



Shelter Cluster Palestine
ShelterCluster.org
Coordinating Humanitarian Shelter



Devastating Lack of Shelter Exacerbates Risk of Harm to Palestinians in Gaza

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1. Executive Summary

The escalation of violence in October 2023, following attacks by Palestinian armed groups and Israel's subsequent offensive on Gaza, caused extensive destruction and displacement. According to the Ministry of Public Works and Housing (MoPWH) in Gaza, 92 per cent of homes have been damaged or destroyed. Nearly the entire 2.2 million population has been displaced, and vital infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, and community centres, has been razed.

The Shelter Cluster in Palestine reports that [nearly one million](#) displaced Palestinians are living in substandard tents or makeshift shelters, with families resorting to [sewing old rice sacks](#) together for basic cover. Many more are living in crowded shelters in unsafe conditions. At present, [18 of Gaza's 36 hospitals](#) are out of service, and [88 per cent of schools](#) require significant rehabilitation or rebuilding.

Despite warnings from the Shelter Cluster in September about the urgent need for shelter assistance for [one million](#) Palestinians in central and southern Gaza, aid flow remained severely restricted. By the time the ceasefire came into effect on 19 January 2025, shelter materials had barely entered Gaza. As a result, aid agencies were only able to support [23 per cent](#) of those in urgent need, while the overall demand for shelter assistance has continued to rise.

The acute shelter crisis compounds the challenges Palestinians face in meeting basic needs, including food security, following weeks of sustained violence, destruction and looting. Women and children are disproportionately affected, with the Protection Cluster documenting rising incidents of violence, deprivation, lack of privacy, and exploitation in the absence of secure shelter.

The [Gaza Protection Monitoring System](#) (PMS) revealed that 70 per cent of respondents expressed severe concerns about shelter safety. Risks of physical violence and exposure to the elements are heightened for those in substandard housing. The lack of adequate shelter has also led to increased risks of gender-based violence (GBV), sexual abuse, exploitation, and child mortality due to hypothermia. Many Palestinians are forced to seek refuge in damaged buildings, exposing them to the dangers of explosive remnants of war (ERW).

To mitigate further harm to the [estimated 1.9 million](#) displaced Palestinians and reduce risks to the most vulnerable, it is imperative that Israel permits the immediate, unrestricted delivery of shelter materials to Gaza at scale.

2. No Safety Without Adequate Shelter

As of 1 December 2024, [69 per cent](#) of all structures in Gaza have been damaged, according to an analysis of high-resolution satellite imagery by the United Nations Satellite Centre (UNOSAT). The Ministry of Public Works and Housing (MoPWH) estimates that 160,000 homes have been destroyed, with a further 276,000 damaged. However, physical verification of these findings has been severely limited due to restricted access caused by ongoing security risks, including explosive remnants of war (ERW) and unexploded ordnance (UXO).

The Shelter Cluster reports that [1.875 million](#) people in Gaza urgently require emergency shelter and essential household items. The destruction has rendered most homes, schools, community centres, health facilities, and markets unusable, devastating Gaza's social fabric and dismantling vital support networks. With winter well underway, [945,000 displaced Palestinians](#) remain in immediate need of assistance to protect themselves from harsh weather conditions, including strong winds, heavy rain, and cold temperatures. Adequate shelter is [more than physical protection](#)—it provides safety, privacy, comfort, and emotional security.

Unfortunately, the limited number of trucks allowed to enter Gaza in the weeks before the ceasefire hindered the delivery of necessary winterisation assistance. This shortfall, combined with malnutrition and inadequate healthcare, has likely contributed to increased child mortality due to conditions such as hypothermia.

The lack of safe and adequate shelter—including proper walls, partitioning, or the ability to lock doors in displacement camps—further exposes displaced individuals to heightened risks of harassment, assault, and exploitation. Vulnerable groups—including women (especially female-headed households), children, older people, and persons with disabilities—are disproportionately affected.

Repeated displacements and severe overcrowding continue to exacerbate these challenges. Before the ceasefire, displacement shelters provided just [1.5 square metres](#) of space per person on average. More than 1.2 million Palestinians were confined to a narrow area from Deir al-Balah to the southwest of Khan Younis, unilaterally designated by Israel as a “humanitarian zone.” According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), population density in this zone reached [32,000 people per square kilometre](#) in August 2024, compared to 1,200 people per square kilometre across Gaza prior to October 2023. While some movement has occurred post-ceasefire, updated assessments are needed to understand the current distribution of displaced populations.

