

Impact of the conflict on people with disabilities in the Gaza Strip

OVERVIEW

The Israeli forces' aerial strikes, ground offensive, and blockade of Gaza that followed the Hamas attacks on 7 October 2023 have had a disproportionate impact on people with disabilities. These attacks have exposed them to various protection risks, especially separation from their primary caregivers and assistive devices, preventing them from fleeing and finding safe shelter. They also face additional challenges in accessing water, food, and medicine (OHCHR 20/11/2023; HRW 01/11/2023).

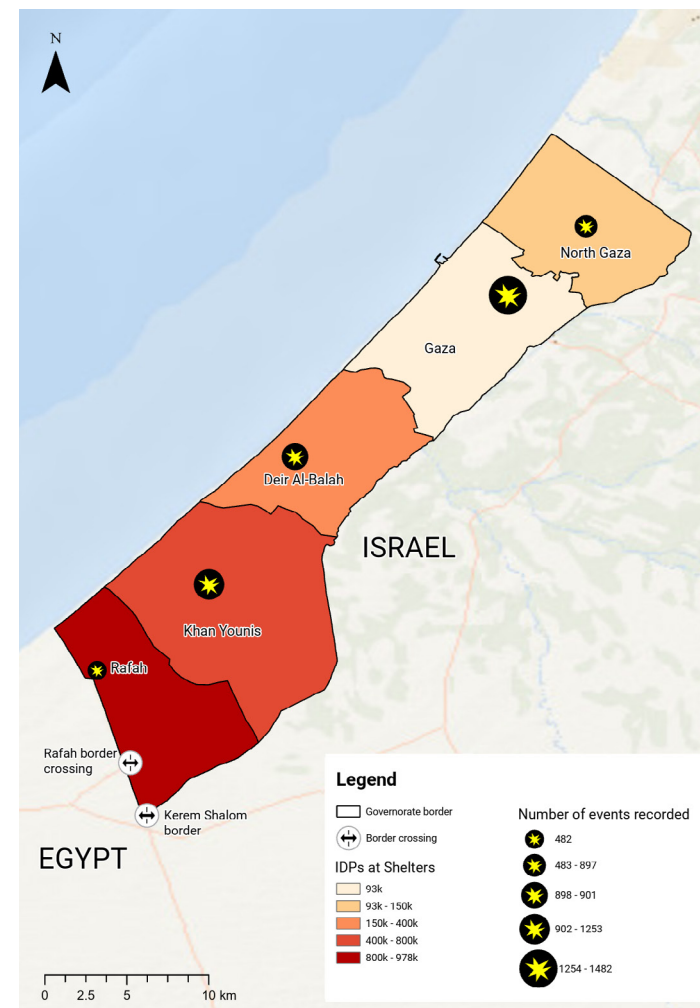
People with disabilities are considered more vulnerable to the impact of conflicts because they face greater barriers to accessing safety and humanitarian assistance than many others. This puts them at increased risk of serious injuries, death, sexual assault, and other forms of harm (HRW 01/11/2023). In long-lasting armed conflicts, disability prevalence is significantly high.

Latest developments in the Gaza Strip

Since 2 February 2024, the Israeli forces have attacked Rafah city, the last refuge on the southern edge of the Gaza Strip, where over two million displaced people have moved after it was designated as a 'safe zone'. Rafah is the only city with access to the limited food and medical aid trickling across the border. Between 2-4 February 2024, it was reported that more than 234 people, mostly women and children, were killed in overnight bombings in the city (The Guardian 04/02/2024; France 24 03/02/2024; OCHA 04/02/2024). On 12 February it was reported that between 67 to 100 people were killed by Israeli airstrikes as warplanes targeted different areas of the city of Rafah (Al Jazeera 12/02/2024). With the recent attacks, people are afraid of dying or having to climb the border to Egypt, which is currently closed to people's movement (VOA 02/02/2024; Reuters 02/02/2024).

