






Psychological burdens during genocide: A psychocartographic qualitative study of civilian experiences in Gaza, December 2024–February 2025

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the intertwined psychological, material, and spatial burdens experienced by displaced Palestinians in Gaza during ongoing war and genocide. Drawing on participants' narratives, three primary themes were identified: (a) psychological burden of war and genocide, reflecting the profound emotional and cognitive toll of disrupted daily life, loss of social networks, and destruction of familiar spaces; participants expressed yearning for life before the war, frustration at global inattention, uncertainty about the future, and longing for the conflict to end, alongside an affirmation of humanity in the face of dehumanization; (b) physical and material challenges of survival during genocide, highlighting the inseparability of environmental hazards, economic precarity, and everyday emotional and social experiences; and (c) unsafety and genocidal violence, capturing the pervasive fear and terror generated by the absence of safe spaces across Gaza. Analysis is informed by critical human geography, Deleuzian rhizomatic theory, and decolonial psychology, framing trauma as embedded in structural violence, spatial oppression, and historical inequities. Participants' narratives reveal that trauma is nonlinear and rhizomatic, intertwining despair, resilience, and solidarity, while oppressive spaces and material deprivation exacerbate psychological suffering. These findings highlight how war and genocide transform everyday spaces into zones of precarity, demonstrating the spatialized and relational nature of trauma. Implications emphasize the need for mental health approaches that attend to the material, social, and spatial dimensions of suffering, and that support locally rooted, collective, and community-based forms of care grounded in lived experience and existing Palestinian responses.

1. Introduction

Almost two years of genocidal violence in the Gaza Strip have generated unprecedented and multilayered psychological burdens, affecting both individuals and the collective social body (Abuward et al., 2025; Aldabbour et al., 2025; Nijim, 2023). The sustained exposure to mass atrocities, displacement, destruction of livelihoods, and systematic targeting of civilian life has produced a physical and psychosocial landscape marked not only by continuous distress but also by profound ruptures in social cohesion, intergenerational continuity, and cultural vitality (Abuward et al., 2025). Within such a context of protracted and deliberate annihilation, dominant psychopathological

frameworks—rooted in Eurocentric epistemologies and standardized diagnostic categories—prove inadequate to capture the depth, specificity, and relational dimensions of suffering (Veronese and Kagee, 2025). These frameworks tend to individualize and medicalize responses to violence, often overlooking the embeddedness of trauma in the historical, political, and colonial structures that generate and sustain such conditions (Ross et al., 2023). As a result, the complexity of pain, sorrow and meaning-making in Gaza remains insufficiently understood when interpreted solely through the lens of conventional psychiatric nosology (Veronese et al., 2023; Giacaman, 2018).

Accordingly, the psychological consequences, including trauma responses, must be understood in their multifaceted layers—ranging from

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individual manifestations of distress to the collective, structural, and systemic dimensions of suffering and annihilation—where personal experiences are inseparably intertwined with the broader historical, sociopolitical, and colonial forces shaping them (Atallah, 2017).

While the term trauma is used in this paper, we do so reflexively and critically. Trauma is not a culturally neutral category and has been shaped by Western clinical and humanitarian frameworks that can depoliticize suffering and individualize experiences of structural violence. Palestinian scholarship and everyday language often frame pain, loss, and endurance through relational, political, and historical registers rather than clinical idioms, a tension we remain attentive to throughout the analysis.

Firstly, the traumatic experience of people enduring genocide in Gaza must be interpreted not merely in terms of its continuity and chronicity, but as a distinct and pervasive traumatic reality—one in which environmental, spatial-geographic, cultural, and identitarian dimensions are radically reshaped under the overwhelming and systematic violence of a colonial project (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2014). In such a context, trauma is not a singular event or a discrete psychological wound; it is an all-encompassing condition that permeates daily life, restructures relationships to place and history, and reconfigures the collective narrative of existence (Giacaman, 2017). The psychological suffering borne by individuals and entire communities is embedded within a matrix of destruction and resistance, and must therefore be conceptualized and addressed across at least four interrelated levels: continuous trauma, sustained by the unceasing threat and recurrence of violence; collective trauma, shared and transmitted across the social body; intergenerational trauma, carried through familial and communal memory into subsequent generations; and colonial trauma, rooted in the enduring structures of occupation, dispossession, and systemic erasure (Atallah and Abu Jamei, 2025). Understanding these intertwined dimensions is essential to grasp the full scope of harm, within such conditions of prolonged exterminatory violence.

1.1. Trauma beyond repair: Ongoing violence, space, and the limits of contemporary trauma theory

Over the past four decades, trauma theory has undergone substantial transformation. Early critiques of individualized and medicalized models have given rise to expansive bodies of work that conceptualize trauma as collective, relational, embodied, and historically situated (Westin, 2022; Thomas et al., 2023). Feminist scholarship has been particularly influential in reframing trauma as rooted in gendered violence, social power, and structural inequality, while post-conflict and genocide studies have documented how mass violence produces shared wounds that exceed individual psychopathology (Moulding, 2024). Foundational contributions such as Herman (2016), Van der Kolk (2014), and Maté (2011), alongside research on collective trauma in Armenia (Trupia, 2017), Rwanda (Jansen et al., 2015), and the former Yugoslavia (Merchant et al., 2026), have decisively challenged narrow diagnostic approaches and emphasized the social, political, and corporeal dimensions of suffering.

However, while these approaches represent critical advances, their underlying assumptions reveal important limitations when applied to contexts of ongoing genocide and settler-colonial violence such as Gaza. Much of contemporary trauma theory—including feminist and collective frameworks—implicitly presumes a temporal rupture between violence and its aftermath. Trauma is often theorized as something that occurs *after* catastrophe, enabling processes of narration, integration, meaning-making, and recovery once active violence has ceased. Even when trauma is described as chronic or intergenerational, it is typically situated within contexts where political violence has formally ended and where some degree of spatial stability, institutional continuity, and future-oriented repair remains imaginable.

In Gaza, such assumptions collapse. Violence is not episodic but continuous; space itself is weaponized; and the conditions necessary for

psychic integration or narrative closure are systematically foreclosed (Mukim et al., 2025). Trauma does not sediment into memory—it is relentlessly reactivated by the environment. Theories that privilege embodiment, attachment, or relational repair still often rely on an underlying horizon of safety, bodily integrity, and survivable environments. Feminist trauma models, while incisive in exposing power and gendered harm, may nevertheless remain tethered to therapeutic imaginaries premised on protection, containment, and the possibility of withdrawal from danger.

Moreover, much progressive trauma scholarship—despite its political commitments—remains epistemically grounded in Global North contexts, where trauma is framed within humanitarian, clinical, or transitional justice paradigms. These frameworks risk reinscribing epistemic violence by universalizing models of healing that presuppose state recognition, post-conflict reconstruction, or the restoration of social contracts that do not exist under conditions of colonial annihilation.

