

“Being Old, Being a Woman in Gaza – What Does Life Look Like in Gaza Today?”

Amira Hass, Haaretz, 6.7.2025

Introduction

Welcome to “Eyes on Gaza”, our daily gathering for protest and learning. Today we’re joined by Amira Hass – journalist, columnist, and activist who has long reported on Palestinian society for Haaretz. From 1993 to 1997 she lived in Gaza and continued to visit regularly for as long as that was possible. To this day, she maintains many close connections and friendships in Gaza. The title of her talk is “Being a Woman, Being Old in Gaza – What Does Life Look Like in Gaza Today?” Thank you, Amira, for joining us.

Lecture

Thank you Ayelet and thank you all for being here. Just one correction—I don’t cover the Palestinian Authority. I report on the Israeli occupation, through the lives of Palestinians living under it. I don’t have slides or satellite imagery. What I ask of you is to use your imagination—or draw from your own knowledge and experience as daughters, granddaughters, sons, and grandsons—while I try to convey the reality as I hear it from my friends in Gaza.

About two months ago, the 85-year-old mother of one of my friends in Gaza passed away. Her death, at that age, was not a tragedy. I knew her and loved her. Her hugs and caresses felt like a mother’s embrace. In recent years, she had difficulty walking and had lost her eyesight, but I always sensed that she still looked at the world with curiosity and a knowing smile—the smile of someone who had been expelled from her village at age eight and built a life in spite of it. She couldn’t read or write, but she worked all her life so that her children—and later, her grandchildren—would be educated. She never complained about the many physical pains she suffered.

The war found her when she was 84 or 85. Like everyone else since the start of the war, her family was forced to flee multiple times—from a relatively open area to their old family home in the Shati refugee camp, then under bombardment to a school in the central Gaza Strip, then to a home in Rafah, and finally to a tent in al-Mawasi. Each time, the priority was to find a way to move her without causing pain—how to carry her, where to place her—because she couldn’t walk, not even 500 meters. Her wheelchair couldn’t make it over what used to be roads—now rubble and sand from repeated airstrikes. So she had to be physically carried, unless a car or cart could reach directly to where they were staying. Each new shelter required a makeshift bed that she could lie on, and in each location, they discovered that medications for her chronic illnesses were either unavailable or insufficient. Multiply her situation by tens of thousands.

This friend of mine confided in me in great details about the two issues that worried him most. First, at the school where they sought refuge, 800 people were waiting in line to use a single toilet. He shared graphic descriptions that I won’t repeat here. He had to find ways to spare his mother this ordeal. At night, getting out of bed was hard for her, so they needed to find adult diapers. These quickly ran out or became prohibitively expensive—more so than baby diapers. He had to ensure she drank enough water, but I know from others that many elderly people drank less. Clean water was scarce, and many elders held in their bodily needs for days to avoid the unbearable ordeal of waiting in line or walking at night to a public latrine far from the tent. They died from a combination of dehydration and internal poisoning.

Before the war, 3 percent of Gaza’s population—about 70,000 people—were over 65. Let’s say only half a percent—12,000—were especially vulnerable. Of those, I personally know of four women and one man, parents of friends, who died during the war. Not from bombings, but from causes like those I’ve just described: one from a combination of cancer and heartbreak, another from high blood pressure and heartbreak, another after a stroke. All were over 85. Four of them had been displaced in 1948. The tragedy is not their death per se—but the cruelty they were subjected to in their final year and a half. I’ll never forget the face of one of them, who died just a month ago. I saw

her in a video I received. Her neighbourhood in Jabalia refugee camp had been bombed, and two close neighbours carried her—almost holding her in midair—trying to escape through the dust and ash. She was a strong woman, but the terror in her face was unmistakable.

That friend—the one who had managed to leave Gaza with his wife and children a few months earlier—told me what I feared he would say after his mother's death. Despite the pain and grief, he felt relieved. This time, he didn't talk about water or toilets. He said one of his greatest fears was that when the army would issue another evacuation order—using the sanitized language of "relocation," "transfer," or "movement"—she would be forgotten in the chaos. That there would be no way to carry her. That she would be left alone to die under the bombing, unable to move or care for herself—even if she wasn't directly hit.

The compounded hardship of women is spoken about even less, especially in a patriarchal and conservative society. Let me begin with the obvious. In these conditions, women are working seven times harder: cleaning, cooking, shopping—what they normally do, only now everything takes more time and energy, and when strength runs out, it takes relentless improvisation. One friend told me she was cooking fava beans. Not from a can—somehow, they had to find water to soak the beans, then cook them. With no gas, they used makeshift stoves or open fires. Then they needed to find wood, and so on. I don't think the war has made men take on more domestic tasks. Though, to be fair, fetching clean water or collecting food from dangerous aid distribution centers has become a deadly full-time job—mostly done by men and boys.

But there are basic things no one talks about. All women in Gaza are expected—and want—to cover their bodies and heads in public. At home, they might wear shorts and uncover their hair. But in Gaza today, there's no private space—from tents that offer no privacy to half-destroyed apartments crammed with twenty members of the extended family. So, women never remove their layers of clothing. Now imagine the sweltering Gaza heat, the humidity, the lack of water, and almost no access to bathing. It's no wonder that skin diseases have become rampant—of the kind it's hard even to imagine. Everything I said about toilets and hygiene for the elderly applies equally to women. They hold in their needs more than men. Sanitary pads were among the first items to run out. Imagine their suffering during menstruation—when they couldn't bathe, either because there was no shower in the tent, or no water, or both.

We're talking about streets where sewage runs openly, garbage piles up, and swarms of insects cloud the air. Men and boys can wade half-naked into the sea. Women and girls cannot. I've heard of infections spreading among women at much higher rates than usual. And still, women continue to get pregnant and give birth in this hell. Some might see this as a sign of vitality and hope—that the nightmare will soon end. I'm sceptical of that explanation. More likely, there's no access to birth control, and no public cultural or religious pressure on men to abstain. So, women find themselves pregnant in a war zone, knowing their babies are already malnourished in the womb. And that's just the tip of the iceberg.