



INVISIBLE NO MORE: Brief No. 1

Left to carry households alone: War and the rise of women-headed households in Gaza

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The war in Gaza has fundamentally reshaped household structures and survival responsibilities. Women reportedly head nearly 1 in 4 households in Gaza – representing an estimated 86,290 households and roughly double the pre-October 2023 rate of around 1 in 9.

A new UN Women analysis indicates a sharp increase in women who have become the primary heads of their households, taking on responsibility for supporting and sustaining their households.¹ The analysis shows that women's household headship extends beyond those formally recorded as household heads. It includes women whose husbands are missing, detained, separated or whose fate remains unknown, as well as women caring for husbands who are severely injured, disabled or otherwise unable to fulfil their previous household roles. In these circumstances, women are becoming the household's principal caregiver, decision-maker, income or cash-flow manager, aid recipient and point of contact with humanitarian assistance systems, while the household continues to be formally classified as male-headed.

For analytical consistency, this report uses "women-headed households" or "WHH" to refer to households in which a woman is identified as the household head in the source data. "De facto women-headed households" refers to households in which women perform the responsibilities associated with household headship in practice but may not be formally or reportedly recognized as doing so.

This distinction has operational implications. Humanitarian assessments, registration systems and targeting

processes frequently rely on reported household headship, civil documentation or other formal classifications. Consequently, women-headed households captured in survey and registration data are likely to represent only part of the broader population of women carrying household headship responsibilities. Where women's actual roles are not accurately reflected in humanitarian data, their households risk being incorrectly assessed or inadequately supported.

The increase in reported and de facto women-headed households is unfolding amid severe restrictions on access to essential services and humanitarian assistance across the Gaza Strip. Humanitarian operations continue to depend on a limited number of border crossings, while movement within Gaza – particularly to areas requiring prior coordination with the Israeli authorities – is subject to delays and other access constraints. Continuing hostilities, insecurity and funding shortfalls further limit the availability and timely delivery of clean water, food, shelter materials, healthcare and hygiene products.

Within this environment, women-headed and de facto women-headed households are likely to face heightened and overlapping barriers to meeting basic needs, accessing services and assistance, remaining safe and preserving their capacity to cope. These pressures are compounded where women have limited income, mobility, documentation or access to information, or where assistance systems do not recognize the responsibilities they are carrying.



The evidence presented in this report underscores the need to identify and prioritize both reported and de facto women-headed households in humanitarian response and recovery planning. As the findings demonstrate, many experience intersecting vulnerabilities related to shelter, income, food security, safety and access to assistance. Deliberate measures are particularly important to identify women who are effectively heading households but remain formally invisible, ensuring that humanitarian assessments and targeting systems reflect the realities of household survival in Gaza.

Key Findings

Finding 1: Women-headed households in Gaza have doubled since before the war.



According to the needs assessment survey conducted at the end of 2025,² households where women are reported as heads in Gaza are estimated to

have reached approximately 23 per cent of all households, equivalent to 86,290 households.^{3,4,5,6} This represents a major shift in household structure and survival responsibility in Gaza.

The figure captures households where women are identified as the household head. However, data analysis conducted as part of the research suggests that it may not fully capture the wider reality of women heading households in practice. In the current context, many women are managing household survival because husbands are missing, detained, separated, injured, disabled, or otherwise unable to fulfil household responsibilities. Some of these households may still be treated as male-headed in assessment, registration or targeting systems. When women's de facto household leadership is not

reflected in assessment, registration and targeting systems, humanitarian actors may fail to identify the full extent of their households' needs. This can affect eligibility, prioritization and access to appropriate assistance.

Finding 2: Women-headed households face greater and more overlapping economic, shelter, insecurity and displacement-related risks than male-headed households.



Women-headed households reported higher unmet shelter needs than male-headed households, at 68 per cent compared with 55 per cent, and higher levels of home destruction, at 74 per cent compared with 67 per cent. They were also displaced more often reporting an average of 8 displacements since October 2023, compared with 7 among male-headed households. Economic insecurity is also more severe. 75 per cent of women-headed households identified cash as a priority need, compared with 63 per cent of male-headed households, and 67 per cent reported unmet cash needs, compared with 55 per cent of male-headed households. The analysis also shows that these needs frequently overlap within the same households. Nearly half of women-headed households, 48 per cent, reported both unmet shelter and unmet cash needs, compare with 32 per cent of male-headed households. This suggests that women-headed households are more likely to report shelter deprivation but are also more likely to face shelter and cash constraints simultaneously.⁷ Women-headed households were also more likely to report facing both unmet cash needs and movement restrictions. This means that the households with the greatest needs may also be among those least able to reach the services, distributions or registration systems intended to support them.

Women-headed households are more likely to report receiving no assistance. 18.3 per cent of their households received no aid, compared with 8.7 per cent of male-headed households and 6.1 per cent of women in male-headed households.

These findings show that women-headed households face multiple and overlapping economic, shelter, and displacement-related pressures. These pressures

may limit women's ability to access assistance, rebuild income sources and secure safe shelter. These pressures can reinforce one another: repeated displacement increases shelter insecurity, shelter insecurity increases reliance on cash assistance, and limited resources can reduce women's ability to secure safer living conditions, rebuild income sources and meet basic needs.

