

# Disability-Inclusive Education in the occupied Palestinian territory (West Bank & Gaza)

**‘Being in school makes me feel that education is really for everyone, including myself.’**

– Islam, 14-year old girl with hearing impairment from Rafah City, Gaza

## What is inclusive education?

UNESCO defines inclusive education as a transformative process that ensures full participation and access to quality learning opportunities for all children, young people, and adults, respecting and valuing diversity, and eliminating all forms of discrimination in and through education<sup>1</sup>. Many learners, including children with disabilities, face numerous barriers (present both within and outside the education system) to access and thrive in education, including humanitarian settings. To achieve inclusive education, these barriers must be comprehensively addressed, and the education system needs to be transformed to adapt and respond to the needs of every learner<sup>2</sup>. Recognizing the ongoing humanitarian situation in oPt, inclusive education in humanitarian contexts means ensuring that all learners, including children with disabilities, receive the necessary support and accommodations to facilitate continuity of education<sup>3</sup>.



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## Situation in oPt

### How many children with disabilities live in oPt?

In 2017, the Population, Housing, and Establishments Census<sup>4</sup> highlighted that the number of persons aged 0-14 years in Palestine is 1.8 million or 38.9% of the total population. Notably, there is no further updated census. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS, 2020)<sup>5</sup> estimated that 15% of primary school-aged children (5-17 years) have disabilities: 17% in the West Bank and about 13% in Gaza Strip.

### How many children with disabilities have access to education?

According to the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, the number of children with disabilities enrolled in grades 1-10 in government schools during the 2015-2016 school year was 4,823 in the West Bank and 2,006 in the Gaza Strip. Since then, the number of children with disabilities enrolled in schools has increased both in Gaza (3,254 in 2020) and in the West Bank (6,135 in 2019). However, the data also shows that about **46% of children with disabilities** aged 6-17 years are **not enrolled in education** (51% in West Bank and 43% in Gaza)<sup>6</sup>.

According to UNICEF (2018)<sup>7</sup>, an estimated 32.5% of 6-9 year old children with disabilities are out of school compared to 0.9% of their peers without disabilities. A higher percentage of 6-9 year old children with disabilities are out of school in the Gaza Strip (45.2%) compared to their peers in the West Bank (27.7%). Gender inequalities are significant: 36.6% of 10-15 year old girls with disabilities are out of school, compared to 26.3% of boys with disabilities in the same age group. This is caused by existing social norms that favor more investing in education for boys or men<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Definition adopted from the Cali Commitment, Outcome Document of the 2019 UNESCO International Forum on Inclusion and Equity in Education.

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Education and Higher Education (2015), Palestine Inclusive Education Policy 2015: <https://www.eenet.org.uk/resources/docs/English%20-%20IE%20Policy.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> INEE (2012). Minimum Standards for Education: Preparedness, Response, and Recovery: [https://inee.org/sites/default/files/resources/INEE\\_Minimum\\_Standards\\_Handbook\\_2010%28HSP%29\\_EN.pdf](https://inee.org/sites/default/files/resources/INEE_Minimum_Standards_Handbook_2010%28HSP%29_EN.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> More information here: [www.pcbs.gov.ps/pcbs\\_2012/Publications.aspx](http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/pcbs_2012/Publications.aspx), <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Downloads/book2383.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> More information here: [PCBS | PCBS: The International Day of Persons with Disabilities on December 3rd, 2020](https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/pcbs_2020/Publications.aspx).

<sup>6</sup> More information here: <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/512/default.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=3607>

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF (2018). State of Palestine Country Report on Out-Of-School Children. [OOSC Study .pdf \(unicef.org\)](https://www.unicef.org/sowc2018).

<sup>8</sup> HI (2021). Gender Equality Study in Education in West Bank and Gaza.

Estimates about the number of children with disabilities and the need of education vary significantly, depending on the sources. According to the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO, 2022)<sup>9</sup>, 74% of children in Gaza and 26% in the West Bank are in need of education. HNO only identified 13,398 children in need of education as having disabilities. This number represents 0.02 % of the overall number of children in need. Humanity & Inclusion (HI, 2021) emphasizes that it does not reflect the actual number of children with disabilities. Therefore, HI utilizes the 15% estimate provided by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS, 2020) to determine the number of children with disabilities in need of education (to be around 83,400).



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## What barriers restrict children with disabilities' access to education<sup>10</sup>?

In its 2021-2022 Recovery and Protection Priorities, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education stresses the negative impacts of the ongoing humanitarian situation in oPt on the education of children with and without disabilities. In this document, the causes are identified in the continued Israeli occupation/settlement in West Bank (with perpetuated attacks on schools and violations against education), the 15-year old Israeli blockade/siege in Gaza, and the COVID-19 pandemic. This resulted in poor learning environments and significant capacity gaps in school-based psychosocial support<sup>11</sup>. In addition, according to the 2021 Multi-Sectoral Needs Analysis (MSNA)<sup>12</sup>, children with disabilities face a higher dropout risk due to gaps in adapted facilities and assistive devices at schools, inadequate transportation means, and limited staff capacity to accommodate their needs. The distance learning platforms to facilitate continuity of learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic lack accessibility features for children with disabilities to access and learn. Indeed, 61% of the households reported that their children with disabilities face challenges in accessing education services (45% in West Bank and 71% in Gaza), while 19% reported no enrollment whatsoever in school<sup>13</sup>.

**Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and harmful cultural beliefs** negatively affect the access of children with disabilities to school. For example, in a study conducted by HI in oPt, 70% of the interviewed parents are concerned that girls and boys with disabilities are more exposed to sexual abuse when away from home. As a result, parents decide not to send their children with disabilities to school. Furthermore, 50% of parents surveyed expressed that they would be ready to marry off their daughter with

## Disability-inclusive education policies in oPt

As a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the oPt commits to promoting disability-inclusive education (Article 24). Its commitment has been translated into a number of national policy documents such as the:

- **Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act of 1994, Article 10:**
  - Ensures that persons with disabilities benefit from equal opportunities for enrollment in pedagogic and education institutions including universities
- **5-Year Strategy for Inclusive Education of 2017:**
  - Envisions a safe, inclusive and equitable enrolment in the education sector at all levels of the system.

<sup>9</sup> More information here: <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-needs-overview-2022>.

<sup>10</sup>Information here are summary of the findings of HI Palestine's Study on Gender Equality in Education in Palestine published in April 2021. However, some information were taken from other sources as part of an internal desk review process, including data collected from the current inclusive education project of HI in Palestine.

<sup>11</sup> OCHA (2021). [Humanitarian Response Plan 2022](https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-response-plan-2022).

<https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-response-plan-2022>.

<sup>12</sup> More information here: 2021 Multi Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA): OPT2101, Version 1 - June 2021 - occupied Palestinian territory | ReliefWeb

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

disabilities under 16 years old. Child marriage, violating child's rights, significantly lowers the chances of girls with disabilities to continue education. According to the MSNA (2021), 9% of girls in West Bank and 11% in Gaza reported verbal harassment; 2% of girls in West Bank and 5% in Gaza reported sexual violence; while being threatened with violence remains a deep concern for boys in West Bank (5%)<sup>14</sup>.

**Inaccessible infrastructure**, including unsafe or inaccessible transportation services, prevents children with disabilities from attending school. Robust literature<sup>15</sup> highlights that schools with inaccessible Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) facilities, including lack of gender-sensitive toilets, contribute to children with disabilities drop-out of school. According to the Education Cluster (2021), the escalation in Gaza in May 2021 caused widespread damage to 331 schools/education infrastructure. A similar situation occurs in West Bank due to continued demolition of buildings and displacement of communities. As of February 2022, 8,278 structures (which include schools) have been demolished<sup>16</sup>. In addition, based on observations, HI stresses that most efforts on renovation/rehabilitation of the damaged schools tend to disregard disability accessibility standards or even basic gender-sensitive accommodations.

**The limited preparation of mainstream school teachers** to apply disability and gender-inclusive teaching practices remains a significant challenge. Experiences from HI's inclusive education project in oPt stress that mainstream teachers often have minimal competencies to teach and support children with disabilities in their classrooms, specifically in providing accessible remote and blended learning modalities. This leads to significant drop-out rates, inadequate learning opportunities, and limited progress in school. Notably, according to MSNA (2021), 79% of children report the need for inclusive remedial classes.

## Recommendations

Building on both the 5-Year Strategy for Inclusive Education of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in oPt and the current Humanitarian Response Plans, HI calls on financial and technical partners to prioritize disability-inclusive education in development and humanitarian settings at all different levels of intervention.

### Policy level (long-term interventions):

- Enhance the capacity of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and the

Education Cluster to develop, review, and implement education policies and strategies that respond to the needs of children with disabilities. This includes a focus on ensuring disability inclusion in all education interventions at all stages of the humanitarian response – from preparedness to response and recovery.

### Family & community level (short and mid-term interventions):

- Address harmful cultural and gender-based beliefs leading to stigma and discrimination of children with disabilities through awareness-raising, advocacy, and communication campaigns.
- Facilitate the provision and referral to mental health and psychosocial support services of children with disabilities and their caregivers, especially those affected by violence and traumas caused by the demolition, harassment, violence at school, displacement, and conflict escalation in the West Bank and Gaza.

### Service level (short and mid-term interventions):

- Ensure continuous teacher training and coaching on inclusive education, develop flexible curricula, and improve infrastructure to make education disability-inclusive and gender-responsive.
- Improve access to and quality of interconnected services, which can significantly enhance children's wellbeing like WASH facilities, digital inclusiveness, safe transportation, health and rehabilitation, and child protection.
- Support schools in developing and operationalizing disability-inclusive emergency preparedness and response plans via dedicated capacity building to ensure continuity of learning during emergencies and return to school as soon as possible.

<sup>14</sup> HI is conscious that the data might be an underestimation, as many people would not feel comfortable to openly speak about harassment/ violence; they remain largely hidden/ unreported

<sup>15</sup> One of them is from UNICEF Palestine: [WASH: water, sanitation and hygiene | UNICEF State of Palestine](#).

<sup>16</sup> OCHA (2022). Data on demolition and displacement in West Bank: <https://www.ochaopt.org/data/demolition>.