Aya Ashraf Ashour

Archivio della vita fragile a Gaza (2023-2025). Tentativi di guarigione e sopravvivenza come cooperatrice umanitaria e come giovane donna di Gaza

Archive of Fragile Life in Gaza (2023-2025): Attempts at Healing and Survival as a Humanitarian Cooperator and as a Gazawi Young Woman

About the writer

Aya Ashour is currently a researcher at the University for Foreigners of Siena, where she conducts studies on the trauma of forced displacement experienced by women during the genocide in Gaza. She combines academic research with her extensive field experience to analyze the psychological, social, and human impacts of displacement.

Aya is also a journalist and protection and humanitarian worker from Gaza, Palestine. She graduated from the Faculty of Law with a specialization in international law, and has focused her academic and professional work on human rights issues, particularly the rights of women and children in conflict settings.

During the genocide in Gaza (2023–2025), she worked on the frontlines of the humanitarian response, engaging across multiple sectors including protection, psychosocial support, education in emergencies, and malnutrition programs. Her field experience led her to take on leadership roles, where she supervised multidisciplinary teams and contributed to the development of humanitarian interventions targeting the most vulnerable groups, especially women and children in shelters and displacement camps.

She also documented the human experience of the war through her journalistic writing for the Italian newspaper «Il Fatto Quotidiano», where she highlighted individual stories and illuminated the intersections between daily suffering and the broader political and humanitarian realities, giving voice to lived experiences often absent from dominant narratives.

Aya's work brings together legal analysis, field experience, and human-centered storytelling. Through her writing and research, she seeks to reframe questions of justice, protection, and the role of local actors in humanitarian response. She has been recognized by international forums for her efforts in amplifying the voices of Palestinian women during the genocide.

Introduction: Humanitarian Praxis Under Conditions of Erasure

Humanitarian work under genocide does not emerge from logistical readiness or institutional design. It emerges from rupture. It begins at the precise moment

when established systems fail and the individual confronts collapse with nothing but moral instinct.

My entry into relief and protection work was not the continuation of an academic trajectory; it was a confrontation with its limits. In July 2023, I graduated in International Law, having written my thesis on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and the role of women in peace and security processes. I believed in frameworks. I believed in structured protection. I believed that representation within international mechanisms could alter lived realities.

A brief summary of the archive

This archive documents the **genocide in Gaza** during the period from 2023 to 2025, combining the **author's personal testimony with her experience in humanitarian work**, recording psychological challenges, the loss of loved ones, and the exhaustion of responsibility while attempting to protect women and children in an unstable and dangerous environment.

This work is considered an archive because it **captures an exceptional period in human history**, one never before witnessed, where collecting and organizing this information was extremely challenging amid direct conflict and widespread destruction. The archive provides a **comprehensive record of daily observations, field experience, structural analysis, and psychological reflection**, offering a profound understanding of the humanitarian reality experienced by both affected communities and local workers.

The text highlights the gap between the theoretical design of humanitarian programs and their implementation on the ground, as well as the structural challenges faced by local workers, while emphasizing the gendered dimension of the author's experience as a young woman at the heart of the humanitarian response.

By merging **personal testimony, structural analysis, and psychological reflection**, this archive aims to serve as a **field-based and analytical reference** for understanding the limits of the humanitarian system, the dimensions of individual and collective resilience, and approaches to sustaining life and healing amid genocide. It underscores that this documentation is not merely a chronicle of events, but a **multi-layered record** preserving an extraordinary humanitarian experience in a conflict unlike any previously witnessed.

The first explosion dissolved that belief system

The epistemic distance between law and lived experience collapsed the moment I entered my first overcrowded shelter as a volunteer. There, I witnessed a mother waiting in line for sanitary pads, an ordinary necessity transformed into a site of humiliation. In that instant, protection ceased to be a legal concept and became a fragile, embodied struggle.

Humanitarian practice under genocide unfolds within a suspended moral order. It operates in a liminal space where protocols exist, yet their implementation becomes structurally impossible.

The language of «beneficiary»and «provider»fractures when displacement is shared, when hunger is mutual, when the tent functions simultaneously as home and workplace. Under such conditions, humanitarianism is stripped of abstraction and reduced to its core ethical question: how to preserve dignity amid systematic erasure.

The Collapse of Neutral Distance

In conventional humanitarian theory, the responder occupies a position of relative stability. Under genocide, that stability disappears. The humanitarian worker becomes both witness and target, provider and displaced subject. This dual positionality destabilizes the assumed neutrality of humanitarian action and exposes its deeply relational character.

To speak of psychosocial support while children sleep on cold floors; to invoke quality standards while infrastructure disintegrates, these are not contradictions, but tensions inherent to practice under annihilator violence. The work becomes less about service delivery and more about negotiating survival with integrity.

Exhaustion as Ethical Continuity

This archive documents not only interventions, but depletion. Under prolonged assault, exhaustion is not incidental, it is structural. Panic, illness without treatment, and chronic uncertainty form the background condition of action. Yet continuation becomes a deliberate ethical stance.

The sense of global abandonment in Gaza reconfigured humanitarian work into an act of resistance. Persistence itself acquired political weight. To remain present, to continue organizing, to document, to listen, these became forms of defiance against disappearance.

Archiving as Counter-Erasure

This archive does not seek to narrate heroism. It seeks to analyze transformation. It traces the movement from instinctive response to organized coordination; from shock to structure; from immediate survival to reflective documentation.

I write not only as a legal scholar or journalist, but as a woman embedded in the gendered realities of displacement and protection work. I write of institutional spaces that collapsed into tents, of celebratory moments interrupted by loss, of children's letters entrusted to my sister before I left for Italy. These fragments are not anecdotal; they are evidentiary.

To archive is to resist erasure. It is to refuse the disappearance of memory into statistics. It is to assert that lived experience under genocide carries analytical, political, and historical weight.

This work, therefore, stands as both testimony and inquiry, a sustained attempt to understand what humanitarianism becomes when law collapses, when protection fails, and when survival itself becomes the primary site of resistance.

Chapter One:
Beginnings: Humanitarian Work Between Risk, Responsibility, and Inner Division

My story in the genocide did not begin with the first airstrike. It began with the first decision I made to go to the field. In that moment, I was not choosing a job. I was choosing a moral position at the heart of catastrophe.

At the beginning of the genocide, everything felt out of control, the sounds, the news, the displacement, the shocked faces, and time itself, no longer measured in hours but in the number of explosions. In the middle of all this, I found myself facing an existential question: Do I remain in the space of personal survival, or do I move toward the space of action? I have never placed myself in the position of a spectator, so I chose to help.

I knew that going to the field meant risk, not only the risk of bombardment or security chaos, but the risk of emotional exposure. I knew I would hear stories that could change me forever. Yet I felt that staying away would be a betrayal of my voice and of the path I had chosen before the war in protection and human rights.

But the decision was not only internal. At home, anxiety was growing. I was living a sharp inner division:

One part of me wanted to stay beside my family, protecting them through my presence.
Another part felt that my true presence belonged in the tent sheltering dozens of women and children who did not even have the luxury of expressing their fear.

Here, the first layer of fragmentation began.

I began humanitarian work in the first week of the genocide, after being displaced from my home to a school that had been turned into a shelter. The decision was not pre-planned, and I had no clear understanding of what humanitarian work meant in the context of an ongoing genocide. I only knew that I could not remain a bystander.

The school was not prepared to receive hundreds of families. Classrooms became shared sleeping spaces, each room holding four or five families. Hallways were filled with mattresses. The yard turned into lines for water and food. In this setting, I began my first psychological first aid interventions for children.

