

Dreams Deferred

The impact of the closure on women in the Gaza Strip

Human rights violations are intrinsic to the systemic restrictions on freedom of movement that comprise the closure of Gaza. Women, who account for 49% of the population of the Strip, are particularly susceptible to the repercussions of the severe limitations imposed by Israel on the movement of people and goods into and out of Gaza. As such, they bear a heavy share of the social and economic costs associated with the tightening of the closure in 2007.

The following factsheet is based on more than 12 years of Gisha's ongoing research on the impact of the closure on [family life](#), [the economy](#), and [civil society](#) from the perspective of women. It aims to present Gisha's key findings on the unique ways in which the policy of closure on Gaza affects the lives of Palestinian women residents of the Strip and makes recommendations for steps that must be taken in order to counteract violations of their fundamental human rights - primarily, the right to freedom of movement.

The impact of the closure on Gaza's workforce, and implications for women's un/employment

More than a decade of closure, including severe restrictions on access, as well as periodic military operations, the continuous closure of the Rafah Crossing to Egypt, and sanctions implemented in the context of the inner-Palestinian rift, have all left their mark on Gaza's job market and the prospects it holds for women. More than 70% of the population in Gaza receives humanitarian aid; 47% suffer from food insecurity. Unemployment rates have risen drastically in the last decade, currently standing at 35% among men and 65.9% among women. While the number of jobs available in Gaza has steadily and significantly dropped, the number of women able to work and seeking employment has increased dramatically by over 200%. The rate of unemployment among women in Gaza with more than 13 years of

education also increased significantly, from 44.3% before the closure was imposed, to 68.9% in 2017. These women enter a job market devoid of opportunities.

The few available positions in the Strip are mostly filled by men. Before the closure was imposed, [many](#) men held permits that allowed them to work in Israel. When Israel stopped allowing laborers from Gaza to work within its borders in early 2006, these individuals were compelled to seek work inside the Strip, shrinking the pool of jobs available to women even further.

According to Mariam Abu Alatta, project manager at Aisha - Association for Woman and Child Protection, “the unemployment rate among young men and women is very high, but even those who are counted as employed face many adversities. Most work contracts, be it with government agencies, humanitarian organizations or civil society organizations, are for periods of between 1-5 months, so there is never any long-term job security for employees. Those who find employment are rarely afforded any social benefits. And of course, payment is often only completed only months after you actually worked.”

The situation in which more and more educated women join the work force and seek employment as the number of available jobs decreases is particularly problematic given that many women have become the sole breadwinners for their families following the death, incapacitating injury or imprisonment of their spouses. An increasing number of women seek employment in professional fields previously monopolized by men, such as banking, investment, and management, though jobs are scarce.

Travel restrictions are one of the major obstacles faced by [women seeking training and professional development](#). More than 85% of women in Gaza’s workforce work in the service sector, in professions such as teaching and nursing. The remaining women in the workforce tend to work in civil society organizations or small businesses. Israel’s limited criteria for movement out of Gaza does not include a general criterion for work-related travel, and Israel’s narrow interpretation of the existing criteria seldom acknowledges people working in these fields as warranting exit permits. As a result, most women who find employment are not eligible to submit applications for exit permits for the purpose of taking advantage of opportunities for professional development.

Israel’s ongoing control over sea and land access to Gaza has also pushed women out of economic sectors they used to participate in before the closure was tightened. **The number of women who work in the fishing and agriculture sectors, for example, plummeted from 36% in 2007 to just 3% in the last quarter of 2017. A variety of harmful practices carried out by Israel exact a heavy price on members of Gaza’s farming and fishing communities, who are among the poorest and most vulnerable in the Strip as it is, and have pushed women out of economic sectors they once played a substantial part in.**

One of the exceptions to the closure is that a small number of businesspeople are able to exit Gaza in order to sell and buy goods. However, the conditions stipulated by Israel for the passage of goods through the crossings, and the correlating transport costs, have set the bar for marketing products from Gaza in Israel and the West Bank too high and out of reach for most women. At the [end of 2016](#), only two percent of valid trader permits were held by women. **As of the beginning of 2018, only five out of the 320 senior-trader permits that are currently valid (known as BMG for “Businessman Gaza” permits) are held by women.**

Policy changes concerning movement of goods have been introduced since 2014, such as expanding the types of produce approved for marketing. At the same time, few substantive changes have been made to the policy on movement of people, barring travel for a large portion of the job market, and denying many, women in particular, opportunities for professional development.

Israel purports to decide what is best for Gaza's economy, and with its resulting policy decisions regarding movement of people and goods, it determines the economic options available to women. The Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) [admitted](#) that "manufacturing capacity, supply and demand in the relevant markets - both the originating market and the destination market" were some of the considerations guiding its decisions on what products can be marketed out of Gaza, and by whom. If Israel gives itself license to design and manage Gaza's economy, with COGAT effectively controlling and regulating the activity of its financial sectors - should Israel not recognize its responsibility for the social, gender-specific impact of its policy as well?