Al Amal Hospital in Khan Younis was among the essential infrastructures attacked on 2 February; as at 6 February, almost 100 people remained inside the ailing hospital, including older patients and others with disabilities who could not be moved (UN 06/02/2024). The humanitarian response is likely to decrease, as interventions suffer interference and delays by the Israeli forces and humanitarian staff and sites receive more threats to their safety (OCHA 05/02/2024).

Number of explosions/remote violence and battles recorded by ACLED between 7 October 2023 and 12 February 2024



Source: ACLED accessed 12/02/2024

About this report

Aim: this report highlights the situation of people with disabilities in the Gaza Strip, with consideration of their immediate and long-term needs resulting from the current violence.

Methodology: the report is based on a review of secondary data and non-public sources, as well as key informant interviews with humanitarian aid providers, including those who specialise in assisting people with disabilities.

Limitations: there is limited information on the current situation of people with disabilities in the Gaza Strip because of operational challenges in accessing them. There is also limited data on disability prevalence disaggregated by sex and age. There is a lack of pre-crisis and current information on people with non-visible disabilities, such as autism, bipolar disorder, chronic pain, seizure disorder, epilepsy, chronic fatigue, and depression, which may challenge a person's movements, senses, or understanding of the current context. The ability to distinguish between older people and people with disabilities is affected by insufficient disaggregated baseline and crisis data, which often groups older people with people with disabilities. Age itself is not a disability, but most older people in Gaza lived with a functional limitation prior to the 7 October attacks (IDA accessed 07/02/2024; Age International 21/12/2023).

Further contextual information on children as a specific population group is available in ACAPS' *Palestine: Impact of the Conflict on Children in the Gaza Strip* report.

KEY MESSAGES

- As at 12 February 2024, the Ministry of Health reported that the impact of the attacks had killed at least 28,400 Palestinians in Gaza and injured almost 68,000 (OCHA 12/02/2024). Some estimated that over 5,000 injured Palestinians were living with a disability. These figures are expected to increase significantly as the conflict continues (OCHA 07/01/2024; EMM 07/12/2023).
- The current precise number of people with disabilities is unknown, but prior to 7 October, 21% of households in Gaza had at least one member with a disability. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), this amounted to approximately 58,000 people with disabilities (PCBS 03/12/2023; OCHA/REACH 07/09/2022). Since 7 October, more than 1,000 children are estimated to have lost a limb in Gaza. This translates to around ten children losing a limb per day (Al Jazeera 01/02/2024; STC 07/01/2024).
- On 13 October 2023, Israeli forces instructed all civilians in northern Gaza to evacuate to the south without considering the specific needs of people with disabilities (HRW 01/11/2023). These people face barriers in fleeing, identifying a safe place to stay, and accessing essential needs, such as water, food, and medicine. They are in dire need of assistive devices, such as wheelchairs, walkers, and hearing aids (HRW 01/11/2023; ICRC 11/2022; Rotenberg et al. 10/01/2024; OCHA/REACH 07/09/2022).
- The frequent forced displacement of people, volunteers, and humanitarian staff makes it difficult to provide services to people in need or follow up services. Despite organisations being able to identify people in need, they usually do not have enough time to prepare and provide aid before the people are forcibly displaced again (KII 08/02/2024).
- People with disabilities face higher protection risks and are more likely to be exposed to death and injuries in insecure areas because they face more physical or cognitive challenges when identifying or fleeing attacks. They also face barriers to accessing information (KII 06/02/2024; HRW 01/11/2023).
- The Israeli forces have been ignoring human rights conventions protecting people with disabilities in armed conflict since 7 October. The Israeli military has established 'safe zones', but access to these areas has been inconsistent, and the information for evacuation and safe zones is not communicated to be inclusive of people with disabilities. The zones have also been attacked and lack access to basic services regardless of their designation (Arab News 21/01/2024; PBS 07/12/2023).
- The lack of inclusive humanitarian assistance, such as shelter, food, water, and medical support, severely affects the physical and mental health situation of people with disabilities (Diakonia IHL Centre 03/12/2021; PCBS 03/12/2023; HI 03/11/2023).

