Women in Gaza say they were promised food, money or work in exchange for sexual interactions

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<https://apnews.com/article/gaza-sexual-exploitation-women-aid-israel-war-44c9daf14f2888d43cd05562b7d24a10>

After weeks of scraping by to feed her six children [in Gaza](https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war), the 38-year-old woman thought she’d found a lifeline.

At a shelter, a friend told her about a man who could help [with food](https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-hamas-war-aid-un-ghf-567c5bffd5d7ae4cc54ea0816a159f8f), [aid](https://apnews.com/article/gaza-aid-humanitarian-israel-f71ba8cb4a67d886270bd0ca3954bc70), maybe even a job. The woman — separated from her husband, and forced to shutter the business that once kept the family afloat — approached him.

It was about a month into the war in Gaza, she said, and he promised her work, a six-month contract with an aid agency. On the day she believed she’d sign the paperwork, he drove her not to an office but to an empty apartment. He complimented her, she said, and told her to remove her headscarf.

He told her he loved her and wouldn’t force her, she said, but he also wouldn’t let her leave. Eventually, they had a sexual encounter, she said. She declined to give details of the nature of their interaction, saying she felt fear and shame.

‘I had to play along because I was scared, I wanted out of this place,’ the woman said.

Before she left, she said, he handed her some money — 100 shekels, about $30. Two weeks later, he gave her a box of medicine and a box of food. But for weeks, the job didn’t materialize.

As Gaza’s [humanitarian crisis grows](https://apnews.com/article/gaza-famine-hunger-israel-ceasefire-a5f88e20db2a5c4f754117de9bdada69), women say they have been exploited by local men — some associated with aid groups — promising food, money, water, supplies or work in exchange for sexual interactions. Six women detailed their experiences to The Associated Press, each speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of retribution from their families or the men and because sexual harassment and assault are considered taboo topics. Sometimes, they said, the men’s solicitation was blatant: ‘Let me touch you,’ one woman recalled being told. Other times, it was culturally coded: ‘I want to marry you,’ or ‘Let’s go together somewhere.’

Aid groups and experts say exploitation often arises during conflicts and other times of desperation, particularly when people are displaced and reliant on assistance. Reports of abuse and exploitation have emerged during emergencies in South Sudan, [Burkina Faso](https://apnews.com/article/islamic-state-group-violence-sexual-assault-only-on-ap-burkina-faso-308f0d4856bac8d426a889bfcdb3e4a6), [Congo](https://apnews.com/article/sexual-exploitation-congo-united-nations-peacekeepers-d8a767eb32da0da7be6ecc6af2cd11fb), [Chad](https://apnews.com/article/sexual-exploitation-chad-sudan-refugees-united-nations-d0a978899f14bdfbdde184f65b37e376) and [Haiti](https://apnews.com/article/7ccc5fbc05124fa9b0f42ce2edb62d9d).

‘It’s a horrible reality that humanitarian crises make people vulnerable in many ways — increased [sexual violence](https://apnews.com/article/islamic-state-group-violence-sexual-assault-only-on-ap-burkina-faso-308f0d4856bac8d426a889bfcdb3e4a6) is often a consequence,’ said Heather Barr, associate director for the women’s rights division at Human Rights Watch. ‘The situation in Gaza today is unspeakable, especially for women and girls.’

Four psychologists working with women in Gaza described patients’ accounts to AP. One said her organization — focused on protecting women and children — treated dozens of cases involving men sexually exploiting vulnerable women, including some in which they became pregnant. The psychologists, all Palestinians working for local organizations in Gaza, spoke on condition of anonymity because of privacy concerns for the women involved and the sensitive nature of the cases, in a conservative culture where sex outside of marriage in any context is seen as a grave offense. They said none of their patients wanted to speak with AP directly.

Five of the women who shared their stories with AP said they did not engage in sexual interaction with the men. The psychologists said some women who came to them agreed to the men’s demands, while others refused.

Six human rights and relief organizations — including the local Palestinian group the Women’s Affairs Center and the Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse network, which coordinates with various aid groups including United Nations agencies — told AP they were aware of reports of sexual abuse and exploitation linked to receiving aid.

Aid groups say the context in Gaza — nearly two years of war, the displacement of at least 90% of the population, and turmoil over aid access — has made humanitarian work for vulnerable people particularly challenging. As hunger and desperation grow across the enclave, [women in particular](https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-hamas-war-gaza-city-displacement-civilians-9c1126edc090fea7bc343b2b2809b7fd) say they’ve been pushed to make impossible decisions.

The groups blame Israel’s offensive and blockade for the humanitarian crisis and say the war has made documenting exploitation cases difficult. More than 66,000 Palestinians have been killed, according to Gaza’s Health Ministry, which is part of the Hamas-run government and staffed by medical professionals. The ministry does not say how many of those killed were civilians or combatants, but it says women and children make up around half the fatalities.

‘Israel’s siege on the Gaza Strip and the restrictions on humanitarian aid are what’s forcing women to resort to this,’ said Amal Syam, director of the Women’s Affairs Center.

