

Masculinity, Caregiving, and the Collapsed Adolescence of Gaza's Young Men

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript explores how the protracted conflict in Gaza has reshaped pathways into manhood. Three cases, two publicly verifiable and one anonymized, are presented. Together, they demonstrate that young men in Gaza have been forced to shoulder caregiving and other social responsibilities beyond what is typical for their ages, while navigating their own displacement, trauma, and disrupted developmental trajectories. The accelerated transition of young people into critical support roles during war constitutes a global public health concern. The ongoing siege and conflict in Gaza have exacerbated this process among Generation Z males, underscoring a need for culturally-appropriate, trauma-informed, and gender-specific interventions. By pairing lived experiences with peer-reviewed scholarship, humanitarian data, and publicly-available media sources, this paper contributes to the ongoing discussion on socially constructed masculinity amid conflict, resilience, and the structural, political, and economic determinants of young male health in Gaza, Palestine. The paper shares public health implications and makes intervention recommendations categorized as: (1) culturally appropriate, (2) trauma-informed, and (3) gender-specific. In doing so, it is hoped that young men in Gaza will have the opportunity to thrive rather than merely survive.

KEYWORDS:

masculinity, men's health, gaza, war health, generation z

INTRODUCTION

This manuscript examines how the protracted conflict in Gaza has reshaped and accelerated pathways into manhood. Over the past three years, insights into the lived experiences of young Gazan men were gathered through direct communications facilitated by the co-author's longstanding personal connections to the region. Observations based on these exchanges are cited throughout as "(Mahayosnand, 2023–2026)." Alongside publicly documented accounts, these cases reveal a reality shared by many young men in Gaza, marked by the forced and premature assumption of roles as caregivers, providers, and protectors.

BACKGROUND

Generation Z (born 1997-2012), currently aged 13-28, is recognized as digital natives who are financially fluent, independent, pragmatic, self-aware, attuned to diversity and mental health, and appreciative of entrepreneurship (Yılmaz et al., 2024). However, unlike most of their global cohort, Generation Z in Gaza has come of age amid armed conflict, systemic deprivation, and a blockade that has spanned most of their lives (Latif et al., 2025). As the fifth generation in Gaza to live under continuous conflict, they have collectively endured substantial trauma (Hamamra et al., 2025). Maloney et al. (2022) emphasize that chronic exposure to direct and structural forms of violence contributes to biopsychosocial challenges that compound over generations.

Following the October 7, 2023 escalation, these longstanding vulnerabilities intensified substantially. To date, Gazan youth and young adults have faced widespread insecurity across all domains, including housing, nutrition, education, and healthcare (Hamamra et al., 2025; Latif et al., 2025; Schlüter et al., 2025; WHO, 2025). Without adequate humanitarian protections in place, the burden of these losses often falls upon civilians (Schlüter et al., 2025).

The current life stage of Generation Z is typically characterized by a focus on higher education, career development, identity exploration, and increasing independence. However, these developmental milestones have instead been disrupted for young men in Gaza, many of whom have been forced to assume critical support roles within their families and communities. Examples of these individuals and their experiences are presented in this paper (Insaan.ngo, 2024; Mahayosnand, 2023–2026; NBC News, 2024; Samir Foundation, 2025; WHO, 2025).

Case 1 — Ezz Lulu, a Medical Student, Founder and Family Caregiver

Medical student Ezz Lulu lost his father, Mr. Samir, during the ongoing conflict in Gaza (Samir Foundation, 2025). Assuming caregiving responsibilities for his surviving mother and sibling while completing his medical education, Ezz experienced firsthand the burden of familial loss increasingly faced by young adults in Gaza (Mahayosnand, 2023–2026). In response to these hardships and in honor of his late father, he founded the Samir Foundation, a UK-registered nonprofit that has since grown into the largest medical support initiative in Gaza. Under his leadership, the Foundation provides scholarships, emergency aid, and professional training to help Gazan medical students continue their studies amid conflict-related disruptions similar to those Ezz endured during his own accelerated transition into adulthood (Samir Foundation, 2025).

Case 2 — Dr. Mohammed Harara, a Physician, Founder and Family Caregiver

Dr. Mohammed Harara, a 27-year-old emergency medicine physician working in Gaza during ongoing attacks, cared for approximately 850 patients in a single shift (NBC News, 2024). His extensive frontline work at Gaza's European General Hospital over seven months of active conflict led him to become a founding board member of Insaan, a nongovernmental organization providing field medical services to Gazans. When asked what he learned during this period, Dr. Harara does not emphasize his medical achievements; instead, he details learning how to protect and provide for his family amid crisis—determining where they could safely live, what they would eat, and how they would sleep—and the patience it required him to develop (Insaan.ngo, 2024). Like many Gazan medical professionals, and despite significant personal risk, Dr. Harara stayed behind to continue treating patients after securing the safe evacuation of his family to Egypt (Mahayosnand, 2023–2026). Forced to shoulder professional and familial duties uncommon for his age, Dr. Harara's young adulthood has been defined by responsibility.

Case 3 – College Student A, a Volunteer, Entrepreneur and Family Caregiver

A college-aged young man took on extensive responsibilities to support his family amid the ongoing crisis in Gaza, including becoming a primary caregiver and managing household needs. Additionally, he contributed to community support efforts, organizing food, funds, and basic supplies for his neighbors. Despite the added strain of multiple displacements and educational disruptions, he continued to adapt, even launching a small business to secure funds for his family (Mahayosnand, 2023–2026). His experiences illustrate how conflict expedites the transition of young men from adolescence into adulthood out of necessity rather than by personal choice.

