

Violence Against Mothers in Gaza: Birth, Postpartum, and Death amidst an ongoing Genocide

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In the Gaza Strip, birth and motherhood – experiences that, in normal circumstances, are meant to be filled with excited anticipation, joy, and love – are turned into a source of dread, vulnerability and unimaginable physical and mental suffering. Israel's actions, including its systematic, widespread attacks on reproductive health facilities,¹ and severe restrictions on food, shelter and medical supplies have resulted in devastating and foreseeable, yet preventable, harm to Palestinian mothers in Gaza.

Mothers in the postpartum period, as well as infants, are among the most severely affected groups in Israel's genocidal campaign against the Palestinian people in Gaza, "facing heightened risk of morbidity and mortality due to their physiological vulnerability and their dependence on medical care and adequate nutrition, which has become increasingly difficult to access throughout 2025" and remains largely inaccessible in 2026.² The suffering and death of newborns, often born prematurely as a result of Israel's creation of conditions of life calculated to destroy Palestinians in Gaza³ and detrimentally impacted by a lack of medical care, starvation, and exposure to cold, has further compounded the trauma experienced by mothers. Together, this targeted violence amounts to: mental and physical torture, grave violations international human rights law; war crimes; crimes against humanity; and acts of genocide.

I. Reproductive Violence During Labour and Birth

Labour and delivery represent a critical juncture where timely medical intervention can mean the difference between life and death. In Gaza, this moment is marked by profound danger. Direct, systematic attacks on hospitals and clinics providing reproductive health services were extensively documented by the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel (the Commission) and the World Health Organization (WHO).⁴ By March 2025, only eight out of 21 hospitals and four

¹ See Al-Haq, *The Systematic Destruction of Gaza's Healthcare System: A Pattern of Genocide* (2025) <https://www.alhaq.org/cached_uploads/download/2025/02/22/destruction-of-gaza-healthcare-system-one-page-view-2-1740217809.pdf>

² Physicians for Human Rights, *Destroying Hope for the Future: Reproductive Violence in Gaza* (January 2026) 25 <https://phr.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Destroying-Hope-for-the-Future_Reproductive-Violence-in-Gaza_PHR-Report_Jan-2026.pdf> (*Destroying Hope for the Future*)

³ UN, 'Gaza: 70% of Newborns are Premature – Press Conference' (Youtube, 23 October 2025) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g16G7Oh8Wuo>>

⁴ Furthermore, Al-Haq's report *The Systematic Destruction of Gaza's Healthcare System: A Pattern of Genocide* reveals, and as confirmed in the recent report by Physicians for Human Rights, hospitals providing maternity services were routinely attacked, blockaded, or raided.

field hospitals were partially operational for maternal health care.⁵ The Commission has since concluded that the pattern of harms to reproductive health and autonomy constitute reproductive violence, used as a tool in Israel's genocide against the Palestinian people in Gaza.⁶

The intentional targeting of medical infrastructure, analysed in Al-Haq's report *The Systematic Destruction of Gaza's Healthcare System: A Pattern of Genocide*, eliminated the possibility of safe delivery for thousands of expectant mothers. Those who reached hospitals frequently required medical interventions, including caesarean sections, due to malnutrition-related complications such as prolonged or obstructed labour and foetal distress. Yet essential supplies were unavailable. Israel's restrictions on medical supplies have been described by clinicians as "extreme, inconsistent, and deliberately opaque".⁷ A wide range of items, including anaesthesia, antibiotics, blood supplies, and sterile surgical equipment, were denied or delayed under "dual-use" classifications or unclear bureaucratic procedures which breach the relevant standards set by international export and sanctions regimes. These contain detailed language clarifying that "dual-use" items that are intended for medical purposes are not subject to import and export control.⁸ As a result, women underwent surgery without adequate pain relief, faced life-threatening haemorrhage without access to blood transfusions, or were denied caesarean sections altogether. These conditions have dramatically increased maternal morbidity and mortality and led to intense physical pain that would have been entirely preventable in any functioning health system. Between May and June 2025 alone, 220 pregnancy-related deaths occurred before delivery. Newborn deaths also increased, with at least 21 babies reported to have died on their first day of life.⁹ This includes premature infants who required incubators, oxygen, or intravenous nutrition, yet died due to the destruction of neonatal intensive care units or a lack of supplies.¹⁰

