



Gendered survival under genocidal violence: A decolonial feminist narrative study of women and displaced families in Gaza

Guido Veronese^{a,b,*}, Bilal Hamamra^c, Faye Mahamid^d, Federica Cavazzoni^a

^a University of Milano-Bicocca, Department of Human Sciences for Education "R. Massa", Milan, Italy

^b Department of Psychology, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

^c An-Najah National University, Department of English Language and Literature, Nablus, Palestine

^d An-Najah National University, Department of Psychology and Counseling, Nablus, Palestine

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on qualitative narrative testimonies from 35 displaced Palestinian refugee women collected during the 2024–2025 assault, the study illuminates the relational, embodied, and ethical labor through which life is sustained under siege. Using a decolonial feminist psychological framework, the study integrates structural analysis, narrative interpretation, and thematic mapping across six experiential domains: rupture of home, cyclical displacement, embodied precarity, silenced endurance, maternal survival work, and testimony as presence. The analysis challenges dominant trauma paradigms by situating emotional and bodily experiences within ongoing colonial violence, enclosure, and infrastructural collapse. Findings demonstrate how care, vigilance, moral restraint, and relational commitments form a coherent survival praxis. The study contributes to transnational feminist scholarship by foregrounding locally grounded knowledge production and offering an alternative understanding of psychological life that resists depoliticization and pathologization.

Introduction

The genocidal assault on Gaza between 2024 and 2025 unfolded within a longue durée of structural violence, settler colonial domination, and militarized enclosure (Verdeja, 2025). Gaza has long been characterized as a space of spatial and political confinement, where infrastructure, kinship networks, and domestic stability are repeatedly dismantled (Nijim, 2022). Within feminist scholarship, Gaza represents a critical site for interrogating how gender, power, and survival intersect under sustained colonial aggression (Ghadbian, 2025). This study positions the everyday experiences of women and gendered subjects not as peripheral narratives but as central analytic grounds for understanding how life is sustained amid systemic destruction. We establish the necessity of a decolonial feminist psychological approach that resists the abstraction of trauma and instead situates emotional, relational, and bodily experiences within historical and political structures (DiGeorgio-Lutz & Gosbee, 2016). Rather than interpreting distress as pathology, the goal is to trace how survival labor, moral agency, and relational ethics emerge in response to the deliberate dismantling of domestic, social, and ecological life (Lindgren, 2018). This framework aligns with indigenous and decolonial epistemologies commitment to centering

transnational feminist critique and amplifying knowledge from colonized contexts (Falcón, 2016).

While this is a women-centered study, the analytic focus on gendered subjectivity allows attention to how women's experiences are shaped by broader gendered regimes of violence, care, and moral responsibility under settler-colonial conditions (Kreft & Schulz, 2022).

Research on mental health in Palestine has consistently documented the psychological and social consequences of living under protracted siege, occupation, and recurrent military assaults (Veronese et al., 2021; Veronese et al., 2022). Quantitative studies from the West Bank and Gaza show high levels of depression, anxiety, and trauma-related symptoms in the general population, linked to displacement, economic hardship, and restrictions on movement (Marie et al., 2016; Zughbur et al., 2025). Recent work conducted during and after the 2023–2025 escalation indicates extremely high rates of probable PTSD, moderate-to-severe depression, and anxiety among adults and young people in Gaza, highlighting the cumulative impact of continuous exposure to bombardment, loss, and uncertainty (Aldabbour et al., 2024; Zughbur et al., 2025). Studies with university students living under siege further show how hopelessness, psychological distress, and reduced life opportunities coexist with forms of resilience and meaning-making

* Corresponding author at: Department of Human Sciences for Education "R. Massa", Piazza dell'Ateneo Nuovo 1, 2016, Milano, Italy.

E-mail address: guido.veronese@unimib.it (G. Veronese).

grounded in local social ecologies (Veronese et al., 2022).

Alongside epidemiological and clinical research, qualitative studies have explored how mental health is shaped by structural violence and everyday forms of oppression. Mental health providers working in Gaza describe a landscape of chronic blockage, material deprivation, and social fragmentation in which individual suffering cannot be separated from the blockade, infrastructural collapse, and ongoing political oppression (Diab et al., 2022; Hamamra et al., 2025a). Their accounts emphasize concerns about social problems, loss of quality of life, and the specific vulnerability of children and families exposed to repeated cycles of violence and displacement (Aldabbour et al., 2025; Diab et al., 2022; Marie et al., 2016). These findings support an ecological and politically informed understanding of distress that moves beyond individual diagnostic categories.

Feminist and decolonial perspectives further deepen this picture by focusing on how gender and power shape exposure to harm and possibilities for survival (Vergès, 2022). Work on militarization and violence against women in Palestine and other conflict zones in the Middle East shows how militarized logics penetrate both public and private spaces, increasing women's exposure to direct and structural violence and transforming domestic and maternal roles into sites of continual risk management (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2010, 2015). At the same time, research on mothering within political violence documents how Palestinian mothers mobilize care, vigilance, and moral responsibility to protect children and sustain family life, often at considerable psychological cost (Sousa et al., 2020). These feminist analyses resonate with decolonial accounts of necropolitics and colonial terror, which conceptualize Gaza as a paradigmatic space where sovereignty is exercised through the management of death and the exposure of populations to slow and spectacular violence (Cavazzoni et al., 2025a; Fanon, 1963; Mbembe, 2003).

