

The Impact of the War in Gaza on Children's Right to Education: A Qualitative Study of Local and International Social Work Interventions¹

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of the ongoing war in Gaza on children's right to education and the role of social work in addressing these challenges. Drawing on a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews with educators and social workers in Gaza and the West Bank, alongside document analysis of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and institutional reports, this study highlights the widespread destruction of educational infrastructure, forced displacement, and severe psychosocial distress among both children and professionals. Schools have been repurposed as shelters, repeatedly targeted in attacks, and have thus become unsuitable as safe learning environments. Educational needs extend beyond academic instruction to include trauma-informed interventions, psychosocial support, inclusive facilities, and curricula adapted to post-conflict realities. Social workers, often operating under life-threatening conditions, combine community-based initiatives with advocacy, integrating psychosocial care into emergency education and documenting rights violations. Yet these efforts are hindered by the blockade, limited resources, bombardments, repeated evacuation orders, and insufficient international solidarity, including global social work institutions. The study argues for decolonizing social work practice, centering Palestinian voices, and embedding education protection within humanitarian, legal, and political frameworks. Recommendations for social work include strengthening community-led responses, advocating for structural change to safeguard education as a fundamental right during and after conflict, and rethinking the role of social work as a human rights profession in the Gaza context.

Key Words:

Gaza, right to education, social work, armed conflict, children's rights

1 Introduction

Human Rights Watch (2024a) has raised serious concerns about the global rise in attacks on education. In 2023 alone, 475 attacks on schools in Palestine were reported, many involving airstrikes or ground offensives with explosive weapons. These actions not only destroyed educational infrastructure but also caused injuries and the killing of students

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and educators. Moreover, the use of school buildings by armed or non-state armed groups increased the risk of them being targeted (Human Rights Watch, 2024a).

The current war in Gaza began after Hamas' October 7, 2023, attack on Israel. In response, the Israeli government launched a large-scale military operation in Gaza, one that has disproportionately affected civilians, especially women, children, and persons with disabilities (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2025). The demographic structure of the Palestinian population must be taken into account in this context. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2023), around 40% of the population is under the age of 14, and nearly half of Gaza's 2.23 million residents are under 18. These children fall under the full protection of international law, particularly the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (adopted 20/11/1989, entered into force 2/9/1990, 1577 UNTS 3, 1989 CRC). However, these rights remain largely theoretical in the current context.

As in many armed conflicts, children are among the first to suffer from hostilities between Hamas and the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF). Yet the current war in Gaza is not the only factor contributing to their vulnerability. Long before October 2023, children in Gaza lived under siege conditions. The 17-year blockade had already severely restricted access to basic rights, including education (Bashir, 2024). The war has now turned this crisis into a humanitarian catastrophe.

The IDF has repeatedly justified airstrikes on schools in Gaza by claiming they were being used as command centres by Hamas (Davies, 2025). However, the extent of the destruction, the high number of civilian deaths, and the consistent targeting of educational facilities raise serious legal and moral concerns.

While the war in Gaza has triggered extensive social, political, legal, and international debates, the direct impact on civil society, particularly children, remains underexplored. Children's specific vulnerabilities, whose development and well-being are deeply affected by war, require urgent attention. Against this background, it is essential to examine both the violations of their right to education and the measures taken to protect it. This requires an understanding of the legal framework and the educational needs of children in the current context and the role and limitations of social work in addressing these challenges. Based on this context, the research is guided by the following research question:

- How has the current war in Gaza impacted children's right to education, and what role has social work played in addressing these challenges?

Sub-questions:

- What are the immediate and long-term educational needs of children affected by the war in Gaza?
- How have local and international social work interventions adapted their approaches to address educational challenges during the war?
- What key constraints limit social work interventions in protecting children's right to education?

This study not only provides a critical analysis of violations but also develops recommendations for social work research and practice, aimed at strengthening its role in protecting educational rights during and after conflict.

The article first establishes the theoretical framework by examining international legal protections for children in armed conflicts, then contextualizes the Gaza context through key historical events and the state of the educational system before the war. It proceeds with education and social work in conflict settings, followed by the methodology, findings and a critical discussion. Finally, it presents practice-oriented recommendations and concludes with key insights and implications for future research.

2 Legal Frameworks

2.1 International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law

Children's rights are specifically protected under International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL) in conflict-affected areas. Relevant legal instruments include the 1989 CRC, the *Geneva Conventions* (adopted 12/8/1949, entered into force 21/10/1950, 75 UNTS 287, 1949 GC), and their *Additional Protocols* (AP). The term "child" is defined in Art. 1 of the 1989 CRC as "every human being below the age of eighteen years unless the local law applicable to the child establishes the age of majority earlier."

The *Hague Conventions*, which contain rules to regulate warfare, provide general rules on occupation (ICRC, n.d.). The Hague Law is internationally binding on all states, regardless of formal acceptance, as it is considered customary international law (Crawford & Pert, 2015). Art. 42 of the *Hague Regulations* (adopted 18/10/1907, entered into force 26/1/1910, 36 Stat. 2277, 187 CTS 227, 1907 HC IV) states that "[t]erritory is considered to be occupied when it is actually placed under the authority of the hostile army." Since the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) has been under Israeli occupation since 1967, the occupying power is required to comply with specific obligations under IHL (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Israel claims to have withdrawn from Gaza in 2005 and argues that Gaza is therefore not occupied and not subject to the law of occupation (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The United Nations (UN), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and various non-governmental human rights organizations contradict Israel's claims (Coop, 2024). Even though Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, as governing bodies, bear responsibility for protecting the rights of their populations, Israel still has obligations as the occupying power (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

IHL emphasizes the special protection of children due to their unique vulnerability (Bolborici, 2024). It regulates the conduct of both state and non-state actors in armed conflict by setting legal boundaries on the use of force and establishing obligations to protect civilians and other non-combatants (Crawford & Pert, 2015). IHRL, unlike IHL, applies in all situations, both in peacetime and during armed conflict (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Children's rights are enshrined in the 1989 CRC, which emphasizes special measures to ensure children's development and protection.