For mothers, witnessing the death of a newborn – or surviving a near-fatal delivery devoid of all necessary medical provisions and in an unsterile environment, with often no home to return

⁵ WHO, 'oPt Emergency Situation Update: Issue 57' (14 March 2025) <https://www.emro.who.int/images/stories/palestine/Sitrep_57.pdf>

⁶ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel, 'Legal analysis of the conduct of Israel in Gaza pursuant to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide' (16 September 2025) paras 127-130 <<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session60/advance-version/a-hrc-60-crp-3.pdf>> ; see also "More than a Human Can Bear": Israel's Systematic Use of Sexual, Reproductive and Other Forms of Gender-Based Violence since 7 October 2023' (13 March 2025) paras 171 and 173 <<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions regular/session58/a-hrc-58-crp-6.pdf>>

⁷ Physicians for Human Rights and Global Human Rights Clinic, "We Could Have Saved So Many More": Anguish and Death Caused by Israel's Restrictions on Medical Supplies in Gaza" (9 July 2025) <<https://phr.org/our-work/resources/we-could-have-saved-so-many-more-anguish-and-death-caused-by-israels-restrictions-on-medical-supplies-in-gaza/>>

⁸ *Destroying Hope for the Future*, 19

⁹ UN Palestine, 'UNFPA Situation Report on the Crisis in the Occupied Palestinian Territory -May/June 2025' (17 July 2025) <<https://www.un.org/unispal/document/unfpa-situation-report-on-the-crisis-in-the-occupied-palestinian-territory-may-june-2025/>>

¹⁰ *Destroying Hope for the Future*, 3

to as a result of being repeatedly forcibly displaced – leads to profound psychological trauma and lasting mental harm, often compounded by an immense sense of helplessness, guilt, and grief.

II. Reproductive Violence During Postpartum

Postpartum recovery is multidimensional and requires psychological and social support along with rest, proper nutrition, and medical follow-up. In Gaza, these foundational conditions have been systematically dismantled by Israel. Throughout early 2025, Israel continued to severely restrict humanitarian aid, including through a complete blockade between March and May 2025. These restrictions have persisted despite the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) declaring that a man-made famine had taken hold of Gaza in July 2025,¹¹ and after the so-called “ceasefire” in October 2025. Pregnant and breastfeeding women were among the most severely affected, experiencing prolonged hunger, dehydration, and micronutrient deficiencies that directly undermined foetal development and subsequent maternal health.¹² Inadequate food intake is also known to adversely affect the uterine contractions, spotting or light ongoing bleeding, perineal or surgical wound healing, and hormonal shifts that occur postpartum, leading to an increased likelihood of infection which, when combined with a weakened immune system, can create a compounding cycle of poor wound care, poor recovery, and worsening health outcomes.¹³ These outcomes are the intended results of a vicious genocidal campaign carried out in pursuit of Israel’s settler-colonial goal of Palestinian erasure.

In Gaza pregnant women and mothers endure extreme psychological stress. Continuous bombardment, forced displacement, loss of family members, birthing difficulties, inability to access medical care, and subsequent challenges faced by newborns and infants – alongside the risk of imminent death at any given point – plunges postpartum mothers into a state of constant, and immense fear. This is a known risk factor for miscarriage and preterm birth, particularly when compounded by malnutrition and lack of medical care, only further exacerbating Israel’s violence against mothers.

III. Violence against Mothers in the form of Harm to Newborns

Under ordinary circumstances, medically indicated baby formula would be provided to malnourished or premature infants and to supplement or replace breastfeeding. However,

¹¹ Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), ‘IPC ALERT: Worst-Case Scenario of Famine Unfolding in the Gaza Strip’, (29 July 2025) <<https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-website/countries-in-focus-archive/issue-133/en/>>

¹² For an extensive analysis on the impact of Israel’s siege on pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, see *Destroying Hope for the Future*

¹³ *Destroying Hope for the Future*, 40-41

severe restrictions on the entry of critical food and medical supplies, in particular baby formula,¹⁴ prevented clinicians from meeting infants' nutritional needs. Even when formula was available, it was often rationed or inaccessible due to the repeated mass forced displacement of the population, the uprooting of humanitarian operations, and incessant aerial bombardment obstructing freedom of movement.

