

The Plastic Bag Epidemic

By Najla Abdellatif Vallander

We have become inseparable from plastic. We package, wrap, and carry our food in plastic. We even put plastic bags in other plastic bags.

A lot could be said about our dependence on plastic and the problematic consequences that result from it. One very prevalent problem in the Palestinian context, however, is the widespread epidemic of plastic shopping bags. Plastic bags have become a staple in the life of every Palestinian. It is almost guaranteed that, when you buy anything from a shop, no matter how big or small, you will get it in a plastic bag. We have adopted this convenient throwaway lifestyle, with the average household consuming around 100 plastic bags a month!



So, what is the problem with plastic? Disposable plastic items are used for a few minutes but eventually remain in the world non-degraded, ending up in landfills and oceans. To put this reality into context, one trillion plastic bags are used worldwide each year, and it can take up to 1,000 years for a single bag to degrade.¹

The overconsumption of plastic bags needs to be drastically reduced. Consumers, however, should not alone bear the responsibility for this task. Shop owners, industries, and local governments in Palestine are a big part of the problem, and there needs to be a national law to regulate the use of plastic bags. The convenience of having plastic bags easily available at no cost has blinded people to the dangers of their use and to what happens after they are thrown away.

One way to deal with this issue would be to put a price on plastic bags or even ban them. This has proven to be effective in over 60 countries, including Bangladesh, Morocco, and Kenya,² drastically limiting the amount of plastic waste.



In addition, reusable cloth bags are a very effective alternative. Wherever I go, I carry a reusable bag with me, and I politely reject any attempt by grocery store personnel to put my groceries in plastic bags. Their reactions can vary, some are pleasantly surprised and happy about the idea of reusable bags, while others are less enthusiastic and do not seem to understand why I would do such a thing. Many shop owners I talk to are aware of the problems of plastic but are concerned that refusing to offer plastic bags or charging for them would be too risky for their businesses.

Although the overwhelming challenge of the plastic bag will take many years to deal with, small individual actions will help move us in the right direction, making the problem more manageable. Having reusable cloth or net bags at hand and refusing to accept the plastic bags offered to you will hopefully inspire others to move towards such alternatives. A simple swap makes a big impact.

Through her blog Zero Waste Palestine, Najla sheds light on climate change-related issues and promotes sustainable and waste-free practices for Palestinian households.

ⁱ <https://www.thebalancesmb.com/how-long-does-it-take-garbage-to-decompose-2878033>.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2176417-new-zealand-becomes-the-latest-country-to-ban-plastic-bags/>.