PUBLIC HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Gazans have witnessed and/or experienced an unprecedented number of traumatic events since October 2023, including displacement, death of loved ones, and direct violence (WHO, 2025). The effects of exposure to sociopolitical violence on youth and adults alike are well-documented and include the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), somatic symptoms, depression, anxiety, and other psychosocial difficulties (Maloney et al., 2022). Compounded by a lack of available support services, the ongoing conflict and siege have resulted in a widespread mental health crisis across Gaza (WHO, 2025).

The World Health Organization (WHO) (2025) has identified men as

a vulnerable population in Gaza. Men are at heightened risk of facing injuries and loss of life, as well as detention and severe mistreatment by Israeli authorities, due to their active engagement in public spaces and participation in first-response services. Additionally, while the rate of suicide has risen across Gaza over the past decade, men aged 18-30 are disproportionately affected, accounting for approximately 75% of deaths by suicide (WHO, 2025). Evidently, young men in Gaza face unique vulnerabilities that merit further investigation.

While the significantly higher levels of exposure to violence reported by Palestinian males compared to their female counterparts have been implicated in these vulnerabilities (Maloney et al., 2022), limited research has explored other underlying variables. This paper posits that the forced and premature assumption of caregiving and other support roles under crisis conditions may represent an additional age and gender-specific risk factor, particularly among Generation Z males in the aftermath of October 7, 2023. Research examining caregiving burden and familial strain in Gaza has focused primarily on women and mothers, leaving the experiences of adolescent and young adult males comparatively underexplored (Veronese et al., 2025).

Hussein et al.'s (2024) study on the notion of masculinity in Palestinian culture identifies three interrelated roles considered central to manhood: provider, protector, and independent decision maker. Notably, these duties are typically associated with fatherhood, marriage, and other familial positions assumed later in life. The clear overlap seen between the cases presented here and these context-dependent, culturally-significant gendered expectations supports the notion that Generation Z Gazan males, most of whom have yet to start families of their own, are experiencing an expedited transition into manhood. Further examination of the extent and public health implications of this phenomenon among adolescents and young men in Gaza is warranted.

INTERVENTION RECOMMENDATIONS

Interventions specifically tailored to address the accelerated assumption of adult social roles by young Gazan males amid protracted conflict require further research examining the prevalence and psychosocial implications of this phenomenon. However, existing literature offers several preliminary considerations.

- **Culturally appropriate interventions**
 - Hamamra et al. (2025) highlight three key culturally-specific coping strategies found among Palestinians. Social support, including familial and community bonds, offers emotional and practical benefits. Religious faith serves as a psychological anchor, fostering hope and resilience. Humor

and emotional expression provide stress relief and a sense of normalcy. These culturally embedded mechanisms should be considered in the development of effective interventions.

- Maloney et al. (2022) note that culturally-tailored, family-based mental health programs have demonstrated promise in promoting positive psychosocial outcomes among youth and young adults in settings impacted by sociopolitical violence.
- Aqtam (2025) emphasizes that interventions tailored to traditional cultural norms and practices, particularly those involving local community leaders, improve both the acceptance and effectiveness of mental health services among Gazans.
- **Trauma-informed interventions**
 - Resilience-building strategies have been shown to support individuals and communities in recovery from trauma. More broadly, the WHO and UNICEF advocate for the use of trauma-informed care models in mental health practice to help affected individuals process and heal from their trauma-related experiences while avoiding unintentional retraumatization (Aqtam, 2025).
- **Gender-specific interventions**
 - Limited research has examined gender-specific interventions tailored to male Palestinian youth and young adults. However, studies on male mental health and suicide prevention offer strategies that may be adapted cross-culturally. For example, Ahmed et al. (2025) found that primary care-linked interventions, such as training healthcare providers to detect signs of male depression, are associated with reductions in suicide mortality. Male-sensitive services, clinical tools, and delivery models identified in existing literature should be further explored through the Palestinian sociocultural lens and used to develop more nuanced interventions for this population.
- **Structural considerations**
 - Adequately addressing this public health crisis requires recognizing the Israeli occupation of Palestine as a major structural determinant contributing to ongoing and preventable patterns of violence, loss, and premature adultification facing young Gazan men. An immediate and lasting humanitarian ceasefire remains essential to prevent the continued escalation of these harms. In the interim, focus should be placed on rehabilitating infrastructure, including

healthcare facilities and schools, and expanding emergency aid efforts to address the most urgent psychosocial support needs of young Gazan men (Schlüter et al., 2025).

- Aqtam (2025) suggests that innovative modes of mental health service delivery, such as telemedicine platforms and mobile clinics, may serve as vital tools for overcoming access challenges posed by the ongoing conflict.

CONCLUSION

This manuscript posits that the accelerated transition of male adolescents and young adults into social support roles shaped by culturally-significant expectations of manhood amid protracted conflict has created an age and gender-specific crisis, with implications for the physical, mental, emotional, social, and financial well-being of Generation Z Gazan males. This forced construction of masculinity, shaped by familial loss, displacement, and other direct consequences of the ongoing humanitarian crisis unfolding in Palestine, warrants the attention of public health leaders, scholars, policymakers, and individuals committed to health and justice.

Safeguarding the futures of Gaza's young men and acknowledging their collapsed adolescence requires collective action and compassion. As academics, scholarly advocacy, whether through signing e-petitions, publishing open letters, or conducting research, serves as a vital mechanism for amplifying Gazan voices silenced by sociopolitical violence (Mahayosnand & Chan, 2024). Young men in Gaza deserve not only survival, but also the opportunity to prosper.

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