated efforts that lead to duplication and inadequate operational cooperation.

Another key challenge relates to the quality of education and training programmes, which are not to the standards required. For example, there is no unified system of enrolment and the curriculum and methods of learning in TVET courses are outdated, which means that young people are entering the job market with outdated skills. The Ministry of Labour runs 577 TVET centres but its training courses are not recognised in education systems, which presents a dead-end for young people who want to pursue educational routes after their TVET course. In addition, TVET courses provide limited opportunities for career progression, as the courses are limited to providing basic skills with no room for career progression.



Enhancing Youth Employability

Over the last five years, Islamic Relief provided several TVET projects that aimed to enhance youth employability in Gaza through developing and sustaining an effective and efficient market driven TVET system. Phase I of the project aimed to develop and sustain a market driven TVET system, capable of delivering competent young people, through the joint forces and coordinated efforts of TVET stakeholders. Within a two-year period of phase I, the project improved the employability of at least 360 TVET graduates and 100 CVET graduates (continuous technical and vocational education and training), of which 184 (40 per cent) secured long-term employment within a six-month period. This is a significant improvement in employability, given that 90 per cent of graduates wait an average of four years before they secure their first job, and most find work in areas not relating to their profession.²⁴

“I graduated from a graphic design course six years ago, I still have not found a job opportunity in that area, not even voluntary work or an internship.”
– Salman

In addition, through engagement with the project, community and private sector organisations have shown an increased preference towards TVET (as a choice), and TVET graduates (as employees). The quality of accessible TVET has been improved (at TVET sector and institutional level) through labour market-driven curricula, qualified staff and accessible infrastructure and resources.

Phase II of the project built on these results to improve the capacity of TVET centres, ensuring that they operate efficiently, effectively and sustainably. The project also aimed to enhance coordination and linkages amongst TVET stakeholders, whilst also enhancing effectiveness and sustainability. Phase II delivered capacity-building training on strategic advocacy, focused on defending strategic issues and problems associated with sustainability (financial, resources, HR and gender), to 30 Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Education and Higher Education representatives. The project also developed an advocacy plan concentrating on working towards a sustainable, gender sensitive TVET system in the Gaza Strip.

Mental health impact of youth unemployment

Mental health is one of the primary health concerns in Palestine, but it's also one of the least acknowledged aspects of healthcare. Conflict and protracted insecurity, along with the struggling socio-economic and humanitarian situation, has led to considerable and acute mental health challenges for young people. The social stigma attached to accessing or providing mental health services adds to the multi-layered access barriers young people must navigate to receive support. In addition, mental health challenges and services in Palestine continue to be under-reported, under-researched and underfunded; services are not able to meet the burden of need.

Mental health infrastructure in Gaza

The healthcare system in Palestine – particularly in Gaza – is complex and fragmented, involving multiple actors. Essential healthcare services are provided by the government (Palestinian Authority), United Nations, NGOs and private healthcare services.²⁵ Mental health services in Gaza are also provided by a number of governmental and non-governmental international stakeholders including the Ministry of Health, NGOs, UN agencies and private actors. The National Mental Health Authority is tasked with providing advice to the government on mental health policies and legislation. The Mental Health Authority is also involved in service planning and monitoring, and quality assessment of mental health services.²⁶ However, the Authority does not directly provide mental health services to the population. Similarly, few international NGOs and UN agencies provide direct mental health services to the public. Most are involved in providing financial and technical support to local, governmental and non-governmental agencies to improve mental health services. For instance, WHO has been working with the Ministry of Health to develop mental health services in Palestine and integrate them into the primary healthcare system. There are also several international NGOs

working in partnership with local actors to provide trauma-focused psychosocial support. However, these projects are rarely long term, and they do not offer specialised mental health services for chronic conditions such as schizophrenia. UNRWA is one of the largest mental health service providers in Gaza, providing psychosocial and mental health activities in over 245 schools, 22 health centres and eight community rehabilitation centres.²⁷

Mental health services are provided through several inpatient and outpatient centres. There is currently just one inpatient hospital and seven outpatient hospitals in Gaza.²⁸ The inpatient hospital has 30 beds, provides 1.89 beds per 100,000 people, and providing clinical support to patients with chronic conditions: 69 per cent of patients are diagnosed with schizophrenia and 14 per cent with mood disorders.²⁹ The outpatient clinics, also known as community mental health centres (CMHC), provide follow-up care in the community. However, none of them provide mobile mental health teams. Cognitive behavioural therapy is provided by psychologists; recovery interventions by mental health nurses; psychosocial rehabilitation by mental health nurses and social workers; dialectical behavioural therapy by psychologists and mental health nurses; and psychological first aid by psychologists, social workers and nurses.