DISABILITY PREVALENCE AND MAIN CONCERNS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN THE GAZA STRIP BEFORE 7 OCTOBER 2023

Figures of disability prevalence prior to 7 October vary according to different sources because of differences in the methodologies used, such as the non-standardised use of the Washington Group questions (a set of questions designed to identify people with functional limitations) in data collection.

- The PCBS reported approximately 58,000 people with disabilities prior to October 7 (PCBS 03/12/2023). The 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) reported that among the 1.3 million people in need in the Gaza Strip as at the end of 2022, approximately 21% had a disability (OCHA 25/01/2023). It is important to note that the HNO figure is based on the findings of the 2022 Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA) by REACH, which reported that 21% of the 4,152 households surveyed in the Gaza Strip included at least one member with a physical or mental disability (OCHA/REACH 07/09/2022).
- The 2022 MSNA also found that 9.3% of households had at least one child (between the ages of 5–17) with a disability (OCHA/REACH 07/09/2022).
- According to the PCBS, the disability percentage varied between governorates in the Gaza Strip. Prior to 7 October 2023, North Gaza governorate recorded the highest disability percentage at nearly 5%, followed by Deir al-Balah Governorate with 4.1% (PCBS 03/12/2023).
- According to estimates before the offensive on the Gaza Strip, by the end of 2023, the number of children with disabilities in the Gaza Strip was expected to reach about 98,000 for those in the 2–17 age group, including about 6,000 children in the 2–4 age group and approximately 92,000 children in the 5–17 age group (PCBS 03/12/2023).
- According to a survey from 2019–2020, about 12% of the children in Palestine suffered from one or more types of functional difficulties (PCBS 03/12/2023).

Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip since 2006 has resulted in challenging living conditions for people with disabilities.

- They face difficulties in accessing assistive devices, such as wheelchairs, hearing aids, crutches, and artificial limbs, and lack the provision of physical rehabilitation and psychosocial support programmes (HRW 03/12/2020; EMM 07/12/2023). For example, Israel has prohibited the import of carbon fibre elements used to stabilise and treat limb injuries and epoxy resins used to make artificial limbs. The alternative use of heavier and less comfortable artificial limbs has further constrained access and movement for people with disabilities (HRW 03/12/2020).

- Public hospitals lack specialised staff, in particular those able to sign language for people with hearing impairments, and the occupational therapists and physiotherapists needed to help patients recover, move around, and carry out their daily activities independently.
- Prior to 7 October, people with disabilities faced greater difficulties in receiving health services, including rehabilitation, compared to others, primarily because of the presence of stigma, discrimination, and substantial physical, economic, and informational obstacles. According to a 2022 study that sampled 8,331 households, 99% of those with a member living with a disability reported encountering an obstacle when trying to access healthcare. The main reason they gave was financial difficulty (HI 03/11/2023; OCHA/REACH 07/09/2022).
- Livelihood access is also difficult for people with disabilities. Prior to 7 October, women with disabilities were highly dependent on their family members because of limited economic opportunities. Only 4% of women with disabilities were employed. With the latest developments, their dependence on family and other people to access humanitarian assistance has increased (OCHA 25/01/2023; KII 27/12/2023).

CRISIS IMPACTS ON PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Reduced ability to move, evacuate, and access safety

Since 11 October 2023, the lack of electricity, connectivity, caregivers, and specialised staff has created communication barriers that pose additional obstacles for people with disabilities. Gaza has been experiencing a complete electricity blackout because of the Israeli siege and discontinuation of the power supply, combined with Gaza's power plant running out of fuel reserves (OCHA 18/01/2024). The current conditions in Gaza constrain people with disabilities from accessing crucial information that could assist them in determining the location, timing, and method of how to flee to a safe place (HRW 01/11/2023; KII 27/12/2023; EMM 07/12/2023). For example, deaf people face external challenges in accessing essential information, such as evacuation orders, information distribution, and where safe shelters are located (KII 08/02/2024). People who are deaf are also unable to hear rockets coming towards them, putting them in danger (HI 12/01/2024).