In 2024, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) criticized the impunity, arguing that the absence of consequences sends a dangerous message regarding the acceptance of multilateral systems. Independent human rights experts documented crimes against humanity and war crimes, including indiscriminate attacks on educational institutions and the targeting of humanitarian workers (OHCHR, 2024). The unlawfulness and disregard for binding measures are further supported by the political protection Israel receives from its allies, who often question the legitimacy of international institutions, mandate holders (OHCHR, 2024), or the jurisdiction of the International

Criminal Court (ICC). Consequently, the success of international criminal justice and accountability for crimes against children depends heavily on the support of other states, civil society organizations, and communities (Amann, 2019).

2.2 Education as a Fundamental Right

While IHL does not provide a specific right to education, it offers provisions aimed at protecting educational institutions and students during armed conflicts. In contrast, IHRL explicitly affirms the right to education (Akbariavaz & Tehrani, 2020). Art. 26 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (adopted 10/12/1948, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 217 A (III), 1948 UDHR) declares education as a universal right, essential for the full development of human personality.

Art. 28 of the 1989 CRC explicitly recognizes every child's right to education, emphasizing the need for accessible, inclusive, and quality learning opportunities. This right is reinforced by Art. 13 of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (adopted 16/12/1966, entered into force 3/1/1976, 993 UNTS 3, 1966 ICESCR), which obligates states and the international community to secure access to education even during emergencies. Additionally, Art. 24 of the 1949 GC IV clarifies that occupying powers must ensure the provision of facilities necessary to protect and educate children.

The right to education is also underscored by intergovernmental commitments like the Safe Schools Declaration (GCPEA, 2015) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 (UN, n.d.a).

However, as demonstrated in the previous section, these legal and policy frameworks remain severely limited. The current conflict exemplifies this violation, affecting both educational infrastructure and access to learning opportunities. Francesca Albanese, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, highlighted in her country report A/79/384 *Genocide as Colonial Erasure*, that the widespread destruction in Gaza points to allegations of "scholasticide", defined as the systematic destruction of educational institutions and the denial of education as a means of erasing cultural and national identity (United Nations General Assembly, 2024).

3. The Gaza Context

3.1 Historical Context and Impact on Civilians

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict escalated significantly with the establishment of the State of Israel and the first Israeli-Arab war in 1948 (Center for Preventive Action, 2025). UN General Assembly Resolution 181 (II) (adopted 29/11/1947, 1947 UNGA Res. 181 [II]) had proposed partition into two independent states but instead triggered war, displacement, and the division of the territory into Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip (UN, n.d.b).

Further key events include the 1967 Six-Day War, which resulted in the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, followed by the First and Second Intifadas (1987 and 2000–2005) and the Oslo Accords (1993 and 1995), which established the Palestinian Authority (Center for Preventive Action, 2025).

The 2006 Palestinian legislative elections led to Hamas, a militant Islamist movement, gaining control over the Gaza Strip. The situation worsened due to an Israeli-imposed blockade and internal conflicts between Hamas and the previous ruling party, Fatah (Center for Preventive Action, 2025). In the following years, Israel launched multiple military operations in Gaza, including Operation Cast Lead (2008), clashes in 2014, and further conflicts in 2018. These events were accompanied by ongoing peace negotiations, UN Security Council Resolutions 1860 (adopted 8/1/2009, 2009 UNSC Res. 1860) and 2334 (adopted 23/12/2016, 2016 UNSC Res. 2334), and continued international mediation (Amnesty International, 2022).

On October 7, 2023, Hamas fighters and other Palestinian armed groups entered southern Israel by breaking down the fence, killing at least 1,200 Israelis, including children, and taking 250 hostages into the Gaza Strip (Human Rights Watch, 2024b). This marked the beginning of a catastrophic escalation of the conflict.

By January 2025, South Africa had brought a case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), accusing Israel of committing genocide against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. While the process remains ongoing, the ICJ has issued provisional measures ordering Israel to prevent acts of genocide by allowing humanitarian aid access and ensuring the provision of basic services (UN, n.d.b).

Israel's evacuation orders displaced over one million people initially, with repeated evacuation orders creating continuous forced movement. Multiple reports from several international organizations documented the targeting of journalists, schools, hospitals, and areas claimed to be safe zones for evacuees (Center for Preventive Action, 2025). During the war, many organizations providing humanitarian aid had to suspend their operations due to Israel's ban and blockade, as well as to ensure their employees' safety after Israel repeatedly killed humanitarian workers (Center for Preventive Action, 2025).

The conflict has displaced nearly 1.9 million people internally. Israel's military use of 2,000-lb bombs and white phosphorus has caused massive civilian casualties, while the destruction of infrastructure has created severe shortages of food, water, and healthcare (Boukari et al., 2024). Already in 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) warned that indirect effects, such as communicable diseases, could kill more people than the armed conflict itself (WHO, 2023). Children suffer particularly from malnutrition and psychological trauma (Boukari et al., 2024). Already in 2023, UNRWA reported a poor situation among school-aged children, with more than half having contemplated suicide and three out of five engaging in self-harming behaviors even before the current war began. Furthermore, over 26,000 children have been orphaned since the war began, placing them at risk of further psychosocial harm (ACAPS, 2024).