“Despair, frustration and depression are very common among graduates, I have felt all of these things since I graduated.”
– Salman, a 26-year-old graduate from Gaza.

Building local resilience

Over the last six years, Islamic Relief has been implementing multiple projects to provide psychosocial support to children, young people, women and families. The projects focused on supporting and training local community members and mental health providers. For instance, as part of a project to create an optimal protective environment for kindergartens in marginalised communities, 50 teachers were trained in mental health first aid, 1,000 children received psychosocial support activities throughout the school year, and 1,000 parents were provided with knowledge and guidance on child psychology and addressing behavioural challenges.

Another project focused on recovering the wellbeing of children and young people in Gaza through individual and family counselling. This project aimed to empower community-based organisations in providing family counselling services to vulnerable families in high risk areas. The project developed a family counselling manual, and delivered training on the manual to eight staff from local partner organisations. The project also delivered 1,200 family counselling sessions, six sessions per family, for 200 families composed of 1,561 individuals (789 males and 772 females). The vast majority of Islamic Relief psychosocial support projects focus on strengthening the capacity of community-based actors, whilst also continuing to deliver psychosocial support to those most in need of mental health services through our local partners.



Crisis within a crisis

Palestinians are predominantly at a high risk of mental health problems due to their chronic exposure to political violence, prolonged displacement, and limited professional, educational or financial opportunities and mental health services.³⁰ As noted previously, over two-thirds of adolescents who were exposed to the Israeli-Palestine conflict and the violent events in Gaza have developed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).³¹ As such, the demand for mental health services remains significantly high. For young people in Gaza, their mental wellbeing is closely linked to their socio-economic wellbeing. Over half (55 per cent) of young people we surveyed are suffering from mental health problems as a result of their socio-economic situation. Meanwhile, 58 per cent indicated that they have regularly experienced anxiety as a result of the socio-economic situation.

Young people in the Gaza Strip are physically and mentally trapped with little hope for a future that provides social security and mobility. As a result of extreme frustrations, many young people are taking desperate measures to escape their hardships. For instance, 61 per cent of young people surveyed want to immigrate in search of better economic opportunities. Fear and lack of hope for the future is particularly common, causing many young people to develop severe depression and anxiety. Many develop negative coping mechanisms simply to survive. In our research, 44 per cent of young people reported developing such coping strategies, e.g. addiction, self-harm and attempted suicide, as a result of their anxiety and depression. The economic and humanitarian hardships are also compounded by the social pressures that young people face, adding to their anxiety about the future. For instance, 45 per cent of young people have delayed marriage as a result of their socio-economic situation whilst 38 per cent of young people have divorced or separated as a result of being unemployed.

Suicide rates among young people in Gaza

Gaza has a young population, with 69 per cent of people below the age of 29. The majority have grown up through political struggle, often experiencing or witnessing extreme violence first-hand. As a result, a significant number of young people in Gaza are deeply traumatised, with little hope for the future. Alarmingly, young people in Gaza are deciding to end their lives to escape their pain, desperation and the injustice that plagues their generation.

“Young people in Gaza only have two options, to migrate or to commit suicide.”

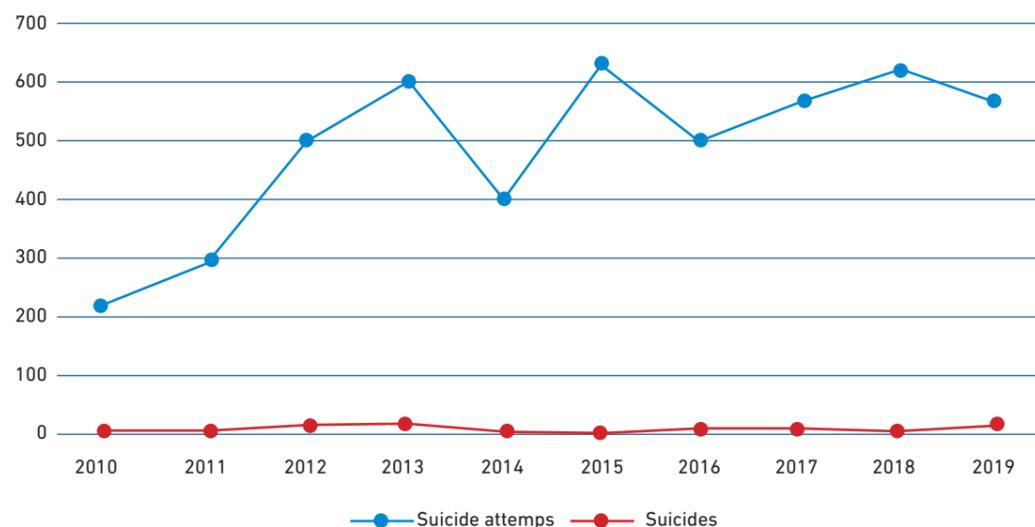
– Salman, a 26-year-old from Gaza.