We had no materials, no drawing tools, no toys, no boards, not even an organized space. I used only my body and my voice. I stood in the schoolyard and began organizing simple group movements for the children: breathing exercises, light jumping, interactive activities. Parents watched me with visible confusion and skepticism. I could see the question in their eyes: What can these movements possibly do in the face of bombing and hunger?

This scene became my first real test in understanding the nature of psychosocial support in emergencies. In violent contexts, psychological work appears invisible compared to material needs. Yet from a trauma-informed perspective, restoring a sense of bodily safety and emotional regulation is a fundamental intervention, even if it seems simple.

At first, there was implicit resistance from the community. Later, something shifted. Parents began asking for additional sessions. Children started waiting for us. I realized then that psychological intervention is not measured by its size, but by its ability to create a temporary space of safety in the middle of chaos.

Building a Team in Disconnection

We were only five people, all young, working voluntarily under a local organization attempting to form an emergency committee at the beginning of the genocide. There was no clear structure, no stable resources, no reliable communication network.

Between November and December, in Al-Nuseirat camp in central Gaza, we worked in around five schools. During days when communication networks were completely cut, we agreed in advance on a specific meeting place and time each day. If one of us arrived and did not find the others, we waited. That was our alternative communication system.

Working in this context was not just about delivering sessions; it was about managing daily risk. Bombing was constant. Roads were unsafe. There was no transportation. And still, we continued.

Expanding Interventions Despite No Resources

As our work developed, we expanded our interventions to include women and persons with disabilities. We provided psychological first aid sessions, mental and reproductive health awareness, and guidance on how to support children during genocide.

We delivered these sessions without materials, without proper spaces, and without guaranteed safety. Often, we ourselves needed psychological support.

Here, I faced one of the most complex aspects of humanitarian work from within:

How can I provide psychological support while living the same trauma?

From the perspective of Feminist Standpoint Theory, my knowledge was not observational from the outside; it was rooted in shared experience. I was not working with beneficiaries ,but with people who shared my risk, displacement, hunger, and fear.

This proximity gave me deep understanding, but also doubled my psychological pressure.

Children's Behavioral Challenges

In many sessions, it was not easy to manage the children. They carried suppressed energy and accumulated aggression. Sometimes, one child could turn the entire session into a space of conflict.

This was not misbehavior in the traditional sense, but a reflection of chronic stress and loss of control. In trauma psychology, such behavior is understood as a neurological response to continuous threat. A child living under bombardment does not always have the tools for calm expression.

We worked in classrooms that turned at night into sleeping spaces for multiple families. We tried to gather ten to fifteen children on a cold winter floor, without proper blankets or mats.

At times, I felt the absurdity of what I was doing:

How can I offer psychological support to a child who is cold and hungry?

Over time, I understood that psychological intervention does not replace food, but it prevents total collapse. It is not an alternative to basic needs; it is a complement to them.

The First Displacement: Between Family and Field

The first displacement was not merely a forced move from a house to a tent; it was psychological disintegration. Suddenly, we had no privacy, no familiar rhythm, no personal space. Everything became exposed, even our emotions.

As a family, we lived in deep confusion. My father tried to appear steady, but I could see the worry in his eyes. He feared for all of us, but he feared for me in a different way.

When I told him I would continue going to the field, it was not easy. His objection was not a rejection of my ambition, but multiplied fear:

Fear of war ,and fear of society.

In his view, and in the view of many others, it was not considered normal for a young woman to move freely in open spaces, crowded camps, and unstable security environments. The war had narrowed space for everyone, but even more for women. The female body in public space became a constant site of concern and social scrutiny.

It took me time to convince him. I explained that my work was not personal adventure but moral commitment. I was not searching for heroism. I was going because there were girls aged 13, 15, and 20 who needed a safe space to play, breathe, and speak.

I asked him to see me as a capable woman, not only as a daughter who needed protection.

In those moments, I understood practically what Feminist Standpoint Theory asserts: a woman's position within social structure is not merely a site of weakness, but a site of knowledge. As a displaced woman working in protection, I could see what others might miss. I could read the silence between women's words, understand the hesitation in girls 'movements, because I was living the same context.

The Inner Division: Between Two Responsibilities

I did not have the luxury of separating my personal and professional life. I went to sessions carrying my family's anxiety.

I returned to the tent carrying stories of violence, harassment, bullying, hunger, displacement, and bombardment.

I lived with constant guilt:

If I stayed with my family, I felt I was abandoning the women.
If I went to the field, I felt I was abandoning my family in their moment of fragility.

This was not merely emotional struggle, it was an ethical dilemma, what humanitarian ethics literature describes as the tension between «responsibility of proximity» (Bulley: 2006) and «public responsibility» (Williamson: 2020).

Do we prioritize those closest to us by blood?

Or those most vulnerable by circumstance?

I tried to balance both worlds, but in truth, I was exhausting myself.

Um Bilal: Popular Wisdom as Moral Reference in a Time of Collapse

I met Um Bilal in Al-Nuseirat camp, in the school where we worked between November and December. She was fifty-five, a widow who had lost her husband during the COVID-19 pandemic. She supported a large family and grandchildren who had been displaced with her from the north of Gaza to the center and then south. She did not join us as a trained volunteer, but as a displaced woman carrying a lifetime of experience.

Our team consisted of five people in our twenties. We moved with energy, enthusiasm, and anxiety. Um Bilal was the only element that gave this energy direction. She did not speak much, but she said the right sentence at the right moment.

In an environment defined by fear, communication blackouts, and constant bombing, she represented a form of informal stability. I later realized that her presence was not only a human addition to the team, but an ethical and epistemological one. She carried knowledge not gained from training, but from life, she could read the community, anticipate reactions, and guide us on how to act.

Humanitarian legitimacy is often granted to academic expertise and technical training. But my experience with Um Bilal showed me clearly that knowledge rooted in lived community experience is equally vital. She knew how to speak to the women in the school, how to explain our work in language close to their reality, and how to balance respect for local culture with the need for change.

When we expanded interventions to women and persons with disabilities, she became the bridge between us and the community. We spoke of psychosocial support and emotional release ,while she told mothers ,Come, let us sit together and lighten our hearts. That difference in language reflected a difference in position.

I understood that humanitarian work in a context of genocide cannot be fully imported from external literature. It must be rooted in local wisdom. Um Bilal represented that root.

Sometimes, when we were exhausted or afraid, she would say:

We remain strong because our children are watching us.

That simple sentence reordered our priorities. During bombardments, when we had pre-agreed meeting points because of network cuts, she walked steadily. She did not deny the danger, but she did not allow it to paralyze us.

For me personally, Um Bilal became more than a colleague. She was my mentor, sometimes my second mother. I told her about my fears before sessions, my shame that what we offered was limited, the pressure I felt as a team leader and as the eldest daughter responsible for a family of ten. She listened without judgment and reframed my fears simply:

You are doing what you can. God sees.

Her presence reshaped my understanding of leadership. Leadership is not always a formal title. Sometimes it is the ability to generate reassurance within a distressed group. For the team, Um Bilal was our moral compass.

In collective trauma, teams need what psychology calls a «container», someone who absorbs tension and redistributes it in bearable ways. Um Bilal played this role naturally. She held our anger, exhaustion, and fear without letting it become collective collapse.

Her position as an older woman also provided important gender balance. In a society under immense pressure, age and gender differences become sensitive factors. Her presence increased mothers ’trust in us and helped me feel I was not alone in carrying responsibility.

Later, when we were displaced together to Rafah, we continued working, though in different organizations. Despite our different professional paths, our bond remained strong. We shared daily reflections, analyzed what was happening, and comforted each other. Our relationship became a form of feminist solidarity beyond formal roles.

Through Um Bilal, I learned that humanitarian work is not only about managing projects or implementing activities, but also about building networks of trust within a fractured community. I also learned that popular wisdom is not a substitute for training, but an indispensable complement.

