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Assessing women's needs in Gaza using participatory rapid appraisal techniques

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• Introduction

Save the Children Federation/US (SCF) has been implementing development projects with Palestinians in the Gaza Strip (Israeli-Occupied Territories) since 1978. Like many other international and local NGOs, SCF found itself implementing women's activities year after year without taking stock of women's expressed needs and their own proposed solutions. A better understanding of the interplay of social, economic, cultural, ideological and political factors in Gaza was critical to developing more appropriate strategies in response to women's needs. As a result, Save the Children organised a Participatory Rapid Appraisal (PRA) focussing on women in the Gaza Strip in August 1990. The purpose was to understand the social and economic roles of women better and to obtain more information to improve women's projects. In addition, the PRA introduced women in Gaza for the first time to participatory research techniques.

• Background

The Gaza Strip, a narrow strip of land on the Eastern Mediterranean, has an estimated population of 750,000. It has been under Israeli military occupation since 1967. The Palestinians of Gaza and the West Bank (total population about 1.7 million) have been engaged in the intifada, the uprising against the military occupation, since December 1987.

The political, economic and military implications of the occupation and the conditions of the uprising make development work in the Gaza Strip a unique and extremely complex endeavour.

Implementing development projects with, and for, women in the Gazan context poses many of the same challenges which face those working in more traditional and less developed Muslim societies. While women in Gaza have shared many of the gains made by urban women in neighbouring countries such as Egypt, Jordan and Syria, in terms of mobility and participation in the 'public' sphere, a resurgence of traditionalism in the last few years has taken away many of the options women could once exercise. Yet while prohibitions on dress and mobility have increased, women have also played an active role in the intifada. It was in this context that the women's needs assessment research was proposed.

The PRA fieldwork itself was done in two sites, Qarara and Zeitoun. Qarara is located in the south of Gaza Strip, an area of about 700 hectares of primarily agricultural land with a population of about 15,000. The great majority of the local population are landed farmers, with a lesser number of landless refugees and some Bedouin families. Qarara is divided into several relatively homogeneous family-based neighbourhoods.

Zeitoun is a very densely-populated quarter of Gaza City. Its area of 20 square kilometers is about one-quarter urban housing and three-quarters agricultural land, with a population of approximately 75,000. The current picture on the streets in most parts of urban Zeitoun is one of squalid crowding; outsiders would probably categorise much of it as an urban slum. The three main populations include refugees, citizens whose families inhabited Gaza before 1948, and a significant population of Bedouin, who have abandoned their traditional migratory lifestyle.

• Preparations

Prior to conducting the PRA training and forming the research team, secondary sources were reviewed, including books, journal articles and unpublished documents on women in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. While informative, this review revealed a notable lack of detailed and reliable data on women in Gaza. Afterwards, semi-structured interviews with key informants in the West Bank and Gaza guided PRA preparation and selection of the research team and tools. The key informants included representatives of women's committees engaged in productivity projects, academics involved in development work with women, and businesspeople promoting private women's industries. These interviews were very helpful in framing the terms of reference for the research itself, and highlighted the key issues related to women's programme in Gaza, specifically:

- Should women be encouraged to move out of traditional 'women's activities' (e.g. embroidery), or encouraged to continue activities in which they already have experience?

- Should all development projects for women be collective, or should organisations also encourage individual, home-based activities, and why?
- What are the relative advantages and disadvantages of women-only and mixed (men and women) development projects?

• PRA fieldwork

To approach the various topics and sub-topics, we reviewed the range of existing RRA/PRA literature to select the most appropriate methods from the 'basket of tools'. Semi-structured interviewing of individual community women, groups and key informants, review of secondary sources, and direct observation were obvious choices.

- Semi-structured interviews were carried out with about 50 individual women, several key informants, and a few groups of women. The information from these interviews formed the core results of the PRA.