According to Gaza Mental Health Programme (GMHP), a leading Palestinian NGO providing mental health services to residents of the Gaza Strip, 38 per cent of young people have considered suicide at least once.³² The most common reason for considering such a desperate act is lack of hope for the future: a generation unable to imagine a better future largely due to a desperate political and economic situation that shows little sign of change. Young people also play a limited role in political life in Gaza, even though political decision-making has a significant impact on their lives. This lack of political participation also contributes to the overwhelming lack of hope and feeling of insignificance.

The second reason for suicide among young people in Gaza relates to the economic crisis, particularly the high unemployment rate.³³ At its peak, the unemployment rate among young people in Gaza was 70 per cent, with young graduates most affected. This economic crisis is compounded by the high poverty rates and food insecurity. In 2017, 62 per cent of the population in Gaza lived below the poverty line.³⁴ Almost 70 per cent of people in Gaza are food insecure and reliant on aid organisations to secure their basic nutritional needs. Food insecurity is particularly common among young people; in a recent study by Gaza Community Mental Health Programme, 80 per cent of graduates indicated that they were food insecure.³⁵ Sadly, these factors all contribute to making suicide seem the only option for many young people.

Figure 4: Number of suicide attempts and suicides in Gaza 2010-2019

Suicide attempts and suicide in the Gaza Strip in 2010-2019



Source: Ministry of Health and Gaza Mental Health Programme

Suicide rates in Gaza have been trending upward for the last 10 years. Current average figures put the number at 562 attempts per year. These attempts are much more prevalent among young men than young women, in both Gaza and the West Bank. According to data from the Palestinian Civil Police in West Bank, in 2019 there were 30 suicide deaths: 25 of those were male.³⁶ In the first quarter of 2020, there were four suicides (three males and one female) and 208 suicide attempts.³⁷

Whilst young men and women in Gaza have similar political and socio-economic situations to navigate, gender-based roles and expectations have produced an environment that places added pressure on young men. The expectation placed on young men to play the provider role in the context of deep socio-economic crisis has led to situations where they have been unable to fulfil expectations. For many young men, the provider role is deeply tied to their sense of identity – particularly in relation to their masculinity – and consequently

their sense of self-worth and value to society. The notion of masculinity in Palestinian society attaches an expectation on men to remain stoic and to be a strong pillar of society. Unfortunately, this has eliminated space for young men to be vulnerable, express their emotions and access mental health services. This added pressure has driven many to the brink.

“Suicide is becoming a norm among young people in Gaza, we are slowly seeing the normalisation of suicide among young people to the extent where they are actively encouraging each other to consider suicide.”
Habiba,* a gender advisor working with young people in Gaza.

Underfunded and under-resourced

Mental health services in Gaza deal with many challenges, including lack of awareness about mental illness, stigma, inconsistent availability of medications, absence of multidisciplinary teamwork, insufficient specialists, a fragmented mental health system and occupation.³⁸ Services in Gaza remain precarious and continue to be underfunded, under-resourced and under-researched.³⁹ Less than two per cent of the annual health budget is dedicated to mental health services; in 2014-2015, mental health hospitals received just 0.7 per cent of the overall budget. Whilst there are international organisations and NGOs providing mental health support, these services are usually tied to two-to-three-year projects that cannot provide long-term solutions for those struggling with complex and chronic mental health conditions.

Along with limited funding, mental health services also struggle with a severe lack of human resources. There are limited mental health nurses, trained psychiatrists, psychologists, or social workers. Whilst there are many political and economic factors driving the shortage of human resources, the social stigma attached to accessing mental health services also extends to mental health service providers. The cost of treatment and inconsistent availability of medications also cause issues. These challenges add to the multiple access barriers that mental health users and providers must both navigate.



Conclusion

Despite being a significant part of the population, young Palestinians in Gaza remain largely unheard and often excluded from decision-making platforms on key issues such as employment, health and education. There is little to no opportunity for young people to participate in the political decision-making process. Consequently, few decisions adequately respond to their needs.