This study therefore argues for the necessity of moving beyond even critical and feminist trauma paradigms toward an understanding of trauma as spatially produced, ecologically embedded, and rhizomatic. In Gaza, trauma is not solely located in bodies or relationships but in destroyed neighborhoods, restricted corridors, contaminated coastlines, and the enforced circulation of fear across space (Abudayya et al., 2023). Suffering emerges through entanglements of psyche, place, material deprivation, and political domination, unfolding non-linearly and without teleological resolution. By integrating critical geography, decolonial psychology, and rhizomatic theory, the present study responds to the limits of existing trauma frameworks and offers an analytic lens capable of apprehending trauma under conditions where violence is ongoing, space is hostile, and survival itself is precarious (Veronese et al., 2025a,b).

The spatiality and interior geographies of the genocidal landscape provide critical interpretative frameworks for examining Gaza's space of suffering, integrating the full spectrum of the aforementioned dimensions of suffering.

Critical and liberatory psychology has long argued that distress cannot be reduced to an individual's internal states, stripped from the historical and political landscapes in which it is produced (Martín-Baró, 1996; Parker, 2007). Suffering here is not only the result of singular traumatic events, but of an environment deliberately shaped to constrain movement, fracture communities, and erode the material conditions of life. In parallel, critical human geography insists that space is never a neutral backdrop but is actively produced through power, militarisation, and colonial occupation (Agha et al., 2024; Harvey, 2006; Massey, 2005). The built environment, the rubble of demolished homes, the narrow corridors of displacement camps, and the military corridors are all spatial inscriptions of structural violence (Ajour, 2025; Weizman, 2024). They are not merely the settings where suffering occurs—they participate in producing it.

In Gaza, the genocidal landscape has carved a geography of loss that is at once exterior and interior. The blockade transforms the entire Strip into an enclosure, a territory of confinement where movement is physically restricted and psychologically foreclosed long before October, 7 (Hynek and Ter-Ghazaryan, 2025). Destruction is cyclical, with bombardments reducing to dust neighbourhoods, schools, mosques, and the intimate landmarks of everyday life. These ruins are more than material debris: they become repositories of collective memory, places where grief accumulates and is renewed with each wave of violence (Al-Houdalieh et al., 2024; Said, 2000). Critical psychology pushes us to see how such losses unsettle the very foundations of identity and belonging, eroding temporal continuity and foreclosing visions of the future (Fanon, 1963; Vavvos, 2024). In the absence of secure places, life trajectories are repeatedly interrupted, forcing people to rebuild not only their homes but also their psychological bearings.

Spatial segregation—whether in the form of displacement into overcrowded shelters or confinement in isolated neighbourhoods—further shapes the contours of collective distress. It limits access to essential

resources, curtails educational and professional opportunities, and imposes chronic uncertainty (Hynek and Ter-Ghazaryan, 2025). The geography of danger becomes embodied: people learn to move quickly through exposed streets, to avoid certain intersections, to recognize the sound of drones, and survive aid hotspots transformed in death traps (Procter, 2024). This embodied navigation of space under siege produces states of hypervigilance, somatic tension, and a constant readiness for flight (Hamamra et al., 2025). At the same time, the materiality of destruction and displacement continually reactivates trauma, as the environment itself becomes a trigger for memories of loss and expulsion (Weizman, 2024).

Seen through the combined lenses of critical psychology, critical human geography, and Deleuze and Guattari's Rhizome theory, Gaza's space of suffering is not an incidental context for mental distress; it is a constitutive element of it. The Rhizome offers a non-hierarchical, non-linear conceptualisation of experience, emphasizing multiplicity, connectivity, and heterogeneity (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Trauma and resistance in Gaza can thus be understood as a complex rhizomatic network, where psychological, spatial, social, and historical nodes interconnect in unpredictable and emergent ways. Just as a rhizome spreads horizontally with multiple entry and exit points, the experiences of suffering and resilience are not isolated or centrally organized but continuously multiply, intersect, and evolve across individual, familial, and communal levels. This perspective allows for the mapping of the entangled layers of trauma without reducing them to linear causality, highlighting the emergent, relational, and adaptive aspects of life under sustained genocidal violence (Jones, 2023).

Decolonial approaches emerge from the recognition that colonialism did not end with formal decolonization but persists as *coloniality* (Agha et al., 2024): enduring structures of power, knowledge, and being that organize space, subjectivity, and life itself. Unlike postcolonial theory, which often focuses on representation, discourse, and the aftermath of empire, decolonial theory foregrounds the ongoing material, epistemic, and spatial organization of violence produced by colonial rule. It asks not only how colonial histories are narrated, but how colonial power continues to shape whose lives are rendered disposable, whose knowledge is legitimized, and which spaces are made inhabitable or destroyed.

Within this horizon, decolonial geography and decolonial psychology offer complementary analytic tools for interpreting the findings of this study (Agha et al., 2024). Decolonial geography exposes how space is actively produced through colonial power—via borders, enclosures, infrastructure, and militarized landscapes—revealing how the destruction of homes, neighborhoods, and mobility networks constitutes a form of violence aimed at eliminating Indigenous presence (Ziadah et al., 2025; El-Shewy et al., 2025). In Gaza, space is not merely where trauma unfolds; it is one of the primary means through which violence is enacted, remembered, and embodied.

Decolonial psychology builds on longer traditions of critical and liberation psychology by extending their focus on power and oppression to the epistemic level (Comas-Fázquez and Rivera, 2020). While liberation psychology centers social suffering and collective agency, decolonial psychology further interrogates how Western psychological knowledge itself can reproduce colonial assumptions by universalizing concepts of trauma, healing, and normalcy. It enables us to see participants' distress not as disordered responses to violence, but as intelligible, relational, and politically situated reactions to a colonial system that continuously destroys the material and symbolic conditions of life. In this sense, decolonial psychology does not replace critical or liberatory approaches; it radicalizes them by linking psychological suffering directly to spatial domination, epistemic violence, and the ongoing production of unlivable worlds.

In contexts such as Gaza, a decolonial lens is therefore not optional but necessary. It allows genocide, spatial destruction, and psychological suffering to be understood not as aberrations or failures of modernity, but as outcomes of a colonial order that actively produces death, displacement, and unlivable environments. Decolonial theory thus

provides the broader epistemic horizon within which the present study situates trauma, space, and survival.

Decolonial theories fundamentally critique how colonial histories continue to shape both space and psychological knowledge (Ziadah et al., 2025; El-Shewy et al., 2025). In spatial terms, they reveal how colonial powers imposed new territorial regimes that erase Indigenous geographies and reinscribe space as a tool of domination and control (Mignolo, 2021). Decolonial geography emphasizes the need to recover subjugated spatial knowledges and to challenge the colonial epistemologies embedded in maps, borders, and urban planning (Escobar et al., 2024).

In psychology, decolonial approaches problematize the universal application of Western models, highlighting how these frameworks often pathologize colonized subjects by ignoring the socio-political violence underlying psychological distress (Nehring & Kerrigan, 2022). Decolonial psychology calls for epistemic sovereignty—valuing community-rooted practices and worldviews that resist coloniality's cognitive and affective impositions (Greenidge et al., 2025).

Together, these perspectives underscore that space and psyche are inseparable from colonial power structures. Healing and resistance thus involve not only reclaiming physical territories but also restoring psychological and cultural autonomy through practices that disrupt colonial narratives and foster collective agency. They lay the conceptual foundation for the present study, which extends the inquiry from theoretical considerations of space–psyche entanglements under colonialism to an empirical exploration of their manifestations in the lived realities of Gaza.