Finding 3: Women heading households report more gender-related protection concerns than women in male headed households, while their own health needs may be less visible in standard reporting.



Both women heads of households and women living in male-headed households reported gender-related protection concerns, but these concerns were higher

among women-headed households at 19 per cent compared with 8 per cent of women in male-headed households. Women-headed households also reported higher unmet needs for safe spaces, at 20 per cent compared with 10 per cent among male-headed households. This finding points to higher reported protection concerns among women-headed households lacking male support or where women are navigating displacement, aid collection, shelter insecurity, income generation and survival responsibilities with limited support. The concerns should be interpreted alongside a total collapse of the security environment and harassment risks women may face during their effort to collect aid and access services which frequently require them to navigate public spaces and service systems under deeply insecure conditions. Health risks may also be less visible in standard needs reporting. Women-headed households reported lower unmet health needs than heads of male-headed households, despite higher levels of chronic illness and psychosocial recovery needs in the longer survey analysis. They also reported children's health needs at more than three and a half times their own reported health needs.

This pattern suggests that self-reported needs data may not fully capture the health and psychosocial burden carried by women heading households, especially where women prioritize children's or other household members needs over their own.

Finding 4: Women heads of households are managing core survival responsibilities.



Women-headed households in Gaza are carrying high levels of responsibility across core household survival functions. Survey findings

show that women-headed households carry high levels of responsibility for key household functions: 82 per cent reported greater decision-making responsibilities, 76 per cent reported managing household cashflow, 72 per cent were responsible for aid registration, and 55 per cent were responsible for aid collection. By comparison, only 5 per cent of women in male-headed households reported responsibility for aid collection. Additional survey analysis also found that women-headed households were more likely than women in male-headed households to report responsibility for income generation, purchasing food and aid registration. These findings suggest that women heads of households are managing functions that are central to household survival and to engagement with humanitarian response: deciding how scarce resources are used, registering for aid, collecting assistance, managing cashflow, and meeting daily needs for food, shelter, and care. In practice, they are a key point of contact between the household and the humanitarian response.

These responsibilities are being carried out in a context where women heads of households also report higher unmet cash and shelter needs, greater childcare responsibilities, heightened protection concerns and potential barriers to legal documentation and recognition.

Recommendations

Prioritize integrated support for women-headed and de facto women-headed households facing overlapping vulnerabilities: Women-headed and de facto women-headed households should be prioritized for support packages that combine multi-purpose cash assistance, shelter repair, livelihood recovery and referral to protection and legal services where needed. This should not be treated as separate sectoral support interventions. The evidence shows that women-headed households face overlapping livelihood, shelter and health related pressures, including higher unmet cash needs, higher levels of

home destruction and repeated displacement. Integrated support is needed because these risks reinforce one another.

Legal and justice institutions should prioritize civil registration, and related legal support for women assuming household headship, including assistance to obtain, replace or update documents linked to death registration, widowhood, child custody, inheritance, access to assistance, and other family sustenance and maintenance issues. This is particularly important in the post-conflict context, where growing numbers of women have assumed primary responsibility for household care, protection, and decision-making. Additionally, women assuming household leadership need support to obtain or replace documents linked to death registration, widowhood, custody, guardianship, inheritance and civil identity. Legal aid should also reach women who may not fit formal widowhood categories, including separated women, women with missing or detained husbands, and women caring for incapacitated husbands.

Design aid delivery around women's responsibilities and mobility constraints: Assistance should recognize that women heads of households are often responsible for aid registration, aid collection, cashflow management, care and household decision making. Assistance should therefore be designed to reduce time, mobility and safety barriers. Practical measures can include mobile registration, simplified documentation requirements where papers are missing or destroyed, safe and accessible aid collection points, clear communication on registration and entitlements, alternatives for women who cannot travel because of childcare, disability, insecurity or caregiving responsibilities and use of trusted women-led organizations and community focal points to support outreach and feedback.

Integrate prevention and protection response into programming for women-headed households: Women-headed households should be prioritized for protection outreach, GBV case management and referrals, psychosocial and legal support. These services should be integrated into cash, shelter, health, livelihoods and legal aid programmes, rather than treated as separate interventions. Practical measures include confidential referral pathways, safe access to services, frontline worker training, psychosocial support for women and children, and protection risk screening within cash, shelter, and aid registration processes.

Ensure women-headed households are represented in recovery planning and implementation: Women-headed households should be consulted in and benefit from humanitarian and recovery planning, shelter response, livelihoods and employment generation programmes, aid design and accountability mechanisms. Evidence consistently demonstrates that women's meaningful participation in crisis response, governance, and local governance and peacebuilding strengthens social cohesion, enhances community resilience, and contributes to more effective and sustainable outcomes.⁸

Excluding women from decision-making and recovery efforts weakens peace and security outcomes, perpetuates inequality, and reinforces harmful gender norms. Women-led organizations in Gaza should be supported to identify access barriers, monitor whether early recovery initiatives are reaching women-headed and de facto women-headed households and shape programme design. This is essential because women-headed households are already managing household decision-making, aid access, care responsibilities, and cash flow. Recovery planning should reflect their actual role in sustaining households.