Table 1. Research Plan: Gaza women's PRA
Goal: to improve understanding of the social and economic roles of women in Gaza

Topic	Sub-topics	Tools					
		SSIs with women	SSIs with key informants	SSIs with groups	Direct observation	Secondary sources	Diagrams
Community institutions, services and sources of support	national institutions		X	X		X	
	UNRWA & external assistance		X	X		X	
	mosques		X	X		X	
	neighbors		X	X		X	
	friends		X	X		X	
	training centres		X	X		X	
	preschools		X	X		X	
	health clinics		X	X		X	
Livelihood	women's work opportunities	X	X			X	
	women's activities	X			X		
	savings & assets	X			X		
	inheritance	X					
	income	X					
	household spending	X		X			
	home production	X			X		
	household duties (daily routine)	X					X
	family size & dependents	X					
division of labor	X						
Education, skills	training needs	X	X			X	
	education & work history	X	X			X	
	skills	X	X			X	
	awareness of rights & potential	X	X			X	
	level of education	X	X			X	
Decision making & participation	household duties	X			X		
	marriage	X			X		
	mobility	X			X		X
	spending in the household	X			X		
	dress	X			X		
	child bearing	X			X		
	working	X			X		
	education	X	X		X		
	all institutions	X	X		X		
	women's institutions	X			X		
women's aspirations	X			X			
Problems	women's problems	X	X	X		X	
	community problems	X	X	X		X	
	family problems	X	X	X		X	
	lack of confidence	X	X	X		X	
	dress	X	X	X		X	
	health	X	X	X		X	
	occupation	X	X	X		X	
	home life	X	X	X		X	
	lack of facilities	X	X	X		X	
	society & traditions	X	X	X		X	

- Direct observation was critical in cross-checking data obtained through interviews. A direct observation checklist was completed by one team-member during each individual interview, and included a section on perceived relationships among family members which was important in analysing male-female dynamics in the household.
- We tried using the seasonal calendar but found it not very relevant as women's lives did not vary enough seasonally to warrant using a seasonal calendar. It appears that seasonal calendars are more relevant for men's lives as their labour patterns tend to change according to seasons more than those of women. Seasonal calendars have become standard in male-focussed PRAs, while in this women-focused PRA a tool examining distribution of daily workload, for example, was found to be more relevant (see daily routine section below).
- Similarly, we experimented with a woman's life cycle diagram, but discarded it. It appeared that changes based on age were less important than political developments, like the beginning of the Israeli occupation (1967) and the intifada (1987), which were much more significant and seemed to overshadow other regular cycles.
- We created two new tools in response to the requirements of the PRA:
 - The first is a mobility map (see example), which was used during each individual interview to determine where, why, and how often women travelled. During the analysis stage these mobility maps served as the basis for discussions about women's mobility and allowed the team to produce a picture of where, and why, women travel.