1.2. Aims and scope

This study aims to explore how spatial and environmental conditions co-shape psychological pain among civilians experiencing genocide in Gaza, an experience increasingly framed here as “Gazacide,” originally articulated by Nijim, to emphasize its unique genocidal and systemic nature (Nijim, 2024). Moving beyond traditional trauma research that often isolates psychological consequences as individual symptoms, this work foregrounds the embodied, collective, and spatial dimensions of suffering. It investigates how place and space—both material and symbolic—mediate the lived experience of violence and trauma in ways that are inseparable from the socio-political and ecological context of prolonged colonial occupation and military violence.

Existing psychological research on Gaza's trauma largely remains parcellized and objectifying, focusing on quantifiable symptoms such as PTSD prevalence or depression scores (Thabet and Vostanis, 2000; El-Khodary and Samara, 2020). While valuable, such studies frequently neglect the broader ecosystemic complexity that informs individual and collective suffering. This narrow focus risks pathologizing individuals without accounting for the spatialized mechanisms of oppression, the ongoing structural violence, and the entanglement of ecological devastation with social and psychological harm (Ruíz, 2024). Moreover, such research often excludes the voices and lived knowledges of the affected populations, perpetuating epistemic violence by producing decontextualized and dehistoricized knowledge (Thambinathan et al., 2023).

This study therefore addresses a critical gap in Gaza trauma research by integrating spatiality, collective dimensions of psychological pain, and ecological factors. It foregrounds how genocidal violence shapes not only the psyche but the very geographies people inhabit, challenging reductionist models and opening pathways for more holistic, situated understandings of social suffering and resilience in contexts of protracted political violence.

We approach trauma not as an object to be diagnosed from outside, but as an experience narrated, mapped, and interpreted by Palestinians themselves. The analytic priority is therefore not clinical classification but understanding how suffering is lived, spatialized, and made meaningful under conditions of colonial violence.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, this research responds to a

practical gap in how psychological suffering in Gaza is understood and addressed. By foregrounding place, displacement, and spatial destruction, the findings speak to practitioners, researchers, and advocates working in mental health, humanitarian response, and human rights, where trauma is often abstracted from the environments and power structures that produce it.

1.3. Background: Gazacide and the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians

The term “Gazacide” has emerged in critical scholarship and activist discourse to characterize the protracted genocidal violence inflicted upon the population of Gaza. This neologism foregrounds the systematic and state-sanctioned nature of violence that transcends episodic military conflicts, encompassing policies of blockade, dispossession, weaponization of hunger, and structural deprivation that collectively threaten the survival of Palestinians in the Strip (Ziadah et al., 2025). Gazacide thus captures the confluence of physical destruction, social fragmentation, and political erasure under conditions of prolonged siege and occupation. Building on Nijim's (2024) formulation, the concept foregrounds the convergence of genocidal violence, spatial destruction, and social erasure.

While the terms *ethnic cleansing* and *genocide* are sometimes used interchangeably in public discourse, they refer to analytically and politically distinct processes. Ethnic cleansing denotes the forced removal of a population from a territory through displacement, expulsion, and demographic engineering, a framework widely used to describe the historical settler-colonial project in Palestine (Pappe, 2021). Genocide, by contrast, refers to the intentional destruction of a protected group, in whole or in part, through killing, bodily and mental harm, and the systematic destruction of conditions of life, as defined in international law (Ozoráková, 2022).

Importantly, these concepts are not mutually exclusive. In settler-colonial contexts, genocide can function as a *means* through which ethnic cleansing is enforced and accelerated (Bartov, 2025). Rather than replacing ethnic cleansing, genocidal violence renders it irreversible by annihilating the material, social, and ecological conditions necessary for return, survival, and collective continuity. In Gaza, mass killing, the destruction of civilian infrastructure, the weaponization of hunger, and the transformation of space into an uninhabitable environment operate as mechanisms that sustain and complete a longer project of territorial removal.

This distinction helps clarify why Gaza is currently investigated under the rubric of genocide by the International Court of Justice. While ethnic cleansing names the historical logic of dispossession, genocide captures the present modality of violence through which that logic is enacted. As scholars have argued, the continued reliance on the term ethnic cleansing risks minimizing exterminatory intent and obscuring how genocidal practices function politically to erase a people's capacity to remain, return, or reproduce social life (Slimia, 2023).

This ongoing violence can be understood as part of a broader settler-colonial and ethnic cleansing project, which seeks to forcibly remove Palestinian populations from their land and undermine their claims to political and territorial rights (Klein, 2007; Pappé, 2025). Ethnic cleansing in this context involves a range of strategies—from targeted military incursions and mass displacement to the destruction of homes, infrastructure, and livelihoods—that collectively function to fragment Palestinian society and erode the social fabric necessary for community survival and resistance (Weizman, 2024).

Gaza, geographically confined and densely populated, has become the epicenter of this process, where physical violence is compounded by an ongoing blockade that restricts access to essential goods, healthcare, and freedom of movement (Verdeja, 2025). This siege reinforces spatial and political isolation, exacerbating economic hardship and intensifying social suffering (UNRWA, 2023). In this environment, the population endures not only the immediate trauma of war but also the chronic trauma of dispossession and existential threat.

The framing of Gaza's suffering as Gazacide shifts the analytical lens from isolated military episodes to a continuous and systemic process of violence and control. This perspective highlights the inseparability of space, politics, and violence in producing conditions that jeopardize Palestinian existence, identity, and wellbeing. Understanding Gazacide as ethnic cleansing therefore demands a multidimensional approach that recognizes the structural, spatial, and psychological impacts of this violence on the Palestinian population.

Genocide provides the foundational analytical lens for understanding the violence unfolding in Gaza. Beyond its legal definition, genocide refers to the systematic destruction of a group's conditions of life, including the material, social, and spatial infrastructures that sustain collective existence. Contemporary genocide scholarship emphasizes that mass killing is only one dimension of genocidal processes; equally central are the deliberate strategies that render life unlivable by dismantling homes, environments, economies, and social worlds.

Palestinian sociologist Sari Hanafi introduced the concept of *spaciocide* to describe the systematic destruction of space—homes, neighborhoods, infrastructures, and mobility networks—as a means of destroying Palestinian life itself (Hanafi, 2006; Huss and Althehe, 2024). Spaciocide foregrounds how the annihilation of built environments directly undermines human spatiality: to destroy space is to destroy the conditions of dwelling, sociality, memory, and futurity.

Relatedly, the concept of *domicide* captures the deliberate destruction of home as a form of violence that collapses distinctions between damage to the built environment and violence against life (Hassoun et al., 2025). As argued in post-conflict analyses of Herzegovina, domicide is not merely collateral damage but a strategy aimed at erasing the possibility of return, continuity, and collective recovery (Tuathail and Dahlman, 2006). These concepts collectively challenge analytic separations between urbicide, infrastructural damage, and human killing, emphasizing instead their ecological and relational entanglement.