Israel says there are no restrictions on aid and that it has taken steps to expand what comes into Gaza. Israel also accuses Hamas of siphoning off aid — without providing evidence of widespread diversion — and blames U.N. agencies for failing to deliver food it has allowed in. The U.N denies there is widespread aid diversion.

Some say limited data is just ‘the tip of the iceberg’

One of the women who spoke to AP described phone calls that began in October, a year into the war. At first, she said, the man’s questions were simple. What happened to her husband? How many children did they have? But, the 35-year-old widow said, his tone took a turn. What underwear was she wearing? How did her husband please her?

She said she’d met the man in Muwasi, a strip of land Israel designated a humanitarian zone. She described standing in line to get assistance and giving her phone number to an aid worker — a Palestinian in a uniform labeled UNRWA, or the United Nations Relief and Works Agency.

Shortly after he took her number, the late-night calls began. He would ask sexual questions, she said, and she’d stay silent. She said that at one point, he asked to come to her, for sex. She refused, and after nearly a dozen calls but no aid, she blocked his number, she added.

The woman said she reported him to UNRWA in Gaza in a verbal complaint. She said she was told she needed a recording of the conversations as proof, but she had an old phone that couldn’t record calls.

UNRWA communications director Juliette Touma said via email that the agency has a zero-tolerance policy for sexual exploitation, takes each report seriously, and doesn’t require proof. But she wouldn’t say whether staff were aware of this particular incident, citing UNRWA’s policy against discussing individual cases, and wouldn’t comment further on its awareness or work on exploitation cases overall.

The PSEA network — to which UNRWA belongs — said survivors can report anonymously or without naming the perpetrator and are never required to provide proof.

Understanding the scale of exploitation is challenging, said Sarah Achiro, a coordinator for the network, which works to prevent, and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse in humanitarian and development settings. Gaza’s limited connectivity restricts calls that could report abuse, and constant displacement makes it harder for survivors to seek in-person help and for aid groups to build trust.

Achiro noted that sexual violence is vastly underreported, particularly in humanitarian and conflict settings, where data often shows just ‘the tip of the iceberg.’

The PSEA network said that last year, it received 18 allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation linked to receiving humanitarian aid in Gaza, all involving either aid workers or those associated with it, such as community representatives or private contractors. Allegations against aid workers are investigated by the employer organization. The network wouldn’t indicate how many of the cases were being investigated, saying it can’t disclose information unless they are formally concluded.

‘I told myself that no one would believe it’

Four of the women who spoke to AP said the men who solicited them identified themselves as aid workers, and, in one case, a community leader promising aid.

Like the widow, several women said it happened while registering or trying to register for aid, with men taking their numbers — frequently a step in the aid process — and later calling. The women said all the men were Palestinian. Several said they weren’t able to identify which aid group the men seemed to be associated with.

The U.N. and aid groups generally work with local communities: paying people as contractors, using volunteers, or having leaders appointed by the community as liaisons.

The mother of six said the man who promised her a job drove a car with U.N. markings. After their interaction, she said, the messages kept coming — late-night sexual calls and requests for photos. She described dodging them with excuses: She was busy, her phone was broken, she couldn’t talk.

But about a month after their sexual interaction, she saw the man at an aid site, in December 2023. He then helped her get a six-month position with UNRWA, which she completed, she said.

She told AP she never reported the man, their encounter or his exploitation attempts.

‘I told myself that no one would believe it,’ she said. ‘Maybe they would say I am only saying this so that they would give me a job.’

Asked about the woman’s story, UNRWA’s Touma emphasized the organization’s zero-tolerance policy and said it would seek more information on the exploitation incidents and accusations.

Since the interaction and her job, the woman has been displaced, doesn’t have work and struggles to feed her family. She said she blocked the man’s number but he’s tried to contact her as recently as this summer.

Groups say that despite stigma, exploitation is clearly on the rise

Some women say they’ve been solicited multiple times, by various men throughout the war.

A 37-year-old mother of four told AP she was approached twice, once by the head of a shelter. She said the man offered food and shelter if they could ‘go together somewhere,’ like the sea. She said she understood he was asking for something sexual. She refused.

Psychologists and women’s groups said cases have increased as the crisis worsened — with more people displaced, reliant on aid, and crammed into camps. One psychologist said some women were kicked out when their husbands learned what happened.

Before the war, exploitation reports happened once or twice a year, but are up dramatically, said Syam, of the Women’s Affairs Center. But she said many organizations won’t highlight the numbers or the issue.

‘Most of us prefer to keep the focus on the violence and violations committed by the Israeli occupation,’ Syam said.

Israel says it is fighting to dismantle Hamas and release [the hostages](https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-gaza-hostages-de5ab67d6eab8c1ef31663b59500d4cb) taken in the 2023 attack that sparked the war, and that it mitigates civilian harm as much as possible.

The women who spoke to AP said it’s important to try to hold on to their dignity as the war continues.

For weeks last fall, a 29-year-old mother said she received calls from an aid worker asking her to marry him in exchange for nutritional supplements for her four children.

She refused and blocked his number, she said, but he called from different phones. He insisted he liked her and made distasteful comments that she called too vulgar to repeat.

‘I felt completely humiliated,’ she said. ‘I had to go and ask for help for my children. If I didn’t do it, who would?’