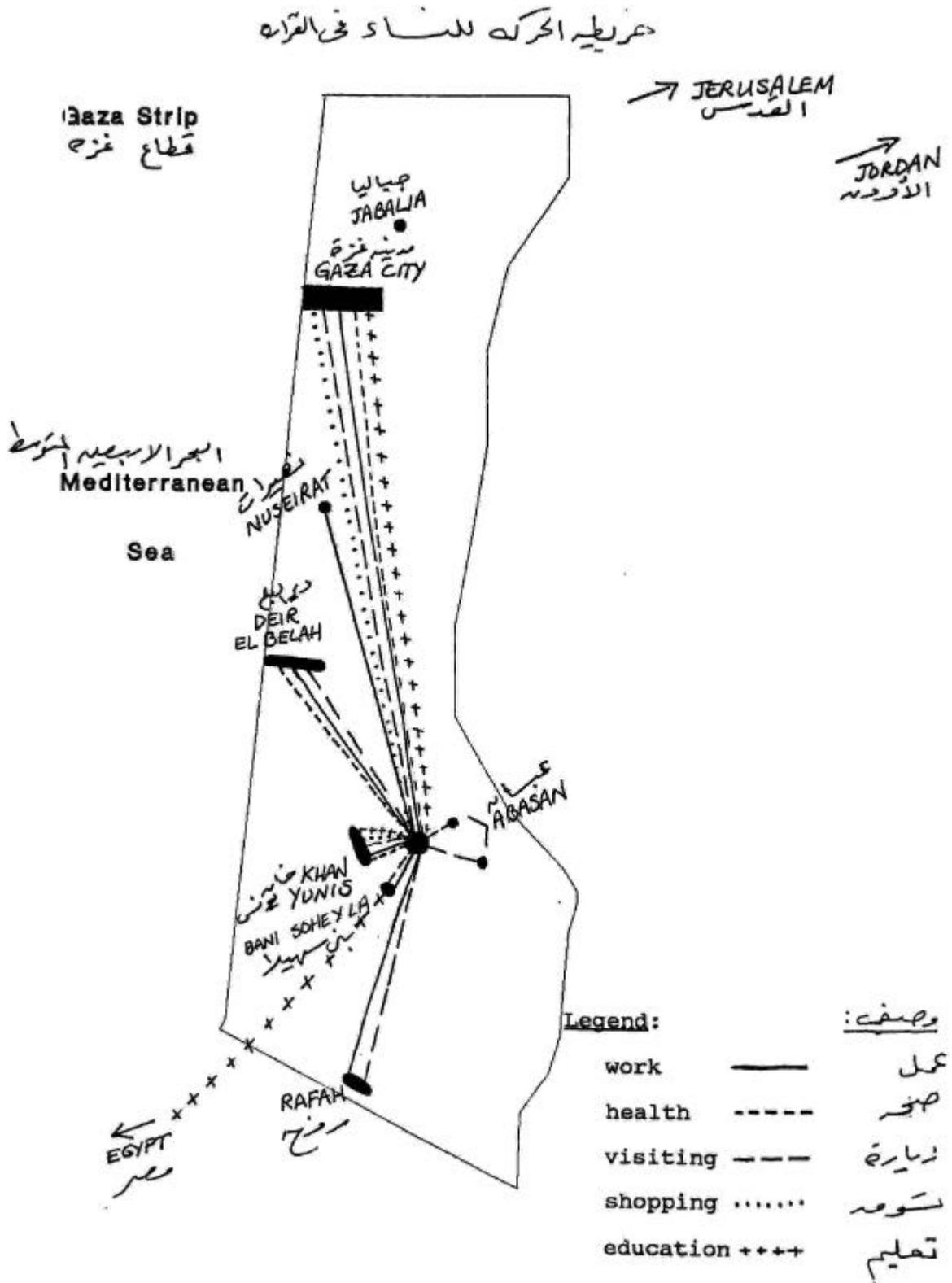
At the centre is the community itself, and at other points on the map are other possible locations to which women might travel. Of course, destinations not on the form could be written in. One blank map

was used for each individual woman interviewed. The interview recorder noted destination, frequency and reason for travel, and the cumulative maps included in the report summarise the information (frequency of travel cannot be seen on the cumulative maps but is explored in the PRA report narrative). We were surprised by the relative lack of mobility of the women interviewed.

- We designed a second form for examining women's workload, the daily routine diagram, which was used to assess the typical daily pattern of women's lives in rural and urban areas. Like the mobility map, the daily routine form was used during each individual interview. While women's daily routine in rural Qarara was fairly uniform, the pattern in urban Zeitoun was more diverse. The major difference in women's daily routine depended on whether or not they worked outside the home. The daily routine form was useful in determining the burden of household responsibilities and the appropriate schedule for future community activities. It was also useful for cross-checking women's information about their time use. For example, some women said they did not engage in productive activities during the interview questioning, but when completing the daily routine form they mentioned that they sew clothing every afternoon.