The concept of Gazacide builds on and extends these frameworks by naming a context in which genocidal violence, spaciocide, and domicide converge under conditions of total enclosure. In Gaza, the destruction of homes, hospitals, coastlines, and neighborhoods is inseparable from mass killing, starvation, and displacement. The findings of the present study—centered on participants' mappings of ruined places, unsafe spaces, and shattered environments—demonstrate how psychological suffering emerges through the systematic devastation of space itself. Gazacide thus captures not only the genocidal targeting of people, but the annihilation of the spatial, ecological, and relational conditions that make Palestinian life possible. It is this spatialized, ecosystemic dimension of genocide that renders Gazacide a necessary and analytically productive concept.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedures

The study involved a purposive sample of 24 Palestinian participants (12 women and 12 men) aged between 18 and 25 years ($M = 22.2$, $SD = 2.1$), all residing in the Gaza Strip at the time of data collection. This age group was selected as it represents a generation navigating the formative transition to adulthood under conditions of protracted siege, recurrent armed assaults, ongoing genocide, and pervasive infrastructural devastation. Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods, initiated via existing networks of trust between the research team and Gaza-based community contacts. Initial outreach was conducted by members of the research team through WhatsApp, a platform that was both accessible and secure for participants given the restricted mobility and unstable telecommunications infrastructure in the region.

Once informed consent was obtained, participants were invited to engage in a creative, participant-led data collection process. Each was

asked to capture photographs and/or short video recordings of locations in Gaza that held deep personal, emotional, or symbolic significance for them. These locations could be public or private spaces—such as homes, streets, markets, seashores, schools, or sites of destruction—and were chosen entirely at the participants' discretion. Some participants additionally provided on-site verbal descriptions of these spaces, recorded directly in the videos, offering spontaneous and affectively rich narratives.

To guide and deepen the elicitation of meaning, participants were also asked to respond to three open-ended prompts.

1. “Why does this place mean to you?”
2. “Describe how you feel and what comes to mind when you're in that place.”
3. “What is your message to the world?”

These prompts were designed to elicit reflections that intertwined spatial, emotional, and political dimensions of experience, while leaving space for participants to express themselves freely and in their own words. Responses were shared with the research team via voice notes and/or written accounts transmitted through WhatsApp. This flexible approach accommodated variations in participants' preferred modes of expression, as well as the constraints posed by electricity outages, internet disruptions, and safety concerns in an active war zone.

The multimodal dataset—comprising still images, video footage, verbal narratives, and written reflections—was thus co-constructed with participants in ways that emphasized their agency and interpretive authority. By foregrounding the voices and perspectives of young Palestinians, the study aimed to capture the complex interplay of place, memory, and psychological life under genocidal violence.

2.2. Instruments

Data collection and visualization were supported through a combination of mobile communication tools and digital mapping platforms to document and contextualize participants' spatial and narrative accounts. Central to this process was the use of *Polarsteps*, a mobile tracking and mapping application that allows the creation of individualized, interactive maps combining geolocated points with multimedia and descriptive narratives.

Individual maps were constructed for each participant by first eliciting detailed spatial information through WhatsApp conversations. Participants were asked to identify and describe both their *regions of origin* and the *areas in Gaza to which they had been displaced* during the ongoing military escalation. In addition to self-reported location data, the research team also inferred displacement trajectories from contextual cues embedded in the photographs, videos, written reflections, and voice recordings provided by participants. This dual approach—direct

questioning combined with interpretive cross-referencing—enabled the creation of more complete and accurate spatial narratives, even in cases where participants' mobility histories were complex or fragmented due to repeated forced displacement.

All written and recorded materials were transcribed verbatim in Arabic (Palestinian dialect) and subsequently translated into English by bilingual research team members trained in qualitative transcription protocols. Special care was taken to preserve participants' original tone, affective expressions, and culturally specific references. These translated narratives were then integrated into the *Polarsteps* maps as captions and descriptions linked to the geotagged images and videos. When applicable, each media item was pinned to the precise location of the site it depicted, allowing for a layered representation that combined geographic specificity with subjective, lived meaning. For example, the map interface allows viewers to click on a point to access photographs, videos, and associated narratives—offering a multimodal, situated account of place and memory (e.g., see Fig. 1).

The completed maps thus functioned both as a data collection tool and as an analytic artifact, providing a spatially anchored framework for interpreting narratives of loss, attachment, and resilience.

2.3. Data integrity and verification

Given the volatile and high-risk environment in which the study was conducted, ensuring the accuracy and reliability of both spatial and narrative data required a set of adaptive verification strategies. First, location data reported by participants were triangulated wherever possible: self-reported information was compared with GPS coordinates embedded in image and video metadata, visual cues present in the media (e.g., distinctive landmarks, building styles, environmental features), and independent geospatial data from publicly available mapping services. In instances where metadata were absent or stripped due to file transfer limitations on WhatsApp, location accuracy was cross-checked with participants in follow-up exchanges to confirm the plausibility of mapped points.

Narrative content underwent a similar process of verification. Transcriptions were reviewed by multiple bilingual team members to minimize misinterpretation, and any ambiguous or culturally specific terms were discussed in team meetings to reach consensus on their most accurate representation in English. Back-translation of a sample of transcripts into Arabic was conducted to check for fidelity of meaning and tone.

In addition, ethical safeguards were implemented to protect participants while maintaining data authenticity. Geotagging of particularly sensitive locations—such as current shelters or sites associated with politically vulnerable activities—was either generalized to a broader area or omitted altogether in the public-facing map to avoid endangering participants. All participants were reminded that they could

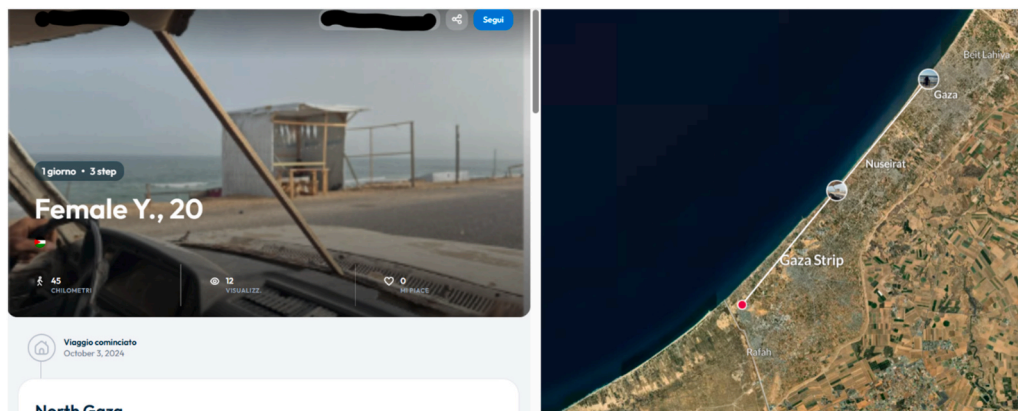


Fig. 1. The geo-localized walk-along using *polarsteps* shows displacement from northern Gaza to Rafah (South).

withhold or anonymize any detail they felt could compromise their safety.

This multi-layered verification process not only increased confidence in the accuracy of the collected data but also respected the precarious realities of conducting research in a war zone, ensuring that the final dataset was both ethically sound and methodologically robust.