3. Children Exposed to Harm

Since October 2023, nearly [950,000 children](#) have been displaced. Military strikes have directly hit [70 per cent](#) of schools, while another 17 per cent have suffered damage from nearby attacks. This constant exposure to extreme violence, combined with overcrowded living conditions, has caused widespread psychological distress among children in Gaza. According to UNICEF, as many as [one million children](#) now require urgent mental health and psychosocial support.

Destruction of Infrastructure and Lack of Safe Spaces

The large-scale destruction of infrastructure and repeated forced displacements have severely impacted child protection services. Many child protection agencies, especially in northern Gaza and Rafah, have lost their premises due to airstrikes. Displaced child protection workers, now without shelter themselves, face immense challenges in providing support.

Child protection agencies have been unable to bring essential materials, including large tents for child-friendly spaces, into Gaza since March 2024 due to severe import restrictions. Some of the existing tents, which could have been used for these spaces, have been repurposed by health partners to treat injured patients after hospitals were forced to cease operations due to Israeli attacks and relocation directives. As a result, child protection actors have had to rely on makeshift shelters constructed from locally sourced plastic materials. These makeshift structures are inadequate, as they quickly overheat in Gaza's intense heat or fail to provide protection from the cold, cutting sessions with children or caregivers short. The limited size of these tents also forces child protection actors to turn away children seeking to attend psychosocial support activities.

During an assessment in summer 2024 in Deir al-Balah, an adolescent girl described the lack of safe spaces for girls, saying, “There is no safe space for girls here, so our families ask us to stay inside our tents all day. I’m tired and hope to have a space to spend time with the girls.”

Unaccompanied and Separated Children at Extreme Risk

UNICEF estimates that at least [17,000 unaccompanied and separated children](#) (UASC) are in Gaza, including many who have been orphaned during the hostilities. The Ministry of Social Development reports that approximately [65,000 children](#) are being cared for by families other than their own. These figures are likely conservative, and the actual numbers could be [significantly higher](#).

UASC are among the most vulnerable and are a key priority for child protection actors. However, the destruction of shelters has left aid agencies unable to provide safe spaces or care arrangements. For example, after Israel’s offensive on Rafah in May 2024, the only organisation equipped to care for UASC was forced to abandon its premises. After the ceasefire, when they were allowed to return to Rafah, they found only rubble remaining.

Alarmingly, the lack of adequate shelter is preventing children from being reunified with their families and has forced some children to live on their own, even when relatives are willing to provide care. A child protection worker in Gaza reported that two separated children in Al-Mawasi, which Israel unilaterally designated as a “humanitarian zone” during the hostilities, are living alone in a temporary, inadequate and unsupervised shelter because their aunt cannot accommodate them in her small, overcrowded makeshift living space.

4. Women and Girls at Risk of Gender-Based Violence

The lack of adequate shelter and materials has forced multiple families to cohabit in single tents, creating unsafe and undignified living conditions for women and girls. Without separate and secure spaces, they face heightened risks of violence, including gender-based violence (GBV). Makeshift shelters are frequently close together, constructed with semi-transparent materials, and lack doors that can be locked, leaving women without private spaces to change their clothes or feel secure.

In Gaza City alone, an estimated [90,000 women](#) were displaced to overcrowded shelters and damaged buildings prior to May 2024, as reported by the Women’s Affairs Centre (WAC) Gaza and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). These women faced limited access to overstretched support services, further compounding their vulnerability.

The absence of secure and private spaces also affects personal hygiene, including menstrual hygiene, and negatively impacts mental and physical health risks, increasing the likelihood of long-term adverse outcomes. Critically, inadequate shelter has heightened GBV risks and undermined aid agencies’ ability to provide support to survivors. According to GBV response partners, incidents of intimate partner and family violence have increased due to these conditions. Furthermore, a risk assessment conducted by the GBV Area of Responsibility (AoR)—a coordination forum for organisations addressing gender-based violence in humanitarian settings—in August 2024 found that the lack of dedicated safe spaces for children has resulted in some child survivors being referred to [adult service points](#), increasing their risk of harm.

An [assessment](#) by WAC Gaza and UNDP in Rafah, conducted prior to May 2024, reported that 94 per cent of women lack privacy and do not feel safe in their shelters. One respondent noted, “There are no safe gathering places for women and girls to seek support and solidarity.”

Extreme violence, displacement, overcrowding, loss of livelihoods, and the inability to meet basic needs have caused significant stress among the male population, contributing to increased [verbal and physical violence](#)

against women and girls, particularly within family units. Over half of GBV cases reported to the AoR have involved survivors sharing shelter with their perpetrators.