As at 23 January 2024, approximately 400,000 Palestinians remained in the northern Gaza Valley without access to any humanitarian assistance since 1 December 2023 (Al Haq et al. 25/01/2024; EMM 23/01/2024). Many of those who could not leave included people with disabilities, who relied on their caregivers or relatives to get to shelters, without whom they are unable to move (HI 03/11/2023; HRW 01/11/2023; EMM 07/12/2023; Al Jazeera 29/12/2023). On 15 October, it was reported that 22 children, including 12 children with disabilities, were unable to evacuate an orphanage in northern Gaza because of the specific needs of some

of the children and a lack of staff, with many having fled (NBC accessed 02/02/2024). It is likely that many other children and adults with disabilities have faced challenges in fleeing and accessing safe shelter, but there is an information gap on the number of people unable to evacuate and their location.

Despite a number of people remaining in northern Gaza, including older people and people with disabilities, there is a severe lack of humanitarian assistance reaching northern Gaza, as Israeli military operations continue and access constraints prevent movements (STC 21/12/2023). The situation in southern Gaza is not much better. Specifically, thousands of people are living on the streets with their children, and people with disabilities are sleeping in the open with no assistance (STC 09/12/2023; UNSG 08/12/2023).

Essential infrastructure across the Gaza Strip has been severely damaged since 7 October.

As at 8 February over 60% of housing units in the Gaza strip have been damaged by the Israeli forces attacks, 70,000 housing units have been destroyed and almost 300,000 housing units have been damaged (NPR 09/02/2024; OCHA 08/02/2024). At least 68% of the buildings were destroyed or damaged in the northern Gaza Strip, at least 72% in Gaza City, 39% in the central camps, 46% in Khan Yunis, and 20% in Rafah (Euro Med Monitor 11/02/2024). This level of destruction has created physical barriers for people with disabilities, making them unable to move around properly (KII 27/12/2023).

Most IDPs live in overcrowded shelters, which are located in health facilities or schools that are not physically accessible for people with disabilities. Some shelters in schools lack the required adaptations, such as ramps, to allow mobility for people with disabilities (Green Network 01/12/2023).

Difficulty obtaining food

The siege by Israel is causing a food crisis in Gaza; the border crossings connecting Egypt and the Gaza Strip, Kerem Shalom, and Rafah only allow a limited number of humanitarian trucks, resulting in scarce food supplies (OCHA 30/01/2024). As at December 2023, approximately 93% of the population in Gaza (around two million people) were experiencing Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse acute food insecurity levels, with over 15% (378,000 people) already at Catastrophe (IPC Phase 5) levels (IPC 21/12/2023). As at 9 February 2024, the number of people facing IPC 5 food insecurity had likely increased because the blockade and attacks in Rafah city have forced people to eat grass and reduced their meals (France24 09/02/2024).

People with disabilities are unable to access food and other essential assistance because of various physical, informational, and institutional barriers, which put them at a higher risk of food insecurity and malnutrition. People with functional limitations cannot queue at food distribution points for hours, and some do not have caregivers to access food for them

(WFP 25/01/2024; WFP 22/01/2024). Those residing upstairs on higher ground face additional difficulty in moving around to access meals. Food distribution has also not been designed to be inclusive of people with hearing impairments, with some organisations calling out people's names to distribute assistance (KII 08/02/2024).

Food is not always adequate for certain specific conditions, especially for people experiencing difficulty swallowing. The lack of electricity to operate food-grinding devices creates a specific obstacle for people with swallowing challenges (KII 27/12/2023; HI 03/11/2023). People with quadriplegia and muscular dystrophy require electricity to operate food-grinding devices for clinical nutrition. This is not possible because of the Israeli siege of Gaza and electricity cuts (EMM 07/12/2023).