Taken together, mental health in Gaza must be read through the lenses of structural violence, settler colonialism, gendered survival labor, and local forms of resilience and *sumūd* (steadfastness) (Veronese et al., 2025). The present study builds on these contributions by focusing on narrative testimonies of women and gendered subjects living through the most recent genocidal assault on Gaza, using a decolonial feminist framework to interpret their embodied, relational, and ethical practices of survival (Aldabbour et al., 2024; Diab et al., 2022; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2010, 2015).

The analysis is grounded in feminist psychology, intersectional feminist critique, postcolonial and decolonial theory. Feminist psychology emphasizes the sociopolitical embeddedness of emotional life and rejects individualized conceptualizations of distress (Brown, 2017). Intersectional feminist perspectives broaden this understanding by highlighting how gender norms and bodily regulation are intensified during militarized crises (Aslam, 2025). Postcolonial theory situates fear, exhaustion, and uncertainty within the historical violence of occupation, while decolonial psychology challenges Western frameworks that pathologize contextually adaptive responses (Gandhi, 2020). This theoretical constellation enables an interpretation of Gaza's narratives that foregrounds relationality, moral agency, and everyday resistance as integral to survival.

Methods

Design

This study utilizes a qualitative, narrative-centered methodology rooted in feminist and decolonial commitments. Testimonies were gathered through secure communication during the 2024–2025 assault. The purpose was not extraction but the creation of relational space enabling participants to articulate experiences in their own terms.

The study was guided by a commitment to non-extractive research practices rooted in feminist and decolonial methodologies. Non-extractiveness was conceptualized as an ethical stance that resists

treating participants' narratives as data to be mined, and instead prioritizes relational accountability, respect for limits, and participant agency. This orientation shaped the research process in concrete ways: interviews were conducted as open, flexible conversations rather than directive interrogations; participants retained control over what could be shared, withheld, or interrupted; silence, hesitation, and partial narration were treated as meaningful rather than as gaps to be filled; and consent was understood as ongoing rather than procedural. The researcher's role was framed as one of witnessing rather than elicitation, with analysis grounded in attentiveness to participants' meanings and conditions of articulation. In this context, "security" did not refer to an absolute or purely technical condition, which would be unattainable under ongoing violence and displacement. Rather, security was understood as a relative, relational, and ethical practice, co-constructed with participants. Technological measures (e.g., encrypted platforms, avoidance of traceable identifiers) were combined with psychological and relational safeguards, including participant control over timing, content, and interruption of communication, ongoing consent, and careful pacing to minimize distress. Particular attention was given to psychological safety, understood as the capacity to speak without coercion, pressure, or expectation of full disclosure, and to ethical safety, involving continuous assessment of risks related to exposure, retraumatization, and social harm. Data collection thus aimed not to guarantee safety in an absolute sense, but to create a *relatively safe space* grounded in trust, discretion, and respect for participants' agency within structurally unsafe conditions. Reflexive thematic analysis guided the interpretation, prioritizing participants' meanings, silences, and embodied descriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Participants included women and gendered subjects experiencing displacement, domestic disruption, caregiving burdens, and direct exposure to violence. All identifying details were removed. Analysis proceeded through immersive reading, collaborative theme development, and decolonial feminist interpretation that situates narratives within structures of colonial domination. The researcher acknowledges positionality as shaped by academic privilege and relative safety, and approaches the work through a lens of relational accountability and solidarity.

The authors' positionality is affected by intersecting locations of gender, academic positioning, and geopolitical privilege. As scholars working from outside Gaza, we write from conditions of relative safety, institutional protection, and academic mobility that stand in stark contrast to the lived realities of participants. At the same time, our engagement with Gaza is not abstract or episodic: it is grounded in long-standing scholarly, professional, and political relationships with Palestinian practitioners, researchers, and communities, as well as sustained commitments to decolonial and transnational feminist praxis. These relationships informed both access to the field and the ethical orientation of the research, while also foregrounding asymmetries of power, exposure, and risk. We understand knowledge production in this context as necessarily relational and politically situated, requiring ongoing reflexivity about how privilege, distance, and solidarity shape what can be asked, heard, interpreted, and represented. Acknowledging these positionalities does not resolve these tensions, but makes them visible as part of the conditions under which the research was conducted.

