

Reframing War

Women, Sanctions, and Impoverishment in Gaza

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Since World War II the United States has established and maintained political, economic, cultural, and military hegemony at the global level (Davis and Ness 2022). Samir Amin (2004) argues that the ongoing project to dominate the world through military force was developed originally from European liberalism, but the United States has taken a more dangerous approach, more vicious than earlier forms of imperialism, plundering natural resources and destroying the lives of the poor.

Since the 1980s imperialist countries (the United States and Europe) have shifted from military intervention to relying on economic sanctions, thus enforcing financial penalties on many countries of the global South under the pretext that they have violated human rights and/or international law. They have imposed sanctions against more than twenty-five countries, destroying thousands of innocent lives and inflicting enormous damage on civil societies (Davis and Ness 2022). It is also worth noting that in the 1990s, the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund have enforced structural adjustment programs on countries of the South using financial schemes that have undermined these countries' subsistence economies, increased their accumulated state debts, and made self-reliance even more difficult to realize (Crisp and Kelly 1999). Additionally, such policies have had gendered effects as they increase women's productive activities and reproductive roles (Moghadam 2009). While structural adjustment programs are different from "sanctions," they have had similar ends and effects.

Economic sanctions have often been adopted by the colonial West to realize goals not met through wars. Afghanistan and Iraq are obvious examples. Despite

their subjection to long and devastating wars, the West had to withdraw without concrete benefits. Sanctions maintained hegemony with less financial and human cost, structured in a way to reach their main goal of blocking the sovereignty of the global South—disciplining and preventing the South from reaching a multipolar world order. Sanctions have also been used to maintain economic inequality and continue with the theft of wealth from the global South to preserve racial hierarchy in the international system (Doutaghi, Mullin, and Farnia 2022). The West believes that sanctions would discipline the behavior of countries that don't conform to its neoliberal agenda and rules, yet sanctions often create resistance. The case of Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali in West Africa is one example that indicates the desire of some global South countries to exercise their right to self-determination and self-reliance by using their own resources.

Imperialist international organizations have claimed these punitive measures as legal and ethical (Davis and Ness 2022; Gordon 1999). The West has never been held accountable. It is important to understand where, how, and by whom sanctions are employed—in other words, to bring a political economic analysis to the structures, chronologies, and ethnicities of actors that organize them (Doutaghi, Mullin, and Farnia 2022).

Recent studies show that the neocolonial capitalist order can only be maintained through “Global South wealth transfer, income deflation, underdevelopment, and empowerment of Western monopolies” (Doutaghi, Mullin, and Farnia 2022). Economic sanctions, blockades, and sieges collectively show effects similar to war but represent modern versions of warfare (Davis and Ness 2021; Gordon 1999; Walzer 1977). Although they might seem to be “peaceful” and silent remedies, they are violent and unethical and represent a crime against humanity. They affect large sectors of society, in particular the poor, children, women, and the least politicized. In this context, it becomes difficult to understand why capitalist and imperialist violence is not accounted for by scholars as war (Doutaghi, Mullin, and Farnia 2022). Sanctions are not silent, peaceful, or nonviolent. As violent tools of warfare, they enforce collective punishment and kill people through starvation and deprivation. This necessitates an analysis of the broader context in which these sanctions exist and operate.

Recent developments reveal changes in the power dynamics within the global order as global South countries begin to seek their independence and right to self-determination. Many of them are investing efforts in creating mechanisms to strengthen and expand the coordination and cooperation among them, supported in some cases by Eastern powers (China and Russia), to face and break US hegemony. Mechanisms like BRICS (founded by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa; Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates joined in 2024) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are gradually changing the architecture of the current world order and opening new opportunities for the South through

the creation of strategic agreements. Subsequently, a new model of development is rising in which concepts like equal rights to development, global justice and peace, and cooperation become the slogans of the era — a model that can potentially create a multipolar world order with opportunities for independence and self-determination for the global South.

The Middle East and Sanctions

In the Middle East, sanctions are often packaged with military aggression. Countries like Palestine (particularly Gaza), Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Iran, and Yemen have been subjected to military as well as economic violence by the United States and Europe. Military aggression not only robbed local communities of their resources, including fuel, but also fragmented land using sectarian, political, and religious tools to divide people, destroy the cultural and historical heritage, and disperse and shatter populations, resulting in internal displacement and cross-border migration (see Al-Ali 2005). This all aims to ensure control through fear, destruction, and demographic resettlement. All this has been done to suppress the populations, cause the failure of the political regime, delegitimize resistance movements, and weaken popular solidarity. In this context where sanctions, siege, and military aggression are combined, the outcomes drastically affect the most vulnerable and the least politicized through the scarcity and inflation of basic items such as food, water, medical care, and fuel. Young people who have tried to migrate have often drowned in the sea or faced humiliation, ill-treatment, and rejection by host countries. It will be important to investigate the gendered aspects of these situations to formulate a new conceptual framework that considers how these crises impact societies at large and women in particular.

