



Participatory action research in partnership with young people with disability: a case from the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory (oPt)

Suzan Mitwalli, Lama Shakhshir, Haneen Taweel, Weeam Hammoudeh, Hanna Kienzler & Rita Giacaman

To cite this article: Suzan Mitwalli, Lama Shakhshir, Haneen Taweel, Weeam Hammoudeh, Hanna Kienzler & Rita Giacaman (23 Feb 2025): Participatory action research in partnership with young people with disability: a case from the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), *Disability & Society*, DOI: [10.1080/09687599.2025.2466473](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2025.2466473)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2025.2466473>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 23 Feb 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 18



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Participatory action research in partnership with young people with disability: a case from the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory (oPt)

Suzan Mitwalli^a, Lama Shakhshir^a, Haneen Taweel^a, Weeam Hammoudeh^a, Hanna Kienzler^b and Rita Giacaman^a

^aInstitute of Community and Public Health, Birzeit University, Ramallah, Palestine; ^bDepartment of Global Health and Social Medicine, King's College London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the process of the participatory action research (PAR) approach of working with a group of Palestinian young people with disabilities to explore their experiences in the Palestinian setting, highlighting education, employment, and social participation. It describes the PAR methodology and the co-researcher involvement in the different study components. It also includes the reflections of our co-researchers (the PAR group members) and of ourselves as university researchers about the benefits and difficulties of the PAR approach. This article will add to the scarce literature on using PAR with young people with disabilities in Low- and Middle-Income Countries, especially war and conflict zones similar to the Palestinian setting.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 August 2024
Accepted 7 February 2025

KEYWORDS

participatory action research; Israeli occupied Palestinian territory; young people with disabilities; Palestinian refugee camps; wars and conflicts; successes and difficulties

Points of interest

- This article focuses on describing an unconventional approach to researching disability experiences that enables young people with disabilities to actively participate in the research as co-researchers and prioritizes that their voices are being heard.
- Using PAR, co-researchers (study participants) with disabilities can share their disability experiences in a respectful and safe space, learn about themselves and their abilities, and gain research-related and life skills.
- This study advocates for the inclusion of young people with disabilities as co-researchers, and has shown that they were essential collaborators in the research. This might have a more significant influence on policymakers in responding to their needs.

CONTACT Suzan Mitwalli  smitwalli@birzeit.edu

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

- Overall, this article will add to the literature on using the PAR approach with young people with disabilities in war-like conditions similar to the Palestinian setting and beyond.

Introduction

People with disabilities in Low- and Middle-income Countries (LMICs) continue to experience the problems of limited levels of education, high unemployment, and poverty (Morwane, Dada, and Bornman 2021). In the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), the setting of this study, people with disabilities face multiple challenges, including high illiteracy rates, and a lack of employment opportunities (PCBS 2011). People with disabilities also suffer from poverty, inadequate physical accessibility, negative attitudes, discrimination, and social obstacles to participate in the community (Mitwalli et al. 2022; Snounu, Smith, and Bishop 2019).

Yet, such a predicament is not adequately addressed in research which can be of influence on policies and practices. In addition, when research is conducted, it is usually completed by able-bodied researchers who write about people with disabilities, instead of bringing in their voices into research and interventions where they can participate in speaking for themselves (Liddiard et al. 2019), although in some studies people with disabilities employ creative approaches to reflect on their disability experience (Alshammari 2022). The scarcity of such studies is another reason why participatory action research engaging people with disabilities themselves is important to write about in terms of methodology.

The dearth of PAR research with people with disabilities in LMICs could be attributed to the limited funding available for research in general and the relatively high cost of PAR as a research methodology. In addition, there is a lack of awareness of the advantages of the PAR approach (Kuper et al. 2021). Given these circumstances, a PAR approach reflecting on the challenges and opportunities encountered in the course of the research, provides a valuable contribution to our knowledge of PAR methodology in general, and as implemented in non-Western settings and settings enduring political instability and military oppression in particular.

This paper addresses PAR as a methodology of working with young people with disabilities living in a Palestinian refugee camp on the West Bank of the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) as co-researchers. While the research study aimed to explore the lived experiences of these young people and their access to education, employment, and social participation, this paper focuses on the research methodology, the group members' reflections as co-researchers, and what researchers have learned from this experience.

The PAR approach has been widely used in the post-colonial period in the Global South as a way to counter the West's domination of knowledge

production and promote the participation and inclusion of communities affected by the topic being researched (Cornish et al. 2023). This approach was particularly adopted by feminist movements and the social psychology field (Cornish et al. 2023), but also extended to other fields such as public health (Minkler et al. 2002). This research approach and methodology involves meaningful collaboration and active participation of the study participants and challenges the power imbalance in the research process with participants substantially involved in all steps of the research, in contrast to traditional research, which tends to be top-down, with the researchers making all the research planning decisions and the researched passively submitted to whatever those decisions entail (Jacobs 2016; McGrath 2022; Tanabe, Pearce, and Krause 2018; White, Suchowierska, and Campbell 2004). This important difference makes PAR research 'emancipatory' in itself (Mathias et al. 2020; Nind 2011) and a democratic research process where participants involved as co-researchers have a voice, a role, and a responsibility in the process (Ángeles et al. 2022; Hawkins 2015; Hemming et al. 2021; Jacobs 2016; Sample 1996). This also corresponds to the research justice framework that endorses the inclusion of the participants' voices and influences in the research process and the right to participate in knowledge production (Ángeles et al. 2022; Mathias et al. 2020). This democratic and equitable nature of knowledge production helps increase the validity and quality of the produced data and provides added value to research and its credibility (Kuper et al. 2021; Nind 2011).