Save the Children (2024) estimated, after the first three months of war, that more than ten children a day lost one or both legs due to bombings, being trapped under rubble, and necessary amputations, which often had to be performed without anaesthesia due to shortages of medical supplies. Furthermore, children are seven times more likely to die from blast injuries. The Ministry of Health in Gaza reported that since October 7, 2023, at least 63,746 Palestinians have been killed and 161,245 others injured as of 4 September 2025 (OCHA, 2025).

3.2 Education before the Latest Escalation

Even before the current war, Gaza's education system was severely damaged by the 17-year blockade and previous conflicts, with 63% of schools operating under a double-shift system (Bashir, 2024). All children faced vulnerability, with risks for those living near the border fence, in refugee camps, and adolescent boys exposed to child labor and normalized violence (UNRWA, 2020).

Amnesty International (2022) has criticized the suppression of Palestinian human development, including in the education sector. Systematic socio-economic disadvantages create barriers to accessing and improving education. The denial of freedom of movement for Palestinians in Gaza further restricts opportunities for higher education abroad. Additionally, since 2007, Israel has refused to allow the entry of materials needed to rebuild civilian infrastructure, including schools. Even before the most recent escalation, the 2014 Israeli offensive destroyed seven schools, of which only one has been rebuilt, contributing to an estimated shortage of 200 schools in Gaza (Amnesty International, 2022). This pattern of destruction and reconstruction has prevented educational stability (Milton et al., 2023).

4 Education in Conflict Zones

Education in Emergencies (EiE) is conceptualized as encompassing quality learning opportunities across all age groups that provide physical, psychological, and cognitive protection (UNESCO, 2025). In crisis settings, education is both a fundamental right and a protective mechanism, offering life-saving information, such as hygiene practices and mine awareness, providing stability, and fostering long-term recovery through skill development and social cohesion. It also promotes inclusion, tolerance, human rights awareness, and conflict resolution, which are essential for post-conflict rebuilding, conciliation, and peacebuilding (INEE, 2018).

Armed conflicts affect education through both direct and indirect pathways (Muthanna et al., 2022). Direct impacts include the physical destruction of schools, targeted attacks on educational facilities, and militarization of learning spaces. Indirect impacts arise from psychosocial trauma among students and teachers, forced displacement, and systemic collapse of educational structures (Muthanna et al., 2022). These interruptions increase vulnerability to child labor, early marriage, and recruitment by armed groups (UNICEF, 2024), while the psychological burden of war further impairs cognitive functioning and learning capacity (Budnyk & Sajdak-Burska, 2023). Moreover, school closures cut off access to health and nutrition services, thereby further increasing children's vulnerability (UNESCO, 2025).

A study by the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge (Educ), the Centre for Lebanese Studies (CLS), and UNRWA (2024) warns that a whole generation may be lost in Gaza, with cumulative effects of trauma, malnutrition, and displacement undermining children's belief in human rights and equality (Educ, CLS & UNRWA, 2024). Similar patterns are observed in Syria, where prioritizing temporary emergency education over sustainable solutions led to poor learning outcomes, high dropout rates, a surge in child labor, and 71% of communities reporting increased child marriages (Qaddour & Husain, 2022).

One example of an approach is the Education Development Centre's Somali Interactive Radio Instruction Program, which delivers literacy, numeracy, life skills, health, and conflict prevention content amid insecurity, and Syria's use of temporary learning spaces in safer villages (GCPEA, n.d.). In Ukraine, after brief school closures, 95% of districts implemented online classes and later returned to in-person learning with bomb shelters and safety measures (GCPEA, 2023).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) illustrates why education becomes secondary in survival situations, since educational needs are situated above basic psychological and safety needs. In Gaza, the siege and war have compromised all levels of this hierarchy (Alah, 2024), forcing children to prioritize immediate needs like food, water, and safety over schooling.

The critical role of education is formally recognized in humanitarian standards. The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2019) emphasizes education's function in providing safe environments, facilitating coordinated evacuations, and disseminating safety information to prevent further injuries among children. Its Minimum Standards for Child Protection (Standard 23) address the intersection of education and child protection, noting that the denial of education heightens vulnerability and recommending integrated approaches between protection and education actors.

5 Social Work and Armed Conflicts

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) defines social work as "a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people" (IFSW, 2014). This definition emphasizes the profession's commitment to social justice, human rights, and collective responsibility. Seifert (2024) argues that the human rights dimension of social work remains essential in armed conflicts, although such concepts expose structural contradictions between professional ideals and the realities of humanitarian practice.

Social work, as conceptualized by Staub-Bernasconi, operates within a triple mandate: (1) providing support to individuals in need, (2) exercising control within institutional structures, and (3) advocating for human rights (Staub-Bernasconi, 2016). In Gaza, children's rights to education represent both a humanitarian and a political concern. Applying these methods enables social workers to bridge emergency relief with long-term strategies that protect vulnerable populations and advocate for systemic change. Basic (2022) highlights the necessity of social work in "changing structures and institutions that prevent the realization of citizens' rights and the promotion of emancipation and social justice" (p. 71).

Rogers (2008) argues that social work in conflict zones must align with IHL, which protects children and education. Integrating IHL into practice can not only strengthen humanitarian responses but also position social workers as witnesses to violations, with a role in documenting and addressing them (Rogers, 2008).