Insufficient WASH facilities and essential hygiene-related items

With the lack of water, some people with disabilities have reported having no choice but to drink and use unsafe contaminated water, including groundwater and even municipal water, which is usually only used for toilets. This increases the risk of waterborne diseases (UNHRC 20/11/2023).

People with disabilities have various difficulties in accessing water. With the scarcity of water, some people with visual impairment and other functional limitations are forced to walk several kilometres every day or wait in very long queues to fetch water, which is insufficient to fulfil the needs of households (KII 08/02/2024; KII 19/12/2023). These people rely on guides to assist them (HRW 01/11/2023).

People with disabilities have difficulty accessing already limited WASH facilities. IDP shelters have a significant lack of WASH facilities. As at 13 December 2023, there was, on average, 1 toilet per 372 people and 1 shower per 4,500 people in Gaza (UNRWA 27/12/2023; WHO 21/12/2023). These figures are much lower than the recommended standard of one toilet per 20 people and one shower per 20 people (IOM accessed 01/02/2024). There is no updated information on the number of toilets and showers, but it is likely to have decreased because of the constant air strikes on essential infrastructure and overcrowded shelters.

WASH facilities lack accessibility adaptations for people with disabilities. Some toilets located in collective shelters require people to squat and are not adapted to specific conditions (Green Network 01/12/2023; KII 19/12/2023). On account of the difficulty in gaining access to shared toilets, some people with disabilities have reduced their consumption of food and beverages (HI 12/01/2024).

The IDP sites lack sufficient water, sanitation, mattresses, and medical beds, resulting in the development of ulcers and other health complications that are difficult to address

in unsterile environments. This aggravates the daily distress experienced by people with disabilities during periods of heightened psychological stress, intensifying their anxiety and fear regarding their personal safety (UNHRC 22/12/2023; HI 03/11/2023; HRW 01/11/2023; EMM 07/12/2023).

Dire health needs and lack of healthcare access

Overcrowding in facilities with a shortage of staff has affected the entire population in the Gaza Strip, worsening the health conditions of people with disabilities. The closure of numerous hospitals has brought the strip's health system to the verge of collapse. As at 7 February 2024, only 13 of the 36 hospitals in Gaza – seven in the north and six in the south – were partially operational. The partially operational hospitals face an overwhelming influx of casualties and are experiencing shortages of electricity, fuel, medicine, and basic supplies (OCHA 09/02/2024; UNFPA 05/02/2024). The lack of medical staff is another obstacle to the proper functioning of the healthcare system in Gaza. Approximately 10,700 medical consultations take place in shelters daily. As at 27 December 2023, there were only 342 health personnel available in the Gaza Strip (UNRWA 27/12/2023). Before 7 October, the average number of medical consultations per doctor was 113, while there were 1,016 health staff (UNRWA accessed 06/02/2024).

Lack of medication access increases the risk of exclusion from communal safe spaces such as shelters because of stigma or fear of unpredictable behaviours. The lack of medical resources significantly affects certain people with disabilities, in particular those experiencing lower limb paralysis or with intellectual disabilities. These people rely on medical resources, such as psychotropic medicine, on a daily basis to treat psychosis, depression, anxiety, sleep problems, and epilepsy or to carry out even the simplest activities (EMM 07/12/2023; Shoumitro et al. 22/03/2023).

Injured people are at risk of long-term impairment. Post-trauma physical rehabilitation is crucial in preventing complications and long-term impairment (KII 27/12/2023). As a result of intense conflict, many people have acquired new disabilities. The siege of the Gaza Strip has led to shortages of medicine and equipment to alternatively treat injuries, which, combined with a lack of medical staff and capacity, have resulted in health facilities resorting to amputations to prevent further infections from wounds. Since 7 October, at least 1,000 children in Gaza have lost a limb, and many have gone through surgical procedures without receiving anaesthesia (MEE 29/12/2023; UN 19/12/2023; STC 11/01/2024; KII 27/12/2023).