Gaza Is Unlivable: A Unique Model of Aggression and Destruction

Gaza has experienced direct military aggression and four wars, in 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2022, in addition to Israel's recent unbalanced aggressive response to Hamas's strike of October 7, 2023, combined with an indefinite siege and economic sanctions extending for almost two decades. These have had immensely severe outcomes for civilians, particularly women and children.

Although Israeli troops and settlers were withdrawn from Gaza in 2005, this has not meant the liberation of Gaza. According to international humanitarian and human rights law, Gaza is still under military occupation. A new pattern of rule has emerged that operates through “comprehensive closure, military escalations, and extrajudicial assassinations” (Winter 2016: 308) combined with continuous security surveillance.

“Gaza is dying as the siege tightly enclaves people who are starving, a whole society is being destroyed and imprisoned in the biggest jail” (Cockburn 2010: 64). Fishermen could not go far from the shore to catch fish, and Israeli boats either

shoot at them to forbid them to fish, destroy their boats, or kill them (64). This cruel package of oppression is gendered. Families in the entire society lose their means of livelihood, resulting in impoverishment and loss of power and capacity to cope. It is within this structure that women also face discrimination in a patriarchal society (see Al-Ali 2005; Farr 2020). The literature on sanctions lacks emphasis of this point.

The previous Gaza wars, and also the recent war, have killed and injured mostly civilians. The wounded do not have access to proper medical treatment due to the sanctions and hospitals' limited capacity. Homes, schools, governmental and nongovernmental organizations, factories, and critical infrastructure have been destroyed, resulting in a total breakdown, causing displacement, trauma, distress, and depression, especially for women and children (UNSCO 2023). Trade was banned by the siege, resulting in the closure of 90 percent of Gaza's factories, causing high unemployment and poverty (Winter 2016). Unemployment in Gaza, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2021), has exceeded 45 percent (80 percent among the youth), leading to high levels of household debt. Air, sea, and soil have become polluted due to the use of lethal weapons, causing high rates of cancer in the population. According to the United Nations, 90 percent of Gaza's water is unpotable, which has led the United Nations to state that, by 2020, Gaza would not be livable (UNDP 2016). About 80 percent of Gazans rely on humanitarian assistance (UNICEF 2023). Despite all this, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has decreased its support due to funding difficulties.

This situation has escalated since October 7, 2023 — a tragedy that has been dubbed a “modern genocide” and “ethnic cleansing” by many experts, some media, and other groups around the world (including the International Court of Justice). According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, by mid-March 2024 at least 31,000 civilians had been martyred¹ in Gaza, among them 13,450 children and 9,000 women. Moreover, 72,760 had been injured, mostly women and children, and 10,000 were still missing under the rubble.

There are no electricity, food supplies, or fuel for ambulances and hospitals. Factories, bakeries, infrastructure (mainly hospitals, which have become military targets), schools, churches, mosques, and homes have been destroyed and are still subjected to air raids and destruction as the occupying power claims this to be in self-defense. Their aim is to make Gaza unlivable, to force the migration of the people, and to fulfill the plan of ending the Palestinians' right to their land. The objective of this war, thus far, seems to be the transfer of Palestinians to Sinai, to fulfill the imperialist economic interests, particularly the economic corridor (IMEC)² and the gas that lies on Gazan shores, and to achieve the strategic aim of ending the Palestinians' right to self-determination and return to their historical land. However, the killing, starvation, and displacement of Palestinian civilians have

created wide global solidarity for the freedom of Palestine as mass protests, including student protests, continue and expand in most of the countries in the world and repeated calls are made for a cease-fire and for curbing the appetite of “Western democracies” for war whose purpose is capital accumulation.

Gender, Sanctions, and War

Academic research on the impact of war, sanctions, and siege on women in Gaza is limited. Although some knowledge has been produced, the links are not clearly conceptualized. Most reports and studies imply that there are gender-specific outcomes that impact women in terms of family dynamics, gender roles, and gender equality. In her work on Iraq, for instance, Nadjé Al-Ali (2005) shows how extended families were unable to support each other due to sanctions and war. The loss of loved ones through war, political repression, malnutrition, and the collapse of the health sector accounted for high mortality rates. The forced economic migration of men due to sanctions accounted for a high number of widows and female-headed households. In these contexts—where all are subjected to continuous aggression, destruction, and limited services; polluted water, sea, and air; internal displacement; and increasing unemployment and poverty—can gender roles be positively transformative? How are women able to respond to these needs within such an overwhelming context where they are already discriminated against at all levels?