However, human rights-based approaches have faced criticism for their Western-centric origins. Sewpaul (2016) emphasizes that such frameworks often neglect the historical and political realities of colonized nations. This critique is particularly relevant in Gaza, where injustices and occupation continue to shape the struggle for rights.

Empirical studies from other contexts highlight practical pathways. In Ukraine, institutionalized responses showed limits, while community-based interventions foster resilience, agency, and recovery (Suhel & Kumar, 2023). Research in Syria similarly found that effective social work does not aim to replace but to reactivate family and community support networks. Effective interventions included peer group activities, awareness-raising, livelihood programs, and case management. Practitioners also emphasized the importance of culturally embedded approaches (Paul et al., 2025).

The Gaza case reflects both parallels and differences. As in Syria or Ukraine, children face multiple forms of vulnerability, but intervention opportunities are constrained by the blockade, recurring displacement, and destruction of infrastructure. While social workers attempt to intervene and strengthen community resilience, their efforts are restricted by scarce resources and security risks. The UNRWA's social work teams in Gaza provide psychosocial first aid, case management, and family as well as individual activities. However, since October 2024, no international UNRWA staff have been permitted to enter the OPT (UNRWA, 2025).

6 Methodology

6.1 Research Design and Sampling

This qualitative study combines semi-structured interviews with educators and social workers in Gaza and the West Bank with content analysis of relevant documents and reports from international organizations. The integration of qualitative interviews and document analysis enables a holistic understanding of the educational realities and the role of social work, thereby facilitating the identification of both immediate and long-term needs of children, the strategies applied to address them, and the structural limitations of such interventions.

The research followed an interpretivist epistemological paradigm, which views reality as socially constructed, subjective, and context-dependent (Bryman, 2016). Triangulation through qualitative interviews and document analysis was employed to enhance the validity of the findings by incorporating multiple sources (Noble & Heale, 2019). This approach captures both individual perspectives and institutional, legal, and political frameworks, applying within-method triangulation (Casey & Murphy, 2009) and data triangulation (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021) to validate and extend findings.

A purposive sampling strategy was applied to identify professionals with direct experience in social work or education in the Gaza context. Given the on-the-ground conditions and access constraints, participants were chosen based on willingness, availability, and relevant expertise (Bryman, 2016).

The final sample consisted of four participants: two located in Gaza during data collection (an English teacher and a social worker) and two based in the West Bank (a representative of the Teacher Creativity Centre Association in Ramallah and a member of the Palestinian Union of Social Workers and Psychologists Palestine in Bethlehem). To facilitate recruitment in Gaza, organizations working directly with educators and social workers were contacted and asked to inform potential participants about the research.

This indirect recruitment process allowed interested individuals to make decisions with minimized pressure, respecting their autonomy, and safeguarded voluntary participation

(Irvine, 2013). Initial contact with those who agreed was established via secure messaging platforms.

To complement the interviews, a systematic qualitative document analysis was conducted, using reports from NGOs, UNRWA, humanitarian assessments, and academic publications. Document analysis provided macro-level and institutional perspectives, contributing to data triangulation and bias reduction (Bowen, 2009). As Morgan (2022) notes, the use of preexisting data is a common strategy to “increase the trustworthiness of a study” (p. 65), while also enabling research on contexts that are difficult to access (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Following Flick (2018), documents were assessed according to authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning. The combination of document and interview data strengthens both the credibility and representativeness of the findings by incorporating multiple sources and viewpoints while also addressing potential gaps arising from ethical constraints or interview limitations in Gaza. Document selection followed purposive and theoretical sampling (Flick, 2018) to complement and deepen interview-derived insights.

6.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The interview guide (17-19 questions, approx. 45 minutes) was adapted to local and international contexts, following Flick's (2011) principles of context-specific interviewing. Due to limited electricity, internet access, and safety concerns, interviews with Gaza-based participants were conducted via text-based synchronous messaging on secure platforms, which constitutes a valid adaptation in crisis contexts (Desai et al., 2022; Gunawan et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews were chosen to enable participants to elaborate on their experiences in their own words while maintaining comparability across interviews. Open-ended questions encouraged rich, detailed responses, and the flexibility to pose follow-up questions enhanced the depth of the data (Bryman, 2008). The interviews in the West Bank took place via Zoom. Arabic translations were provided, and informed consent was obtained in advance. A native Arabic-speaking translator facilitated the interviews. The translator was briefed on research ethics and confidentiality obligations. Transcripts were produced using the intelligent verbatim method (McMullen, 2023), following Kuckartz et al. (2008), and were double-checked for accuracy and contextual correctness.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Braun et al., 2019). This method was chosen for its flexibility and capacity to work across different material types while remaining grounded in participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Interview transcripts and documents were imported into MAXQDA and coded through repeated readings. Initial codes were inductively generated, refined, and grouped into broader themes based on recurring patterns. Selected quotations illustrate key themes and concepts. To ensure triangulation, codes were systematically compared across three data sources: Gaza interviews, West Bank interviews, and documents, using MAXQDA's Code Matrix Browser. This process validated and refined core themes across sources, enhancing the credibility of findings.

6.3 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

All participants received an informed consent form that outlined the aim of the study, ensured confidentiality, and clarified the voluntary nature of their participation. Anonymity was ensured by removing identifiable data and deleting transcripts after secure storage.

Questions were designed to avoid trauma-related or politically sensitive content, and participants could skip any question.

