

# How to do Participatory Action Research (PAR) in refugee settings

## What is Participatory Action Research?

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a research approach, which is used either in communities or organisations to gather information about a social or environmental issue. It is a collaborative approach and the people involved (the participants) develop their own solution to the issue being looked at.

The key features of PAR are:

- It is driven and managed by the research participants who have a stake in the subject
- It is a democratic process, with everyone's voice being heard
- It is collaborative at every stage and involves discussions, everyone contributing their different skills and working together
- It is intended to lead to action. The participants decide what that action should be and then make it happen.

## Please describe a situation which your project has faced while starting PAR research with refugees in Jordan

Setting up Participatory Action Research (PAR) among Syrian refugees in Jordan proved to be very challenging for several reasons.

An important element of using PAR is that its success lies in the hands of the participants, who are also the target group or target community. Participants in a typical PAR research project are all considered 'co-researchers' who help to design and do the research. Local people in a particular area or community get together to look at a social (or environmental) issue that they think is a problem. They decide jointly to study this issue and eventually take some form of action.

In our project, we already had an agreed research question, which was: *What does early marriage mean for Syrian refugee women and what is the relationship between early marriage and sexual and reproductive health consequences?* So, the participants in our research did not help create the question.

Secondly, many Syrian refugees in Jordan live between waiting to resettle to another third country or to return to Syria. Unsure whether they will stay in Jordan they often hesitate taking part in activities that involve a sense of commitment to the place they are in.

Lastly, the participants were recruited with the help of a non-government organisation that had been raising awareness about the dangers associated with early marriage. Many participants therefore had strong negative views on early marriage which meant that they were more likely to view the research project as being associated with raising awareness.

This made it challenging to gather a group of women committed to working on the project's research question.



## How did you work on this problem and what changes did you make?

In the first five research meetings, several methods were used to gather the group's main concerns, interests and questions. These included neighbourhood mapping and drawing. The women shared their daily experience of activities, where they went, and their relations with Syrian/Jordanian/etc. neighbours and family and they talked about how these made them feel.

This provided insights into their lives and worries, especially about marriage, raising a child in a new country, and SRHR.

In the remaining seven sessions the meetings gradually developed into guided group talks and discussions which developed naturally. In these, there was more attention on specific events and what was happening in the women's lives at those times.

## What did you achieve?

There were two main achievements:

- 1 The PAR sessions gave the women psychological and emotional space, which helped them talk more freely than they would have done in a close, family space.
- 2 The sessions helped the women to widen their social network.

Many of the women said they found the sessions helpful and supportive and they appreciated the opportunity to share their feelings quite openly. This built trust among the group.

They revealed they did not have many opportunities to talk to friends or other women as the main people with whom they talked to were their extended family or their in-laws. Many found this limiting and they appreciated the opportunity to widen their social circle and make new friends.

## What did you learn from this experience?

We learnt that there is an unresolved difference between what PAR is supposed to be, namely communities jointly creating the research questions and co-conducting the research) versus how funding actually works.

Donors typically require a detailed set of research questions, an outline research methodology and research methods before agreeing funding. Using PAR, however, would mean that most of such information only becomes clear during the research process. Currently, such an approach is not accepted by donor/funding agencies.

So, the very research methodology that could give valuable findings cannot be used to its full potential due to how research funding is set up.

Secondly, we learnt that although we weren't using PAR in its typical form, by being flexible and adapting how we used it, the meetings gradually became what the participants most needed and wanted:

- To meet and connect with other women and mothers outside of their normal social circle, which was usually mostly just family
- To share personal information and feelings with each other
- To build a wider support network.

## What are your top tips for using PAR?

- PAR is a collaborative approach to research so that at each step – designing the research, developing the questions to ask, reflecting on the information gathered, creating the action plan and putting that plan into action – it is important to check that what is happening fully involves and includes the community with whom you are working
- PAR assumes that all participants are committed and willing to reflect on a particular social issue and how it affects them. To use PAR successfully, the social and political situation in the country/area in which you want to do it must be one in which the participants are able to speak and act freely and be able to commit to taking part in the research. In the case of refugees, many global/national structural, economic and political factors may prevent their full commitment
- Make sure there is enough time for activities that allow participants to get to know each other well. This will help build trust between them. An open, trusting environment in which everyone feels at ease is extremely important for a successful PAR group.

## What next steps would you suggest for anyone considering using PAR for the first time?

- Try to speak to someone who has successfully used PAR before – how did they find using it?
- When recruiting participants for PAR, try to act as independently as possible. When working through organisations, the PAR research process may easily be seen as part of this particular organisation's activities and not as an independent research project
- Allow time for yourself and the group to 'fail'. This means that it takes time to understand which directions are not useful for the group to go down and which topics the group are happy to discuss. You may find that a large part of the meetings will be used for finding out the basics, such as identifying the problem, the best ways to reflect on that problem, and how to solve that problem.

## Author biography



Dr. Van Raemdonck has extensive research experience of researching societies, culture, and beliefs in the Middle East, particularly in Egypt and Jordan. She researched action against Female Genital Cutting in Egypt before undertaking research into early marriage among Syrian refugees in Jordan.

In this project, she led two Participatory Action Research (PAR) groups with Syrian married and unmarried women over a year and conducted in depth research with two Syrian families.

## Other resources

The Participatory Methods website from IDS: <https://www.participatorymethods.org/>

Participatory methods toolboxes: <http://www.networkedtoolbox.com/>

Participatory political processes: <https://participedia.net/>

IICA 80 Tools for Participatory Development - The classic PRA Toolkit that has a tried and tested set of tools for working with beneficiaries: <http://repiica.iica.int/docs/B1013I/B1013I.pdf>

Van Raemdonck, A. & de Regt, M. (2020, forthcoming), 'Early marriage in perspective: practicing an ethics of dialogue with Syrian refugees in Jordan', *Progress in Development Studies* (Special Issue: Governing choice and child marriage: Young women, marriage and development aid programmes).