Impact of the closure on family life

While certain restrictions on movement of goods to and from Gaza have been eased over the course of the closure, severe restrictions on travel of people remain nearly unchanged, and in the past year, have even been [tightened](#). Given that the Gaza Strip is so small, restrictions on the movement of commercial goods have an immediate, easily identifiable effect. The impact of restrictions on travel of people is harder to quantify, as are their direct manifestations in family life.

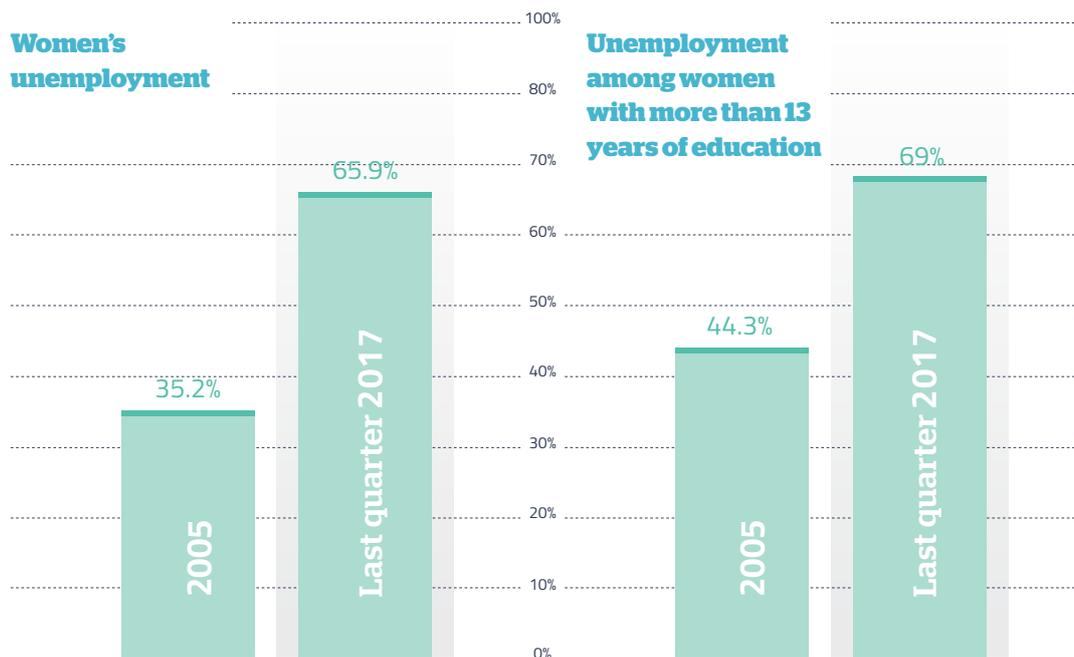
The "[separation policy](#)," enforced by Israel between the two parts of the Palestinian territory, creates an almost impermeable barrier between Gaza and the West Bank, violating the cohesion and stability of nuclear families as well as preventing routine contact between members of extended families, separating couples and keeping [parents](#) apart from their children.

More than a decade after Israel declared Gaza a "[hostile entity](#)," travel between the Strip and the West Bank is still limited to the few people who meet Israel's narrow criteria - mainly medical patients and their companions, a quota of approved traders, and other "exceptional humanitarian cases." Relocation from Gaza to the West Bank is [all but impossible](#). Families divided across the Palestinian territory can meet only in the case of a wedding, a life-threatening medical condition or death of a first-degree relative. Even within these limited circumstances, countless permit applications are [denied](#) outright for no reason, only [partially approved](#) (for some family members, but not for others), or simply left [pending](#) with no response from Israeli authorities, rendering them effectively denied.

In many cases, women are those who join their partners in their partner's family home. In the case of women from Gaza or the West Bank who marry someone from the other part of the Palestinian territory, Israel's restrictive permit regime means an indefinite separation from their parents, siblings, and other friends and family. Israel's restrictions on travel thus compound an already difficult situation women face by making a woman's journey to leave her home effectively [a one-way street](#).

Even when women do meet Israel's stringent criteria for submitting permit applications to visit their families in Israel or the West Bank, and even if their permits are approved, Israel's bureaucratic procedures for the travel of minors accompanying their parents often pose impossible ultimatums for women, such as having to decide whether to see their parents and leave their minor children in the Strip, or to stay with their children and wait years on end in the hopes of one day visiting their family members who live outside Gaza. Many other tragic absurdities befall women in Gaza as a direct result of Israel's permit regime, given that Palestinian women's right to family life is constantly being contested and infringed upon.

In addition to the impact on families, Israel's separation policy also undermines the work of [women's civil society organizations](#) in the Strip by cutting them off from Palestinian civil society organizations in the West Bank. In the year 2000, Israel implemented a [sweeping prohibition on student travel](#) between Gaza and West Bank universities. In the academic year of 2017, over 55% of students registered at universities and colleges in Gaza were women. The separation policy denies students, most of whom are women, academic opportunities that are only available in West Bank universities.