The researcher's positionality as an external observer was continuously reflected upon. In line with Schulz (2020), ethical challenges arising from socio-economic, political, and cultural asymmetries in research relationships were acknowledged. Such asymmetries can reinforce power imbalances by positioning participants as requiring protection from the researcher (Schulz, 2020). To mitigate these dynamics, reflexivity was applied throughout, and questions were designed to minimize harm. The study adopted an advocacy-oriented stance (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Wa-Mbaleka, 2020), aiming to raise awareness of structural injustices and ethical dilemmas in social work, while acknowledging the ethical tension of benefiting from participants' experiences.

Several limitations must be noted. Ongoing escalations during data collection altered local realities and limited the validity of the documents. Remote, text-based interviews in Gaza restricted access to non-verbal reactions and reduced the depth of the data. The sample size, while providing in-depth insights, is limited and affects the generalizability of the findings. Finally, the reliance on NGO reports may reflect editorial and political bias (Bowen, 2009). The scope, covering both the impact on education and the role of social work, was broad relative to the length and depth possible.

7 Findings

The following findings are presented using data from both the documents included in the document analysis and the conducted interviews. Examples from both sources are used to illustrate the results.

7.1 Impact on Education

The war in Gaza has profoundly disrupted education at multiple levels, including infrastructure, accessibility, and psychosocial well-being. The triangulation of documents and interviews consistently highlights displacement, destruction, and insecurity as key barriers.

Since the beginning of the war, approximately 90% of the population has been displaced multiple times (ACAPS, 2024), which significantly limits access to schooling. Many schools have been repurposed as emergency shelters, with 1.4 million people housed in 264 schools by late 2024 (OPT Education Cluster, 2024a). A participant from Gaza described, "Evacuating from one place to another for safety purposes also does not give us the chance to think about our kids' teaching" (personal communication, February 2, 2025).

By the end of 2024, about 95.2% of school buildings in Gaza had suffered damage, and 88% required substantial reconstruction before reopening (OPT Education Cluster, 2025). Between November 2023 and July 2024, 378 schools were directly attacked, many while being used as civilian shelters (ACAPS, 2024). Northern Gaza was particularly affected, with 97.7% of schools damaged, while UNRWA-operated schools were hit or damaged in 83.4% of cases (OPT Education Cluster, 2024b). Interviews confirm this pattern: one participant noted that Northern Gaza was disproportionately affected since tanks remained, and bombardment hindered any educational intervention (personal communication, February 2, 2025). Both documents and participants interpreted this destruction as a deliberate attack on collective knowledge and culture. As one document

stated, such destruction “jeopardizes Palestinian identity” (Educ, CLS & UNRWA, 2024, p. 18), undermining long-term prospects for self-determination and national development.

Displacement and insecurity further exclude children from formal and informal education. In 2024, Tawjihi national secondary exams were cancelled for 39,000 students (OPT Education Cluster, 2024c) and 58,000 children could not start first grade (ACAPS, 2024). Vulnerable groups, such as children with disabilities, were disproportionately affected (Educ, CLS & UNRWA, 2024) due to lack of transportation, accessible shelters, and the absence of inclusive facilities. A social worker explained, “They certainly did not receive any services – both because of their disabilities and because services were unavailable” (personal communication, April 26, 2025). Parents also restricted mobility for safety reasons, as one teacher described, “Many parents try to keep their kids beside them for safety purposes and to be all together. So, if Israel bomb[s] them, they all die together” (personal communication, February 2, 2025).

Educators, social workers, and volunteers who attempted to create educational activities sometimes lost their lives or were separated from their families (personal communication, April 3, 2025). Data also indicate that children increasingly assume adult responsibilities such as queuing for water and food, caring for siblings, and contributing to household income: “Every day, children are responsible for bringing food from charity kitchens, where they stand in line for more than four hours just to get a meal or to fetch water” (personal communication, April 3, 2025). Another participant observed that Gaza’s children are “losing language, emotional capacity” (personal communication, April 11, 2025). This source underlines that the collapse of educational structures also erodes childhood itself, forcing children into adult roles while undermining their psychosocial development.

Material deprivation and the lack of digital infrastructure further limit access to education. Unreliable electricity, scarce devices, and limited internet connectivity hinder digital learning options (OPT Education Cluster, 2025). This was confirmed in interviews:

“Online learning doesn’t work because there’s no stable internet. The Ministry of Education tried to relaunch some platforms for children, but you’re talking about 700,000 children in Gaza, including high school students. You’ll never be able to reach them all. And with the war back, people are afraid of gathering in one place...and that carries a high level of danger” (personal communication, April 3, 2025).

Attempts to create new learning spaces are also undermined by insecurity and political restrictions. As one participant stated,

“When we talk about security and politics in Gaza, we’re talking about the occupation. The occupation rejects every form of life in Gaza, including the rebuilding of education. Any attempt at rebuilding is regularly sabotaged by the occupation. Border crossings are closed... No books get in, no educational materials, nothing. The constant bombardment is also critical... Some attempts can succeed partially, but they often fail because of the war” (personal communication, April 11, 2025).

This is underlined by reports noting that repeated evacuation orders forced the closure of Temporary Learning Spaces (TLS), undermining even emergency interventions (Educ, CLS & UNRWA, 2024).

The data show that systematic destruction of schools, mass displacement, and prolonged denial of education directly violate children’s right to education. The collapse of

infrastructure, displacement, insecurity, and material deprivation intersect to restrict both formal and alternative learning opportunities.

7.2 Educational Needs

Both interviews and documents point to an acute lack of psychosocial support for children, educators, and social workers. A social worker in Gaza stated, "When it comes to psychosocial well-being, it is almost non-existent" (personal communication, April 26, 2025). Reports stress the need for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) programs (OPT Education Cluster, 2024d) and resilience-building, including play-based learning (Educ, CLS & UNRWA, 2024). Participants equally emphasized life skills and psychosocial competencies (personal communications, February-April 26, 2025).