In environments where institutions collapse, relationships become the true institution.

And Um Bilal was one of its pillars.

Humanitarian Interventions That Remain in My Mind: Maryam's Story and the Christmas Celebration

One of the scenes that will never leave my mind was the birthday of little Maryam. It was my first real lesson in humanitarian work during war, a lesson about creativity amidst destruction and about the human ability to bring joy despite all constraints. Maryam had just turned one, and her grandmother dreamed of celebrating for the first time in her life this small occasion. Yet the circumstances were extremely harsh: no sugar in the market, no eggs, no baking tools, nothing to make a cake from.

When her grandmother told me about her wish, I felt the weight of responsibility on my shoulders. The goal was not merely to make a cake, but to create a moment of safety and happiness for the children amid the rubble, a moment that would give them a sense that life still had meaning and that someone cared about them.

My team and I started searching the market for what was available. We found a little candy, some flour, cocoa, baking powder, and oil. We had no oven, so we decided to make the cake over a fire using wood. It was a major practical challenge: mixing ingredients in limited pots, lighting a fire under unstable conditions, and ensuring the cake would not burn or fail. Every step tested patience, creativity, and resilience.

Then came the moment of telling the children. We told them there would be a birthday party for Maryam and that everyone was invited. At first, the children didn't believe it, they weren't used to moments of simple joy amid destruction. Yet, with the first coloring activity and the first smiles, happiness began to appear on their faces. They joined the celebration: playing together, singing, and helping set the small table.

What affected me most was seeing the joy of Maryam's grandmother and mother. I saw tears in their eyes, not tears of sadness, but tears of gratitude and joy we hadn't witnessed in months. It was a profound moment of empowerment for both myself and my community: despite the cruelty of war, we provided something that proved to children and families that life was worth trying for, and that hope exists even in the hardest circumstances.

This activity was also a lesson in humanitarian ethics and trauma-informed practice. The goal was not only to celebrate but to create a space where children and mothers could feel safe, express their feelings, and interact in a healthy way, away from fear, death, and daily deprivation. We used limited resources to meet psychosocial and social needs, redefining the meaning of humanitarian support in the field.

Unfortunately, later, during another wave of bombing, Maryam lost her grandmother and the rest of her family, leaving only her and her mother. But this memory remains a living testimony to a small humanitarian intervention with profound impact, reminding me that simple moments we create for children amid war leave an indelible mark on their lives and on my professional and humanitarian journey.

New Year 2024 Celebration at the Shelter

During New Year 2024, amid ongoing bombardment and the chaos filling the shelter, my team and I decided to give the children a genuine moment of joy. There was no stable electricity, no entertainment tools, no dedicated play space, and the children and families were under severe psychological strain. Nevertheless, our goal was clear: to give the children a space to feel joy and celebrate, even for a few hours, away from fear, death, cold, and hunger.

We first prepared the materials: searching for colored papers, wooden pencils, and balloons, and found only a limited amount. The scarcity did not stop us, it became a challenge to transform the few resources into a rich experience for the children. We decided to paint on the walls of the large school and create a visually engaging space so the children would feel as if they were inside a different world. We painted Santa Claus on a large poster, which became a small symbol of joy amid destruction.

Then came the children. They participated enthusiastically in coloring, and we also painted on their faces with simple colors, creating an atmosphere of laughter and delight that had been absent for a long time. Their sense of belonging and engagement, even temporarily, acted as a simple collective psychological therapy, allowing them to express repressed emotions amid the war.

Later, I kept the Santa Claus poster we had painted together throughout my displacements. It felt like carrying a warm memory and a real archive of a moment that was never normal. I entrusted it to my sister Noor after leaving Gaza and repeatedly instructed her to keep it along with the many other tangible memories

I preserved during my humanitarian work. It was something tangible, whose memory is priceless.

For me, this activity was a double challenge: on one hand, creating a safe environment for play and expression in the camp, and on the other, managing limited resources and a small team while maintaining safety during ongoing bombardment. I carefully observed each child, noting their fear and hesitation, and guided them to engage in the activity while providing a sense of safety and psychosocial support, even amidst chaos.

This activity was not merely a visual or artistic celebration but a practical lesson in trauma-informed practice and humanitarian ethics:

- Through the activity, we created a safe space within a hazardous environment.
- Children were able to express repressed feelings, laugh, and communicate with peers despite all their losses and daily suffering.
- The experience provided children with a sense of control, which is essential in coping with trauma during conflicts.

Unfortunately, in 2025, some of the children who participated in this celebration were killed when the school they were in was bombed while I was displaced elsewhere. This reality was a double wound: the brief joy we had created through small humanitarian interventions was not enough to protect them from destruction. Yet it taught me that every humanitarian moment, however small, leaves an indelible impact on the lives of those we assist and on my own soul

This photo was taken on 31/12/2023 in one of the schools in Al-Nuseirat Refugee Camp, which had been turned into a shelter during the genocide. In the picture, I am standing next to a drawing of Santa Claus holding a candy cane, as we celebrated the arrival of a new year with the children.

We lived those moments while the sound of bombardment around us never stopped. Sometimes we raised our laughter to drown out the explosions, trying to create a small space of joy inside classrooms that had shifted from places of learning into overcrowded shelters for displaced families. I still remember the faces of the children who helped draw on the classroom walls and on this poster. Some of them we later lost, and their drawings remain as witnesses to their presence.

We did not have real celebration supplies. The celebration was simple, random drawings and a few available colors, but those small details carried deep meaning. We were trying to hold on to the idea that life continues, and that children deserve a moment of celebration even in the harshest circumstances.

I still keep this drawing to this day. I left it in the care of my sister Noor when I left Gaza, as a piece of memory and as proof that, despite everything, we tried to create a moment of life.

Chapter Conclusion

This is how my beginning in the war was formed:

It was not simply the beginning of work, but the beginning of redefining myself.

I learned that humanitarian work is not neutral, it is deeply personal. I learned that the female body in wartime becomes a site of social negotiation. And I learned that fragmentation is not weakness, but an existential condition experienced by those who try to carry two worlds in one heart.

This chapter does not only document my first steps in the field. It documents the moment I chose to act despite fear, and to carry responsibility for my voice and the voices around me, even while I was still searching for a space of safety.

Chapter Two:
Rafah and the Kitchen: Gender, Survival, and the Political Economy of Hunger During Ramadan

This phase began in early January 2024, after my displacement from Al-Nuseirat refugee camp in central Gaza to the city of Rafah in the south. It ended in early May, when I was displaced once again to Khan Younis.

When I arrived in Rafah, I was no longer working in a schoolyard with children. I moved into a completely different space: a field kitchen providing hot meals to displaced families in the camps. I was living in a tent and working in a kitchen with twelve men. I was the only woman among them.

It was my first real test in a male-dominated work environment within the context of genocide and famine.

Gender Within the Emergency Space

My presence as the only woman among this number of men was not ordinary. At first, it was not easy for them to accept me. The resistance was not direct, but it was visible, in their looks, in their caution, in the way they rearranged their roles.

In traditional societies, especially during collapse, gender roles tend to become more rigid, not more flexible. Genocide does not automatically liberate women; sometimes it pushes society back toward its most conservative forms. My presence in the kitchen was not just a job, it was a quiet disruption of a familiar order.

The paradox was that the same men who were hesitant about my role were also trying to protect me. They insisted on walking me back to my tent if it was late. They told me to step away if nearby shelling was heard. I was living a complex contradiction:

Implicit rejection of my role, and active protection of my person.

This contradiction taught me something important about gender in the context of genocide: masculinity here was not only authority, but also a sense of responsibility.

Still, that protection did not erase the fact that I had to prove myself every day.

I worked twice as hard, not only because the work was exhausting, but because I wanted to say, silently: I am here to stay, and I can endure.