Mariam Abu Alatta

Mariam Abu Alatta is a project manager and fundraiser at Aisha - Association for Woman and Child Protection, an independent organization of Palestinian women established in 2009, which works to achieve gender integration through economic empowerment and psychosocial support to marginalized women and children in Gaza. Mariam graduated with a bachelor's degree in architecture from the Islamic University of Gaza in 2006.

"The year I graduated from university there were the elections and the internal Palestinian struggle that ensued, followed by a big Israeli military operation in Gaza, which made it generally impossible for anyone to find work. After years of failed attempts to secure a long-term position in architecture, I considered trying to move to another country and finding a job elsewhere. At one point I was even accepted to a job in the United Arab Emirates, but after much deliberation, I decided against it. What I wanted to do was remain in Gaza and contribute to my own society and community. That decision was very significant. For many years after, I sought employment in architecture, but was ultimately unable to find work in my professional field.

"Those who knew me personally when I was a student can tell you how energized and positive I was back then. I used to volunteer in several places and my days were hectic with activity. After graduating and realizing I couldn't find any job opportunities, I became depressed. I could barely find the energy to leave the house, because I realized my diploma wasn't going to help me in any way to find a job. The cost of architecture studies is high, while work opportunities in the Strip have dwindled and possibilities elsewhere are limited. Many civil engineering companies in the Strip have shut down in recent years. All the while, the conditions of Gaza's infrastructure are getting worse.

"As a woman, the process of looking for a job in Gaza is extremely difficult. You are faced with a huge lack of jobs to begin with, as well as discriminatory preference of men, who are thought of as the main providers for their families.

"The appalling economic situation is leading university graduates to increased drug addiction, violence, serious depression, and suicide. To be able to earn a living is an honor. Young people increasingly feel like they have no options. They lose all hope, turn to drugs, feel like there is no point in living. The emotional burdens and traumas of life in Gaza weigh especially heavily on women. The reality of poverty soaks into social ties and community. We are so busy and invested in trying to find an income that even maintaining friendships becomes secondary.

"Work opportunities abroad for women from Gaza are also scarce - the Israeli policy at the crossings, and the 'security blocks' placed on people, barring them from travel, make it extremely hard. It's reached a point where we don't even consider submitting permit applications for professional opportunities abroad because we know in advance that they will be denied.

"Women deserve to be allowed to succeed and prove themselves in any profession, to accrue work experience, and realize their dreams. They deserve the chance to meet their financial needs, like all people do, to be independent and give back to their society."

Conclusions and recommendations

Restrictions on movement imposed by Israel affect all residents of Gaza - men, women and children alike - but their impact on women is particularly severe because of a systemic preference toward men. The limitations on economic activity which are part and parcel of the closure imposed by Israel have constricted Gaza's workforce, meaning that women experience greater initial difficulty entering the job market as well as advancing within it. Access restrictions prevent women from developing a competitive edge because they cannot leave Gaza to acquire professional tools and skills that are unavailable in the Strip. They also obstruct women's relationships with their families and communities.

Women are an integral part of any healthy, thriving society and work force. Their potential contribution to the advancement and development of Gaza's economy is immense. Travel restrictions violate Gaza women's fundamental right to freedom of movement, splitting families, hindering economic development in Gaza, and denying a life with dignity to all residents of Gaza, both women and men.

- A functioning, thriving economy is based on a wide variety of business and industry, including commerce, service provision, small companies and civil society organizations. Israel must **recognize the legitimate needs of businesswomen and professionals** in Gaza and allow them to travel abroad and between the parts of the Palestinian territory, subject only to individual security screening.
- Israel must **improve conditions at Kerem Shalom Crossing and open an additional commercial crossing in the northern Gaza Strip**, either at Erez Crossing, or nearby it. This would reduce the cost of transporting goods to and from the Strip, allowing a wider variety of traders and business owners to sell their products in the West Bank and Israel, including women. **Israel must also allow goods to be transported in hand luggage and refrain from blocking the passage of parcels by mail, to enable and encourage small-scale trade.**
- Israel must terminate its practices of spraying herbicides over Gaza's farming areas; preventing the entrance of equipment and materials essential to agriculture; limiting the marketing of produce to the West Bank and Israel, and; restricting activity of Gaza's fishing zone, in order to **allow growth of these economic sectors**. This would enable women the possibility of gaining employment in sectors that were central to their livelihoods before the closure was imposed.
- **Israel must revoke the "separation policy,"** which violates international law, and causes unnecessary suffering by splitting families apart, as well as hampering the many economic, social and cultural ties between the West Bank and Gaza.
- **Gisha calls for Israel's failed policy of closure to be brought to an end**, given the ongoing and extensive violations of human rights caused by severe and sweeping restrictions on freedom of movement.