There is also a severe shortage of qualified teachers, counselors, and professional support teams. As one report stated, "Every school and learning space needs a school counselor and MHPSS focal point..." (OPT Education Cluster, 2024d).

Immediate measures must respond not only to learning needs but also to vulnerabilities such as disability, malnutrition, homelessness, and exposure to landmines. Teachers, themselves traumatized and displaced, also require support. One participant stressed, "When the right to life is secured, we can talk about the right to education" (personal communication, April 3, 2025).

Applying Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, survival has become the overriding priority, pushing education into the background. The triangulation of interviews and documents highlights that without a ceasefire, safe learning environments, and access to basic needs, education remains secondary.

One participant emphasized the broader meaning of schools:

Schools here don't just teach math – they're the last bulwark against total societal collapse... Gaza's trauma exceeds clinical measurement... Our sumoud [resilience] concept helps somewhat, but when a child witnesses their teacher's dismemberment, no philosophy comforts" (personal communication, April 11, 2025).

Interviews and documents highlight that education must be addressed as both an immediate humanitarian priority and a long-term measure. Post-war educational restoration requires a multidimensional and trauma-informed approach beyond physical reconstruction. The estimated cost of rebuilding schools is USD 855 million (OPT Education Cluster, 2024a). Importantly, facilities must be designed for accessibility, especially for the high number of children with physical disabilities, many resulting from war-related injuries (OPT Education Cluster, 2025), and include safety measures against military threats such as unexploded ordnance.

Reports also note that schools themselves are linked to traumatic experiences, as children and teachers lived through bombardments while using schools as shelters (Educ, CLS & UNRWA, 2024). Curricula must therefore adapt to post-war realities, addressing learning gaps and trauma, and altered perceptions, including children's questioning of values such as human rights (ACAPS, 2024). Training for educators should include child protection, disability inclusion, and mental health skills (Educ, CLS & UNRWA, 2024).

Altogether, the findings underscore that addressing educational needs in Gaza requires not only rebuilding schools but also ensuring safe spaces, psychosocial care, inclusive curricula, and sustained support for teachers and learners.

7.3 Role of Social Work

Social workers in Gaza operate under extreme conditions, supporting children and families despite bombardment, displacement, and destruction. They provide psychosocial first aid, group counselling, awareness sessions, and educational support. As one explained, "My work shifted to providing psychosocial first aid to displaced people from all categories" (personal communication, April 26, 2025).

The interviews show that community-based resilience is central. Despite their personal conditions, social workers adapt to support education through improvised learning spaces such as kindergartens, tents, or damaged buildings, serving both educational and psychosocial purposes (personal communications, February 2 & April 26, 2025). As a participant described,

"[i]n dealing with crises, some managed to work with teachers to establish tents or spaces for children's education... Social workers were crucial in these teams... All this work is completely voluntary... Everything is volunteer-based to maintain children's education and resist forced displacement as much as possible" (personal communication, April 11, 2025).

This community-oriented approach reflects social work's dual role in protecting the right to education and providing stability.

It is important to note that social work in Gaza often does not fit neatly into professional categories. Their work overlaps with emergency response, volunteer initiatives, and informal community-led activities. At times, their role is visible only through specific interview accounts.

Findings also highlight the ethical dilemmas faced by social workers, who work under life-threatening conditions without safe spaces, psychosocial care, or resources. As one stated, "we work knowing that we could be killed at any moment... Despite this, I was leaving my kids with my mom to go to these educational tents..." (personal communication, February 2, 2025)

7.4 International Responses and Gaps

Despite these life-threatening conditions, international responses remain limited. Documents point to ongoing advocacy efforts, alarming warnings, and awareness-raising initiatives by NGOs in the West Bank, as well as UNRWA (2025) acting as the main social work provider in Gaza. However, these responses lack effective protection mechanisms and do not lead to accountability for perpetrators, leaving a critical gap between advocacy and enforceable action.

A further structural gap concerns international funding. Participants pointed to the collapse of educational funding and stressed that support must be delivered "unconditionally, because right now, almost everything in Gaza comes with conditions... Organizations have shifted their priorities... it's all about emergency relief now, not structural development" (personal communication, April 3, 2025).

The analyzed documents likewise highlight underfunding, leading to the closure of TLSs. Despite binding norms recognizing education as a life-saving intervention, less than half of the requested funding had been delivered by August 2024 (Educ, CLS & UNRWA, 2024).

While Gaza's social workers are supported by colleagues in the West Bank through remote solidarity, such as training and guidance during pauses in bombardment, advocacy, monitoring, and documentation of legal violations, global solidarity remains weak (personal communication, April 3, 2025). One participant reported,

"[w]e have social workers who were martyred. We have social workers who were arrested... the social work associations in Jordan, Egypt, Yemen, and some European countries... directed sharp criticism at the international federation" (personal communication, April 11, 2025).

This gap between local resilience and weak global solidarity challenges the human rights mandate of the profession.

8 Discussion

The systematic destruction of schools, mass displacement, and prolonged denial of education in Gaza constitute direct violations of both IHL and IHRL. Children's right to education is compromised through the collapse of educational infrastructure, repeated displacement, and safety concerns that prevent attendance. Limited access to electricity and internet blocks alternative learning opportunities, while the prioritization of daily survival over schooling further undermines the continuity of education. Together, these conditions illustrate how the war in Gaza has restricted the realization of children's right to education.

