

The terror of childbirth under siege

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One Abstract published Online by The *Lancet* gives the harrowing accounts of women who had to give birth during the Israeli assault on the Gaza strip in December 2008 and January 2009. The paper is by Sahar Hassan and Laura Wick, Birzeit University, oPt.

Women who had given birth and [midwives](#) who assisted births during Dec 27, 2008, and Jan 18, 2009, were identified and a small group of women were asked to tell the authors their stories. With the exception of one woman, who declined, all were relieved to recount their experiences.

Seven of 11 women gave birth in hospitals, one in a clinic, and three at home—seven were vaginal deliveries, three were caesareans, and one woman miscarried. Some of the complications included [sepsis](#), severe back and neck pain from [anaesthesia](#), [hypothermia](#) in the newborn baby, and eclamptic fits. The women and five midwives interviewed described childbirth during the bombings, with dead and injured people around them; and how they coped with the violence, fear, uncertainty, and the loneliness and pain of waiting for labour to begin, for the baby to be born, and to be reunited with their loved ones.

One woman described nights as ghouls, saying: "I was not thinking like other people in face of death or shelling...but was only thinking of my case! What would happen if I had labour pains at night? How will I manage? They were shelling even ambulances! Nights were like nightmares. Each morning I breathed a sigh of relief that daylight had appeared." Another said: "I cannot believe that I did not die. Actually I feel I was sent to life again. Now I try not to think of that time."

The authors say: "Women felt trapped for fear of death from bombs falling on them or their families in the home, street, or hospital; and from childbirth if a birth attendant was not available or [emergency care](#) was not attainable. Midwives expressed their fear of assisting women [giving birth](#) under duress, and their lack of preparedness—material and psychological—to attend births outside hospitals. Women came to terms with what they had lived through by focusing on everyday life, as suggested in the writings of Veena Das, and by looking after the survival of their families, which seemed to be essential for reconstructing their fragmented existence."

They conclude: "Women expressed the severe trauma they had endured, but also their heroic struggles to give or assist birth, and to survive with their families. These [women](#) were living a process of healing while surrounded by destruction, and with nowhere else to go, they had begun to remake their lives."

Provided by Lancet

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