The Moral Economy of Hunger

The scarcity of food during that period was unprecedented. No goods in the market. No vegetables. No meat. What existed was what institutions could provide. The kitchen was not merely a place for cooking; it was a daily site of tension between need and scarcity.

Every evening, I watched women and children stand in long lines.

Waiting itself was a daily experience of humiliation.

In social theory, the concept of a «scarcity economy» describes societies where values and relationships are reshaped by limited resources. But what I witnessed was not only material scarcity, but it was also a complete restructuring of priorities.

The father who once worked before the genocide now waited for a meal. The mother who once managed her home now waited for a bag of flour. Children who once went to school now calculated the timing of food distribution.

I listened daily to people's stories. Children told me how they tried to continue their education despite the absence of schools. Some still dreamed of becoming doctors or engineers while living in tents without water. I discovered real talents: a boy who drew with astonishing precision, a girl who memorized poetry, a child who built toys from plastic scraps.

As a journalist, I wrote about them. Words were the only tool of resistance I possessed.

Breadwinning and Family Pressure

During this period, I was not only a humanitarian worker. I was the primary provider for a family of ten. My youngest sister was three years old. Every day, I carried a portion of food back to our tent, as all workers did.

This act, taking part of the food to one's family, was neither theft nor ethical violation. It was a form of collective survival. In times of collapse, the boundaries

between public and private blur. A humanitarian worker is not separate from her community; she is part of it.

I worked knowing that my salary, though modest, was what maintained my family's fragile stability. Responsibility was not theoretical. It had real faces waiting for me in the tent.

Ramadan Under the Tent

The first Ramadan in Rafah arrived. It was entirely different from the Ramadan we once knew.

No full tables.
No family visits.
No streetlights.

Yet despite everything, there was determination to create meaning.

We worked all day and then prepared iftar meals. Fasting while performing exhausting labor under constant bombardment was physically and psychologically brutal. Still, no one considered stopping.

Listening as Humanitarian Work

Working in the kitchen was not only about distributing food. It was a daily space of listening.

Women told me about their lives before the genocide, how they used to plant in their gardens, how they prepared their children for school. Some confessed that they had begun to hate themselves because they could no longer protect their children.

This sense of guilt was repeated often.

The mother feels she has failed, even though genocide is what stripped her of everything.

I observed how hunger reshaped family relationships. Tension increased. Sometimes violence increased. But at the same time, I witnessed remarkable solidarity among families.

A Woman's Position Between Work and Care

My position placed me at a complex intersection:

I was a woman working in a male-dominated space,
a breadwinner for my family,
a humanitarian worker serving my community,
and a displaced person living in a tent.

This gender–economic intersection meant living what feminist theory calls «multiple burdens«» (Collins : 1990). There was no separation between my roles. I moved constantly between them without rest.

I would return to my tent after a long day and ask myself:

How can I provide psychological or food support to others while I live the same conditions?

But I never considered stopping.

Because stopping would have meant total collapse.

Humanitarian Interventions That Remain in My Memory: Celebrating the Arrival of the First Month of Ramadan Amid Genocide

One of the most important humanitarian interventions that has stayed in my memory was celebrating the arrival of the first month of Ramadan with children in a displacement camp in the city of Rafah. Despite the continuous bombing, the harsh conditions, and the lack of resources, we decorated the kitchen and the street around the camp. We sang traditional songs with the children, songs they used to sing in their streets and neighborhoods before the war, with their families.

We bought balloons and simple gifts for them from the market, even though the prices were extremely high. Sometimes we had to pay from our own pockets to make sure the children could feel some joy, because the organization’s support was often not enough.

From a social perspective, such moments are not luxury. Celebration during genocide is an act of resistance. It is a reassertion of collective identity. The children who laughed that day did not forget the genocide, but they remembered that they were still alive.

Working in the Malnutrition Department in Rafah: Between Saving Lives and Facing Violence

Later, I moved to work with an international organization partnered with a local organization in the malnutrition department in Rafah. I can say with confidence

that this was the most dangerous and hardest work I have ever done, not only physically, but emotionally as well.

We provided counseling and support to pregnant and breastfeeding women. We carefully checked malnutrition levels for them and for their children between the ages of two and five. We measured arm circumference, monitored weight, checked for signs of severe thinness, and held awareness sessions about breastfeeding, the use of nutritional supplements, and the importance of proper nutrition during famine and genocide.

We received training to do this work. We were young people from different academic backgrounds, not all of us from medical fields. Still, we carried a heavy responsibility: trying to save the lives of children and mothers in a time of famine. This was not a normal health program in a stable place. It was an emergency intervention in the middle of crisis.

Hunger as Daily Violence

The challenge was not only medical, but also social and security-related.

Food in the market was very limited. People were fighting for a bag of flour, so how could they not fight for a nutritional supplement? We sometimes faced violence during the distribution of supplements. There were moments when people tried to attack us to take the boxes. I remember a father who forced his way into the center to get supplements for his seven-year-old child, even though the criteria clearly defined the eligible age group. He was holding a sharp tool, and his anger came before his words. He was not a bad person. He was a desperate father.

At that time, I understood that the problem was not that people rejected the criteria. The problem was that the need was bigger than any criteria. The community could not understand why a two-year-old child could receive the supplement while a seven-year-old child, who also looked very thin, could not. For them, hunger was the same for everyone.

We tried to protect ourselves from airstrikes, from hunger, and sometimes from the community itself. Our work was not only about measuring arms and distributing supplements. It was about managing a collective crisis under constant psychological pressure.

An Image I Cannot Forget

I remember a baby I visited in his tent. He was only six months old. When I held him, I felt like I was holding a skeleton covered with thin skin. His bones were pressing against his skin. His eyes were too big for his face. His body did not look like the body of a baby his age. His mother was also suffering from malnutrition. Her body was very weak, her breast milk was limited, and her voice was tired.

In that moment, malnutrition was not a number on a form. It was something I was holding in my hands.

I also remember the weak bodies of pregnant women. They looked pale and exhausted, as if pregnancy itself was an extra burden on a body that was already struggling. Some fathers fought hard to get supplements for their children. At the same time, some families received the supplements and then sold them in the market to buy other essential food like rice or flour.

At first, this confused me. How could someone sell a supplement meant to treat a malnourished child? But I learned not to judge from a comfortable position. In famine, families think about collective survival. If selling one box of supplements could feed five family members for two days, their choice was about immediate survival.

Between Standards and Reality

We tried to convince the community of the importance of the nutritional supplement. We explained that it was not a luxury, but a treatment. However, in the absence of vegetables, fruits, and meat, some people saw it as unimportant. They would says «What will this powder do if we cannot find bread?».

This is where I experienced one of my deepest professional struggles: the tension between international humanitarian standards and field reality.

The standards said:

- The age group is specific.
- The dosage is calculated.
- The most severe cases are prioritized.

But reality said:

- Everyone is hungry.
- Everyone is at risk.
- Everyone feels they deserve help.

From a trauma-informed perspective, I understood that much of the anger and violence was not truly directed at us. It was an expression of collective trauma. Hunger itself is a form of violence. When it is combined with fear, bombing, and displacement, emotional explosions become understandable.

From an ethical perspective, I learned that fairness in times of scarcity is not about personal feelings. It is about commitment to standards, even when they feel harsh. Sometimes I returned to my tent feeling heavy with guilt. Could I have done more? Should I have been more flexible? Or was sticking to the standards the only way to prevent complete chaos?

How This Work Changed Me

This work changed how I see life, the human body, motherhood, and justice.

It taught me that hunger is not only the absence of food. It is the absence of safety, stability, and future. It taught me that being a local humanitarian worker means living a painful dual reality. In the morning, I measured malnutrition for a child. In the evening, I worried about food for my own family. I explained proper nutrition to mothers, while knowing that the market was empty.