2.4. Data analysis

The transcribed textual material—comprising participants' written accounts, voice note transcriptions, and verbal descriptions embedded in video recordings—was analyzed using *reflective thematic analysis (RTA)* (Braun and Clarke, 2019), a flexible qualitative method well-suited to identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning within complex narrative data. This approach was chosen because it allows for a systematic yet interpretive engagement with participants' accounts, accommodating both manifest (explicit) and latent (underlying) content.

The analysis proceeded through multiple, iterative stages. First, all English translations of the Arabic transcriptions were read in full by the primary analyst to gain a holistic understanding of each participant's narrative and to note preliminary impressions. During this phase, attention was given to both spatial references (e.g., descriptions of specific places, landscapes, and environmental conditions) and emotional or symbolic associations linked to those locations.

Next, a process of *initial coding* was undertaken. Segments of text were assigned descriptive codes that captured salient ideas, experiences, or affective states. Coding was conducted manually to allow for close, repeated engagement with the material, although digital spreadsheets were used to organize and track the evolving codebook. The coding process remained open-ended at this stage, allowing for the emergence of unanticipated categories that reflected participants' own language and framing.

Following initial coding, *focused coding* was employed to cluster related codes into broader thematic categories. This step involved identifying patterns across the dataset, grouping together codes that described similar experiences or phenomena—such as spatial displacement, destruction of meaningful sites, environmental degradation. The research team met regularly to discuss the emerging thematic structure, ensuring reflexive dialogue and analytic rigor. Discrepancies in coding or theme boundaries were resolved through collaborative discussion, with reference to the original Arabic transcripts to preserve cultural and linguistic nuance.

A final phase of *thematic refinement* involved reviewing all themes to ensure they were internally coherent, distinct from one another, and meaningfully connected to the study's aims. Particular attention was given to the relational interplay between space and psyche—how the physical environment, displacement trajectories, and material destruction intertwined with psychological pain, identity, and collective suffering. Representative quotations were selected for each theme, preserving participants' original phrasing as much as possible to maintain authenticity and voice.

While thematic analysis was primarily applied to the textual data, the visual materials (photographs and videos) were also revisited during the analytic process. These images were examined both independently and in conjunction with the associated narratives to ensure that visual cues informed the interpretation of themes. In cases where the imagery added contextual depth or emotional resonance, these insights were incorporated into the thematic descriptions.

The iterative, reflexive nature of this analytic process allowed for a nuanced interpretation of the data, ensuring that findings remained grounded in participants' lived experiences while engaging critically with the broader socio-political and ecological context of genocidal violence in Gaza.

2.5. Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with internationally recognized ethical standards for research involving human participants and received formal approval from the University of Milano–Bicocca Institutional Review Board (IRB), protocol number pr.776/2024. Given the highly sensitive context of ongoing armed conflict and genocidal violence in Gaza, particular care was taken to ensure that all procedures prioritized the safety, dignity, and autonomy of participants.

Informed consent was obtained remotely, as in-person interactions were impossible due to movement restrictions and security risks. The research team provided participants with a clear, accessible explanation—both in Arabic and English—of the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without providing a reason and that doing so would have no negative consequences. Consent was given in written form through secure WhatsApp messages or audio confirmation, depending on participants' preferences and technological constraints.

Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained. Identifying details, such as full names, exact addresses, and unredacted images of participants or their families, were omitted or altered in all public-facing materials. Locations that could compromise safety—such as current shelters or politically sensitive sites—were either generalized to a wider geographic area or excluded from the interactive maps. All raw data were stored on encrypted, password-protected drives accessible only to the research team.

Minimizing psychological risk was a priority, given that the research involved recalling and documenting sites often associated with trauma, loss, and displacement. To mitigate potential distress, participants were encouraged to share only what they felt comfortable disclosing and were reminded they could skip any question or withdraw from the process at any time. Where appropriate, participants were provided with contact information for local mental health resources and community-based psychosocial support networks in Gaza.

Cultural sensitivity and participant agency were embedded in the research design. Participants were given freedom to select the locations they documented, the mediums through which they expressed themselves (text, voice notes, or videos), and the language they used. The translation process was handled by bilingual Palestinian researchers familiar with local dialects and cultural references to ensure fidelity to participants' intended meanings.

Data security in conflict settings was addressed by adapting communication and file-sharing strategies to the realities of Gaza's unstable internet connectivity and intermittent electricity. WhatsApp, chosen for its widespread use and relative security, was used for both recruitment and data submission. All files were promptly downloaded, encrypted, and stored offline to prevent accidental loss or interception.

This ethical framework aimed to balance the imperative of documenting lived experiences under extreme conditions with the equally urgent responsibility to protect participants from additional harm. In doing so, it sought to uphold not only the procedural aspects of research ethics but also a relational ethic of care that respected the agency, safety, and narrative sovereignty of the individuals who chose to share their stories.

2.6. Researcher positionality

The research team consisted of five authors: two based in Italy, two residing in Gaza, and one based in Lebanon. Two members identified as cisgender male and the remaining three as cisgender female. This diverse composition reflected a blend of insider and outsider perspectives, combining lived experience within Gaza under siege with external vantage points shaped by different socio-political, cultural, and academic contexts.

The Italian authors contributed methodological expertise,

theoretical framing, and access to institutional resources, while the Gaza-based researchers brought intimate, first-hand knowledge of the local geography, socio-cultural dynamics, and the everyday realities of war, displacement, and survival. The Lebanese author contributed both regional contextual understanding and a bridging perspective that situated the Gaza experience within broader Middle Eastern histories of displacement and resistance.

As a collective, the research team approached this project with a shared commitment to research as a radical space of political debate and human rights advocacy. This stance was not an ancillary concern but a guiding epistemological principle: the study was conceived as a form of knowledge production that actively challenges colonial and dehumanizing narratives about Gaza, foregrounding instead the agency, voices, and spatial imaginaries of Palestinians living under genocidal violence.

We acknowledge that our differing proximities to the field shaped both our interpretations and our interactions with the data. Gaza-based team members navigated the research process while directly experiencing displacement, loss, and daily threats to safety—conditions that infused the work with urgency and ethical responsibility. Non-Gazan authors, while benefiting from relative safety and academic privilege, engaged reflexively with their positionality to avoid extractive dynamics, striving instead to amplify rather than appropriate the narratives shared by participants.

Throughout the research process, decisions were made collaboratively, with particular weight given to the perspectives of the Gaza-based researchers to ensure cultural accuracy, political sensitivity, and ethical integrity. This approach aligns with a decolonial research ethic that recognizes the asymmetries of power in global knowledge production and seeks to redistribute epistemic authority to those whose lived realities form the core of the study.

3. Results

Three main themes emerged from the RTA: the psychological burden of war and genocide, the physical and material challenges of survival, and the persistent unsafety produced by genocidal violence. Collectively, these themes illustrate how trauma is not only an individual psychological experience but also a socially and spatially embedded condition. They demonstrate the ways in which emotional suffering, material deprivation, and the erosion of safety interact to shape daily life under conditions of war and genocide, while also foregrounding participants' resilience and insistence on their humanity in the face of systemic dehumanization.