Participants

All participants in this study were Palestinian refugee women. Throughout the analysis, women are understood not only as a demographic category but as gendered subjects whose everyday practices of care, silence, endurance, and moral responsibility are shaped by the gendered organization of violence under siege and displacement. The term *gendered subjects* is therefore used analytically, not to displace women as the central focus of the study, but to foreground how gender operates as a structuring force in survival practices, vulnerability, and ethical labor within conditions of colonial and militarized violence. The study participants were Gazan refugees selected from internally

displaced Palestinian camps in the city of Rafah during the recent conflict in the Gaza Strip. The group comprised 35 women, aged between 19 and 60 years (mean age = 33.24 years, SD = 12.14). All participants were residing in Palestinian camps in Rafah. They were all sufficiently eligible and spoke Arabic to complete the research tasks. Eligibility criteria included being an adult refugee (aged 18 or older), currently experiencing displacement in Gaza, having sufficient proficiency in Arabic to participate in an interview, and being able to provide informed consent under the prevailing conditions. Eligibility was assessed pragmatically and ethically, taking into account participants' physical safety, emotional readiness, and situational capacity to engage at the time of contact, given the ongoing violence and instability.

In this study, all participants are legally recognized Palestinian refugees, while also experiencing acute internal displacement as a result of the ongoing assault. The term *refugee* is used in its political and legal sense, reflecting participants' inherited and internationally recognized status as Palestinian refugees. The term *displaced* is used descriptively to capture the immediate and repeated forced movements, loss of shelter, and precarious living conditions experienced during the 2024–2025 violence. Where possible, terminology has been harmonized, and distinctions are made explicit to reflect both the structural condition of refugeeness and the situational reality of ongoing internal displacement.

Data collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with displaced women living in various shelters across Gaza. The interviews were conducted in person or over the phone, depending on accessibility and security conditions. Data collection was conducted through a combination of in-person and remote interviews, determined by security conditions, mobility constraints, and participants' access to communication tools. A local researcher based in Gaza conducted in-person interviews when conditions allowed, while remote interviews were facilitated by team members operating outside Gaza through phone communication. These different modes of engagement shaped the research process in distinct ways: in-person encounters allowed for greater attention to embodied cues and immediate contextual awareness, while remote interviews required heightened sensitivity to pacing, privacy, and emotional containment in the absence of shared physical space. Across both modes, relational and ethical considerations guided decisions regarding timing, duration, and depth of engagement, with priority given to participants' safety and agency.

The interviews were conducted with informed consent, ensuring that participants were fully aware of the study's objectives and their right to withdraw at any time. The testimonies were translated and transcribed for analysis, preserving the original wording as much as possible to maintain authenticity. The data collection focused on gathering personal narratives that provide insight into their experiences of women during the conflict, providing a wide array of perspectives on the challenges they face. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, including those most affected by airstrikes and displacement. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 min.

Data analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed into Arabic by a native-speaking researcher. The written transcripts were analyzed using Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) methodology (Parker, 2005) to identify the main themes emerging from the material. A bottom-up, data-driven text analysis approach was applied to extract categories from the raw data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Each interview was carefully examined to identify concepts and statements containing similar words. The analysis process included the following steps: (a) conducting open coding analysis to derive the main themes from the participants' narratives; (b) coding and organizing the themes into structured texts; and (c) discussing and reaching agreement on categories or subcodes

with five judges.

Ethical approval and oversight

This study received ethical approval from the An-Najah National University Ethic Committee, approval number (Mas. Mar. 2025/10). Given the context of ongoing genocidal violence, ethical review emphasized relational safety, minimization of harm, and participants' ongoing control over disclosure rather than proceduralized notions of risk management. Consent was understood as an ongoing process, and participation could be interrupted or withdrawn at any point without consequence. All procedures complied with international ethical standards for research with human participants under conditions of extreme vulnerability.

Findings

The analysis revealed six interrelated themes that illuminate how women in Gaza navigate survival amid genocidal violence. Participants described *the shattered threshold of home* becoming a *scene of violence*, as domestic spaces collapsed under bombardment and intrusion. They spoke of *displacement as a distinctly gendered condition of vulnerability*, marked by continual uprooting and the strain of maintaining safety in unstable environments. Narratives highlighted *the body as both target and testament*, carrying fear, deprivation, and moral endurance. Participants also revealed *silence as a grammar of survival*, used to manage stigma, protect dignity, and preserve fragile social cohesion. Central throughout was *maternal resilience and the ethics of care*, where caregiving became a vital infrastructure of protection and meaning. Finally, many articulated *testimony as a reclamation of dignity*, using speech to bear witness against erasure and affirm presence despite overwhelming violence.

The shattered threshold: home as a scene of violence

The interviews uncover how domestic spaces, once symbols of protection and belonging, have turned into sites where fear, grief, and aggression intertwine, erasing boundaries between the external war and the inner sanctum of family life. The women's and men's voices carry the rhythms of shock, hesitation, and disbelief, as if every word were pulled from the rubble itself. One woman said that “the house fell before I could reach my daughter; I ran barefoot, and in that moment I realized there is no difference between the sky that bombs us and the walls that trap us” (31, Khan Younis). Her tone wavers between breathless terror and revelation, revealing a realization forged in catastrophe. One woman said that “after the roof collapsed, I hid with my children in what used to be our kitchen, but the smell of smoke mixed with fear until I could no longer tell which one was inside me” (37, Gaza City). Her phrasing, circular and repetitive, captures the disorientation of trauma. One woman said that “my husband screamed at the children to be silent; later he wept, then struck me, saying the noise might bring death back” (33, Beit Lahia). The gesture of striking becomes both confession and containment of terror. Across these interviews, tone and cadence register the breakdown of moral order: pauses replace clarity, breaths replace punctuation, and language itself trembles between articulation and collapse.