I am the oldest among ten siblings. My youngest sister was only three years old at that time. The pressure to support my family was always with me. It was one of the hidden reasons that pushed me to continue working despite the danger and exhaustion.

Working in the malnutrition department was not just a job. It was a daily confrontation with the fragility of the human body, and the fragility of the humanitarian system itself. It tested my strength and my ability to balance compassion with discipline, and humanity with standards.

And the image of that six-month-old baby, with bones pressing against his skin, still reminds me why this was the hardest experience of my life, and why it was, despite everything, necessary.

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Um Bilal in Rafah

In Rafah, my relationship with Um Bilal continued, even though each of us worked for a different organization. We exchanged stories daily. She told me about her challenges; I told her about the kitchen, the men, and the endless lines.

Her continued presence in my life reduced my sense of isolation. In an environment where bonds were eroding, our friendship became a form of stability.

Chapter Conclusion

Rafah was not only another station of displacement. I admit that I often hated Rafah and the period I spent there. It added years to my life, responsibilities far greater than I was ready to carry. Working without any basic humanitarian conditions. Walking an hour to work every day because there was no transportation, while hunger consumed us. Even the simplest things that might have brought me comfort, a cup of coffee, a piece of chocolate, were absent.

At the same time, it was a phase that reshaped my understanding of gender, economy, and responsibility.

There, I learned that humanitarian work is not only about implementing activities. It is about managing deep social tensions:

Tension between men and women,
between need and norms,
between dignity and dependence on aid,
between faith and exhaustion.

And in the middle of it all, I was trying to remain whole.

Chapter Three:

Part One

Between Displacement and Leadership, Professional and Personal Transformation in Khan Younis

I was displaced from Rafah to Khan Younis at the beginning of May 2024. The displacement was not only a geographical move; it was also a deep internal transition between two stages of my life. I was leaving a phase of intense, direct fieldwork and entering a stage that was more structured, more complex, and more professionally demanding. I can say that this period was the most transformative in my life, even though it unfolded in the middle of chaos.

When I arrived in Khan Younis, I had already gained significant field experience and developed a level of psychological resilience I did not know I possessed. I began seriously searching for a position within an international organization, motivated by a desire to grow professionally and to work within a more organized structure.

When I started working, I discovered another layer of humanitarian work inside Gaza. It was a world governed by coordination mechanisms, meetings, reports, strategies, and continuous efforts to leverage international relationships to facilitate the entry of aid after Israeli approval. The work was no longer only about responding directly to individual cases; it became part of a larger system operating within political and security constraints.

I became part of a broader team of humanitarian workers. This allowed us to think collectively, coordinate with international and local organizations, refer complex cases, and guide beneficiaries to the correct sources of support. Although more resources were available compared to previous stages, they were still insufficient in the face of overwhelming needs during genocide.

I began working as a supervisor for twenty-two psychosocial specialists. This role was a major challenge. Some of them were the same age as my parents, and others were my age. I had to prove myself as a young manager in a diverse professional environment with different academic backgrounds and levels of experience.

I became deeply involved in planning, field visits, monitoring and evaluation, accountability, weekly and monthly reporting, quality measurement, team needs

assessments, and staff wellbeing. However, maintaining these professional standards in an unstable environment was extremely difficult. I supervised five operational points in the southern part of Gaza, and each location could be evacuated at any moment. We worked knowing that today's plan might collapse before the end of the day.

I tried to remain committed to humanitarian standards, but I often felt constrained by bureaucracy. Everything required procedures and approvals, while some cases demanded immediate intervention. There were moments when I could personally help someone, but my professional role and organizational policies prevented me from doing so.

I remember a case that deeply affected me: a mother experiencing physical violence from her husband and his family, and her daughters were also affected. One of her daughters, fifteen years old, came asking for underwear and sanitary pads. It was one of the hardest moments for me to tell her that this was not within our program's mandate. I wanted to help her personally, but organizational rules were clear. In that moment, I felt the heavy tension between my humanity and my administrative responsibilities.

At the same time, I was living a profound psychological split between my professional and personal life. Our office was a newly built villa converted into a workspace: clean walls, organized desks, a functioning kitchen and bathroom with running water. We used organizational vehicles to move between locations. Then I would return to my tent, where there was no proper bathroom, no real kitchen, and no running water. In my daily life, I used a donkey-drawn cart for transportation. The contrast was extreme. Moving between these two realities was one of the most painful psychological divisions I experienced.

Despite this, I loved my work. I appreciated the sense of capability, respect, and relative stability it provided. The salary was good, the treatment was professional, the protection was better, and transportation was safe. I felt I was reclaiming part of my professional dignity while still living in a tent.

Meanwhile, I witnessed the expanding circle of violence. Children faced bullying and harassment, along with bombing, displacement, hunger, injury, and death. Women endured multiple layers of violence. We often scheduled sessions around water, food, and medical queues so that beneficiaries would not have to choose between survival and psychological support. Life revolved around an endless cycle of violence, and we tried to provide support within it while surviving it ourselves.

The Most Significant Humanitarian Interventions That Remain in My Memory

First: The Basketball Space for Adolescent Girls

One of the most meaningful interventions during this period was the creation of a basketball space for adolescent girls aged 13 to 20 within the displacement camps.

This was not simply a recreational activity. It was a socially sensitive and culturally complex initiative. For girls to play sports with their bodies in an open space within a crowded camp, where tents were close together and eyes were always watching, was not easily accepted. At first, there were looks of disapproval and quiet questions about whether sports were appropriate when people needed food more urgently.

However, we believed that psychological needs are as important as physical ones. We worked under the protection of an international organization and within a structured system, which gave us institutional legitimacy and helped us continue despite community resistance.

When the girls began playing, I saw something shift. I saw bodies that had been confined inside tents begin to move freely. I heard loud laughter in a space that was usually filled with tension and silence. In this context, sport became a symbolic reclaiming of bodily autonomy, public presence, and the right to exist beyond mere survival.

Psychologically, physical movement helps release trauma stored in the body. Socially, this space broke isolation and restored a sense of community among the girls. For me, this intervention demonstrated that protection does not only mean preventing harm; it also means creating opportunities for normalcy, dignity, and joy, even temporarily.

Second: The *Mother and Child* sessions

The sessions titled *Mother and Child activity* deeply moved me.

We brought mothers and their children together inside a tent and created space for them to express their feelings toward one another. In a context dominated by survival stress, emotional space had almost disappeared.

In one session, a mother said that it was the first time she had hugged her daughter and truly listened to her since the war began. She had been consumed by securing food and water, washing clothes by hand, and standing in endless queues. There had been no time for emotional connection. When she embraced her daughter and they cried together, I witnessed what felt like genuine relational repair.

In another session, a child said he felt as if he had returned home for one hour because his mother was listening to him with attention. In that moment, I understood that « home » is not walls; it is emotional safety within a relationship.

Genocide does not only destroy infrastructure; it reshapes family dynamics. Mothers become survival providers, and children become silent carriers of trauma. These sessions helped restore emotional roles and rebuild connection. They did not stop the war, but they paused emotional rupture. They did not rebuild destroyed houses, but they restored the feeling of home, even briefly.

By the end of this phase, I understood that humanitarian work is not only about managing resources or adhering to standards. It is a daily negotiation between what is possible and what is needed, between rules and conscience, between personal survival and collective responsibility.

Amid an endless cycle of violence, small spaces, like a basketball court or a mother holding her child, became quiet forms of human resistance.

This photo captures one of the most important awareness sessions provided to children, titled *Safe and Unsafe Touch.* The session aimed to educate children

about personal body boundaries, identifying which areas of the body are private, which touches are appropriate or inappropriate, the nature of touch itself, and who is allowed to touch them and in what context.

