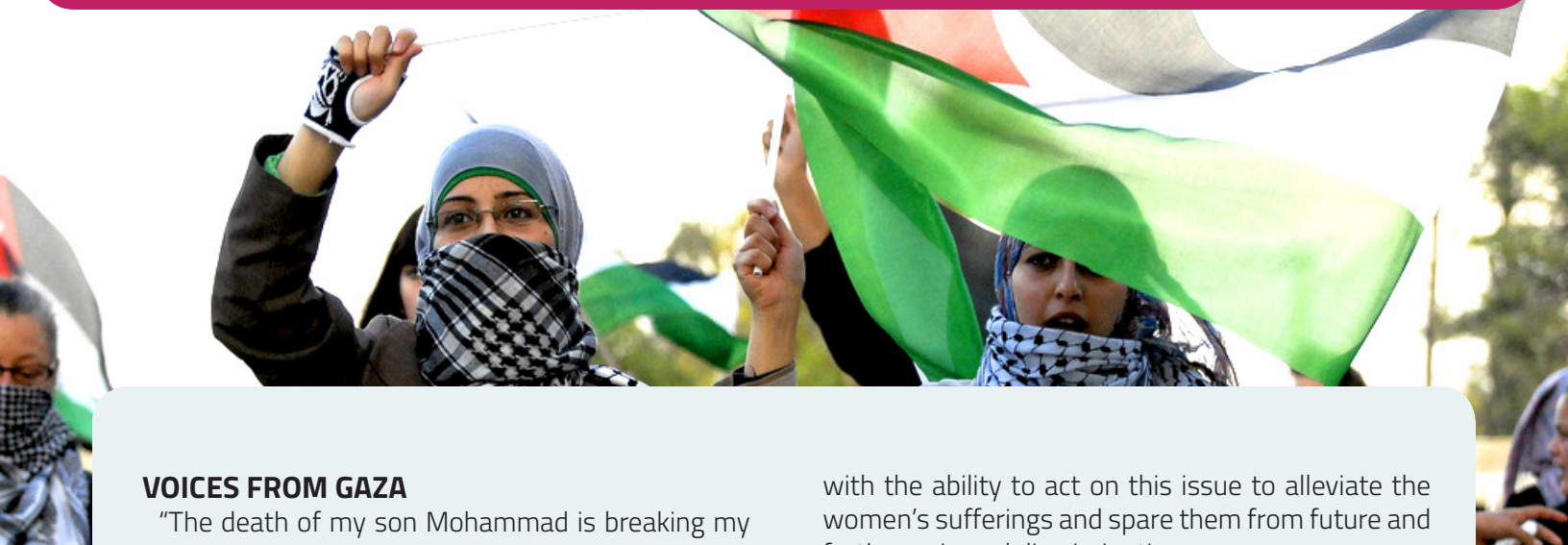


THE UNTOLD CONSEQUENCES OF THE GREAT MARCH OF RETURN ON WOMEN IN GAZA ONE YEAR LATER



VOICES FROM GAZA

"The death of my son Mohammad is breaking my heart. My second son is going to the Great March of Return. I am so worried about him and am afraid of losing him. I am afraid that he may get injured or return with an amputated leg or arm. Our life is painful, there is no joy."¹

"When you get up from bed and do not find your son, you feel like it is hell."

"I lost a lot. I cannot even visit my sick mother, I cannot speak to anyone and I hate my husband."

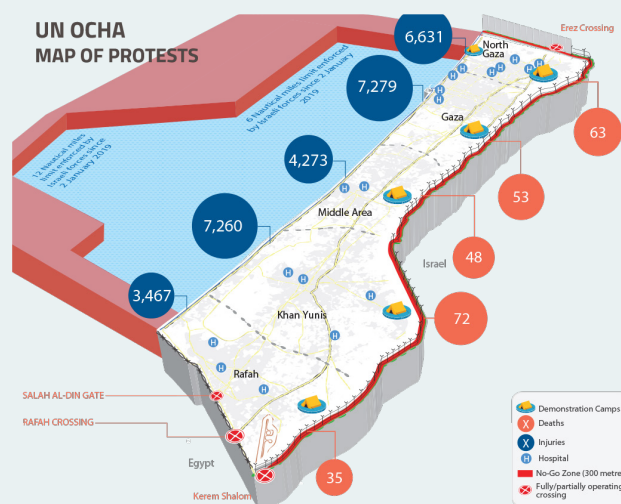
These are the voices of women in Gaza. They speak words of pain and intense emotions, words that ask to be heard and cannot be ignored.