In the second group of interviews, displacement and confinement appear as extensions of domestic ruin, where the ordinary gestures of feeding, cleaning, and guarding acquire new political and emotional weight. One woman said that “I used to cook for my family; now I cook for strangers in the shelter, and every meal tastes like loss” (42, Deir al-Balah). Her rhythm slows around the word loss, transforming daily routine into ritual lament. One man said that “at night the men argue about who guards the door, though the door is gone; we pretend the curtain is a wall so the women can sleep” (46, Rafah). His phrasing, fragmented and ironic, mimics the exhaustion of endless vigilance. One woman said that “the home was destroyed, but its ghosts remain; every

argument, every silence echoes louder here than the planes above us" (40, Jabalia). The repetition of every intensifies her awareness of sound as haunting. The oral tone of these interviews is subdued yet heavy with endurance; the speakers gesture while recalling, their voices lowering when mentioning children or silence. In their words, the home becomes not only a ruin but a psychological threshold between life and erasure, where the act of speaking reclaims fragments of safety that architecture could no longer provide.

Displacement and the gender of vulnerability

The interviews expose displacement not as movement but as an unending repetition of departure, a lived condition in which each relocation erases the illusion of safety and inscribes new forms of vulnerability upon the body. The participants' voices carry the exhaustion of constant readiness, their pauses heavy with the impossibility of rest. One woman said that "we walk with the children from camp to camp, carrying our food on our heads, and every road smells the same—dust, sweat, and someone else's grief" (29, Gaza City). Her tone carries both fatigue and submission, collapsing individuality into the shared odor of despair. One woman said that "at every checkpoint I cover my daughter's face, not because of modesty but because I fear the look of pity from soldiers" (36, Khan Younis). The gesture of covering becomes protective theatre, a bodily performance of fear and dignity intertwined. One woman said that "I sleep with my shoes on so I can run again; it's strange how even rest feels like disobedience here" (32, Deir al-Balah). Her phrasing trembles between irony and sorrow, transforming rest into an act of rebellion against uncertainty. Across these interviews, tone operates as a map of psychic endurance: sentences taper into murmurs, pauses elongate where fear lives, and repetition replaces closure. The displaced speak in rhythms of interruption, their syntax itself testifying to the permanence of exile.

The interviews with men and women together illustrate how displacement unravels gendered roles, leaving behind fragile performances of care, protection, and shame enacted within collapsing hierarchies. One man said that "I walk behind my wife and daughters at night, pretending I can guard them, but in truth I just count their steps to make sure they're still here" (41, Rafah). His confession carries a trembling honesty, his words folding protection into arithmetic survival. One woman said that "in the line for water, hands brush against us, words are whispered we can't answer, and we stare at the ground pretending not to hear" (27, Gaza City). Her voice lowers on pretending, embodying silence as a shield. One woman said that "we hide behind sacks of flour when we change clothes, laughing loudly so no one notices how we tremble" (30, Beit Lahia). The laughter, almost forced, reveals how fear disguises itself in gestures of composure. These spoken moments emerge as fragments of moral theatre: counting, pretending, laughing—each movement carrying the dual weight of endurance and exposure. Tone and gesture together transform displacement from geography into condition, from the loss of place into the loss of rest, creating an existence defined by alertness, where survival is rehearsed rather than lived.

The body as target and testament

The interviews reveal that the body in Gaza is not only a biological entity but an archive of humiliation and faith, a living surface upon which loss, dignity, and endurance are inscribed through gesture and speech. The interviewees spoke slowly, often lowering their eyes when recalling what their bodies had witnessed, as if remembering were itself an act of exposure. One woman said that "during the nights in the camp, I lie awake and count my breaths, afraid that even the sound of living could invite harm" (30, Rafah). Her voice wavered between fear and defiance, transforming breath into the smallest and most sacred form of resistance. One woman said that "I feed my children before I eat so that the emptiness in my stomach reminds me I am still alive" (35, Gaza City). The rhythm of her statement suggests ritual, her hunger

reimagined as devotion. One woman said that "a soldier shouted at me to uncover my face; I felt naked even though I was clothed, as though modesty itself had been stripped away from the air" (27, Khan Younis). Her phrasing reveals how colonial domination enters the realm of the spiritual, turning modesty into a battlefield. Tone, in these interviews, trembles between confession and prophecy. The women's gestures—covering faces, withholding food, guarding breath—carry the moral gravity of testimony; the body becomes both wound and witness, the site where trauma and survival converge.