A clear answer to these questions is difficult as the overall situation poses challenges for any optimistic analysis. Although Palestinian women and organizations have been empowered during the national struggle and daily resistance against the colonial occupation, women have had to drift from their gender struggles to respond to the national crises. Whatever they have accumulated in terms of achievements over the years has weakened and ceased to be a priority. Women are torn between the national crisis (aggression and siege), the political divisions within Gaza, and the overall deteriorating socioeconomic conditions that impose on them an emergency agenda that weakens their gender struggle (Al-Ali 2005; Kuttab 1993, 2008). The focus in times of (constant) crisis becomes the safety and livelihood of their children and family (Kuttab 2011). Although it is important to be reminded of the changes effected by women’s organizations and the efforts they have exerted to raise gender consciousness and encourage women to become active citizens, women have invested most of their efforts in responding to the practical and strategic needs and interests of their families and communities.

There cannot be a unitary analysis of women of all classes. Vulnerable women coming from poor families in refugee camps are affected more severely than educated, middle-class women (Al-Ali 2005). The crisis only adds to the already onerous provision of care. Challenges faced by women are more extreme than those faced by men because of the added problems of gender discrimination and segregation, social isolation, and unemployment (in a patriarchal society) (Kuttab 2006). Women in Palestine are considered the backbone of the household, described as shock

absorbers even in WB reports because of their ability to cope under stress with resilience to protect the family and enhance their steadfastness (Kuttab 2011, 2012; Muhanna 2016; Veronese et al. 2021).

The crisis has affected people's mental health in general. Studies see stress, trauma, depression, and confusion impacting most of society, with women facing more pressure. For instance, when a breadwinner is martyred and women are left with no financial support and limited assistance, they experience psychological stress. There are many daily concerns women have to negotiate, such as dropping out of school, school closure, forced or early marriage, high-risk pregnancies, long power outages, the destruction of houses, and the search for safe and affordable alternatives to ensure the family's unity, security, stability, and dignity. All these challenges are considered part of women's gendered roles that cause them additional stress.

Recent reports from nongovernmental and international organizations state that women as care providers are often thrust into new gender roles, especially if they have lost their breadwinner and become widows. These new gender roles add more stress on women, who are often already culturally, socially, and economically discriminated against. Some widows may live with the husband's family as their sole option for survival, while others try to find alternative pathways to escape social controls by either remarrying or working in the informal economy without social protection (Kuttab 2008). Additionally, due to the crisis and high unemployment of men, gender-based violence has intensified in all its forms, and most survivors do not seek help due to the lack of services and fear of stigma and reprisal (Hammami et al. 2009). Women are blamed for incidents where children and youth, especially girls, are injured (OCHA 2018) in the context of a generalized lack of psychosocial support for depression, anxiety, frustration, and anger — all of which limit opportunities for positive coping.

Additional pressure includes the fear of losing or injuring one's children when fleeing to temporary shelters or running to hospitals, and exposing one's children to high risks of losing their lives from either raids or the scarcity of medical equipment and medications due to sanctions. Restrictions on mobility for women constitute another level of pressure: mobility is often only permitted when women need to work or find resources that can enhance the livelihood of the family (Hilal and Kuttab 2008; Muhanna 2016).

Findings from a 2009 survey on heads of households conducted by the Institute of Community and Public Health at Birzeit University showed that female-headed households are poorer and more stressed than male-headed households, that most rely on financial assistance and food aid, and that women heads of households are four times more likely than their male counterparts to care for the disabled or chronically ill (Giacaman 2010). Other studies have stressed family property and child custody as major challenges affecting children with traumatic stress, especially when they have lost a family member (Hammami 2009).

In a study on living conditions in Gaza, researchers assumed that living under conditions of isolation and constant crisis undermines sources of resilience and



prohibits women from coping with traumatic realities. Results showed that men who are perceived as breadwinners have not been able to cope, while on the contrary, women have situated themselves as agents in resisting the occupation and nurturing their children's psychological well-being, demonstrating higher levels of resilience (Mackenzie and Foster 2017; Muhanna 2016; Veronese et al. 2021).

Women in Gaza are powerful, resilient, and able to cope with pressures, but the nature of suffering is extensive and the scope of support by government and civil society organizations is enormously limited. This reality makes clear that feminist and women's movements of the global South, and especially the Middle East, need to work together, especially given the many resonances across their various experiences (Kuttab 2014; Moghadam 2009).

Engagement with transnational feminist networks is also critical for the exchange of information, mutual support, lobbying, advocacy, and collective action toward the realization of common goals of equality and empowerment (Moghadam 1999). Yet concepts like equality and empowerment should be defined within their contexts. In the Palestinian experience, empowerment is attained through resistance (Kuttab 2010).

It is critical that we develop a new, suitable theoretical framework and platform of action for similar contexts — one that can transform the gender struggle into a collective one that reflects wider common concerns; one that can face new challenges of geopolitical realities and respond to practical needs and strategic interests; one that can expose the inhumanity of capitalism that causes wars, poverty, and unemployment. Progressive political movements in the South are active and in solidarity; it is time for women of the South to coordinate and work together for gender justice and human prosperity.

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Notes

1. All persons killed by the Israeli military in clashes or wars with Palestinians are called martyrs.
2. This corridor includes India, the Middle East, and Europe.

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