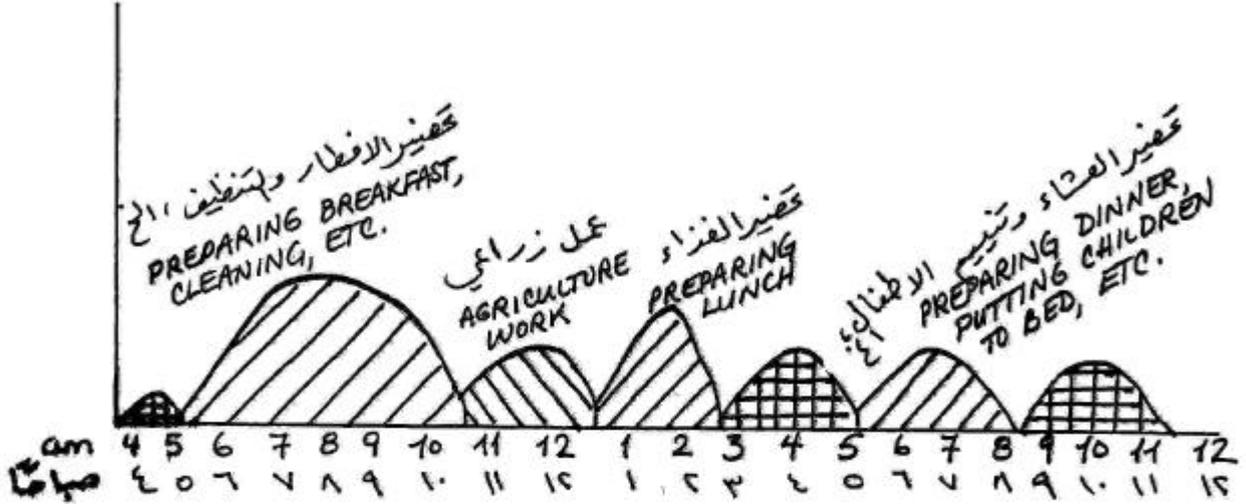
The final report from the PRA ('Participatory Rapid Appraisal on Women in the Gaza Strip', Oct. 1990, available in English and Arabic) provides results from the two areas of Qarara and Zeitoun according to these categories: education; health; life in the home and daily routine; agriculture; wealth, income and work outside the home; decision-making and participation in the community; and needs and problems.

Figure 1. Qarara women's mobility map

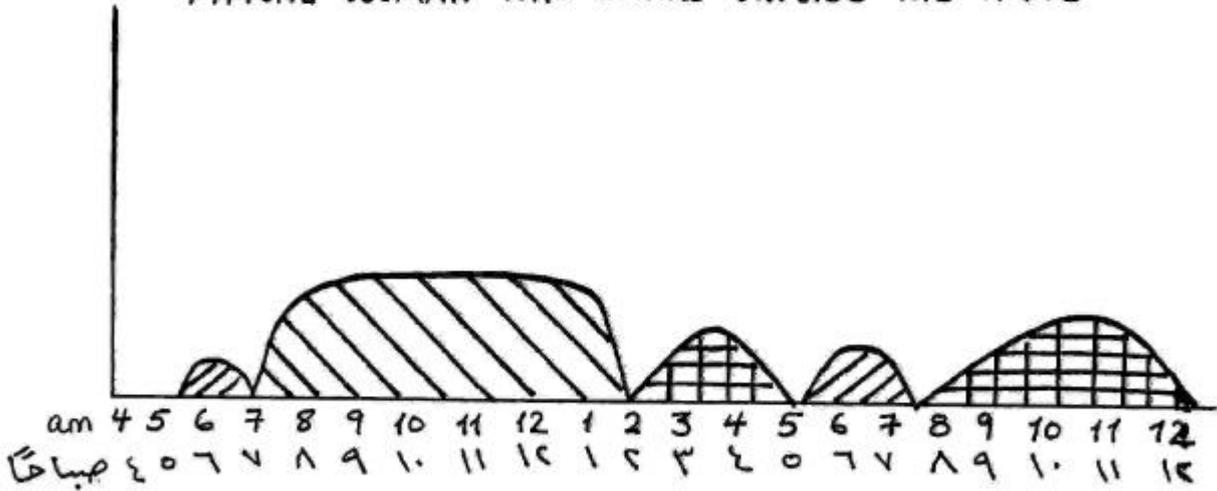


الروتينه اليومي DAILY ROUTINE

معدل المرأة التي لا تخرج للعمل
TYPICAL WOMAN WHO DOES NOT WORK OUTSIDE THE HOME



معدل المرأة التي تخرج للعمل:
TYPICAL WOMAN WHO WORKS OUTSIDE THE HOME



-  الواجبات البيتية
HOUSEHOLD DUTIES
-  الدخل الناتج بما في ذلك الزراعة.
INCOME GENERATION INCLUDING AGRICULTURE
-  وقت الاستراحة أو الترفيه
TIME FOR SELF - REST OR RELAXATION