The men's interviews reveal a parallel awareness of bodily vulnerability, where masculinity is reframed through helplessness, care, and moral witnessing. Their tone is quieter, burdened by recognition that protection has become symbolic rather than physical. One man said that "I held my wife's hand as she gave birth in the shelter; I washed the blood with rainwater because there were no doctors, only prayers" (41, Beit Lahia). His pauses marked reverence, as if cleansing were a sacrament. One man said that "at night, I hear women whispering of men who touch them in the dark; I want to stop it, but fear has made us all smaller than ourselves" (45, Deir al-Balah). The repetition of fear reveals shame and paralysis. One man said that "we walk side by side, but I feel her steps heavier than mine; she carries not only the children but the shame the world placed on her" (38, Gaza City). The metaphor of weight redefines care as shared suffering. Across these interviews, speech and gesture interlace: trembling hands, prolonged silences, tightened throats. Tone itself becomes moral resistance, restoring humanity to the damaged body. The act of speaking transforms flesh into scripture, converting survival into testimony, and asserting that endurance itself is the final act of justice.

Silence, stigma, and the grammar of fear

The interviews show that silence functions not as absence but as a carefully regulated communicative practice—an intentional survival strategy through which individuals manage the layered dynamics of fear, shame, and social risk that structure life within displaced communities. The pauses, half-spoken phrases, and unfinished sentences recorded in these conversations illustrate how trauma restructures communication, forcing language to retreat into gesture and breath. One woman said that "we whisper at night about what happened, and even the children know those words are forbidden because they belong to the darkness" (29, Rafah). Her tone lowered as she said darkness, her voice sinking into the very thing she named. One woman said that "I told no one about the man who followed me from the water line; in the camp, stories become rumors, and rumors destroy women faster than hunger" (33, Gaza City). Her emphasis on destroy revealed moral exhaustion rather than rage, her silence less a void than an ethical negotiation. One woman said that "I sleep beside my sister, holding her hand, not because I'm afraid of the bombs but because I'm afraid of voices that sound too kind" (30, Khan Younis). Her nervous laughter before the word kind signaled the corrosion of trust. Tone and gesture here operate as emotional punctuation: sighs, lowered eyes, and folded arms articulate what cannot safely be said. In these interviews, silence is not ignorance but resistance, a language without grammar that shields dignity from the violence of exposure.

The male and female interviewees alike position silence as both complicity and confession, navigating an ethical labyrinth where speech can endanger as much as it redeems. Their voices waver between empathy and paralysis, revealing that the social order of displacement depends on what remains unspoken. One man said that "in the shelter, women cry without sound; we pretend not to see, because seeing means asking, and asking can destroy what little peace remains" (41, Deir al-Balah). His deliberate pause before destroy exposed the shame embedded in observation. One man said that "a woman told me her husband beats her at night so others won't hear, and she thanks him for the silence because it keeps her children safe" (36, Gaza City). The irony of thanks carried unbearable weight, his tone turning reflective and

subdued. One woman said that “I wanted to tell the doctor what happened, but she was surrounded by men, and my voice turned to air before it reached her” (28, Beit Lahia). The imagery of vanishing voice becomes metaphor for moral erasure. The pacing of these spoken narratives—broken, elliptical, suspended—transforms the interview setting into an ethical space where the researcher listens to the unsayable. Silence delineates the limits of speech while reflecting the persistence of dignity that refuses to be consumed by fear.

Maternal resilience and the ethics of care

The interviews reveal that motherhood in Gaza has transformed from a domestic role into a moral and political vocation, where nurturing the living amid the dead becomes an act of defiance against annihilation. The cadence of the women's voices—measured, fatigued, and unwavering—suggests that care itself has become a language of resistance, a grammar of survival articulated through touch and repetition. One woman said that “I mix flour with rainwater to feed my children, and while they eat, I tell them this is how bread tastes when made from patience” (37, Rafah). Her tone trembled on the word patience, shaping hunger into a theology of endurance. One woman said that “my son asks why I smile when I cry, and I tell him it's because a mother's tears are meant to clean her children's fear” (33, Khan Younis). The rhythm of her statement mimicked prayer, her tears transformed into liturgy. One woman said that “the shelter smells of sickness, but I keep washing the blankets, because keeping them clean makes me believe our lives can be clean again too” (40, Gaza City). Her gesture, described softly, elevated hygiene into sacrament. In tone and structure, these interviews communicate moral steadfastness; pauses convey contemplation rather than despair, and metaphor transforms exhaustion into grace. Each woman's testimony positions care as the last form of agency, where tenderness becomes resistance and compassion becomes the architecture of meaning.

The interviews with men register reverence and remorse, as if the act of observing maternal resilience unsettled and redefined their understanding of responsibility. Their phrasing is slow, their tone marked by humility and recognition. One man said that “at night I hear women whispering prayers over sleeping children, and I think those whispers hold the city together better than any wall ever did” (45, Deir al-Balah). His emphasis on together blurred the boundary between faith and architecture. One man said that “my wife gave her food to the children and fainted; I called it sacrifice, but she called it duty, and that word broke my heart” (41, Beit Lahia). The contrast between sacrifice and duty exposes gendered expectations of devotion. One man said that “in the morning I saw a woman cleaning a bloodstained floor with her scarf, saying she wanted the children to remember love, not blood” (30, Gaza City). The sensory image of fabric against blood merges tenderness with defiance. The oral tone of these interviews suggests a transformation of care into theology: speech slows, sentences unfold with reverence, and pauses become sites of reflection. Through gesture and rhythm, caregiving transcends survival; it becomes an ethical act that binds the community through mercy when institutions and structures have failed.

