



مركز الميزان لحقوق الإنسان
AL MEZAN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Fact Sheet

The Situation of Rural Women in the Gaza Strip



@Al Mezan Center for Human Rights

Gaza Strip, 2020



Al Mezan Center for Human Rights

Al Mezan Center for Human Rights is an independent, non-partisan, non-governmental human rights organization based in the Gaza Strip, holding special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council. Since its establishment in 1999, Al Mezan has been dedicated to protecting and advancing respect for human rights and enhancing democracy, community and citizen participation in the oPt, particularly in the Gaza Strip.

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Introduction

Peasant¹ and other rural Palestinian women in the Gaza Strip play a major role in the economic survival of their families and in the comprehensive development of their communities. Increasingly, however, their ability to fully pursue and participate in agricultural activity and enjoy their economic, social and cultural rights,² including those enshrined in the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP)³ and Palestinian law,⁴ has been substantially hindered. This is due to Israel's ongoing 14-year closure and blockade, repeated military bombardments, and Israel's unilaterally imposed maritime and land buffer zone, also referred to as "access-restricted areas". In addition, some intra-Palestinian factors have, to a lesser extent, stifled rural women's attempts to attain self-sufficiency or independence.

The number of peasant women in Gaza, who are also referred to as 'rural women', working permanently or temporarily and with or without a salary, was last estimated at 6,425 in 2010.⁵

This fact sheet highlights the key role that women play in rural development, as well as the increasing challenges that they face, including the deterioration of living conditions due to high rates of poverty. The fact sheet concludes with a number of recommendations and calls for Palestinian duty-bearers and the international community to take action.

The statistical overview is based on a questionnaire that was designed by the Center's researchers to collect data from a random sample of 56 peasant women throughout the rural

¹ Article 1(1) of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas defines a peasant as "any person who engages or who seeks to engage alone, or in association with others or as a community, in small-scale agricultural production for subsistence and/or for the market, and who relies significantly, though not necessarily exclusively, on family or household labour and other non-monetized ways of organizing labour, and who has a special dependency on and attachment to the land." Article 1(2) adds that "the present Declaration applies to any person engaged in artisanal or small-scale agriculture, crop planting, livestock raising, pastoralism, fishing, forestry, hunting or gathering, and handicrafts related to agriculture or a related occupation in a rural area. It also applies to dependent family members of peasants."

² See the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the specialized agreements annexed to the International Bill of Human Rights.

³ See the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas.

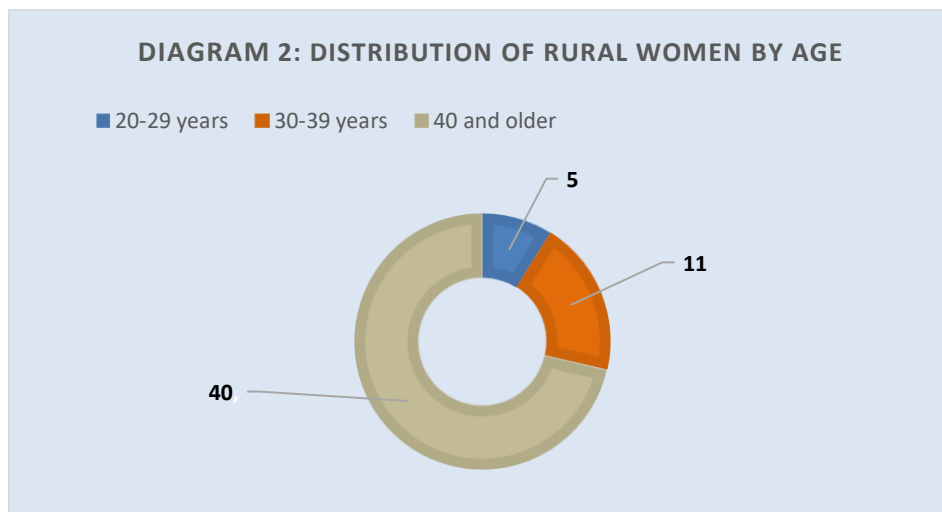
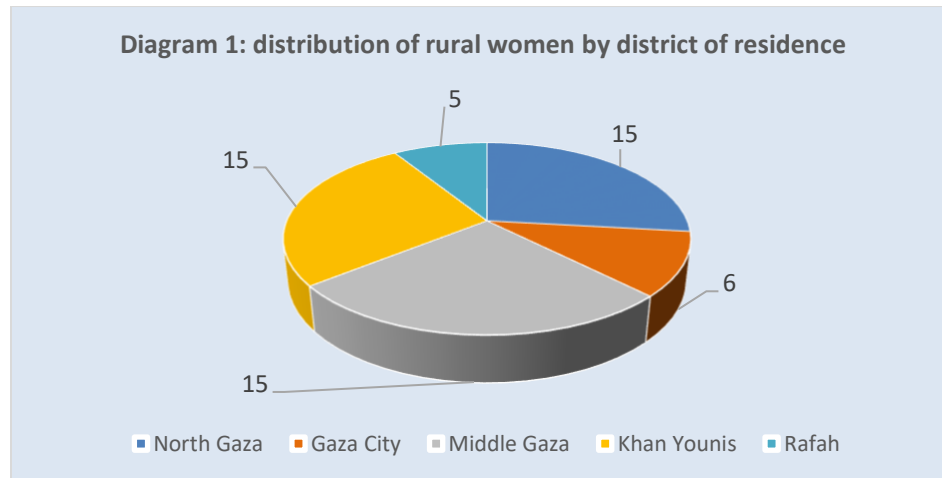
⁴ See the following laws: the amended Palestinian Basic Law of 2003, Personal Status Law No. 61 of 1976, Labor Law No. 7 of 2000, Civil Service Law No. 4 of 1998, Criminal Procedure Law No. 3 of 2001, and Law No. 7 of 1999 regarding the environment, and the Agriculture Law No. 2 of 2003.