The considerable gap between the outputs of the education system and the needs of the labour market presents a significant challenge for young people, particularly young university graduates who enter the labour market with a skills gap. Due to stigma, lack of strategic direction and coordination within the TVET sector, TVET graduates also enter the labour market with outdated skills, unable to meet the needs of the rapidly changing labour market. Young people are entering a highly competitive job market without any of the tools (non-academic skills, life and career skills) they need to secure employment.

In addition, the labour market has also been damaged by the closure of the external market due to occupation and blockade, low investment and low levels of funding to support young people, particularly youth entrepreneurship. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has added to the challenges, sending unemployment up another 3.6 per cent. The pandemic has made it significantly more difficult for young people to secure employment, particularly in public service sectors.

Fear and lack of hope for the future have become the norm among young people in Gaza. Anxiety, PTSD and depression are also common features. With limited and under-resourced mental health services and social stigma against mental health, young people (particularly young men) are suffering in silence. The suicide rate in Gaza has been steadily increasing, with an average rate of 562 suicide attempts per year.

Despite the many challenges, young people in Gaza remain resilient. Civil society, governments, donors, UN agencies and private actors can all play a role in creating an environment in which young people in Gaza can thrive and reach their full potential, and not become a generation of lost opportunities and unfulfilled dreams.



Recommendations

The socio-economic future and mental health of young people in Gaza is very much tied to the political situation, particularly in relation to youth unemployment and political participation. As such, any measures to adequately address the issues of youth unemployment, limited access to adequate education and health services for young people must equally advocate for a long-term political solution that centralises the needs of young people in the Gaza Strip.

This will require simultaneous work by stakeholders at different levels, at an institutional, political and legal level, and on issues that concern livelihoods, access to jobs, education, mental health, political and economic inclusion, lower barriers to decision-making, and equal access and opportunities.

Islamic Relief is already actively engaged in supporting marginalised young people and extending opportunity through a variety of education, training and livelihoods projects. We are committed to expanding this work where funds allow, and on the basis both of this report and the experience of our programmes on the ground, we have a number of recommendations for how others can contribute to meeting the challenges we have outlined. The following are recommendations to specific stakeholders based on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with young people and other key informants.

Local and regional government

1. Ensure that young people are represented in political spaces by ensuring the voices and experiences of young people are reflected in decision and policy-making platforms.
2. Ensure the implementation of labour laws and regulations to protect and safeguard the rights of young people in accessing and maintaining employment.
3. Modify university curricula to better suit the needs of the local and external labour markets.
4. Create and support national vocational skills development programmes, small-scale youth enterprises and financial literacy skills to increase the employability of young people.
5. Develop a comprehensive technical and vocational education training (TVET) strategy to ensure that all TVET projects are standardised and coordinated.
6. Increase young women's participation in TVET courses by opening spaces for young women in male-dominated TVET courses.

7. Invest in and prioritise mental health services for young people, ensuring they are accessible, inclusive and adequately meet the needs of those with more comprehensive issues.
8. Invest in and promote the training of mental health professionals to improve human resources and data collection within the mental health service sector.

Civil society organisations and UN agencies

1. Advocate and facilitate the right of young people to secure employment by enhancing their employability through career-based and financial literacy training.
2. Engage with and support the Ministry of Education and Higher Education to amend university curricula, ensuring that they are up-to-date and meet the demands of the labour market.
3. Conduct community-based awareness raising to address the social stigma against TVET.
4. Engage with and provide support to the private sector, helping them promote TVET culture and opportunities for young people.
5. Support young entrepreneurs and promote entrepreneurship, providing entrepreneurship and financial literacy training to young people.
6. Create community-based awareness campaigns to eliminate gender-based stereotypes in relation to vocational training.
7. Strengthen partnerships with local mental health service providers, focusing on coordination and complementarity of mental health services.

Donor agencies

1. Address socio-economic barriers that young people face in the labour market, providing young people with skills training to bridge the gap between labour market requirements and the education system.
2. Promote civic engagement and awareness in programming to facilitate more inclusive participation of young people.
3. Develop closer links with the private sector to ensure the relevance and usefulness of their programmes, such as on-the-job training, 'soft skills' training and career guidance.
4. Provide funding for entrepreneurship training programmes and grants to assist young people in setting up small businesses.
5. Support youth organisations, networks and movements for civic engagement and promote equal opportunities for young women to participate in political processes.

Endnotes

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