One year after its beginning, the Great March of Return in Gaza has had severe consequences on the lives of thousands of women. The widespread and disproportionate violence the Israeli Forces resorted to in response to the protests has taken its toll not only on casualties; the reaction on protesters has also had a ripple effect on women's wellbeing, significantly intensifying their vulnerability and dramatically worsening a preexisting disadvantaged condition brought about by a profound humanitarian crisis and the inherently patriarchal nature of the society in the Gaza Strip. For these reasons, it is worth and compelling to shed a light inside the houses of these women, to comprehend and empathize with what they have been going through, most of the time alone and away from the spotlight, during this long year of protests. Understanding the implications of the Great March of Return on women who have been directly or indirectly affected by it becomes a crucial first step for duty-bearers and other actors

with the ability to act on this issue to alleviate the women's sufferings and spare them from future and further pain and discrimination.

THE CONTEXT: THE GREAT MARCH OF RETURN

On the 30th March 2018, on the occasion of the Palestinian Land Day, people from all sectors of the Palestinian society mobilized throughout the Gaza Strip. The participants of what immediately became known as the Great March of Return demanded and upheld the right of millions of Palestinian refugees, enshrined in UN General Assembly Resolution 194, to return to their old villages and land from which they were uprooted and forced to flee in 1948. At the same time, the unprecedented humanitarian crisis resulting from 12 years of land,



sea, and air blockade on the Strip provoked an even more massive participation to the protest, hence

resulting from widespread poverty, food insecurity, unemployment, lack of basic services and physical isolation from the outside world. Since the 30th of March 2018, the population of Gaza has joined the demonstrations at the border on each single Friday, and sometimes on other days of the week, for one whole year. One year of constant protests, yet one year of violent responses and crackdowns from the Israeli armed forces. The excessive use of force of Israeli soldiers against unarmed protestors has resulted in more than 260 deaths with over 29000 injured²; and, in particular, the unnecessary and disproportionate, hence unlawful, use of live ammunition against civilians has led the United Nations Independent Commission of Inquiry on the Gaza protests to conclude that Israeli soldiers have committed serious violations of International Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law, which may amount to war crimes³.

THE IMPACT OF THE GREAT MARCH OF RETURN ON WOMEN

The one-year-long violence in response to the protests at the border has had extremely harsh consequences on women who have been either directly or indirectly affected by the Great March of Return. The implications of the March on the psychological wellbeing of affected women have been widespread feelings of fear, stress, and anxiety. Many women interviewed reportedly live in a constant state of sadness, helplessness, and carelessness for their psychological and physical conditions.

Even when they are the direct victims of the violence at the borders, they still express more concern for their sons' safety than for their own. When their sons have been injured, the mothers express sentiments of regret and self-blame, feelings that are often triggered and fueled by the psychological violence of the husbands.

"I wish my son had never left the house without telling me, and I wish I could have him back."

The stories and testimonies of women who have suffered the loss of a child during the Great March of Return reveal exceptionally acute pain and suf-

"I am sad and worried. I can't sleep and I feel hopeless."

"I can't take care of my children anymore, I can't even take care of myself now."



ferings, and, in some cases, the trauma bears severe consequences like the inability to cope with grief and constant intrusive recollections of the event of the death, which they may have directly witnessed.

"Every time I see someone being killed, I imagine my child in his place."

"When I see my son's friends, I think he is still alive. Now I'm alive because I have to be."

"Sometimes I look for my son and call him. I wish I could hug him one more time. I wish I could open his grave just to see him one more time. I really miss him."

All these negative emotions often translate into physical symptoms, like high blood pressure, dizziness, headaches, hallucinations, loss of appetite, sleep problems. Some women just cannot stop crying.

The Great March of Return has severely disrupted the everyday life of the interviewed women on several levels and placed additional burdens on them. Even prior to the Great March of Return, women in Gaza

suffered from several forms of oppression and discrimination, resulting from 12 years of life under siege and within a patriarchal society. During this year of protests, women whose family

members have been injured have gone through major life changes; 82% of them are fully in charge of the injured member, which has placed additional worries and responsibilities on them, while, when the mothers have been injured during the March, the responsibility of their care falls on their daughters, in 67% of the instances⁴. The worsening economic situation caused by the loss of the major source of income fol-

lowing the injury of male members of the family has forced the female counterparts to become the primary breadwinners, which, however, collides with the high unemployment rate and the gender-based discriminatory practices in employment and at the workplace. Increased responsibilities and constant negative emotions have disrupted women's social lives and relationships with their loved and closest ones. At the same time, those women who have been injured and have acquired a disability face further social constraints and a generally negative attitude of people towards them. Most of the times, injured women find themselves trapped in a vicious circle of discrimination and failure to fulfil their gender roles, which triggers further frustration and loss of self-esteem.