⁵ See Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, Agricultural Census 2010 Final Results, December 2011. Link: http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/pcbs_2012/Publications.aspx



areas, which extend along the northern and eastern perimeter of the Gaza Strip;⁶ a number of interviews with the staff of local service institutions adds context to the reporting.⁷

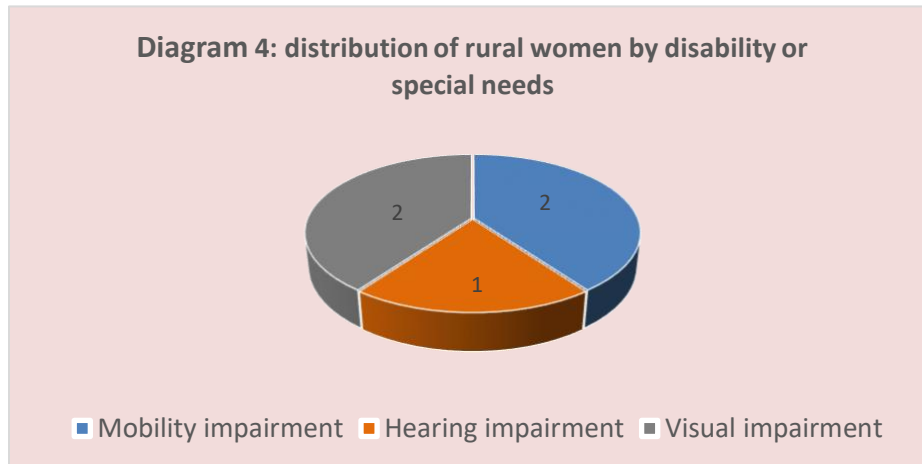
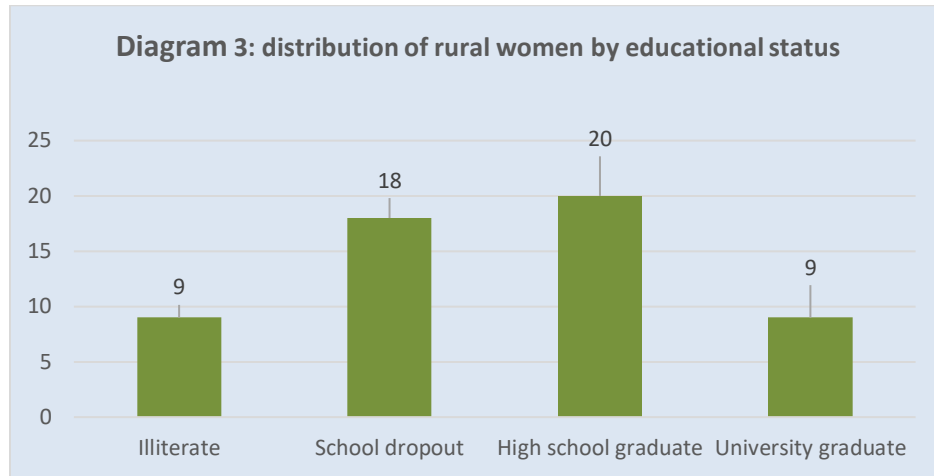
General characteristics of Gaza's rural women⁸