The persistent air strikes have had a profound impact on the mental and emotional wellbeing of people with disabilities, causing constant fear and anxiety and leading to heightened mental health and psychosocial needs. They reside in a constant state of anguish, plagued by uncertainty regarding their wellbeing and what lies ahead (HelpAge 20/10/2023). The current

level of destruction is unprecedented and, along with the electricity blackout, aggravates physical barriers, contributing to mental health and psychosocial support needs. The destruction of homes and toys, the disruption of routines, and even small changes to the environment and behaviours can cause great discomfort to people with developmental disabilities, such as autism, which can lead to increased mental health needs (PC 24/06/2023).

Lack of access to healthcare and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services may increase the risk of developing or worsening disability, as well as result in serious complications, depression, and higher rates of mortality and morbidity (OCHA 25/01/2023). Healthcare access is crucial, as any untreated trauma can lead to enduring mental and physical disabilities. The prevalence of mental and physical disabilities in the Gaza Strip can be expected to increase significantly as the conflict continues (KII 27/12/2023). Before 7 October, mental health was already a major concern in the strip. According to a 2022 survey, over two-thirds (approximately 1.4 million) of the population in the Gaza Strip experienced depression. Levels of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms were more prevalent among younger age groups (18–29 years old) and tended to decrease as individuals aged. Anxiety was the most prevalent functional difficulty, approximately 13% of the children aged 5–17 years experienced it (PCBS 03/12/2023; PCBS accessed 08/01/2024; WHO 17/06/2022). Before 7 October, households with members with disabilities reported more MHPSS needs than households without members with disabilities (OCHA/REACH 01/11/2022).

Conflict disproportionately affects people with neurological disorders, including autism. Extensive damage and destruction of civilian infrastructure resulting from the conflict have significantly reduced the capacity of existing diagnosis and rehabilitation centres in Gaza (OCHA 28/01/2024). Prior to 7 October, people with autism and other non-visible disabilities in Gaza were generally undiagnosed and did not have access to any official developmental support services or social protection because of a lack of facilities dedicated to diagnosis and rehabilitation (EI 07/12/2022; Shawahna 03/08/2017; Al Jazeera 25/05/2014).

The number of people diagnosed with autism has increased in recent years, thought to be related to the exposure of densely populated areas to white phosphorus bombing during Israel's attacks on Gaza in late 2008. It is believed that phosphate toxicity from dysregulated phosphate metabolism can affect almost every major organ system of the body, including the central nervous system (Brown 13/06/2023; Al Jazeera 25/05/2014). There are reports of white phosphorous being used during air strikes to attack Gaza and Lebanon on 10–11 October 2023, violating international humanitarian law (Le Monde 02/02/2024; NYT 11/12/2023; HRW 12/10/2023).

The conflict is creating specific challenges for older people to obtain necessary medication and medical care (HelpAge 20/10/2023). Prior to the conflict, an estimated nine out of ten older people in Gaza had at least one disability. Eight out of ten suffered from chronic health

conditions that required continuous medication to treat symptoms and alleviate pain (Age International 21/12/2023). Before 7 October, there were around 96,000 older people in the Gaza Strip. The older population in Gaza is reported to be disproportionately affected by non-communicable diseases and disabilities, including musculoskeletal disorders, diabetes, and kidney diseases (OCHA 25/01/2023).

Since the beginning of January 2024, there has been heavy rain in the Gaza Strip, increasing the risk of waterborne diseases and increasing people's exposure to infections and health consequences, particularly people with disabilities and chronic illnesses (CNN 25/01/2024; MEMO 27/01/2024). These people usually have impaired immunity, making them vulnerable to different diseases, including those that are waterborne (UNDRR accessed 09/02/2024). Heavy rainfall can typically be expected to continue until the end of February.

Heightened protection risks

People with disabilities face higher protection risks because of barriers to accessing information and services, putting them at higher risk of death and injuries as they face more physical or cognitive challenges when fleeing attacks and unsafe environments. People with new disabilities lack resources and are not familiar with how to manage the challenges they face, exposing them to greater protection risks (KII 06/02/2024).