3.1. Theme 1: Psychological burden of war and genocide

Participants' narratives revealed the profound emotional and cognitive toll of living under ongoing war and genocide. The disruption of daily life, loss of social networks, and destruction of familiar spaces contributed to pervasive psychological strain, highlighting how trauma is embedded both socially and spatially. This theme encompasses four interrelated subthemes: *yearning for life before the war*, *lack of global attention*, *uncertainty about the future*, and *longing for the conflict to end*, alongside an overarching affirmation of humanity in the face of dehumanization.

3.1.1. Yearning for One's life before the war

Many participants expressed a deep longing for the routines, relationships, and places that defined life before the conflict. This nostalgia was closely linked to memories of home, community, and social cohesion, illustrating how the destruction of physical and social spaces generates temporal and emotional rupture. One participant described this vividly:

"I pleaded with the sea through the lyrics of a song, as if begging it: 'Bring back the lifetime from the beginning, bring our loved ones

once more. Bring back our closeness and gatherings, bring back our neighbors and friends.'" (N.,W, 20 years old)

The metaphorical plea to the sea captures the intersection of place, memory, and sociality in shaping the psychological burden of war. Other participants recalled the loss of everyday pleasures and social spaces:

"Here in the north, we lived through the worst famine in the world. I used to dream about our life before the war—I dreamed about food and fruits, about how our diet used to be and how we weren't deprived of anything." (S.,W 23 years old)

Such language conveys the experiential totality of hunger under siege. While the famine in Gaza is among the most severe contemporary cases of human-made food deprivation, this account is presented as a phenomenological expression of suffering rather than a literal historical comparison.

3.1.2. Lack of global attention to the genocide

Participants also articulated feelings of abandonment by the international community and neighboring states. This perceived invisibility exacerbated the psychological impact of conflict, reinforcing a sense of moral neglect and injustice:

"My message to the world: Honestly, the world doesn't hear us. Neither anyone sees us. We are now entering the third year of this war. The war started in 2023, and now it's 2025. I don't know if anyone hears us, if anyone even knows about us, or if anyone even cares. There's a very bitter sorrow [*kaher*] inside our hearts ... Even our stories in the media have become boring to the world. I don't even know if they see us or not anymore." (S.,W 25 years old)

Another participant reinforced this sense of neglect and abandonment:

"Everyone here is suffering in silence. No one is paying attention to this massacre and genocide we are living through and enduring without being guilty of anything." (N.,W, 23 years old)

3.1.3. Uncertainty during the war

Participants frequently expressed feelings of uncertainty and anxiety about the future:

"So I tell the world: Everything we have lost is impossible to bring back, but can this continuous loss and suffering ever stop? Will we be able to create happy memories again or will we have a life? We are human beings, and we have the right to live and to have everything beautiful in life." (F.,W, 20 years old)

"All my thinking, Wallahi [I swear to God], was: Will we survive? Does anyone know about us, the things that are happening to us? Because there was no communication at all—nothing." (S.,W, 25 years old)

3.1.4. Longing for the war to end

Many participants articulated a strong desire for the conflict to end, emphasizing both personal safety and the hope of returning to normal life:

"Every step in our lives has become difficult. But life keeps moving forward. I just wish for the war to end so we can live our lives without the fear of death and bombings." (N.,M,18 years old)

"Sometimes, I feel sorrow for our situation and I feel sadness for my daughters, living in these conditions. They are still so young, and they haven't had the chance to see anything nice in this world ... All I wish is for the war to end. Even if we have to stay in tents, at least my daughters would live without the sound of bombing, without terror and hunger." (N.,W, 24 years old)

3.1.5. Reminding the world of One's humanity

Finally, participants emphasized the affirmation of their humanity in the face of global dehumanization:

“So I tell the world: Everything we have lost is impossible to bring back, but can this continuous loss and suffering ever stop? Will we be able to create happy memories again? Will we have a life again? We are human beings, and we have the right to live and to have everything beautiful in life.” (F.,W, 20 years old)

“My message to the world is that the war does not resemble us at all. We truly love life, believe us. My name is Nouri Al-Tarib, a displaced person in Al-Mawasi, Khan Younis, on the seashore.” (N.,W, 21 years old)

Together, these narratives illuminate the complex psychological burden of war and genocide, showing how trauma is intertwined with social isolation, spatial loss, global neglect, and enduring uncertainty. They highlight both intimate experiences of suffering and the broader socio-political forces shaping daily life in Gaza.

3.2. Theme 2: Physical and material challenges of survival during genocide

Beyond psychological suffering, participants described daily struggles for survival, shaped by environmental hazards and economic precarity. Their narratives revealed how war and siege conditions create material vulnerabilities that are deeply intertwined with emotional and social experiences encompassing four interlocked sub-themes: deterioration of living conditions, places with challenging environmental conditions, food scarcity and famine, gratitude for relative safety.

3.2.1. Deterioration of living conditions

Participants described a profound deterioration of lifestyle, living conditions, and daily routines, marked by a shift from living to mere survival. One participant reflected on this regression:

“We’ve reverted to using primitive methods for everything—transportation, baking bread with clay ovens, and cooking over firewood. We struggle with overcrowding in a limited geographic space and the difficult circumstances that have been imposed on us.” [N.,W, 23 years old]

Others reported the physical hardships of makeshift living arrangements:

“During the summer, my dishwashing table was outside the tent where I was displaced. Honestly, it was annoying because one of its legs was slightly broken. Water would drown me a bit, and it was an uncomfortable feeling ... I spent so much time hunched over while washing the dishes.” [N., W, 21 years old]

3.2.2. Places with challenging environmental conditions

Displacement often forced participants into physically dangerous and environmentally precarious areas. Exposure to storms, flooding, and destroyed shelters compounded the stress of forced migration. One participant described:

“When the first storm hit, people drowned on the shore, so the beach in front of where I was displaced that was once filled with tents, now they’re all gone. It’s been about a month and a half since there are no tents anymore. People started fleeing from this place, searching for a new place, moving inland—somewhere away from the sea.” [F.,M, 21 years old]

Another participant emphasized the ongoing hazards posed by weather and overcrowding:

“The coastline has become crowded to a great extent as a result of forced displacement westward, to the point that some of the

displaced now sleep directly on the sand. The worst part? With every storm, the tents get flooded, people go missing, some literally freeze to death, facing the sea’s strong winds. Sewage now also spills directly into the water, filling the air with a repulsive smell.” [M.,M, 23 years old]

3.2.3. Food scarcity and famine

Economic deprivation emerged as a critical material challenge, with participants reporting extreme difficulty accessing food due to rising prices and limited availability. This illustrates the structural violence imposed by siege conditions.