• **Conclusions from the research**

Following the two-week field research, intensive analysis and discussions resulted in conclusions and recommendations for each of the areas, and comparisons between the two areas. It showed the many similarities in the situations and lives of women in two different kinds of communities in Gaza, and also highlighted existing differences. Conducting the PRA in two distinct areas, one urban and one rural, was critical because Gazan women's lives, and the choices they can make, are determined by their environment to a very great degree. The customs and traditions in rural areas like Qarara are strong enough to ensure a slow pace of change in women's roles in society. In Zeitoun, a wider and more complex variety of factors make the paths of women's lives less predictable, but change and development continue to be constrained. The summary sections of the report which follow show the kind of information on women which a PRA team can gather.

• **Education and health**

The quality of women's lives, as measured by indicators like education and health, is relatively low in both Qarara and Zeitoun. In Qarara, the political situation in the last few years has thwarted any improvement in education for girls because of fears for girls' safety while travelling far to school. The educational level of girls in Zeitoun is better, and the dropout rate for girls is low. This should have a notable positive and lasting impact on the development of women in Zeitoun.

Health awareness is lower in Qarara, but more health problems are apparent in Zeitoun. In Qarara, women and men have healthier diets, rich in fresh foods and relatively low in refined foods. Most of the women work in agriculture and their regiment includes regular movement, while most of the women in Zeitoun lead very sedentary lives without manual work or any kind of exercise. Urban environmental problems in Zeitoun include overcrowding, rubbish, sewage, and vehicle exhaust fumes, plus regular military activity (tear gas, house raids, etc). These conditions certainly contribute to common health problems such as high blood pressure, respiratory problems including asthma, and psychological disorders. Overall, while women's lives in Qarara

have become easier with the introduction of running water, electricity and other modern conveniences, women's lives in Zeitoun have become more difficult with increasing urbanisation.

• **Life in the home and daily routine**

In Qarara, household responsibilities are greater, because in addition to cleaning the house and caring for children, women are expected to contribute to agriculture and care for the household animals. In Zeitoun, few women are expected to work in agriculture or animal husbandry, even those whose families own land. Qarara women also become wives and mothers earlier, and take on full responsibilities as the 'woman of the house' at a young age.

In Qarara, adult brothers are likely to set up separate households, so their wives usually live in nuclear family households. Family expectations come from their husbands and sometimes their mothers-in-law, more than from other family members. In Zeitoun, the extended family pattern is stronger and a variety of older relatives, especially mothers-in-law and uncles, exert control over women's lives. Their influence is often stronger than that of the husband. In Qarara the husbands were frequently at home during the individual interviews; in Zeitoun the research team rarely encountered the women's husbands.

• **Work outside the home**

Women in Zeitoun more frequently hold jobs outside the home than women in Qarara. While some women in Zeitoun believe it is forbidden for women to work outside the home, and some families prevent their women from doing it, there is less control because generally women's movement is less closely monitored than in Qarara. In Qarara a woman leaving the home for her job every day is very conspicuous. In Zeitoun a wider range of lifestyles is tolerated, for both women and men. However, this varies by neighbourhood in Zeitoun, and in some areas controlled heavily by fundamentalist groups a woman is likely to be criticised by her extended family and community for being active outside the home.

Although more women in Zeitoun work outside the home, women's contributions to the household and community economy are less than

in rural areas like Qarara. Women's potential productivity in urban areas like Zeitoun remains untapped to a large degree.

- **Decision-making and participation in the community**

Women in Zeitoun expect to share in most decisions made in their lives and homes, whereas women in Qarara feel much more strongly that they are on the receiving end of decisions. The girls and women of Zeitoun have relatively more input into decisions about education, marriage, childrearing, general family matters, and mobility. But their participation in community life (the 'public sphere') is still very limited. In both areas, attending meetings, coordinating neighbourhood activities, or participating in any communal activities (women-only or mixed) are extremely rare. There are no indications that these kinds of activities have increased since the beginning of the intifada. Indeed, women are now more fearful of leaving their homes to participate in activities in their communities.