Bearing witness: reclaiming dignity through speech

The interviews reveal that speaking itself has become Gaza's final act of survival, a reclamation of moral ground through the fragile material of voice. The participants spoke with measured intensity, as though aware that every sentence was both confession and defiance. Their tone shifted between calm and tremor, oscillating between exposure and reclamation. One woman said that “I talk even when no one listens, because my words are the only thing they haven't managed to bomb yet” (35, Rafah). Her delivery was steady, the faintest irony turning speech into shelter. One woman said that “I told my story to a stranger with a notebook; she cried, and I felt guilty for making her feel what I live every day” (32, Khan Younis). The cadence of felt guilty lingered, her words

performing the tension between empathy and exhaustion. One woman said that “we stand in line for water, and I tell the woman beside me about my sister; she says she lost one too, and our pain starts to sound the same” (30, Gaza City). The repetition of sound the same conveys shared rhythm as solidarity. Tone and gesture fuse here—voices lower, shoulders stiffen, eyes close briefly—as speaking becomes ritual. These interviews demonstrate that language can reclaim what violence seeks to erase; each syllable, shaped by survival, becomes a boundary between memory and oblivion.

The men's voices transform testimony into moral reflection, exposing how silence, once a form of pride, becomes complicity under atrocity. They speak with hesitation, their pauses carrying ethical weight. One man said that “I used to be silent because I thought men should not cry, but now silence feels like betrayal; every tear carries someone else's story” (45, Deir al-Balah). The rhythm of every tear extends the confession into collective mourning. One man said that “I listen to women talk about what they suffered, and I realize their words are not complaints—they are warnings to the world about what we have become” (38, Beit Lahia). The word warnings emerges with restrained anger, a prophetic tone breaking through humility. One man said that “sometimes I write on the walls of the tent—names, prayers, numbers—so that even if I die, someone will know we tried to speak” (42, Khan Younis). His gesture of inscribing transforms voice into permanence. In these interviews, tone, rhythm, and imagery expose the sanctity of articulation: pauses resemble prayer, hesitations mirror moral burden, and words replace the ruins of institutions. Through testimony, dignity is rebuilt not as abstraction but as sound—the trembling assertion that presence endures even when everything else has been turned to dust.

Discussion

The findings make clear that survival in Gaza emerges not from individualized resilience but from relational, embodied, and ethical labor shaped by structural and colonial violence (Atallah et al., 2021; Barber, 2013; Giacaman, 2020). Each theme reveals specific modes through which participants navigate the collapse of domestic infrastructures, the instability of shelter, the precarity of the body, the politics of silence, the intensification of caregiving, and the reclamation of voice (Hamamra et al., 2025b; Veronese et al., 2025). Our findings offered an integrated analysis of how daily life activities in Gaza constitute a coherent survival praxis under genocidal conditions. The destruction of domestic space emerges as both material and symbolic rupture (Polanska, 2024; Stagni, 2025). Participants' testimonies show how homes become permeable to violence, erasing the distinction between public assault and private refuge. This aligns with feminist analyses of militarized settings, where domesticity becomes a frontline rather than a sanctuary (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2010, 2025). The collapse of home structures forces continuous renegotiation of care, authority, and safety, revealing how structural violence reorganizes intimate life (Golańska, 2022). The fear, aggression, and disorientation described by participants demonstrate how colonial warfare penetrates kinship relations, reshaping emotional rhythms and communication (Jackson, 2018). This supports research showing that Gazan families face psychological distress not only from bombardment but from the moral injuries produced by the destruction of familiar space and routine (Diab et al., 2022; Marie et al., 2016). The breakdown of the home thus becomes an early register of societal disintegration, where survival depends on reconfiguring domestic life under catastrophic conditions (Akesson, 2023).

Displacement appears not as mobility but as forced, repetitive uprooting that erodes stability and stretches gendered expectations. Participants describe displacement as a condition of permanent readiness—walking, guarding, scanning, pretending—aligning with studies showing that repeated dislocation is a primary driver of mental distress in Gaza (Aldabbour et al., 2024; Zughbur et al., 2025). Gendered

vulnerability surfaces through both external threats and internalized expectations: women manage crowding, exposure, and harassment, while men struggle with the collapse of provider-protector roles. Intersectional feminist perspectives highlight how militarized crises intensify normative gender scripts and simultaneously expose their fragility (Werth & Zien, 2024). As domestic routines disappear, bodily and emotional labor is redistributed, often unequally, leading to heightened exhaustion and moral strain. Displacement thus becomes a gendered theatre of endurance, where social roles are strained yet reconfigured through acts of mutual protection, improvisation, and shared vigilance.