Strengthen the identification and analysis of reported and de facto women-headed households: Humanitarian and recovery assessments, registration systems and targeting processes should systematically capture both formally reported household headship and the responsibilities women perform in practice.

Assessment and targeting criteria should recognize women as de facto heads of household where they are the primary decision-maker, caregiver, income or cash-flow manager, aid recipient or point of contact with assistance systems, even when the household remains formally classified as male-headed. This would help ensure that their responsibilities and vulnerabilities are accurately reflected and that their households are not overlooked, misclassified or inadequately supported.

Methodology

This brief draws on household survey commissioned by UN Women on behalf of the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group, undertaken by Ground Truth Solutions and Arab World for Research and Development (AWRAD) in Gaza, at the end of 2025. The survey used a two-stage stratified sampling design covering the general

adult population (18+) residing in currently accessible (non-displacement) areas of the Gaza Strip, drawing on PCBS census enumeration areas and Site Management Cluster lists of collective centers and organized tented sites as the sampling frame. Given the conflict context, this represents a subset of Gaza's territory rather than full geographic coverage; the sample was stratified by settlement type (enumeration areas, collective centers, organized tented sites).⁹

For this analysis, three main groups of respondents are compared: households where a man is reported as the household head (n=207); households where a woman is reported as the household head (n=93); Women living in households where a man is reported as the household head (n=147). Total analytical sample N=447. Reported household headship is a survey-based classification and should be interpreted as an operational and analytical category. It is used to identify patterns in reported needs, responsibilities, barriers and access to assistance, while recognizing that it may not fully capture household composition, intra-household authority, legal recognition, or de facto forms of women's household headship.

Descriptive statistics computed by groups of analysis. Significance tested using standard two-sample t-tests (equal variances). Compound vulnerability assessed through joint indicator pairs and a 6-domain



vulnerability index (food, shelter, health, cash, safety, GBV), supplemented by a 3-dimensional caregiving composite index (sole domestic burden, care barriers to services, and conflict-induced role shift). Health indicators are interpreted with a self-deprivation adjustment. Regression analysis uses OLS linear probability models to further confirm correlation, controlling for age, education, disability status, UNRWA refugee status, household size, and frequency of displacement since October 7.

The findings should be interpreted with caution given displacement, documentation barriers, missing persons, detention, injury, disability, repeated displacement and the partial collapse of civil registration systems. These factors may affect both how households are classified and how women's responsibilities are reported.

Endnotes

- 1 Based on household survey data commissioned by UN Women on behalf of the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group, undertaken by Ground Truth Solutions and Arab World for Research and Development (AWRAD) in Gaza, November–December 2025.
- 2 Household survey commissioned by UN Women on behalf of the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group, undertaken by Ground Truth Solutions and Arab World for Research and Development (AWRAD) in Gaza, November–December 2025.
- 3 This is based on the latest statistics released by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) on 8 March 2026, in its publication: Highlights on the Situation of Palestinian Women on International Women's Day.
- 4 Estimate calculated by applying the 23 per cent share of women-headed households reported in the end-2025 needs assessment survey to the estimated total number of households in Gaza. The household denominator was derived from an estimated population of 2.1 million people divided by the pre-war average household size of approximately 5.6 persons, producing an estimated 375,000 households. This gives approximately 86,290 women-headed households.
- 5 This finding was triangulated against UN Women's technical modelling, which uses the pre-war PCBS baseline of 12 per cent female-headed households and estimates the increase in women-headed households by applying adult male mortality data, marital status assumptions and an undercount adjustment scenario. The convergence between the survey finding and the modelled range strengthens confidence that women-headed households in Gaza have at least doubled compared with the pre-war baseline, while noting that estimates remain subject to uncertainty due to displacement, missing persons, detention, injury, documentation barriers and the partial collapse of civil registration systems.
- 6 This estimate refers to households where women are reported or identified as the household head. It may not fully capture the wider reality of women managing household survival in practice where households continue to be classified as male-headed.
- 7 The compound indicator was calculated by identifying households that reported both unmet shelter needs and unmet cash needs. Among women-headed households, 45 out of 93 households reported both conditions, equivalent to 48 per cent. This shows the extent to which shelter deprivation and cash insecurity overlap within the same households, rather than occurring as separate needs.
- 8 Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group Palestine, Gender Matters Bulletin No.6 - Beyond the Crisis: Palestinian Women Heading Recovery, Reconstruction and Peacebuilding, 13 May 2026
- 9 In Stage 1, 50 PSUs (19 EAs, 6 collective centers, 25 organized tented sites) were selected using probability-proportional-to-size (PPS) sampling within accessible, non-displacement areas; in Stage 2, 10 households were sampled per PSU using random-walk, systematic interval, or building/room-count methods depending on settlement type, with individual respondents selected via a Kish table to ensure a balanced 50/50 gender split.

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