In Gaza, the rights of people with disabilities are not protected and respected despite the existing legal framework (Green Network 01/12/2023). International human rights law and international humanitarian law, as well as UN resolutions, protect the rights of people with disabilities in situations of armed conflict. Article 11 of the UNCRC, ratified by Israel in 2012 and by Palestine in 2014, states that member states need to take "all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including situations of armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies, and the occurrence of natural disasters" (UN DESA accessed 12/01/2024; Israel Ministry of Justice 01/02/2021; UN Treaty Body Database accessed 05/02/2024). According to international humanitarian law, each conflict party must give effective warning of attacks that may affect the civilian population unless circumstances do not permit (ICRC accessed 12/01/2024). Despite the Israeli military's orders for civilians to relocate into designated 'safe zones', many people have been unable to receive or understand this crucial information because of power cuts, extended communication disruptions, limited technology accessibility, and lack of clarity of available instructions. Even prior to 7 October, there were reports of human rights violations against people with disabilities in Gaza resulting from the Israeli Government's prolonged blockade of the Gaza Strip, as well as neglect by the Hamas authorities (HRW 01/11/2023).

People with disabilities are at risk of family separation as they cannot flee, may have lost their relatives and caregivers, and are left alone to address their needs. People with

disabilities, particularly those with limited mobility, rely on their caregivers and are unable to evacuate on their own. Family separation or loss puts them at extreme risk, as many are unable to evacuate and are helpless without their carers (HI 03/11/2023). According to testimonies, some people with disabilities have decided to stay behind when their families fled (HRW 01/11/2023). Many people, including older people who lived alone, have died as Israeli air strikes destroyed their residences, leaving them trapped under the rubble (HelpAge 20/10/2023; EMM 22/12/2023). It is worth noting that usually, women are disproportionately responsible for caring for older relatives or family members with disabilities who are unable to move (UN Women 19/01/2024).

People with disabilities are at an increased risk of facing armed violence when left behind in insecure areas. Escaping the offensive and bombardments has been extremely difficult for many people with disabilities, particularly those with motor impairments (Arab News 21/01/2024). A general lack of assistive devices in Gaza, such as wheelchairs, prostheses, crutches, and hearing aids, a result primarily of restrictions linked to Israel's 16-year closure of Gaza, is affecting people's ability to flee. Specifically, people who have visual, hearing, developmental, or intellectual disabilities may not see, hear, know about, or understand what is happening and where to go to access shelters and humanitarian aid (HRW 01/11/2023; KII 27/12/2023). Many people with disabilities have had to leave their assistive devices behind to evacuate or have lost their devices when Israeli air strikes damaged or destroyed their homes (HRW 01/11/2023).

There is a risk of gender-based violence in overcrowded shelters. There is a high protection risk for women with disabilities in the Gaza Strip given the overcrowding in shelters, the lack of gender-segregated toilets, and inadequate street lights (KII 27/12/2023). According to CARE Palestine, women with disabilities in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank are four times more prone to intimate partner violence than other women. These women often have no choice but to rely on their abuser for mobility (OCHA 25/01/2023). Women with disabilities typically face heightened vulnerability to sexual abuse, sexually transmitted infections, and forced healthcare practices, such as abortion, because of limited access to sexual and reproductive health services. In conflict situations, these challenges worsen as a result of barriers such as lack of awareness on reproductive health needs, stigma, and poverty, making it difficult for women and girls with disabilities to exercise their sexual and reproductive health rights (UNFPA 25/05/2019). Girls with disabilities often face sexual violence, trafficking, and enslavement during armed conflict and are disproportionately excluded from education services (OHCHR 02/12/2022).