In the image, the drawing created by the adolescents serves as a simple visual tool to explain these concepts to younger children. It was not merely an art activity, but a protection tool. The adolescents chose to translate sensitive concepts into clear and understandable visual language, reflecting their growing awareness and their willingness to pass knowledge on to younger peers. There was a sense of solidarity in this act, as they became active participants in community-based protection.

The photo reflects an important educational moment, where drawing became a gateway to discussing the body, personal boundaries, and the right to safety. In a context marked by vulnerability, these sessions were an attempt to strengthen children's awareness of their right to protect their bodies and to provide them with simple tools to say no and seek help when needed.

Part Two:

Parallel Paths: Building Education in the Midst of Collapse

While I was working in the structured humanitarian system, navigating meetings, reports, and supervision responsibilities, I was also involved, on a part-time basis, in an education program with a local organization. If my primary role exposed me to the institutional face of humanitarian work, this parallel experience reconnected me to grassroots mobilization and community-led action.

The project was built around a simple but ambitious idea: forming youth networks to enhance educational opportunities and wellbeing for children and adolescents in southern Gaza.

At the beginning, twenty-five young men and women from different academic backgrounds and different areas of the Gaza Strip were selected to form the core youth network. I was one of them. We came from diverse disciplines, education, psychology, social sciences, and other fields, but we were united by a shared sense of urgency. Education had been interrupted for nearly two years. An entire generation was suspended between displacement and uncertainty.

We underwent intensive training focused on Education in Emergencies, humanitarian principles, child protection, and the types of interventions we could realistically implement in such a volatile context. The training was not theoretical alone; it was grounded in our lived reality. We were trained to assess needs, to identify protection risks, to design low-resource educational activities, and to understand that education in such contexts is not only about academic content, it is about restoring routine, safety, and dignity.

After completing the training, we developed intervention plans: what we could do, where we could do it, when it could realistically happen, and what form it would take. But the vision extended beyond our initial group. We began forming additional local youth networks across southern Gaza. Those of us who had received the intensive foundational training became trainers ourselves. We trained our peers, young people selected from their communities, so that the model could expand horizontally. It was a peer-education approach, multiplying knowledge through community ownership.

When the networks were ready to enter the field, we began drafting detailed operational plans for interventions, activities, and initiatives targeting children and adolescents. We conducted informal needs assessments within displacement

camps. We tried to understand what could be restored from an educational process that had been halted for two years. We also made deliberate efforts to involve families and community members in the planning of activities. We knew that education in isolation would not survive; it needed social endorsement.

The first tangible step was establishing learning spaces in southern Gaza. In overcrowded camps, this meant negotiating for small areas where educational tents could be erected. We formed basic classrooms and coordinated with volunteer teachers willing to resume teaching despite their own displacement and hardship. We created artistic spaces and small scientific corners, improvised laboratories built with the simplest tools available in local markets. Materials were scarce and expensive, but we worked with whatever could be found.

Once children were reintroduced to a preliminary educational routine, we began forming internal committees within the learning spaces, committees led by the children themselves. The goal was not only to teach them but to involve them in shaping their environment. These committees addressed cleanliness, peer support, activity planning, and problem-solving within the tent. In a context where children had lost control over nearly every aspect of their lives, even small participatory roles became acts of agency.

Resources were almost nonexistent. Markets were empty or unstable. Prices fluctuated unpredictably. Yet we insisted on creating something from nothing. The project's continuity was constantly threatened by external forces: famine conditions, shortages of supplies, extreme winter cold and unbearable summer heat inside the educational tents, transportation disruptions, waves of displacement, and the ongoing psychological toll on children who had been out of school for two years.

Integrating children back into structured learning was not simple. Many struggled with concentration. Some displayed heightened aggression. Others were withdrawn. Their emotions were compressed under layers of trauma, bombing, loss, hunger, instability. Community-level challenges also surfaced: skepticism, fatigue, and survival priorities that understandably overshadowed educational engagement.

At the beginning, there was no formal governmental framework overseeing these educational efforts. They operated in a gray zone of emergency improvisation. Later, the Ministry of Education began to formally recognize and adopt aspects of these initiatives, providing a degree of legitimacy and structure that had been missing in the early phase.

Finding physical space for educational tents within already overcrowded displacement camps was itself a negotiation. Camps were not designed for schooling; they were spaces of survival. Often, we scheduled classes around water and food distribution times. We knew that no child could focus on a lesson if they were waiting in line for drinking water. Survival came first.

In many sessions, children sat on the ground. There were no desks or tables in the beginning. Gradually, small improvements were made, but the educational process remained confined within the limited physical boundaries of the tent. Heat accumulated in summer. Cold penetrated in winter. Yet the tent became a symbolic classroom, fragile, but real.

Within the curriculum, we deliberately integrated topics beyond core academic subjects. We discussed human rights, even though the children were living in a reality where their most basic rights, life, shelter, food, were systematically violated. Teaching children about rights they did not possess felt paradoxical, even painful. Yet it was essential. Awareness itself was a form of empowerment. We wanted them to know that what they were experiencing was not normal, not deserved, not inevitable.

We incorporated art and theater as expressive tools. We addressed personal hygiene in a context where water was scarce. We encouraged children to support peers with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, fostering peer-support networks among the children themselves. Gradually, solidarity began to emerge within the tent.

What amazed us most was the children's ability to transform daily suffering into storytelling and theatrical performance. They turned bombardment into narrative scenes, displacement into metaphor, hunger into dialogue. The learning space became not only a classroom but a space of emotional discharge and creative survival. Expression became a coping mechanism.

The Most Significant Humanitarian Interventions That Remain in My Memory

The Girls' Tent Initiative

One of the most significant interventions that remains deeply engraved in my memory from this period was the *Girls Tent* initiative.

This initiative targeted girls aged 13 to 18 within a space exclusively designated for them. The objective was to create a safe environment where adolescent girls could express themselves, relax, and explore their identities away from the constant public exposure of camp life.

We addressed multiple themes: talent development, self-care, psychosocial support, navigating adolescence during genocide, and body awareness. Many of these girls were going through puberty and self-discovery in an environment devoid of privacy. In overcrowded tents, there was little room for confidential conversations about menstruation, hormonal changes, emotional fluctuations, or bodily transformation.

We discussed menstrual health in a context where sanitary products were scarce. We talked about emotional changes without pathologizing them. We addressed identity and self-worth in a reality that reduced individuals to survival statistics. The sessions also included physical activities, light exercise, meditation, and yoga facilitated by specialists. For many girls, it was the first time they experienced guided relaxation in the midst of continuous stress.