Participants' narratives reveal the body as both vulnerable and morally expressive. Women speak of breath, hunger, modesty, and exposure, capturing how colonial violence is inscribed on the body through deprivation, surveillance, and humiliation. These testimonies echo decolonial accounts of necropolitics, where the body becomes the primary site through which domination and survival are negotiated (Deprez, 2023; Mbembe, 2003). Yet the body also becomes a medium of agency: counting breaths, withholding food, guarding gestures, and maintaining ritualized movements turn bodily discipline into testimony (Mukim et al., 2025). Embodiment is a central dimension of emotional life, particularly in contexts where trauma reorganizes sensory and affective experience (Baker, 2020). Participants' descriptions reflect how bodily practices become ethical acts that resist dehumanization, aligning with research in Gaza showing how physical endurance and caregiving ritualize resilience (Veronese et al., 2021). The body thus functions simultaneously as archive, threshold, and declaration (Fassin, 2011).

Silence emerges as an adaptive, ethically charged strategy rather than a void. Participants describe silence as protection from rumor, shame, surveillance, and retaliation. This reflects findings from feminist studies in conflict zones that document silence as a form of survival—particularly for gender-based violence—where disclosure risks social harm or renewed danger (Rowe & Malhotra, 2013; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2003, 2015; Sousa et al., 2020). The testimonies show how silence regulates social relationships inside shelters, maintaining fragile solidarity while managing fear. Men's interviews reveal how silence also operates as moral hesitation, balancing empathy with the risk of destabilizing community order. Silence becomes a grammar of survival, where what cannot be spoken preserves dignity and cohesion. This intersects with decolonial psychology, which critiques Western expectations of disclosure as inherently therapeutic, showing that in Gaza silence is contextually rational, relational, and morally encoded (Ferrari, 2020).

Maternal labor emerges as a central survival infrastructure. Caregiving becomes not a private act but a political and ethical practice sustaining families amid deprivation (Negi, 2025; Paryente, 2025). Participants' narratives depict care as ritual, devotion, and moral duty, aligning with research showing that Palestinian mothers sustain community coherence through vigilance, emotional regulation, and sacrificial resource distribution (Sousa et al., 2020; Sousa & Veronese, 2022). These acts challenge individualistic models of coping, demonstrating relational forms of resilience grounded in obligation, tenderness, and moral clarity. The men's testimonies reveal how maternal resilience destabilizes gender hierarchies, producing reverence, guilt, and transformed understandings of responsibility. Feminist and transfeminist perspectives interpret caregiving as political agency in conditions where institutional support has collapsed (Fischer & Dolezal, 2018). Maternal labor becomes a crucial epistemic site where survival practices are generated, cultivated, and transmitted.

Participants frame speech as one of the last remaining forms of agency. Testimony—whether whispered, written, or shared between strangers—becomes a means of asserting presence against erasure. This echoes scholarship documenting how speaking under oppression is both burden and resistance, transforming memory into political action (Fanon, 1963; Ndayisenga, 2022). The act of witnessing reconstitutes dignity, redistributing pain into shared moral space. Speech counters the

isolating effects of displacement and the silencing pressures of shame or surveillance. Even when narratives tremble or trail off, voice becomes a fragile material through which participants reclaim authorship of their experiences (Medina, 2023). This aligns with epistemic accounts of testimony as embodied praxis that resists institutional erasure and asserts relational subjectivity (Sippel & Ucelo Jiménez, 2025).

All in all, the themes illustrate a survival praxis rooted not in psychological resilience as conventionally defined but in relational ethics, embodied discipline, and collective meaning-making. These practices arise directly from Gaza's conditions of siege, displacement, deprivation, and structural violence (Hammad & Tribe, 2020). The participants' strategies—rebuilding domestic life, navigating displacement, regulating bodily vulnerability, engaging in strategic silence, sustaining caregiving, and bearing witness—are not isolated coping mechanisms but interconnected responses generated within networks of care, obligation, and resistance (Krystalli & Schulz, 2022).

The analysis suggests that survival in Gaza is inherently collective, gendered, and political (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2025). The experiences described challenge frameworks that individualize trauma, instead showing that emotional and bodily life is structured by historical, material, and colonial forces. At the same time, the findings demonstrate profound moral agency: participants organize care, manage fear, sustain dignity, and produce knowledge despite conditions designed to destroy social fabric. These practices form an alternative epistemology—one grounded in lived experience, relational interdependence, and ethical clarity.

Ultimately, the findings call for psychological and humanitarian approaches that recognize survival not as an individual trait but as a shared labor embedded in historical, political, and gendered realities. By foregrounding voices from Gaza, this study contributes to transnational feminist scholarship and challenges depoliticized understandings of trauma, offering a grounded account of how life is maintained under genocidal violence.

Limitations

This study is shaped by several methodological and contextual limitations that must be acknowledged, particularly given the extreme conditions under which the narratives were produced. First, the data were collected during an ongoing genocidal assault, which imposed significant constraints on communication, privacy, safety, and continuity. Interruptions due to bombardment, displacement, loss of electricity, or uncertainty may have restricted participants' ability to elaborate on their experiences or revisit earlier narratives. As such, the accounts reflect moments of articulation within a rapidly shifting landscape of danger rather than stable or complete life histories.