“I am currently at more than one point of sale of goods in the northern regions that have become an alternative to markets. I enter these places and leave empty-handed because there is nothing we can afford to buy. The prices of the goods here are extremely high; we really cannot afford them.” [S.,W, 23 years old]

Participants recounted the scarcity of basic food supplies:

“It was the beginning of the flour crisis; there was no bread. Our main meal was rice. There were no vegetables. It was the beginning of starvation, we didn’t have anything.” [S.,W,25 years old]

“As long as I am walking in the market, I find myself surprised by the goods that are there ... Here in the north, we lived through the worst famine in the world. I used to dream about food and fruits, about how our diet used to be and how we weren’t deprived of anything.” [S.,W, 23 years old]

3.2.4. Gratitude for relative safety

Even amidst extreme hardship, participants expressed gratitude for comparatively better living conditions:

“I never imagined that a place that means to me would be my tent. After the invasion of Rafah and our displacement, I lived in so many displacement locations, crowded with people, exhaustion, and noise. When I finally got my own tent, I felt like I owned the whole world.” [N.,W, 24 years old]

3.3. Theme 3: Unsafety and genocidal violence

This theme highlights the pervasive erosion of safety and the constant exposure to violence experienced by participants during the ongoing genocide. Testimonies consistently revealed that no environment could be perceived as secure—homes, hospitals, and public spaces all remained vulnerable to attack. Fear and displacement permeated daily life, shaping psychological distress and reinforcing a sense of powerlessness. Participants’ accounts clustered around four interconnected subthemes: no safe places and feeling unsafe, absence of moral limits in Israeli military violence, invasions by Israeli forces, and violence against civilians. Across these domains, narratives illustrated how the experience of unsafety extended beyond immediate physical threats, embedding itself in the social and emotional fabric of daily life. The systematic nature of these violations further points to the dismantling of moral and legal constraints in the conduct of military violence, situating individual and social suffering within broader patterns of genocidal practice.

3.3.1. No safe places and feeling unsafe

Participants repeatedly reported a pervasive sense of unsafety and fear in many areas of Gaza during the genocide. A participant expressed a relative sense of protection by being in a house rather than a tent, but emphasized that no real safety existed:

“I feel lucky that I’m in a house and not in a tent like other people. That’s something I feel a lot—that I don’t have to be in a tent, there

is concrete protecting me, even though I don't feel safe. There is no real safety because, as I said, this area is very peripheral, and at any time, the Jews could be at ours" (B.,M 21 years old).

Similarly, another participant reflected on the complex emotions tied to Al-Shifa Hospital:

"I used to think that I hated Al-Shifa because of my memories there [...] But honestly, when I saw it bombed, I felt deep sorrow for it, even though all my memories there were bad [...] Maybe it was because the adrenaline that was through the roof back then from fearing for my life" (A.,M, 25 years old).

The ongoing fear of bombings and displacement was also expressed in this way:

"Every step in our lives has become difficult. But life keeps moving forward. I just wish for the war to end so we can live our lives without the fear of death and bombings. [...] Of course, I'm still afraid to go out" (N.,W, 18 years old).

Another participant highlighted the psychological burden of displacement despite having a house:

"We say Alhamdulillah that we are at least in a house with walls and not in a tent ... That we have warmth and not in the cold like the rest of our people in the tents. Of course, the area is dangerous, and we have been besieged more than once but we just keep praying to return to our homes. As someone who's displaced to it, I feel sadness and distress—why aren't we in our home? Why are we forced to keep living in fear?" (M.,M, 21 years old).

Additionally, it was recounted the fear during the invasion of Al-Rimal and the psychological impact of uncertainty:

"The Al-Rimal area was also under attack. We had relatives from Al-Rimal, but we couldn't reach these areas because, unfortunately, it also had Jews stationed there too. So, we didn't know where to go, there was no one we could stay with, there was no safe space [...] I remember experiencing a tough psychological state, I was too afraid to go outside. Despite my age, and regardless that I am old, I used to be scared and I clung to my mother [...] I thought that the Jews would enter and kill us all, that no one would remain in Gaza City" (S.,W, 25 years old).

3.3.2. Absence of moral limits in Israeli military violence

Participants exposed the absence of moral or legal limits in the violent escalation of Israeli military operations. B. highlighted the destructive capacity of the occupation:

"What is my message to the world about this place? [...] I hope, hope, hope, this war ends before its [*Qizzan an-Najjar*'s] turn arrives. Because from what I'm seeing, I feel like there is nothing too big for the occupation. I mean, it's normal for them, it's possible for them to wipe out a big area, it won't matter to it [the occupation] a lot, for it to stay in a good condition" (B.,M, 21 years old).

Participants expressed sorrow and a call for global attention to protect civilians and medical facilities:

"Every time I pass by the hospital, I feel a deep sense of sorrow and bitterness. It reminds me of how much the world has wronged and abandoned us, how no one moved to protect even a hospital. Israel has also shattered every limit and every human right—now, no hospital, no school, no place of worship is beyond the reach of the Zionist machine of destruction" (A.,M, 25 years old).

Others additionally emphasized the importance of supporting hospitals to maintain humanitarian care:

"This hospital is a central facility. It needs continuous support—medical supplies, medical staff, and field training. Instead of

having patients sleep in tents, a proper building should be constructed to accommodate them and more. And that in order to keep it functional, so it can continue giving humanitarian care to the vast population that relies on it. My greatest hope is that it won't end up on the list of places that will be reached by destruction. Losing this hospital would be a catastrophe, not only for this struggling community, but for me as well" (B.,F, 25 years old).

3.3.3. Invasions by Israeli forces

Participants reported intrusive and often violent military presence. One respondent described coping rituals amid nightly bombardments:

"And when darkness falls [referring to nighttime], and when I see the sky filled with stars and also with the occupation's planes that have disfigured the sky of my city, I gaze at the sky and speak to my souls—my martyred family. I talk to them every evening while sitting on the roof of this house. I speak, fully certain that my words will reach them" (F.,W, 20 years old).

Y. recounted escaping shelling and gunfire during displacement:

"All of us kept our heads down so the bullets wouldn't reach us. My eyes caught a glimpse of the sea, the warships, launching shells. A shell hit a car in front of us, and bullets were going down on our windshield like a scene from a movie. The car swerved into a side street, and in that moment, we exhaled—the sea and the warships were out of sight, we were safe. After that, I avoided going to the sea" (Y.,W, 20 years old).

S. described repeated displacements and the impossibility of finding safe shelter:

"Look, honestly, I was displaced so so many times during the war, especially since I persevered in the north, in Gaza City. So we were displaced repeatedly due to the ground invasions, at the beginning of the war, I was displaced to my grandfather's house, and it got bombed. I returned to my home until the Jews entered on us by land in Al-Shuja'iyah street" (S.,W, 25 years old).

3.3.4. Violence against civilians

Participants consistently highlighted indiscriminate attacks on civilians. Following the description of the physical and psychological dangers of daily life in Gaza:

"I saw the sea on the road of my displacement from the north to the south. The car sped forward at an unimaginable pace, as if it, too, was afraid, just like us. All of us kept our heads down so the bullets wouldn't reach us. My eyes caught a glimpse of the sea, the warships, launching shells. A shell hit a car in front of us, and bullets were going down on our windshield like a scene from a movie. The car swerved into a side street, and in that moment, we exhaled—the sea and the warships were out of sight, we were safe" (Y.,W, 20 years old).

"Until now, I have only spoken about the beloved sea in a good way. But the war has revealed its dark side. The coastline has become crowded to a great extent as a result of forced displacement westward, to the point that some of the displaced now sleep directly on the sand. The worst part? With every storm, the tents get flooded, people go missing, some literally freeze to death, facing the sea's strong winds. Sewage now also spills directly into the water, filling the air with a repulsive smell. Fishermen are bombed while they try to work. The airstrikes hit people daily, some get injured, some die. Even though the sea is still the sea, I've started to unconsciously hate it. Oh God, let the sea be sea again" (M.,M, 23 years old).