Gender-based violence represents another huge concern when considering the consequences of the Great March of Return on women: according to the GBV Sub-Cluster, the mass demonstrations and the violent response of Israel are worsening the living conditions of women and increasing their risk of gender-based violence⁵. In fact, the life changes brought about by the protests in many women's lives heightened the level of violence and especially provoked physical abuses⁶.

Despite the hardships suffered, women in Gaza have courageously and proactively resorted to the most various practices to cope with their emotional sufferings and patiently start their process of healing. The main coping mechanisms they have adopted are religious practices, solidarity, and recreational activities. Others have resorted to crying and relaxing, actively practicing patience or simply retreating

AS CONSEQUENCE OF THE GREAT MARCH OF RETURN



into silence, endlessly waiting for the psychological and physical wounds to heal. All these small actions represent precious self-help strategies that show the women's resilience and their desire to recover.

These stories of unspoken and hidden hardships highlight how the Great March of Return, and the violent response of Israeli armed forces, does not end at the borders. It penetrates the houses. And deeply



scars women who live in those houses.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE NOW

Women in Gaza manifested the necessity to receive economic and psychosocial support in order to re-establish some kind of balance in their tumultuous lives. Yet, the actions that need to be taken must go far beyond the mere response to the women's immediate needs; they must halt the violence as a response to the protests and must address the major demands that sparked the protests in the first place. COSPE and PWWSD call upon:

- o All duty-bearers to immediately cease and ensure full accountability for International Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law violations, in line with the recommendations of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian territory to the Human Rights Council on 18 March 2019, and posing a special attention on the rights of women and on consequences of the violations on this vulnerable category.

In particular, COSPE and PWWSD call upon Italy and EU Member States, in line with their obligations under Common Article 1 to the Geneva Conventions, to:

- o Urge Israel to immediately halt the use of lethal force against civilians protesting at the borders, which the Commission of Inquiry has declared unlawful and which may amount to a war crime;
- o Ensure Israel's accountability for the violations that have been and are being committed through prompt, impartial and independent investigations on the crimes according to international standards, and that remedies are provided to the victims;

- o Press Israel to establish a time-bound plan to immediately lift the blockade imposed on Gaza, in line with Security Council Resolution 1860;
- o Urge Israel, as the Occupying Power in Gaza, to protect and safeguard the rights and wellbeing of the Palestinian people, and, in particular, to protect, respect and fulfill the rights of women, as enshrined in the CEDAW (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women);
- o Stop exporting weapons to Israel and respect obligations of the Arms Trade Treaty;
- o Support the Palestinian Authority in scaling up the provision of support services to women who have been affected by the Great March of Return;
- o Urge the Palestinian Authority to address the widespread discrimination against women that permeates and impacts every aspect of their lives, and to ensure the rights enshrined in the CEDAW, of which the State of Palestine is a party.

Ultimately, women in Gaza should enjoy the right to protest peacefully and express their demands, while still feeling safe and able to live a serene and joyful life. The mobilization of all duty-bearers is crucial and must be swift and prompt with the objective of halting the violations and ensuring accountability, but, most importantly, for upholding the rights of women, preserving their dignity and security, reversing their situation of discrimination and oppression, and empowering them to recover from the trauma and become active agents with effective control over their own lives and destiny.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 The quotations and the major findings in the factsheet have been gathered through 5 focus groups the Palestinian Working Women Society for Development (PWWSD) carried out in cooperation with COSPE with 80 women in the Gaza Strip
- 2 WHO Health Cluster, Situation Report: occupied Palestinian territory, Gaza, February 2019. http://healthclusteropt.org/admin/file_manager/uploads/files/shares/Documents/5c87d1586ccc4.pdf
- 3 Human Rights Council, Report of the international commission of inquiry on the protests in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, February 2019
- 4 PWWSD and COSPE focus groups results
- 5 GBV Sub Cluster, Impact of the "Great March of Return" on Gender-based Violence, Situation Report, June 2018.
- 6 PWWSD and COSPE focus groups results



COSPE is an Italian NGO established in 1983, and operating in 24 countries. COSPE works in Palestine since 1995, mainly in supporting life of Palestinian population, in particular in favour of youth and women.

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**PALESTINIAN WORKING WOMAN
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PWWSD established in 1981, is a Palestinian women's, mass, developmental, learning human rights organization that contributes to developing the feminist struggle in Palestine.

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