



# The Deprioritization of Gender and Protection During UNRWA's 2018 Financial Crisis



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## Introduction

During emergencies— health, economic, military, or otherwise—gender work has often been relegated to non-essential status, limiting the quality and inclusivity of humanitarian response. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was in crisis after its largest donor, the U.S., terminated funding in 2018. This research considers how UNRWA's gender and protection work was impacted by the agency's 2018 financial crisis.

## Materials and methods

- Interviews with 10 UNRWA staff
- Literature review on feminist analysis of humanitarian aid
- Analysis of UNRWA and State Department budgets

## Results

- UNRWA's institutional structure did not sufficiently value gender work, relegating this approach to non-essential status in crisis and making it especially vulnerable during budget cuts.
  - Background: UNRWA has historically faced budget crises and struggled to fund its programs. As a result, UNRWA "projectized" what they deemed non-essential (gender and protection). Projectizing is when core services do not receive Core Programme Budget funds and are consequently repackaged and externally funded as specific, time-bound activities.
- As a result of these compounded vulnerabilities, UNRWA dismantled gender and protection, ending targeted interventions, oversimplifying mainstreaming efforts, and exporting their work to non-experts.
- In favor of "sprinkling" a little bit of gender into the other departments, UNRWA got rid of the Protection Programme, phased out most protection teams, and pivoted away from targeted interventions.
- UNRWA's attempt to mainstream an unfunded mandate made gender work everyone's and no one's responsibility. Additionally, UNRWA's approach made gender a box to check rather than a framework of analysis.

## Conclusions

- UNRWA ended livelihood programs, anti-violence interventions, and mobile health clinics. These decisions interact with feelings of shame and despair, which are indigenous to the Israeli occupation.
- From global case studies, we know that stigma (including untreated mental illness), despair, lack of livelihood opportunities, unemployment, shame, and lack of healthy coping mechanisms correlate with increased rates of violence.

Therefore, I conclude that if conditions remain the same, UNRWA's operating locations will see **increased and intergenerational** gender-based violence and community violence.

## Background

Socialized gender roles determine how people experience and recover from crises. However, gender is often deprioritized in favor of "essential" services (food, shelter) in humanitarian work. Responses that do not consider identity-based needs reinforce gender inequalities and jeopardize the resilience of communities with imposed vulnerabilities.

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## Further information

President Biden reinstated funding to UNRWA in 2021. But the agency's view on humanitarian aid— and which services are essential—means that gender and protection will likely still be deprioritized after the funding crisis. It's also important to note that this regressive view of humanitarian aid is entrenched in many organizations— this research just focused on UNRWA.