Traditions are generally mentioned as the reasons why women may not participate in an activity, but traditions are not consistent throughout Gaza. For example, in Qarara it is considered shameful for women to work in sewing factories away from their neighbourhoods, but completely acceptable for them to do agricultural work. In Zeitoun it is shameful for women to engage in agricultural work, but acceptable to work in sewing factories. Many people also invoke religion as a reason preventing women from certain activities, yet this too is inconsistent among groups and areas.

In summary, the assumptions that women in urban areas of Gaza have a higher standard of living, more control over their lives, and contribute more to their communities, must be re-examined in light of the information obtained through this PRA on women in Gaza. Women in Qarara, unused to being approached by outsiders at all, could nevertheless identify potential communal activities in which they wanted to participate. Women in Zeitoun were less able to conceptualise activities they and other women could do to enhance their lives. The difference could be attributed to greater community integration, such that Qarara women can more readily imagine working together. It could also be that the existence of development projects

already undertaken by Save the Children and other organisations in Qarara has exposed women there to the concept of community-based projects.

A process of consciousness-raising and confidence-building will be important in both communities. Approaches will differ, and will have to be developed together with the different kinds of women in these communities, including farming women, housewives, professional women, and Bedouin women. These basic steps will be crucial in any attempt to bring women more fully into the development process in rural or urban areas of the Gaza Strip, and are the necessary underpinning to helping women to reach their potential in the home and community.

- **Lessons learned**

The women's PRA in Gaza generated the desired results in a reasonably short time. Involving community members in the research was an unqualified success. The research team being composed almost entirely of women from Gaza greatly facilitated the entering of the research team into the communities, and created an instant atmosphere of trust between the interviewers and the community. Furthermore, the two community members on the research team were able greatly to accelerate the team's understanding of the situation of local women, and they were able to put the collected information into perspective.

The importance of community participation in PRA became apparent when the team interviewed Bedouin women in Zeitoun. None of the team members were familiar with the lifestyles of the Bedouin, and there was an obvious distinction between the Bedouin community women and the non-Bedouin research team. It turned out to be much more difficult to interpret, generalise and analyse the information gathered from the Bedouin than from other women. This experience shows that women from the Bedouin community should have been involved in the PRA research team. A PRA team has to be aware of the main 'communities' it will study, and include representatives from each of these communities, before setting out to collect information.

Although only two of the women in the research team had prior experience in research methods, the intensive three-day training on PRA at the beginning gave enough skills to all participants to

make a well-prepared team. Nevertheless, team members needed coaching (by the trainer and each other) during most of the PRA constantly to improve their PRA techniques. Because of the flexibility of PRA, and the use of on-the-spot analysis, team members could identify problems and quickly rectify them.

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The most beneficial aspects of tools within this PRA were: the mix of both individual and group interviews, the element of surprise in the household interviews which allowed the research team to meet women in natural situations, the reaching of all socio-economic levels within the communities, and the ability to cross-check information through the use of different tools. One member of the research team who was simultaneously involved in traditional survey research noted two main benefits of PRA: the ability to add questions during the interview and probe, and direct observation as a cross-check to information obtained verbally.

Problems which arose during the PRA were:

- Too many women (sometimes four at a time) conducted the interviews - it would have been better to have two to three team members in anyone interview. The high number was chosen because: more women received training and practice in PRA techniques; a larger team helped overcome lack of experience as members contributed distinct strengths; and in the unpredictable climate of Gaza, with frequent curfews and strikes, it lessened the risk of losing a 'critical mass' of research team members.
- The interview questions were not 'perfect'. Some interview questions were unclear, especially for uneducated community women. There was some repetition of questions, and not enough questions which could uncover inaccuracies in responses.
- Finally, PRA was found to be better suited to a rural area with a small population where life among the community is relatively homogeneous. In Zeitoun, the information from a one-week PRA could not be as reliable or representative as that obtained for Qarara. Either more time, or perhaps an expanded methodology, would have elicited better results.