Mothers described profound powerlessness: watching their babies lose weight, cry from hunger, or become lethargic and dehydrated, unable to obtain formula or produce milk due to the extreme mental and physical stress experienced by mothers throughout their pregnancy.¹⁵ Israel's infliction of a forced inability to nourish one's child represents a particularly cruel form of violence against mothers, attacking their ability to bond with their child at the most crucial stage. Furthermore, Israel's targeting of neonatal intensive care units, destruction of essential equipment such as incubators,¹⁶ and electricity blackouts has resulted in premature infants – who require warmth, sterile environments, and specialized feeding – dying from hypothermia, infection, dehydration, and malnutrition.

Al-Haq's documented mothers suffering from the death of their newborn child due to Israel's creation of conditions of life calculated to destroy Palestinians in Gaza.¹⁷ M.M.H.AA lost her newborn baby boy, Ali, to the cold while forcibly displaced in Khan Younis in December 2024.¹⁸ After giving birth prematurely, Ali (weighing just 1.7kg) needed to be kept in an incubator, but – after a difficult labour during which M.M.H.AA underwent a caesarean section without full anaesthesia – was discharged the next day and forced to return to her tent despite the harsh winter weather. Without medical care, proper shelter, and warmth, Ali died:

After a week [of his birth], I woke up at night and held my baby to feed him. He opened his mouth, he wanted to breastfeed, but then he closed it. I put him down, and blood started to pour down from his nose and mouth. I screamed for my husband, who took him to the hospital. The doctors told us that he died of hypothermia.¹⁹

S.I.A.S.AR, also forcibly displaced to Khan Younis, described to Al-Haq the night she discovered her one-month-old son had died from hypothermia:

So he woke up at 1:00 am, I fed him, and then we went to sleep. I always put him to sleep in my arms, against my body to keep him warm. But my arm started to hurt, so I laid him down beside me and went to sleep. When I woke up, I noticed he hadn't stirred to feed in a while. I started nudging him, trying to get him to move – nudging his body – but there was no movement at all. Nothing. Thank God... (crying) [...] I swear by

¹⁴ European Parliament, 'Parliamentary Question | Access to Baby Formula in Gaza' (7 July 2025) <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/O-10-2025-000023_EN.html>

¹⁵ *Destroying Hope for the Future*, 19

¹⁶ *Destroying Hope for the Future*, 5, 15-16

¹⁷ See further Al-Haq, 'Field Focus: Newborns Freeze to Death in Gaza' (8 March 2025) <<https://www.alhaq.org/monitoring-documentation/26030.html>>

¹⁸ Al-Haq Affidavit GZ589

¹⁹ Al-Haq Affidavit GZ589

God – he was frozen solid, like a block of ice. I opened his blanket to try to move him – his fingernails were blue, his toes and hands too, all blue. I knew. [...] I just held him to my chest to warm him up. Then my husband said, “I’ll take him to the hospital.” He took him. Later, he came back and brought me some clothes – but he didn’t bring the baby.²⁰

In the same month, December 2024, R.A.R.AQ lost her 22-day old baby girl, Aisha, due to the extreme cold.²¹ As R.A.R.AQ recounted to Al-Haq:

When I left the hospital and went back to the tent, the temperature was very low, it was very cold. Although my baby was healthy, she caught a cold as a result. It’s a tent after all. I took her back to the hospital, and they told me that nothing was wrong with her. So, I went back to the tent. Nothing was wrong with her; the baby was normal. The day she passed away, she breastfed. She was sleeping in my arms the entire night. I was so happy as it was the first day she breastfed properly. We slept together, while she was in my arms, at dawn. That Friday night was very cold. She passed away here in the tent. When I woke up, I found her frozen, like a piece of wood. [Her father] took her to the hospital right away. The doctors told us that she passed away from the cold [hypothermia], freezing.

After this devastating loss, R.A.R.AQ was forced to return to the tent, where she and her family had to continue to endure the brutal cold. She explained that no matter what she provided for her children, it would never be enough as long as they do not have an adequate shelter:

[W]here else would we go? Our home was burned, everything was burned. The tent does not prevent the cold. We want a place to shelter us from the cold and keep us warm. What can this tent made of nylon, paper, cloth do for us? It does not shield us from the wind, rain, cold or water. In the rain, in the middle of the night, we have to leave [the tent], so my child can use the bathroom in the cold. The bathroom is far away from us, and the dogs are around us. I get scared. My whole pregnancy I was scared of the dogs.