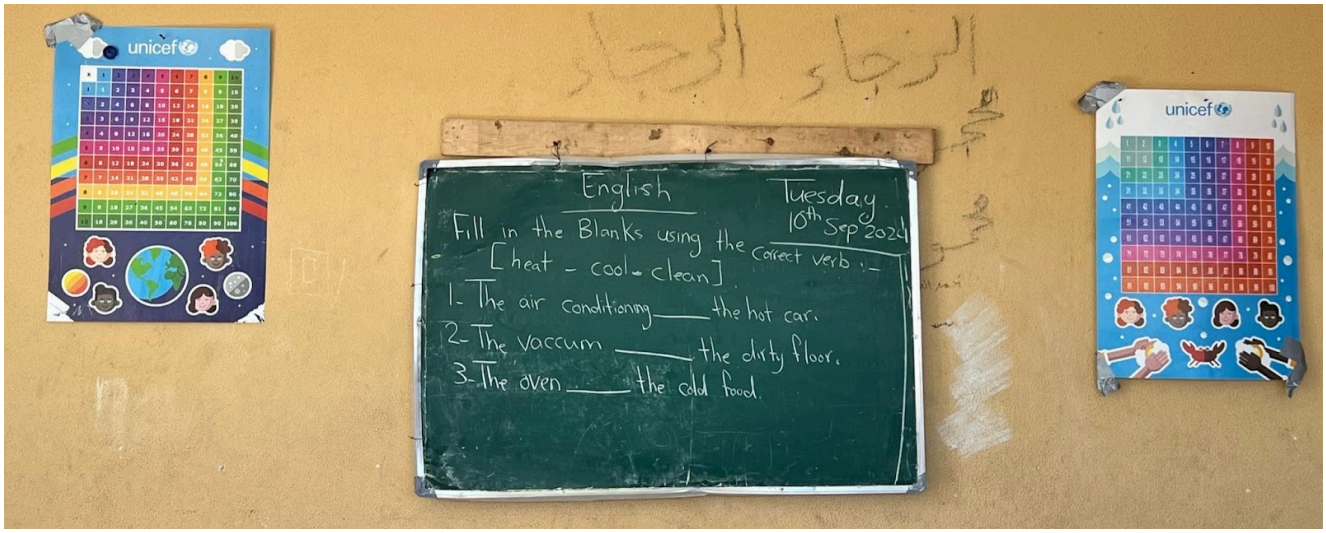
The Girls' Tent was not merely recreational; it was protective. Adolescence is inherently vulnerable. Under conditions of genocide, that vulnerability intensifies. The space functioned as a buffer, imperfect, temporary, but necessary.

None of these interventions solved the structural devastation surrounding us. They did not end the violence. They did not restore stable schooling systems. They did not eliminate hunger or displacement. But they softened the weight of genocide, even if only slightly, for those most vulnerable.

They created spaces where children and adolescents could express themselves, rebuild fragments of routine, and reclaim small aspects of agency. We continued despite the obstacles, despite resource shortages, mobility restrictions, social resistance, and exhaustion.

Later, we lost two of our colleagues from the youth networks in an Israeli airstrike. Their loss deeply shook us. Grief entered the project. The tents carried not only children's voices but also the memory of those we had lost. Continuing the work became both an act of commitment and an act of mourning.

Even in the shadow of death, we persisted. Because in a context designed to erase futures, creating even the smallest educational space was a declaration that the future still mattered.



In this photo, one of the English lessons for children is shown at a university that was transformed into a shelter in the southern Gaza Strip. During this period, children were taught only four core subjects instead of eight before the outbreak of the massacre: Arabic, English, mathematics, and science.

Conclusion

Chapter Three was not merely a geographical transition from Rafah to Khan Younis, nor simply a professional progression from direct fieldwork to a supervisory role within an international organization. It was a profound internal shift between two versions of myself, one shaped under the pressure of displacement and loss, and another striving to build structure and meaning within chaos.

During this phase, I lived contradiction in all its forms: between the tent I returned to each evening and the organized office where I worked each morning; between the humanitarian standards we tried to uphold and a reality that exceeded any standard; between people's urgent needs and the administrative procedures that regulated our response. I moved daily between two parallel worlds, trying to maintain my psychological balance between them.

Amid this division, I came to understand that humanitarian work is not merely about implementing activities or managing projects, it is an ongoing ethical act. It is a daily negotiation between what is possible and what is necessary, between what resources allow and what human dignity demands.

The experiences I lived through, from educational spaces inside tents, to children's committees, to the Girls' Tent initiative, to psychosocial support sessions, to supervising exhausted teams striving to endure, confirmed for me that humanitarian intervention in a context of genocide is not measured by the scale of structural change it achieves, but by its ability to protect what remains of humanity. Sometimes the achievement is simply creating a safe space for two hours. Sometimes success is a child laughing despite hunger, a girl speaking about her body without fear, or an adolescent recognizing that they have rights, even if those rights are not yet realized.

This chapter taught me that leadership in crisis settings is not authority, but emotional and ethical responsibility. That education in emergencies is not merely the restoration of curricula, but the reconstruction of daily meaning. And that psychosocial support does not eliminate pain but prevents it from turning into deadly silence.

It also taught me about loss, loss of colleagues, loss of homes, loss of certainty. Yet continuation itself became a quiet form of resistance. Keeping an educational tent standing in an overcrowded camp, training a young person who would then train others, offering a girl a space to breathe, these were implicit declarations that the future had not been entirely erased.

At the end of this chapter, I do not emerge with definitive answers, but with a deeper awareness of the complexity of humanitarian work when it intersects with personal survival. I realized that I was not only working within the humanitarian response; I was part of it. I was helping others endure, while learning how to endure myself.

Perhaps that is the most important lesson: in the harshest contexts, humanitarian intervention is not merely a response to crisis, it is a daily attempt to protect meaning and to keep a small window open toward life.

Chapter Four:

Memory as Responsibility. When We Became the Response

This chapter did not begin the moment I left Gaza, nor when I decided to write this archive. It began in that unannounced moment when we, our generation of youth, realized that we had become both the first and the last line of defense at once. We were not waiting for a humanitarian response; we were the response.

During the genocide, we worked in everything. It was not a professional choice, but an existential necessity. Most of us did not work within our academic specializations. There was no luxury of specialization. I personally moved between multiple roles: I worked in malnutrition, in education, in psychosocial support, in protection, and even in journalistic documentation. I did not do this out of ambition or curiosity, but because I knew, as we all knew, that our society was collapsing, and that any delay in providing basic humanitarian first aid would deepen that collapse.

We were driven by a collective sense of responsibility. We were not working merely for the sake of work, but because we clearly understood that survival, even at its most minimal level, required us to fill enormous gaps left by the absence of external support. The number of international humanitarian workers who were able to enter the Strip was extremely limited. Experts and specialists were not available in the way a catastrophe of this magnitude required. There was no humanitarian influx proportional to the scale of the disaster. And so we found ourselves, young men and women, performing roles beyond our training and experience, learning in the midst of collapse.

This transformation is not a minor detail of our experience; it is one of its most defining features. The line between specialist and volunteer, between humanitarian worker and survivor, dissolved. We were not external actors providing a service; we were part of the very community struggling to survive. We were tending to others while bleeding alongside them.

From a theoretical perspective, this phenomenon can be read through the concept of «community-based self-response». As highlighted in humanitarian literature, affected populations are not passive recipients of aid but active agents in crisis response. «Communities are often the first to respond, supporting one another before formal systems are in place» (UNHCR: 2013). Furthermore, «communities and individuals affected by armed conflict… do not wait for humanitarian actors to analyse and address the problems they face» (ICRC: 2018). This reinforces the

concept of community-based self-response as a form of locally driven agency and protection.

in disaster contexts, where local communities spontaneously rise to compensate for the absence or limitation of international response. But what we experienced went beyond that framework. It was not merely social adaptation; it was a redefinition of the role of youth in a context of genocide. We shifted from an age group often categorized as beneficiaries of programs to active agents leading the response, planning, implementing, and carrying the psychological and moral burden.

I worked in malnutrition because children were losing weight at a terrifying speed. I worked in education because year after year of interruption threatened to deprive an entire generation of its educational trajectory. I worked in psychosocial support because silence was turning into aggression or internal collapse. I worked in protection because children needed someone to explain the meaning of boundaries and safety in a world that had lost both. And I wrote as a journalist because the narrative itself was at risk of erasure.

This multiplicity of roles was not only a strength; it was also a burden. We carried immense cognitive and emotional loads. There was insufficient supervision, and no structured psychosocial support for local workers, even though we were the most exposed to trauma. We worked during the day and returned to our tents at night as displaced persons. We facilitated psychosocial support sessions and then tried to regulate our own fear in the darkness.