With research participants being actively involved in all research steps ranging from determining the research problem to taking part in the planning, data collection, analysis and dissemination (Hemming et al. 2021; Jacobs 2016; Kramer et al. 2011; Nind 2011; Rix et al. 2021; Tanabe, Pearce, and Krause 2018), PAR methodology aims to achieve social change by targeting the problems that affect participants lives and responding to their needs (Ollerton and Horsfall 2013; White, Suchowierska, and Campbell 2004). PAR research brings participants together who tend to grapple with similar problems and who tend to have deep-insight into these problems based on their lived experiences in contrast to the researchers, who are often from different socioeconomic backgrounds with no lived experience of the matter (Ángeles et al. 2022; Jacobs 2016; Ollerton and Horsfall 2013; White, Suchowierska, and Campbell 2004). Through active participation, PAR also empowers participants by building their capacities in research skills and social change (Holt et al. 2019; Liddiard et al. 2019; Minkler et al. 2002; Sample 1996). That is, PAR provides more holistic and contextual interpretations of the social realities of the involved participants (Nind 2011), and it helps to create more relevant, effective, and sustainable social interventions (Mathias et al. 2020; McGrath 2022).

Given the relative novelty of the PAR approach in research and the history of marginalization people with disabilities have faced, disability rights movements informed by the UN Convention on the Rights of People with

Disabilities (UNCRPD) advocate for the crucial inclusion and participation of people with disabilities in research that affects their lives (Liddiard et al. 2019; Mathias et al. 2020). In addition to equitable inclusion of people with disabilities in PAR, it also contributes to producing more relevant and valid evidence needed to influence policies on disability and can lead to improvements in the lives of people with disabilities (Buettgen et al. 2012; Kuper et al. 2021; Nind 2011).

Involving people with disabilities in PAR has other benefits as well. These include raising their awareness of their rights and making them more confident to express themselves (Nind 2011). Additionally, taking an active role in the research process, in all its phases, from generating ideas to disseminating results, helps people with disabilities acquire leadership skills by making them more assertive about their own capabilities (Jacobs 2016; Mathias et al. 2020; Nind 2011). While the importance of involving people with disabilities in PAR is evident, as described above, most research on the use of this approach in studies involving people with disabilities is focused on high-income settings, with limited research on the opportunities and challenges of using PAR in studies with people with disabilities living in LMICs (Kuper et al. 2021; Vaughan et al. 2020). Thus, this study aims to contribute to the literature on PAR in LMICS in general, and specifically to the context of war-like conditions of the occupied Palestinian territory.

Methodology

We, researchers at the Institute of Community and Public Health at Birzeit University in the oPt, used the participatory action research approach in working with a group of young people with disabilities in a Palestinian refugee camp in the center of the West Bank. This study took place from September 2022 to March 2024.

Setting

In the Israeli-occupied West Bank, approximately **26.3%** of the population lives in Palestinian refugee camps housing Palestinians who were evicted, dispossessed, and dispersed as a result of the 1948 Arab Israeli war and the creation of the state of Israel on over 50% of the land of historic Palestine (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 2019; UNRWA n.d.). These Palestinian refugee camps have, in the course of time, developed into favela-like living centres, some the size of villages, and others rather bigger, and more like suburban areas. There are 19 camps in the West Bank in which the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA n.d.) provides main services, including education and health (UNRWA 2023). People there have poor living conditions with limited essential infrastructure (UNRWA n.d.).

We recruited young people with disabilities from one Palestinian refugee camp to work with us as co-researchers because refugees are more exposed to direct Israeli military violence compared to the rest of the population, and may have a higher share of people with disabilities due to Israeli occupation violence. Additionally, the limitations and scarcity of infrastructure pronounced in the Palestinian refugee camps, especially for people with disabilities, added another justification to recruiting study participants from there, including the problem of narrow streets, lack of pavements and lighting at night which pose as additional burden to people with disabilities. Thus, we wanted to give voice to this group of young people having a triple challenge: living under Israeli military occupation with chronic exposure to political violence, living in a refugee camp, and having a disability.