Commenting on the death of her daughter, R.A.R.AQ expressed: “It’s a very difficult feeling. I waited for her; she was my only daughter. I have four boys and she was the only girl. I was waiting for her. I had her, and now she is gone.”

N.D.I.AF also gave birth to a baby girl, Sila, in December 2024, yet due to exhaustion and malnourishment was unable to produce any milk at the beginning – nor did she have any nappies or clothes after repeated rounds of forced displacement.²² Three weeks later, Sila died from the cold:

The night my daughter passed away—it was freezing. The night we went through was like ice. The sea is close to us, and we had no mattresses or blankets. We were sleeping

²⁰ Al-Haq Affidavit GZ602

²¹ Al-Haq Affidavit GZ587

²² Al-Haq Affidavit GZ600

on the sand. After I gave birth, some people took pity on us and gave me a few blankets to lay down so the tent could stay warm. [...] At around 5:00 am, I told my husband, "I feel like Sila didn't nurse well tonight." He got up and lit a fire so I could prepare a bottle for her. Then he went to wake her to feed her—he lifted the blanket from her face and found her completely blue—blue, stiff—and her nose and mouth were bleeding, bleeding all over. Her little hands were frozen stiff. I was in shock—she had been fine, breastfeeding all night, nothing was wrong with her. And then suddenly she was like that. [...]

After examining her, the doctor said: "The baby has been dead for an hour and a half from the cold—her heart stopped because of the freezing temperature." I was completely shocked. She had been perfectly fine when I gave birth—born naturally—and then suddenly I lost her. We were going through incredibly hard times, and when God finally blessed me with her, I was so happy. Her father was so happy too. Losing my daughter—it's something unbearably painful.

Like pregnancy-related deaths, these fatalities were predictable and avoidable. Moreover, these testimonies represent just a small fraction of these tragic, preventable incidents. As Dr. F.A.N., a paediatrician working at Nasser Medical Complex, explained to Al-Haq after the death of Sham, a two-month-old baby girl, due to severe hypothermia:

This is not the first recorded death due to hypothermia, but we do not have a clear or accurate number of cases that have died as a result of hypothermia in recent days during the winter season. However, during shifts or work in the paediatric department, *there is not a single day or shift in the children's reception unit that does not see cases of hypothermia*. Either they die or we can save them and admit them to intensive care for warming [...] The conditions in the destroyed houses or tents are not suitable for maintaining the temperature of children of this age, especially children under one year old or under eight months old, who are more vulnerable to hypothermia.²³

For mothers, the death of a newborn only compounds the trauma of pregnancy and birth amidst siege and a genocidal assault. Mothers have been forced to process the immense pain and grief without proper support, or even the ability to bury children with dignity. Such experiences undoubtedly leave lasting psychological scars, to accompany the long-term harm inflicted by Israel because of malnutrition, untreated infections, birthing (including surgical) complications, and a decimation of health infrastructure – all of which threaten women's future fertility.

²³ Al-Haq Affidavit GZ763 (emphasis added)

Legal Analysis

Violence against Palestinian mothers in Gaza is the intended outcome of acts carried out in pursuit of Israel's Zionist, settler-colonial goal of Palestinian erasure. Despite the International Court of Justice expressly ordering Israel to allow the unimpeded entry of aid,²⁴ as well as affirming its obligation to ensure that the population of the Occupied Palestinian Territory has the essential supplies of daily life, including food, water, clothing, bedding, shelter, fuel, medical supplies and services, and to agree and facilitate relief schemes so long as that population is inadequately supplied,²⁵ Israel continues to restrict essential humanitarian assistance as it routinely violates the so-called "ceasefire" and targets Palestinians across the Gaza Strip.

While these acts have targeted men, women and children alike, there is a clear gendered and disproportionate impact on pregnant, lactating and postpartum mothers due to their physiological vulnerability and dependence on medical care. The suffering of newborns has also reverberated back onto mothers, deepening grief, powerlessness, and long-term psychological harm, which is further compounded by them experiencing life-threatening complications that would have been entirely preventable, and at least treatable, but have led to ongoing physical and mental injury and lasting harm to fertility.²⁶