Second, although the study centers women across multiple shelter sites and displacement conditions, it does not claim representativeness. The sample is shaped by who was available, reachable, and willing to speak in an environment where testimony can carry personal and communal risks. Voices from certain groups—older women, adolescents, people with disabilities, and those in the most isolated or heavily bombarded areas—may be underrepresented. This limits the breadth of social positions captured within the themes.

Third, the reliance on secure messaging and remote communication, while ethically necessary, constrained the depth of embodied and interactional cues typically observable in qualitative interviews. The inability to conduct repeat or follow-up interviews further limited opportunities to clarify ambiguous elements, explore narrative contradictions, or deepen specific threads that emerged spontaneously.

Fourth, the researcher's positionality—operating from outside Gaza and benefiting from relative safety and institutional privilege—shapes both the interpretive lens and the relational dynamic. While efforts were made to engage reflexively and with accountability, the power asymmetry inherent in knowledge production across borders cannot be fully neutralized. Interpretation is therefore influenced by both the

testimonies themselves and the researcher's analytical commitments within feminist, transnational feminist, and decolonial frameworks.

Finally, the study focuses on thematic interpretation rather than longitudinal change. The findings capture affective, relational, and ethical responses within a discrete period of extreme violence but cannot account for how these practices evolve over time, especially if conditions worsen, stabilize, or transform. Future research rooted in long-term, community-led qualitative inquiry would be necessary to build on the insights developed here.

Despite these limitations, the narratives analyzed offer rare, urgently needed insight into the lived experiences of gendered survival under settler-colonial annihilation. The constraints of the research context are themselves part of the story, revealing how knowledge must be produced differently when the world of participants is being dismantled in real time.

Conclusion

This study contributes to transnational feminist and decolonial scholarship by illustrating how women in Gaza enact life-sustaining practices amid genocidal violence (Ihmoud, 2025). Their narratives reveal a survival praxis anchored in relational ethics, embodied care, and political presence, challenging psychological frameworks that individualize trauma and detach suffering from the structural realities of settler-colonial oppression (Henninger & Marion, 2025; Thomas et al., 2023). By centering lived experience, the study foregrounds forms of knowledge typically erased in humanitarian and clinical discourse, offering a grounded understanding of how survival emerges through collective, ethical, and gendered labor (Mullan, 2023).

The findings point to the limits of Western-derived clinical models that treat distress as an individual pathology. Mental health professionals working with Palestinian communities—locally or in diaspora—must adopt approaches that honor contextual trauma, recognize collective forms of coping, and avoid depoliticizing clients' experiences (Atallah & Abu-Jamei, 2025). Interventions should integrate narrative, embodied, and relational modalities that align with local cultural practices and gendered forms of care. Culturally responsive frameworks must acknowledge that symptoms of fear, vigilance, exhaustion, or silence are often adaptive responses to ongoing violence, not signs of dysfunction.

The themes highlight the need for community-wide interventions that bolster relational networks, restore social cohesion, and support caregiving structures. Shelter-based programming should consider overcrowding, gendered vulnerability, and the ethical burdens placed on mothers and young people. Interventions that mobilize peer support, collective storytelling, and safe spaces for women can reinforce social resilience while respecting the risks associated with disclosure and visibility (Cavazzoni et al., 2025b; Jawad et al., 2025). Strengthening the capacity of local practitioners—who themselves endure the violence—is essential to sustainable psychosocial support.

The testimonies demonstrate that mental health cannot be meaningfully addressed without confronting the political conditions producing mass suffering. Policy efforts must prioritize ending the blockade, ensuring safe movement, restoring infrastructure, and protecting civilians (Veronese & Kagee, 2025). International agencies must shift from short-term humanitarian responses toward policies that recognize structural violence as a primary determinant of mental health. Gender-responsive protections are urgently needed to reduce exposure to gender-based violence during displacement, overcrowding, and sheltering.

Human rights, mental health, and the necessity of ending colonial violence

The study underscores the inseparability of mental health and human rights. As long as systematic colonial violence

continues—including bombardment, forced displacement, enclosure, deprivation, and gender-targeted harm—psychosocial suffering will intensify across generations (El-Khoury et al., 2025). Protecting mental health in Gaza requires more than service delivery: it demands the dismantling of structures that produce death, dispossession, and social rupture. Women's and men's narratives show that survival is continually negotiated against forces designed to erase them. Ending the assault on Gaza and addressing the conditions of occupation are not political preferences but urgent mental health imperatives (Abuward et al., 2025).

Future studies should adopt longitudinal, community-led designs to document how survival practices evolve over time, especially as displacement becomes protracted and as families navigate long-term loss. Research should include underrepresented groups such as adolescents, older adults, and people with disabilities, whose gendered and embodied experiences of violence remain understudied. Methods must privilege relational ethics, co-production with local practitioners, and decolonial accountability to avoid extractive research models (Atallah, 2025). There is also a critical need for feminist, trauma-informed mapping (Stevens-Uninsky et al., 2025) of how environmental destruction, displacement routes, and shelter infrastructures shape psychological life.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Guido Veronese: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Formal analysis. **Bilal Hamamra:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Fayez Mahamid:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Federica Cavazzoni:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Data curation.

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