GBV [minimum standards](#) in humanitarian action require access to safe shelters for survivors or those at risk, ensuring safety, privacy, and recovery. However, inadequate shelter conditions have prevented the establishment of safe spaces for women and girls. A risk assessment conducted by AoR partners in August 2024 found that over half of women believe that establishing refuges for survivors would reduce ongoing or further abuse.

Without proper shelter materials to establish safe spaces, GBV response efforts remain severely constrained. It is unsafe and inconsistent with minimum standards to provide GBV services in spaces that lack safety, privacy, and confidentiality. The provision of appropriate tents and shelter materials is urgently needed to enable safe service delivery, protection, and recovery for survivors and those at risk.

5. Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Prevalent

The critical shortage of shelter materials in Gaza has left vulnerable Palestinians exposed to heightened risks of sexual exploitation and abuse. With essential supplies such as tents and tarpaulins in critically short supply, competition for these resources has intensified. This scarcity has exacerbated existing power imbalances, leaving the most vulnerable Palestinians, such as female-headed households, unaccompanied minors, and persons with disabilities, at greater risk of exploitation as they struggle to access the shelter they need to survive.

Assessments conducted in Rafah and Khan Younis in April 2024 by the PSEA Network (IASC, 2024) revealed severe congestion in shelters, with some sites housing up to 40,000 people and rooms accommodating as many as six families. This overcrowding, coupled with inadequate lighting, limited supervision, and inconsistent security presence, has increased the risk of abuse, harassment, and exploitation. Reports of abusive behaviour—including violence, threats, and harassment by security personnel and unidentified humanitarian workers in shelters and informal camps—highlight the urgent need for stronger protection measures. Given the continued deterioration of conditions, these risks have likely intensified since the assessment.

The crisis has created conditions in which vulnerabilities can be exploited, including by some [humanitarian workers and contractors](#). Strengthening accountability measures and ensuring mandatory Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) training are crucial to preventing and addressing these risks.

The risks are further compounded by the breakdown of social support networks caused by repeated rounds of forcible displacement. Families are forced to live in overcrowded and unsafe conditions, often far from familiar social safety structures. Women and girls are particularly at risk in these environments, with female-headed households and unaccompanied children among the most vulnerable groups.

6. Legal Framework

Under international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL), Israel, as the occupying power, is obligated to uphold the rights of individuals under its actual authority for as long as it maintains its presence in occupied territory—regardless of the unlawfulness of that presence. This obligation includes respecting, protecting, facilitating, and providing adequate housing and shelter.

In occupied territory, the destruction or rendering of homes uninhabitable—if wanton and extensive—constitutes a grave breach of the prohibition on the destruction of real property and a serious violation of the right to housing. Such actions deprive individuals of the security, peace, and dignity that housing is meant to provide. The only exception under IHL applies when destruction is rendered absolutely necessary by military operations—a justification that does not apply to Israel's widespread administrative or punitive demolitions.

The law of armed conflict prohibits all parties, including occupying powers, from attacking homes or shelters, which are *prima facie* civilian objects, unless they have become legitimate military objectives. Even in such cases, the destruction's impact on civilians must be carefully assessed in line with the principles of military necessity and proportionality.

Additionally, IHL requires parties to a conflict to agree to and facilitate the rapid and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian relief to civilians in need. As the occupying power, Israel has a specific responsibility to maintain public life, essential services, and human development. If it cannot meet these obligations directly, it must facilitate relief efforts by impartial humanitarian organisations and third states on behalf of the Palestinian people and their government.

Forcible transfer of protected persons within occupied territory, or their deportation outside it, is prohibited. However, in exceptional cases where the security of the population or imperative military reasons so demand, an occupying power may order a temporary evacuation of civilians. All persons thus evacuated shall be transferred back to their homes as soon as hostilities in the area in question have ceased. In the case of all displacement, the occupying power must ensure, to the greatest extent possible, the safety, dignity, and access to basic necessities of those affected, including adequate accommodation. These obligations are particularly relevant to the nearly two million forcibly displaced Palestinians in Gaza, where the Israeli military's destruction of homes and other civilian infrastructure and other steps that suggest permanent displacement raise concerns of the commission of forcible transfer as a grave breach.

7. Coordinating Humanitarian Response and Development: Restoring Gaza's Social Fabric

Delivering aid in Gaza remains a complex challenge. While the ceasefire presents an opportunity to stabilise the situation, movement restrictions and logistical hurdles continue to delay urgent humanitarian assistance. At the same time, development agencies are eager to initiate longer-term recovery and reconstruction projects. Ensuring that both immediate aid and recovery plans progress in tandem is critical, as sidelining urgent needs could exacerbate vulnerabilities for those most affected by the hostilities.