Taken together, Israel's conduct reveals a methodical, widespread and systematic assault on motherhood and reproductive life generally. Acute malnutrition, denial of medical care, destruction of hospitals and reproductive health care facilities, and obstruction of humanitarian aid have caused immense, foreseeable harm including, *inter alia*, miscarriages, maternal deaths, long-term (yet avoidable) health complications, premature births, infant starvation, newborn deaths due to the cold, and profound psychological trauma. However, considering the forced collapse of Gaza's health information system after 7 October 2023, making systematic data collection nearly impossible, reported figures likely represent significant undercounts and fail to reflect the extent of harm suffered by Palestinian mothers in the Gaza Strip. Based on the information available, Israel's violence against mothers constitutes a wide array of international crimes:

²⁴ Each of the three Orders on Provisional Measures demanded that Israel enable the provision of urgently needed humanitarian assistance, *see* ICJ, *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel)* <<https://www.icj-cij.org/case/192>>. For an analysis of each of these Orders and Israel's pursuant obligations, *see* Al-Haq, *Beyond the Orders: An Analysis of the ICJ's Decisions, Opinions, and Declarations in South Africa v. Israel - Gaza's Urgent Need for Implementation* (29 December 2025) <https://www.alhaq.org/cached_uploads/download/2025/12/29/beyond-the-orders-1-1767031760.pdf>

²⁵ ICJ, *Obligations of Israel in relation to the Presence and Activities of the United Nations, Other International Organizations and Third States in and in relation to the Occupied Palestinian Territory*, Advisory Opinion (22 October 2025) <<https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/196/196-20251022-adv-01-00-en.pdf>>

²⁶ *See Destroying Hope for the Future*

- The deliberate infliction of starvation and creation of a manmade famine amount to starvation as a method of warfare²⁷ and the genocidal acts of creation of conditions of life calculated to destroy,²⁸ killing,²⁹ and causing serious bodily and mental harm;³⁰
- The severe physical and mental injury to mothers as a result of its wholesale destruction of Gaza's health infrastructure, in particular maternal health facilities, and blockade of medical supplies, hygiene products, shelter provisions, etc. amounts to the war crimes of torture and inhumane treatment³¹ and wilfully causing great suffering.³² It equally constitutes the crimes against humanity of torture³³ and potentially other inhumane acts,³⁴ in light of Israel's deliberate infliction of foreseeable harm due to the denial of medical care. Due to the distinct and disproportionate harm inflicted on pregnant, birthing and postpartum women – revealed through any gender-competent, intersectional analysis – also constitutes the crimes against humanity of persecution on the basis of gender; and the inhumane acts of apartheid based on discriminatory treatment of Palestinian women based on race, which is carried out with the intention of maintaining a regime of racial domination of Israeli Jews over the Palestinian people.³⁵ Lastly, due to Israel's intent to destroy Palestinians in Gaza, such harm also constitutes the genocidal act of causing serious bodily or mental harm³⁶ and the imposition of measures intended to prevent births due to reproductive violence not only destroying individual lives but undermining the future of an entire population by impacting future health (of mothers and babies) and fertility;³⁷
- Where mothers have lost their life due to the acts outlined above, it constitutes the war crime of wilful killing,³⁸ the crime against humanity of extermination,³⁹ persecution,⁴⁰ and apartheid,⁴¹ and the genocidal act of killing.⁴²

²⁷ Rome Statute, Art. 8(2)(b)(xxv)

²⁸ Rome Statute, Art. 5(c); Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, Art. II (c)

²⁹ Rome Statute, Art. 5(a); Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, Art. II (a)

³⁰ Rome Statute, Art. 5(b); Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, Art. II (b)

³¹ Rome Statute, Art. 8(2)(a)(ii)

³² Rome Statute, Art. 8(2)(a)(iii)

³³ Rome Statute, Art. 7(1)(f)

³⁴ Rome Statute, Art. 7(1)(k)

³⁵ Rome Statute, Art. 7(1)(h); UN OHCHR, Israel's 55-year occupation of Palestinian Territory is apartheid – UN human rights expert (25 March 2022), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/03/israels-55-year-occupation-palestinian-territory-apartheid-un-human-rights>

³⁶ Rome Statute, Art. 5(b); Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, Art. II (b)

³⁷ Rome Statute, Art. 5(d); Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, Art. II (d)

³⁸ Rome Statute, Art. 8(2)(a)(i)

³⁹ Rome Statute, Art. 7(1)(b)

⁴⁰ Rome Statute, Art. 7(1)(h)

⁴¹ Rome Statute, Art 7(1)(j)

⁴² Rome Statute, Art. 5(a); Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, Art. II (a)