⁶ The questionnaires were filled by Al Mezan's lawyers Rana Al-Madhoun and Nuha Abu Zarifa via phone interviews with the statistical population, 25 September–3 October 2020.

⁷ Eleven phone interviews were conducted by Al Mezan's researchers Basem Abu Jrai and Hussein Hamad between 27 September and 4 October. The interviewees included officials from the Ministry of Agriculture, the Union of Agricultural Work Committees, Palestinian Agricultural Relief, Rural Women's Development Society, Bent Alreef Charitable Society, Rural Women's Development Society - Wadi Al Salqa, Future Development Committee, Takween Association for Development, Al Taghreed Association for Culture and Development, and the Palestinian Commission for Development and Environment Protection.

⁸ Based on the questionnaire.



Israeli violations in the “buffer zone”

- Israel’s near-daily use of military force in the access-restricted area (or “buffer zone”) has made rural and agricultural work an immediate threat to life and safety for Palestinian farmers. Al Mezan’s documentation between 2015 and 2020⁹ shows that the Israeli forces killed one peasant woman and wounded three others who were tending to or approaching their fields. In addition, 29 peasant women incurred damages to their farmlands, estimated to be 109,650 square meter in size, as the Israeli forces systematically razed agricultural lands adjacent to the separation fence. Another 29 peasant women reported damage to agricultural crops due to Israel’s aerial spraying

⁹ Al Mezan, database, statistics on female victims whose property was damaged in the border regions (eastern and northern) between 2015 and 2020.



of high concentration herbicides along the fence. Access to agricultural property and land was also hindered in 338 incidents due to military incursions in the same period.

- The electricity crisis, which is attributable to Israel's blockade and fluctuating restrictions on fuel entry into the Gaza Strip, had a detrimental impact on small-scale farms.¹⁰ With the daily, prolonged electricity outages, irrigation is disrupted, and the ability to store perishable agricultural produce is a growing concern.

Cultural and socioeconomic factors affecting rural women in the Gaza Strip¹¹

- Poverty remains a constant challenge for Palestinian rural women in Gaza. Al Mezan's questionnaire shows that 85.7 percent of the peasant women do not have a stable income, whereas 10.7 percent have an income under 1,450 NIS per month, which falls below the national poverty line.¹²
- Sixty-six percent of the surveyed rural women cited that they had not received social assistance from the government, and 83 percent said that they had not received relief aid from civil society organizations.¹³
- Although Gaza's peasant women are the primary caretakers of not only the household, but also farms and relevant agricultural activity, they are most often denied tenure and financial independence.
- Many peasant women still struggle for inheritance rights amid diminishing access to the legal system, largely because of patriarchal practices and financial restrictions.
- The traditional, extended family cohabitation practices expose rural women to decreased privacy and additional household chores.
- Early marriage, which is encouraged through socioeconomic determinants, such as tradition and poverty, often based on coercion, put in place serious hurdles to the empowerment of the female population in rural areas.
- The lockdown instituted to stem the spread of the coronavirus meant that peasant women were confined to their houses, which put their livelihoods at risk and contributed to an increase in gender-based violence. Thirty-five women, constituting 62.5 percent of the statistical population, reported at least one form of domestic abuse. Twenty-five percent noted an increase in domestic abuse that correlated with the pandemic lockdown measures.¹⁴