The collected data highlight key patterns: Political barriers, lack of resources, and psychosocial consequences emerged as dominant themes. Local actors emphasized the immediate educational needs, including safe learning environments and psychosocial support, while participants from the West Bank also discussed long-term strategies, reflecting differences in lived experiences and capacities between actors within and outside Gaza. Visualizations from MAXQDA's Code Matrix Browser reinforce these insights: structural inequality, political barriers, and resource scarcity were consistently coded across interviews, particularly in Gaza. Psychosocial effects and urgent educational needs dominate the data, underscoring the immediate and long-term implications of the war on children's well-being and learning outcomes.

Compared to Syria, where school destruction and displacement are also widespread, Gaza is uniquely constrained by a strict blockade that limits digital learning and external support. The geographic situation further exacerbates the crisis, as there is almost no space for safe evacuation within Gaza, making all areas highly vulnerable. Additionally, Gaza has witnessed the highest number of humanitarian actors being killed during a conflict (United Nations, 2025). In contrast, in Syria, social work could be more systematically established during the war through external actors (Paul et al., 2025). Nevertheless, Syria experienced similar challenges, including delayed early recovery interventions, limited standardized education responses, and chronic funding shortages (Qaddour & Husain, 2022).

Social work has played a crucial role in mitigating these impacts. Locally, social workers operate as first responders, linking educational activities with trauma care, providing psychosocial support, and maintaining minimal educational continuity under extreme

conditions. Internationally, organizations focus on advocacy and institutional frameworks. The study's findings illustrate discrepancies in international responses: participants criticized the IFSW for perceived inaction and double standards when comparing support in Gaza to responses in Ukraine, highlighting geopolitical biases that affect professional accountability and global advocacy.

Ethical considerations emerged during the research, particularly regarding reciprocity and the use of participants' experiences for academic purposes. Following Creswell & Poth (2018) and Wa-Mbaleka (2020), the study aimed to foster advocacy and awareness of systemic inequalities, emphasizing reflective practice and the human rights-based approach of social work. By translating experiences into actionable recommendations, this study seeks to contribute to both professional practice and policy discourse.

In summary, the war in Gaza has created multifaceted barriers to children's education. Social work at both local and international levels can mitigate some immediate consequences, but broader structural, political, and ethical challenges remain. Gaza's unique conditions highlight the need for sustained global advocacy and context-specific, human rights-based interventions.

9 Recommendations

9.1 Decolonizing Social Work and International Engagement

Decolonizing social work requires amplifying local voices not only during implementation but also in political framing and advocacy (Boryczko et al., 2023). Silence or neutral claims of professional bodies, such as the IFSW, in the face of war crimes represent a political stance (personal communication, April 11, 2025). In Gaza, a decolonial and human rights-based approach must therefore center Palestinian knowledge and lived experiences rather than replicating Western-centric frameworks. UN agencies, NGOs, and funding bodies should actively support Palestinian-led initiatives at all stages, including program design, monitoring, and advocacy, ensuring that local expertise shapes decision-making. Funding mechanisms should be flexible and unconditional, allowing local actors to address both immediate humanitarian needs and structural barriers. International social work associations must move beyond symbolic statements and provide tangible support, including resources, capacity-building, and legal protection for practitioners operating under life-threatening conditions.

9.2 Strengthening Community-Based and Trauma-Informed Responses

Local social workers in Gaza demonstrate adaptability, maintaining educational continuity through improvised learning spaces while providing psychosocial support (personal communications, February-April 2025). Trauma-informed interventions, including play-based learning, MHPSS, and teacher support, are essential for children's psychosocial and educational well-being. Funding bodies should provide resources that integrate education and psychosocial care, recognizing that addressing trauma is inseparable from learning. NGOs must support teacher training in psychosocial first aid (Educ, CLS & UNRWA, 2024), child protection, and disability inclusion, while ensuring emergency learning spaces are provided and maintained. International development programs should link micro-level interventions to broader structural advocacy, ensuring short-term support contributes to long-term, rights-based outcomes.

9.3 Political Engagement and Human Rights Advocacy

Social work practice cannot be separated from political realities when fundamental rights are systematically violated. Social workers and allied international actors must engage in advocacy to uphold IHL and human rights treaties, hold perpetrators accountable, and pressure decision-makers at local, regional, and global levels. Interviews made clear that Palestinian social workers depend on international solidarity. As a participant said, "Social work, and this is essential, is a form of soft power" (personal communication, April 11, 2025). The international social work community must therefore move from symbolic statements to concrete actions, supporting Palestinian-led initiatives, cutting ties with complicit institutions, and refusing to normalize oppression. The IFSW's (2025) censure of the Israeli Union of Social Workers for failing to advocate for peace is a step in the right direction. However, as a participant noted, many Israeli social workers actively support military operations in Gaza without questioning state policy (personal communication, April 11, 2025). Social work must therefore not look away.

Such protection and advocacy must be embedded in legal frameworks, humanitarian action, and sustained international advocacy. This requires coordination between UN agencies, funding bodies, and international NGOs to ensure that interventions support rights-based education, document violations, and pressure decision-making. The participant's description illustrates the practical implication of this approach:

"Our role is to talk about responsibility, Israel's responsibility, and the rights involved. We participate in the Global Campaign for Education and the Arab Education Coalition. Our coalition includes around eighty local organizations, plus Arab coalitions. For example, we hold the Global Action Week for Education. We run campaigns to pressure decision-makers and advocate in schools, political forums, and international spaces to raise awareness about children's suffering. We also work with funders and present the situation on social media and to international institutions to show both the achievements and the hardships children face. Through UNICEF and UNESCO, we try to deliver education and portray the hardships children endure. Everyone tries to make their voice heard within their specialty" (personal communication, April 3, 2025).