To ensure that all interventions genuinely support those in need, it is essential to align humanitarian and development efforts. A coordinated approach—through a shared platform or mechanism—can enable stakeholders to agree on priorities, sequence activities, and avoid duplicating or conflicting efforts. This is particularly vital in Gaza, where overcrowded conditions and significant resource constraints necessitate precise, well-coordinated action to ensure that no vulnerable community is overlooked.

Shelter is one of the most pressing concerns. Temporary housing often becomes semi-permanent due to delays in reconstruction, affecting both community dynamics and future urban planning. Coordination across the Shelter Cluster, the Site Management Working Group, explosive ordnance clearance teams, the HLP Technical Working Group, and development actors is essential. Emergency shelter and settlement assistance not only address immediate needs but can also lay the groundwork for long-term urban development and social protection. Without such collaboration, well-intentioned interventions may introduce legal or safety risks.

Ultimately, genuine recovery in Gaza requires restoring the social fabric, rebuilding trust, and supporting communities as they heal, alongside rebuilding infrastructure. By addressing immediate humanitarian needs while making meaningful long-term investments, stakeholders can help Gaza's population rebuild not only their homes but also their lives—step by step.

8. Shelter Materials Urgently Needed at Scale

The Protection and Shelter Clusters in Palestine are prepared to expand essential shelter and protection services across Gaza, including specialised support for child protection and GBV. However, they require immediate access to critical shelter materials to operate effectively.

The Protection and Shelter Clusters urge donor states to ensure that Israel takes the following actions:

1. **Permit the unhindered entry of essential shelter materials into Gaza**

Israel must allow the unrestricted entry of materials necessary for adequate shelter solutions at scale. These materials include 2.4m timber, tools and fixings, winter clothing, bedding sets, and humanitarian-standard tents. Current restrictions, particularly on standard pallet dimensions, significantly hinder the delivery of framing kits. Despite the increased logistical capacity following the ceasefire, the ongoing restrictions on palletisation remain a critical barrier to timely and effective shelter assistance.

2. **Allow the entry of large-size tents for protection services**

Aid agencies urgently require large tents for child protection and GBV response services. These tents must meet global minimum humanitarian standards to ensure the safety and dignity of women and children in Gaza. Without them, agencies cannot adequately mitigate risks of harm.

3. **Facilitate the entry of sealing-off kits for winterisation**

At least 25,000 sealing-off kits (equivalent to 25 truckloads per week) are required in southern Gaza for six weeks to weatherproof shelters. Since the initial request in September, fewer than half of the required kits have been delivered, and winter conditions are now compounding vulnerabilities.

4. **Ensure open crossings and streamlined clearance processes**

All land crossings into Gaza must remain open to facilitate humanitarian aid. Lengthy clearance processes, arbitrary entry denials, and lack of written justifications for refusals disrupt relief efforts. Israel should allow established humanitarian coordination bodies to prioritise shipments.

5. **Support the return of forcibly displaced persons to northern Gaza and guarantee HLP rights**

Forcibly displaced persons from northern Gaza must be allowed to return safely, with their housing, land, and property (HLP) rights fully respected and upheld. Protecting these rights is essential to ensuring sustainable shelter solutions, effective site management, and the provision of WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) services. These measures are critical to addressing overcrowding and mitigating risks of GBV and child protection concerns.

The Protection and Shelter Clusters urge donor states to ensure that Israel and Palestinian authorities take the following actions:

1. **Enable the safe movement of shelter materials within Gaza**

Humanitarian actors must be permitted to securely transport shelter materials within Gaza, with assurances for driver safety and clearances along designated routes from Israel, the Occupying Power, as well as local authorities.

2. **Ensure the protection of civilians**

All feasible precautions must be taken to minimise harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure. This includes refraining from actions that compromise the safe delivery of humanitarian aid or escalate risks to vulnerable populations.

3. **Respect international humanitarian law (IHL)**

All parties must abide by their IHL obligations to protect civilians and humanitarian workers. Any actions that exacerbate the humanitarian crisis or disrupt the implementation of essential aid programmes must be prevented.

The Protection and Shelter Clusters urge donor states to take the following actions:

1. **Leverage diplomatic and financial influence**

Diplomatic and financial tools should be utilised to ensure that Israel and other relevant parties fulfil their obligations under IHL and allow the sustained and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian assistance.

2. **Provide financial support**

Donors are called to scale up financial contributions to address critical gaps in shelter materials, protection services, and other humanitarian needs in Gaza, ensuring the timely implementation of aid programmes.