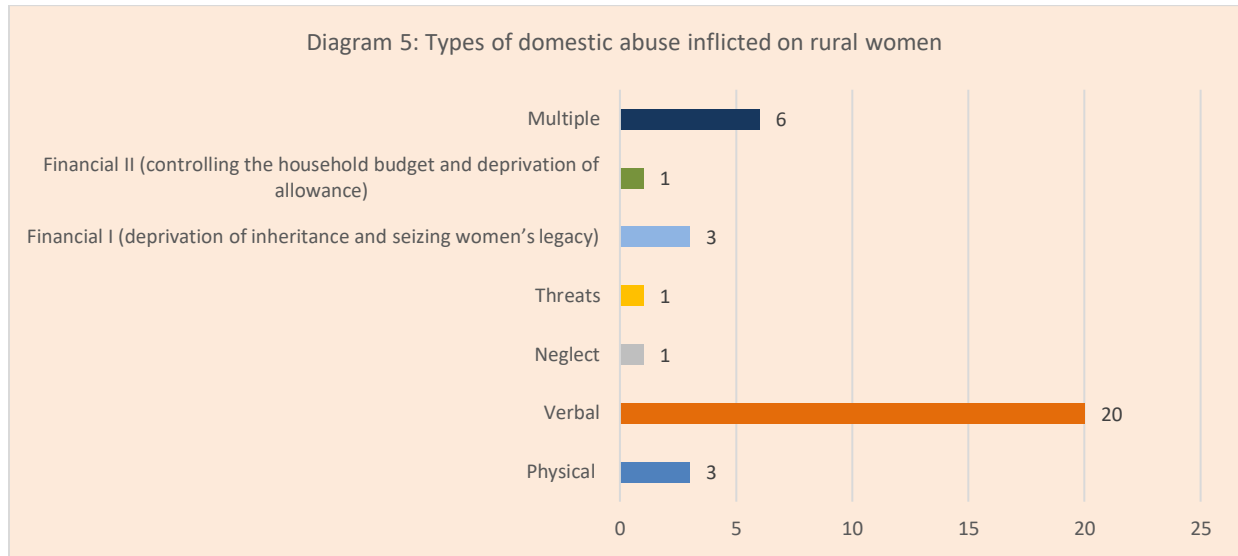
¹⁰ According to phone interviews with officials from local service institutions.

¹¹ Ibid

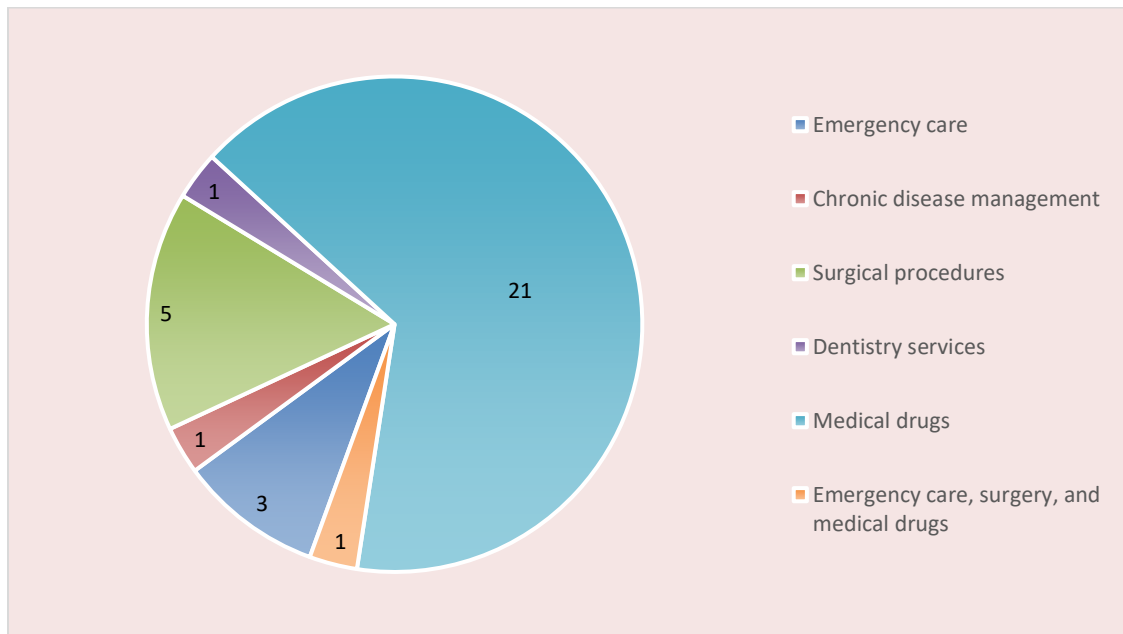
¹² The poverty line and deep poverty line for a reference household of five individuals (two adults and three children) in 2017 were 2,470 NIS and 1,974 NIS, respectively, as set by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. Link: [http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Document/pdf/txt_e_poverty2017.pdf?date=16 4 2018 2](http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Document/pdf/txt_e_poverty2017.pdf?date=16%204%202018%20)