In this context, humanitarian work becomes an act of collective survival. We were not merely applying theories; we were testing their limits. In a context of genocide, the meaning of neutrality shifts, the concept of protection expands, and education transforms from a developmental right into a tool of resistance against erasure. The question was no longer: How do we improve service quality? It became: How do we preserve the minimum threshold of organized life?

The absence of significant international presence in the response became a structural factor shaping our experience. While the global humanitarian system is expected to move quickly and efficiently in large-scale disasters, we faced a gap between discourse and reality. This does not negate the efforts that were made, but it highlights the fragility of the system when politics intersects with relief. In that space, local response emerged as both an ethical and political act, not a military confrontation, but resistance through care, through education, through presence.

In this final chapter, I do not write to exaggerate our role, but to situate it within its context. We were young people trying to prevent total collapse. We made mistakes at times, learned quickly, became exhausted, yet continued. We were not superheroes, but human beings who understood that the absence of action meant allowing the void to swallow an entire society.

Over time, I realized that this archive is not only documentation of interventions and activities; it is testimony to a generation. A generation forced to grow up quickly, to move beyond its specialization, to assume responsibilities larger than its age, and to build a response structure from within the rubble.

We became, despite our fragility, the primary humanitarian response for our own community. And perhaps this is the deepest meaning of this phase: when the world is absent, only the community remains, trying to protect what is left of its life with its own hands.

Gender Within the Response

Being a young woman at the heart of the humanitarian response added another layer of responsibility and pressure. At times, I felt that people expected from me patience, compassion, and the capacity to endure doubly, both as a worker and as a woman. Working with women and children directly affected by war made me confront parts of myself I had never known, how to balance the grief I carried inside with the strength needed to support them.

At the same time, I sometimes felt targeted by the sensitivity of situations while also being protected within the work framework, a mixture of strength and vulnerability, responsibility and emotion, courage and fear. This duality created a deeply personal experience that was not gender-neutral, embodying what humanitarian work meant as a woman.

Moments of Personal Collapse and Emotional Exhaustion

There were days when I returned to continue work from inside the tent, trying to coordinate multiple tasks at the same time, monitoring children and women, and communicating with multiple teams, all while a voice in my head screamed from exhaustion and pressure. I remember one time when I went to the office bathroom and could not hold myself; I broke down in hysterical tears, feeling everything collapsing around me and my heart unable to keep up with the weight of responsibility.

We all had to bear each other and continue, despite the moments of loss that were the most painful. I lost two of my uncles and my closest friends, and every loss made endurance more difficult, yet it also demanded that we keep going, no matter the cost.

Every moment of collapse was a reminder that humanitarian work, especially in war, is not just a profession, it is a continuous test of psychological and human limits. Survival was not merely physical; it was an illusion, because everything I lived carried inside me, in an unforgettable memory, in a constant feeling of responsibility, grief, and resilience.

Meaning Fatigue

After days and weeks of these experiences, one reaches what can be called meaning fatigue: an exhaustion measured not only in the body but in the persistent feeling that every explanation for the suffering collapses in the face of daily reality. This feeling makes us question the limits of responsibility and whether we can truly comprehend or absorb the magnitude of loss, or if we are merely trying to preserve what little can be saved.

The Self Between Trauma and Resilience: An Analytical Reading of My Experience

The psychological impact of humanitarian work on me was not merely professional exhaustion; it was a complex experience that can be understood through the concept of «secondary trauma» (Figley: 1998). Working daily with children who had been exposed to bombardment, displacement, loss, and constant fear was not simply about listening to their stories; it was about deep emotional engagement with their lived realities. I carried their stories with me after the sessions ended. Their voices, their drawings, their silences, and even their unfinished questions remained within me.

Secondary trauma does not mean that I lived their exact experiences, but it acknowledges that repeated exposure to others' suffering can reshape the emotional and psychological framework of a humanitarian worker. At times, I noticed that I had become hyper-vigilant, overly sensitive to sounds, and preoccupied with anticipating the worst. This was not weakness; it was a natural response of a body and mind functioning in an environment of continuous threat.

What made our experience distinct, however, was that I was not an external witness. I was living the same displacement, facing the same risks. Here, secondary trauma intersected with what could be described as simultaneous compounded trauma, where the humanitarian worker is both survivor and responder at the same time. This overlap blurred the boundaries between caring for others and caring for oneself. There was no real space to process my own emotions, because the work was ongoing, and the needs were urgent.

Alongside this psychological dimension, another, more complex process emerged: moral resilience.
In a context of genocide, one does not only endure psychological strain, but also continuous ethical testing. How do you preserve your belief in protection and justice while witnessing the inability of the international system to enforce them? How do you continue speaking about children's rights while knowing those rights are being violated without accountability?

At many moments, I felt an internal tension between what I had studied about international humanitarian law and what I was witnessing daily. That tension could have evolved into moral collapse or a complete loss of faith in rights-based frameworks. Instead, it led to a reconfiguration of my belief, not its disappearance. I no longer saw the law as an immediate guarantee of protection, but as a long-term tool of struggle. I no longer perceived justice as an imminent event, but as a horizon that must be held onto despite its distance.

Moral resilience, in this sense, did not mean denying pain or justifying reality. It meant continuing to act according to the same ethical principles despite profound disappointment. To facilitate a protection session while knowing that the outside world was not responding at the necessary scale became a form of ethical resistance. To write and document despite feelings of powerlessness became a way of holding onto meaning in the face of absurdity.

On a personal level, this work reshaped my relationship with myself. I learned to accept my fragility without seeing it as the opposite of strength. I realized that leadership in a context of genocide is not about having definitive answers, but about making decisions in the absence of certainty. I understood that perseverance is not heroism; it is a series of small, daily commitments repeated despite exhaustion.

My understanding of professional identity also shifted. I no longer saw myself solely as a protection worker, a writer, or a legal scholar. I began to understand my role as a bridge between field experience and analysis, between pain and language, between lived reality and documentation. This integration of action and

writing gave me a way to organize internal chaos and to transform suffering into knowledge.

Perhaps the most profound effect of this experience is that I no longer perceive humanity as an abstract concept. I see it as a daily practice: in the way I speak to a child, in my insistence on completing a session despite shelling, in the act of writing this archive.

Humanitarian work during genocide taught me that trauma does not eliminate the capacity for action; that fragility does not contradict leadership; and that belief in justice can change form without being extinguished.

I did not emerge from this experience unchanged.

I emerged more aware of the psychological cost of humanitarian work, and more conscious of the urgent need for protection and care for local responders, care that is no less important than that provided to beneficiaries. I also emerged with a deeper conviction that response is not merely an emergency intervention, but a long-term ethical position.

Chapter Conclusion: Between Resilience and Responsibility

At the end of each day, amid the rubble and destruction, I felt that we, the local humanitarian workers, had become the body and soul of the response. Our mission was no longer simply to implement programs; it was to carry the full truth: the hope of children, the safety of women, and the dignity of the entire community.

This experience left a dual impact on me: on one hand, the shock of the scale of losses, and on the other, the determination to keep going despite everything. I realized that humanitarian work is not merely a profession but an ongoing moral responsibility, requiring endurance in the face of collapse, creativity amid chaos, and justice despite the structural inequities of the global system.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this experience is the realization that humanity cannot be understood merely through numbers, budgets, and reports, but through the stories of those who live the crisis daily and find in little things what keeps us alive. Every breakdown, every tear, every moment of loss was testimony to the human depth of the responsibility we carry.

Finally, the greatest question remains suspended in the air, needing no single answer, yet accompanying every step we take:
How do we rebuild humanity after extermination, and how do we ensure speed, justice, and solidarity in every future response?

In this moment, I can only hold onto hope and carry memory as a responsibility, so that what we live through today becomes a true lesson for those who come after us, and so that the archive itself, one day, may stand as proof that even amid destruction, humanity can persist.