Building on this, international organizations should use their mandates to amplify advocacy for safe learning environments and accountability. Funding bodies should link financial support to upholding international human rights standards, ensuring the resources do not reinforce systemic oppression or selective neutrality. International social work associations should coordinate advocacy campaigns, highlight violations of children's rights and support Palestinian-led initiatives.

9.4 Rebuilding Education

Education in Gaza is not only physically destroyed but also politicized. Post-war reconstruction requires acknowledging the blockade, structural violence, and trauma experienced by children and educators. UN agencies and donors should fund crisis-sensitive curricula that reflect local realities, incorporate Palestinian history, address collective trauma, and promote human rights education. International stakeholders should support inclusive rebuilding, ensuring schools are accessible to children with disabilities, safe from military threats, and equipped to provide psychosocial support. Lessons from comparable contexts, such as Papua New Guinea, demonstrate that negotiations with all parties to allow education in designated safe zones can be effective and should be supported by international actors (UNICEF, 2025).

10 Conclusion

Without an urgent ceasefire, reconstruction, and accountability, an entire generation in Gaza faces irreversible harm. The systematic attacks on schools, mass displacement, and denial of education amount to violations of international law and affect the long-term prospects of children's development and self-determination.

In this context, social workers in Gaza assume a crucial role. Despite their own displacement and trauma, they act as first responders, integrating psychosocial care into improvised learning spaces and sustaining community resilience under siege conditions. These practices reveal both the strengths and the limits of local coping strategies in the absence of effective international protection.

As a human rights profession, social work cannot remain neutral in the face of systemic violations. It must critically rethink its professional foundations, moving beyond service delivery to political advocacy. This includes supporting Palestinian-led initiatives, calling for sanctions on states that violate IHL, and ensuring that protection is embedded in legal frameworks, humanitarian action, and global advocacy. Without such engagement, the ethical foundations of social work risk becoming empty rhetoric. Strengthening global networks and adopting decolonized approaches are therefore necessary to challenge structural injustice and address the root causes of crises.

Finally, the study acknowledges that its focus is intentionally on the rights of the children in Gaza and the systems and realities they inhabit. While Israeli responsibilities are central, Hamas also bears responsibility. Yet Hamas cannot be regarded as a functioning government, and the population remains dependent on international aid and the conditions attached to it. Any meaningful recovery must therefore combine material reconstruction with psychosocial rehabilitation, supported by structural change in international policy and funding frameworks. Only then can the right to education for Gaza's children be restored and protected.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

Gaza:

- Question 1: Can you briefly introduce yourself and describe your role in supporting education in Gaza?
- Question 2: How has your work changed since the start of the current war?
- Question 3: What are the most urgent needs and biggest challenges currently facing in the education sector?

- Question 4: Are there specific groups of children facing greater barriers to education?
- Question 5: What do you think are the lasting consequences for children's learning and well-being?
- Question 6: What educational programs are currently available? Which subjects and materials are being used? Are there any digital learning options?
- Question 7: What resources are currently most lacking?
- Question 8: Is there any support for teachers/ social workers themselves?
- Question 9: How are teachers /social workers prepared to work with traumatised children?
- Question 10: What role does social work currently play in the education context? Are there collaborations between schools, social workers, and local NGOs? How do these partnerships function in practice?
- Question 11: How is social work being practiced in your current context, especially in relation to education and child well-being?
- Question 12: How effective have these efforts been? What are the biggest challenges you face in your daily work?
- Question 13: How do resource shortages limit your ability to respond to children's needs?
- Question 14: What would strengthen your intervention possibilities on the ground?
- Question 15: In your experience, how are human rights violations addressed in your work? Is this discussed with your teams or the children? If so, how?
- Question 16: What strategies could international actors adopt to better support education in emergencies in Gaza?
- Question 17: What actions have you seen from international or humanitarian organizations on the ground?

West Bank:

- Question 1: Can you briefly introduce yourself? Can you describe your organizations current work in Gaza? How or does it intersect with education?
- Question 2: Have you already worked in Gaza before the current war? How has your focus evolved?
- Question 3: What are the main barriers to education in Gaza that your organization has identified? Has your organization addressed these challenges? If so, how?
- Question 4: Based on your experience in other conflict zones, what strategies have helped maintain access to education during crisis?
- Question 5: How does your approach in Gaza differ from your work in other conflict settings?
- Question 6: How do prolonged school interruptions impact children's futures, based on your research/experience?
- Question 7: Based on your experience in other conflict zones, what long-term effects have school interruptions had on children's futures, and do you expect similar risks for children in Gaza?
- Question 8: How do you assess long-term risks to children's learning, psychosocial well-being and development?

- Question 9: Have the program you supported included informal education such as trauma care or psychosocial support?
- Question 10: What would be helpful for you to support education in Gaza or why you don't?
- Question 11: Is psychosocial support available for your staff working in Gaza?
- Question 12: How does your organization engage with social work in Gaza? Do you collaborate with local social workers?
- Question 13: Are your efforts visible and effective on the ground? How do local partners perceive them?
- Question 14: How does your organization handle human rights violations? Do you advocate around these issues?
- Question 15: Where do you see the biggest gaps in protecting children's right to education in Gaza?
- Question 16: What structural changes are needed to strengthen education in conflict zones?
- Question 17: How do political/security constraints impact your education related work in Gaza?
- Question 18: How can international social work better collaborate with local actors in Gaza?
- Question 19: What should international organizations do to better advocate for children's right to education in Gaza?