¹³ According to the questionnaire.

¹⁴ Ibid



- Fifty-seven percent of the surveyed women said that they struggle to access adequate healthcare, with 37.5 percent saying their families lacked essential drugs, and 8.9 percent indicating that they or family members were in need of surgery. The Diagram below details the healthcare services that the statistical population is calling for from governmental clinics in rural areas.¹⁵



¹⁵ According to the questionnaire.



- Rural women with low computer and digital literacy struggle to figure out how to partake in their children's remote learning as schools remain closed during the lockdown.
- Nine rural women, who make up 16 percent of the statistical population, identified themselves as illiterate and noted that they do not have access to governmental literacy programs. Seven of them confirmed that civil society institutions failed to meet their needs in this regard.¹⁶

The pandemic's implications on peasant women and their work¹⁷

- In August, the local authorities in Gaza imposed a mandatory lockdown to curb the spread of the virus after the first cases to be detected outside the quarantine facilities were confirmed. The lockdown and ensuing curfew limited peasant women's access to their lands and subsequently their ability to cultivate and sell the agricultural produce.
- Local market closures left most peasant women unable to sell their produce beyond their neighborhoods, and instead sold locally for a portion of the regular prices.
- The pandemic amplified the pre-existing difficulty in replenishing supplies and machinery, as financial aid for peasant women and their small-scale businesses continued to decline.
- Movement between cities and governorates was fully banned, which resulted in a disconnect between agricultural service institutions and rural women, particularly residents of the perimeter areas, and inadequate availability of, and access to, fertilizers, pesticides, seeds, veterinary medicines and other needed products and services.
- Specialized awareness activities aimed at rural women's empowerment were halted.



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¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ According to phone interviews with officials from local service institutions.



- Institutional finance for peasant women's small-scale enterprises was affected as a result of the decline in international funds.
- Demand for agricultural produce, and revenues from agricultural projects, especially those financed by lending institutions, declined. As a result, peasant women who have obtained loans to finance income-generating projects are at risk of accumulating unpaid debts.
- The lockdown diminished the operating capacities of the under-resourced Ministry of Agriculture as the ministry's staff were unable to contact peasant women in need. In addition, livestock sustained losses due to lack of necessary veterinary services.

Recommendations

Palestinian peasant and rural women in the Gaza Strip are exposed to an array of hardships emanating from Israel's incessant human rights violations, and a combination of cultural and socioeconomic factors. The pandemic further compounded these conditions. To this end, Al Mezan puts forth a number of recommendations and calls for action:

1. The international community must honor its moral and legal obligations by taking action to investigate Israeli violations that affect Palestinian women, ensure accountability, and guarantee redress and reparations for the victims.
2. Expedited action must be taken to put in place policy and legislative procedures and measures to counter violence against women as well as domestic violence, and to ensure the provision of adequate psychological support and healthcare services.
3. Local and international institutions must be attentive to peasant women's needs and invest in rural women's capacity building and economic empowerment, by providing them with access to financial resources.
4. Officials must develop and implement awareness programs aimed at increasing peasant and rural women's knowledge of their political, economic, social and cultural rights, and increasing their expertise in agriculture, management, marketing and food processing, especially programs promoting computer and digital literacy.
5. The promotion of the role of women and their integration into unions and specialized agricultural cooperative societies and committees must be prioritized. They must be enabled to obtain leadership roles and partake in decision making. Relevant Palestinian laws (Personal Status Law) must be amended to address and protect women's rights to, inter alia, property, work, education, and health, as enshrined in international conventions.



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