In the long term, girls with disabilities face the risk of entering an early marriage as a coping mechanism. Girls with disabilities face a range of compounding factors associated with patriarchal social norms and socioeconomic disadvantages. These factors contribute to detrimental practices, such as child marriage. Girls with disabilities face heightened pressure to marry at a young age to guarantee their security and economic stability. In 2022,

the HNO reported that over 50% of Palestinian parents declared that it was more difficult for a girl with a disability to marry and that they would be ready to marry their daughter off before they turned 16 (OCHA 25/01/2023).

Disrupted education for children with disabilities

The 2023–2024 school year has been suspended since October 2023. Over 85% of the population is displaced, and the Israeli attacks are indiscriminately targeting schools and universities, destroying educational infrastructure. An estimated 280 government schools and 65 UNRWA schools had been destroyed or damaged as at 24 January, and remaining education institutions were being used as shelters for displaced Gazans (Al Jazeera 24/01/2024). The lack of a ceasefire prevents the rebuilding and reopening of schools. Re-establishing an education system will likely take years.

The disruption of education and the lack of learning opportunities are expected to worsen developmental and learning issues for children with disabilities. Prior to 7 October, learning disabilities were the most common disability among children aged 2–17 years in the Gaza Strip, with an estimated 21,200 children experiencing learning disabilities in 2023, while hearing disabilities were the least common (PCBS 03/12/2023). Learning disabilities affect brain function and hinder learning, comprehension, and action. Reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with daily tasks, such as household tasks, socialising, and managing money, can last a lifetime (Mencap accessed 08/02/2024). In 2022, 93.5% of 4,152 households surveyed in Gaza reported the perception that children with mental or physical disabilities encountered additional obstacles in obtaining educational services. During the 2021–2022 academic year, 14% of school-aged children with disabilities discontinued their education as a result of various obstacles, such as bullying, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient teaching methods tailored to their needs, lack of accessibility, and limited transportation options (OCHA/REACH 07/09/2022). In 2019, only 3,223 children with disabilities were enrolled in public schools in the Gaza Strip, and according to UNICEF, there were around 180,000 children with disabilities in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. This indicates that many children with disabilities did not have access to education services (HI 26/09/2023). Girls with disabilities are more likely to experience school dropout compared to boys, often because of family concerns regarding their safety and protection from harassment and bullying (HI 26/09/2023; OCHA 25/01/2023; HRW 03/12/2020).

DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES

As at 7 February 2024, there was no comprehensive information on the total number of people with disabilities and their location in the Gaza Strip. Humanitarian responders are unable to target people with disabilities or take into account their specific needs because of reduced capacity for access, assessment, and coordination resulting from operational constraints and information challenges in the Gaza Strip (KII 27/12/2023; KII 08/02/2024).

Given the magnitude of needs and the level of constraints on the humanitarian response, targeted and specific responses are almost impossible. Only a few humanitarian responders are specifically catering to people with disabilities. As at 24 January, UNICEF had provided assistance to 803 children with disabilities (UNICEF 27/01/2024). As at 12 January, Humanity & Inclusion had distributed assistive devices and aid items, including 300 wheelchairs, 50 wheeled toilets, 250 crutches and 150 crutch tips, to approximately 3,500 people (HI 12/01/2024).

In general, people with disabilities face higher challenges in gaining access to what aid is available, and many are not able to move to the areas where humanitarian aid is distributed (HI 12/01/2024). Currently, the entire population in Gaza is vulnerable to both hunger and unsafe conditions. Comprehensive protection is necessary to ensure survival, and people with disabilities should not be left out. They require adapted support to effectively address their specific needs through inclusive responses (IASC 19/11/2019). UNSC Resolution No. 2475 of 2019 urges all armed conflict parties to ensure measures to protect civilians with disabilities; allow and facilitate safe, timely, and unimpeded humanitarian access to all people in need of assistance; and provide timely, sustainable, inclusive, and accessible assistance to civilians with disabilities (UNSC 20/06/2019).

As everyone in Gaza currently has high humanitarian needs, and the families of people with disabilities are unable to provide for them adequately, there is a significant need for support from humanitarian responders (UNHRC 20/11/2023).