Additionally, it was emphasized the global neglect and human cost of the conflict:

“Everyone here is suffering in silence. No one is paying attention to this massacre and genocide we are living through, and enduring without being guilty of anything. Every day, we wake up to a new tragedy and new victims, all of them are children and women. I hope that someone will look at how we are suffering with mercy” (N.,W, 23 years old).

4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that psychological suffering in Gaza is fundamentally spatial, relational, and historically produced, rather than reducible to individual psychopathology. Participants’ narratives consistently foregrounded homes, streets, beaches, hospitals, and routes of displacement as central to their experiences of fear, grief, endurance, and meaning-making. These accounts resonate strongly with human geographical treatments of trauma that conceptualize suffering as embedded in place, atmosphere, and everyday spatial practices rather than located solely within individual minds (Castañeda, 2018; Pain, 2021).

From a critical geographical perspective, trauma emerges where violence is inscribed into the material and symbolic organization of space. In Gaza, the systematic destruction of homes, the enclosure of movement, and the conversion of ordinary environments into sites of danger illustrate how space itself becomes a medium of harm (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005; Weizman, 2024). Participants did not describe trauma as detached memories of discrete events, but as an ongoing condition continually reactivated by ruined neighborhoods, overcrowded shelters, militarized corridors, and uninhabitable coastlines. This aligns with geographical work on geotrauma, which emphasizes how place-based violence produces enduring psychological effects through repeated exposure to unsafe and destabilized environments (Pain, 2021).

Situating these findings within genocide studies further clarifies the role of space in producing suffering. The destruction of the built environment in Gaza is not incidental damage but a central mechanism of genocidal violence, aimed at dismantling the conditions necessary for collective life. This spatial strategy resonates with concepts such as spaciocide and domicide, which refuse to separate the annihilation of homes, infrastructures, and landscapes from violence against human life itself. Participants’ accounts of rubble, displacement, hunger, and exposure underscore how the loss of place simultaneously erodes identity, continuity, and psychological orientation, transforming everyday survival into a constant negotiation with danger and loss (Nixon, 2011; Ajjour, 2025).

Within this spatialized context, trauma cannot be understood as linear or sequential. The rhizomatic framework helps elucidate how suffering, resilience, solidarity, and resistance coexist and interconnect across multiple levels. Rather than unfolding as a progression from exposure to recovery, participants’ experiences revealed trauma as non-linear and distributed, branching across bodies, places, relationships, and temporalities (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Grief for destroyed homes coexisted with acts of mutual care; fear was interwoven with gratitude for relative shelter; despair intersected with assertions of humanity and belonging. The rhizome thus operates here not as an abstract metaphor but as an analytic tool that captures the multiplicity and simultaneity of lived experience under ongoing genocidal violence (Jones, 2023).

A decolonial lens further sharpens this analysis by situating trauma within the ongoing structures of settler-colonial domination. Decolonial geography exposes how colonial power reorganizes space through enclosure, erasure, and dispossession, while decolonial psychology interrogates how Western trauma frameworks risk depoliticizing suffering by abstracting it from these material conditions (Mignolo, 2021; Hook, 2016). Participants’ narratives resist such abstraction. Their accounts of hunger, displacement, and fear were inseparable from political histories,

collective memory, and the lived reality of occupation. Trauma here is not merely a response to violence but an expression of colonial conditions that continuously undermine the possibility of safety, futurity, and repair (Giacaman, 2017; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2014).

This has important implications for mental health provision. The findings caution against interventions that isolate distress from place or prioritize individual symptom management in the absence of material and spatial restoration. Participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of safety, shelter, routine, and social connection—elements historically sustained through Palestinian community-based practices of care, mutual aid, and collective resilience. A decolonial approach to mental health provision therefore entails supporting and rebuilding locally rooted infrastructures of care, rather than imposing externally designed therapeutic models detached from lived realities (Atallah, 2017; Veronese et al., 2023).

Decolonial mental health practice in Gaza must be understood as place-based and collective, oriented toward restoring social ties, supporting communal spaces, and enabling continuity of everyday life under extreme conditions. Such approaches already existed in Gaza prior to the genocide through family networks, community organizations, cultural practices, and informal support systems. The role of research and practice is not to replace these responses, but to recognize, protect, and amplify them in ways that respect epistemic sovereignty and local knowledge (Greenidge et al., 2025).

Finally, these findings underscore the need to reconceptualize trauma research in contexts of genocide as inherently spatial and political. By integrating critical geography, rhizomatic analysis, and decolonial psychology, this study demonstrates how psychological suffering is produced through the destruction of place, the fragmentation of social worlds, and the foreclosure of futurity. Trauma in Gaza is thus not only a psychological condition but a lived geography of loss, endurance, and resistance.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the intertwined psychological, material, and spatial burdens experienced by displaced Palestinians in Gaza under conditions of ongoing war and genocide. Participants’ narratives reveal how suffering is lived through the destruction of homes, neighborhoods, and everyday environments, producing profound disruptions to safety, identity, and social continuity. Trauma emerges not as an isolated psychological response but as a spatially embedded and relational condition shaped by prolonged displacement, material deprivation, and the erosion of places that sustain everyday life.

By integrating insights from critical human geography, rhizomatic theory, and decolonial psychology, the study advances an understanding of trauma as nonlinear, collective, and inseparable from space. The findings demonstrate how genocidal violence in Gaza operates through the systematic transformation of ordinary environments into sites of danger and loss, underscoring that the destruction of place is central to the production of psychological suffering. This spatialized perspective strengthens the analytic value of Gazacide by situating trauma within the broader processes of colonial violence, dispossession, and enforced uninhabitability.

The implications of these findings extend beyond theoretical contribution. Mental health responses in Gaza cannot be meaningfully developed without attention to the material, social, and political conditions that produce distress. Interventions that focus narrowly on individual symptoms risk obscuring the structural roots of suffering and overlooking the importance of place, safety, and collective life. Instead, the findings point toward approaches that support community-based forms of care, rebuild social and spatial connections, and attend to the everyday environments through which people sustain dignity and belonging. Such orientations resonate with broader critiques of humanitarian and psychiatric responses that detach mental health from lived social realities and power relations (Fassin, 2011; Bracken et al.,

2021).

At a moment of profound devastation, this study contributes evidence that psychological suffering in Gaza is inseparable from spatial destruction and collective loss. Understanding trauma as situated within landscapes of violence and endurance highlights the necessity of responses grounded in local knowledge, social networks, and the restoration of livable environments. In doing so, the research underscores the importance of approaches that recognize not only harm, but also the relational and spatial foundations through which Palestinian communities continue to assert life, humanity, and resilience amid ongoing genocide.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Guido Veronese: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Chiara Fiscono:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing. **Nermin Abudlebdeh:** Data curation, Writing – review & editing. **Abdelrahman Almqayyad:** Data curation, Writing – review & editing. **Tracy Lyn Chemaly:** Data curation.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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