

# "We've never seen a conflict this century that's impacted women and their children like the one in Gaza"

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Deborah Harrington is a consultant obstetrician at Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust. In December 2023, she volunteered with Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP) and International Rescue Committee (IRC)'s Emergency Medical Team in Gaza's Al-Aqsa Hospital.

On International Women's Day, she spoke to MAP about how Israel's indiscriminate bombardment and siege of Gaza is impacting women and girls.

I went to Al-Aqsa Hospital in Gaza in December, after my colleague Professor Nick Maynard asked if I would be interested in volunteering with MAP. Although I'd been in touch with colleagues in Gaza, and seen and read about the unfolding catastrophe in the news, nothing really could have prepared me for the scale of the suffering I witnessed.

There were waves and waves of mass casualties coming into the hospital. The vast majority were women and children. That was unexpected.

In a war, you don't expect to see so many children coming in with such horrific injuries from bombs, missiles, shells and bullets.

## "I'm a mother myself. And I was thinking to myself how wrong this is"

I witnessed so much suffering but one particular child I will never forget. A young girl about 13 years old was brought in along with several other injured children when their shelter was bombed. She had such extensive burns that she wasn't going to survive.

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She had been burnt from the waist up so severely that her arms had contracted. Her hands were burnt down to the bone. Her face was burnt black and her lips and mouth had contracted too. But she was alive and conscious, and when she first came in, she was trying to speak. She was obviously in pain but the morphine supply had run out.

There was no adult with her when she was brought into the resuscitation room. Her mother had been killed. Her suffering and the sight and the smell of burning will stay with me forever.

I also remember a mother who'd had surgery for a shrapnel injury. She'd had parts of her bowel and her spleen removed, and while in recovery she was very quiet and just staring into the distance. I asked the nurse what had happened to her. Her husband and two of her children had been killed in the bomb that injured her. Despite her injuries, she had to pick up one of her children in pieces.

I'm a mother myself. I have four children. And I was thinking to myself how wrong this is. Just the thought of having to put your child back together to give them a burial even when she was so severely injured herself.

I also have met some truly remarkable women. A colleague that I'd previously met in Gaza during a teaching mission had had twins in early October, right at the start of this war.

She was displaced and was staying in a tent outside Al-Aqsa Hospital, but she and her babies had no winter clothes because it was warm when they fled their home in Gaza City.

She couldn't get ahold of infant formula milk and she couldn't produce enough breastmilk to feed both babies. I was able to get a tiny supply of formula milk, nappies and warm clothes to her for the babies.

She recently she sent me some beautiful photos of her babies in their new clothes. I keep looking at them, and thinking about what she's going through, and how she's still somehow found the time to share these beautiful photographs with me.

### **"We must keep the women of Gaza in our minds"**

In conflict, women are particularly impacted for all sorts of reasons, and especially so because of their caring responsibilities. As an obstetrician, I cannot comprehend the horror of the situation for pregnant and breastfeeding women.

What's more; Gaza has been under siege for nearly two decades. But this is different. Not only is the scale incomprehensible but since 7 October, [nearly 70% of people killed are women and children](#), whereas in the 18 years leading up to this, the total number of women and children killed made up [14% of all deaths](#). How can this be tolerated?

All women should be thought about on International Women's Day, but we must keep the women of Gaza in our minds, because we've never before seen a conflict this century that's impacted women and their children like the one in Gaza.

I'm hearing directly from my obstetric and midwifery colleagues in Gaza, and those working in maternity. They are brilliant, but they are absolutely exhausted and overwhelmed with numbers. They're also hungry, they are trying to look after their families, and many have been displaced multiple times.

If I could be of any use, I very much hope to go back to Gaza.

### **How you can help**

This International Women's Day [your gift](#) could help provide women in Gaza with essential medical and humanitarian supplies, including drugs, vaccines, plus food to aid our malnutrition project, which is helping one in 10 children in Gaza who are suffering from malnourishment.

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