Recruitment and preliminary work with co-researchers

We obtained ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee at the Institute of Community and Public Health, Birzeit University (ref number 2022 (7–2)) before recruiting participants. The recruitment of study participants, our co-researchers, took several steps. We first met with the director of a community organization in the refugee camp who works with people with disabilities. We explained the aim of the research to the director, who later invited a group of people with disabilities (4 women and 2 men) to participate, where we organized a focus group discussion with this group. It was a preliminary meeting to get to know the situation of people with disabilities inside the refugee camp and as a starting point to recruit young people with disabilities for our study. Following this meeting, we had an introductory meeting with a group of nine young people with disabilities, also invited by the community organization, explaining the aim of the research, clarifying the role of the group members as co-researchers, going over the information sheet we had prepared and distributed to them, and checking their interest in participating in our project. In the next meeting with this group, all participants expressed their interest and agreed to work with us on the research, and provided their oral consent to be our co-researchers.

Co-researchers

Nine participants (i.e. co-researchers) accepted to participate in our research: four young men and five young women aged 18–32. Their disabilities included physical impairments, mild speech problems, learning, and visual disabilities. Some had multiple disabilities, such as learning and physical. Most had less than high school education, and only one had a college education. None of them were married except for one young woman who was married and had children. The group members were financially compensated for their work as

co-researchers, because their role as co-researchers was an essential part of the research, and they deserved to get paid for their work. We introduced the co-researchers to basic research methods while emphasizing how their collaboration and participation, combined with their lived experiences, would foster the role of research in making their voices heard.

Study design

The study primarily consisted of the formation of a PAR group where members actively contributed to all research components. Our co-researchers were involved in the various study phases, including planning, data collection, analysis, and co-production of group intervention.

In total, we conducted 30 collective work meetings with our co-researchers. In the following sections, we describe how we worked with the PAR group members on different study components in more detail.

Preliminary work with the co-researchers

The plan for working with the PAR group was evolving as we moved forward. The first meetings with the group focused on emphasizing what PAR is about and entails, building the group, and facilitating the interaction between the group members through different activities. Together, we developed the ground rules that everyone participating should abide by, such as confidentiality, trust, and respecting each other. During our meetings, we provided equal opportunity for all members to participate. This was achieved by ensuring that the sessions were scheduled according to the members' preferences, ice-breaker activities at the start of each meeting, interesting questions and answers, and group fun activities. We also diversified group and individual activities to encourage the participation of all members.

Each session took about two hours, and the group members were regularly consulted on the techniques they felt comfortable with during the sessions. Examples of these techniques include working as one bigger group or working in smaller groups when there was a need for discussions of topics in more depth. Meetings initially took place at the Palestinian refugee camp's community organization center. Later, they were held at our university to provide our co-researchers with the space and privacy to express themselves more fully. This was their suggestion because they felt uncomfortable at the community center due to the lack of privacy.

We conducted several meetings with the group to understand their experience accessing education, employment, and social participation through interactive methods to encourage group members to participate, discuss, and express themselves. These methods ranged from group discussions, where we asked them to talk freely about their experiences, to dividing the

participants into small groups or individually when it was difficult for those members with learning difficulties to express themselves. According to the group members, small groups were considered a better way to explore their experiences than one big group, as they allowed more focused discussion and information.

Development of the semi-structure interview guide and conducting the interviews

In preparation for building the group members' research capacity, we introduced the team to an overview of academic research principles and steps by using examples of research topics. The group members then co-developed an interview guide and framed a set of questions for interviews with other young people with disabilities to extend our understanding of their experiences. This involved several rounds of piloting the questions with the members through role plays until we agreed on the final version of the interview guide. The interview questions were structured and developed in line with the main interview topics as follows: experience with disability, daily life, education experience (both formal and informal), work experience, if any, and social life. The questions were directly derived from the group members' reported experience and their interest in learning about other young people with disabilities. We then trained the group members on interviewing skills and the ethics of conducting interviews. This was done by experimenting with the questions and testing them on the group, rehearsing how to introduce group members to the interviewees, informing the interviewees of the research objective and the importance of their participation, obtaining their formal consent, assuring them that the information they share is confidential, and telling the interviewees their rights, such as their right to withdraw at any time during the interview and not answering any questions if they do not want to. During the interviews, our group members were the main interviewers, and we were the co-interviewers, as we were there to provide them with the support they needed. The group members conducted twenty interviews among men and women, different types of disabilities, and who came from various localities of the Ramallah governorate of the West Bank.

Mapping exercise

We worked on an interview guide intended for use with organizations working with people with disabilities, as we intended to map these organizations and prepare a directory of such organizations to be a reference document for people with disabilities seeking services. Again, the group's experience in seeking services and the information they would like to be included in such a directory given their needs and experiences enriched the

interview guide. We sent an information sheet to the organizations in advance and obtained informed consent before the interviews. The mapping was collectively performed, with the group members taking the role of main interviewers and interviewing most organizations. Other organizations provided the necessary information for the directory by filling out a Google document.

Data analysis

The next step entailed analyzing the interviews collected from young people with disabilities with group members deciding together on which were the main themes uncovered by the interviews and how the experiences of other young people with disabilities were similar or different from theirs. The analysis began by collectively reviewing each interview transcript with all group members, reading it carefully, and extracting the main ideas and themes based on a memo we wrote which was divided by topic according to the interview guide. The memo is an analytical tool that allows the researchers to analyze the data based on the interview topics and is believed to strengthen the engagement of researchers with the data (Birks et al., 2008). This was completed in an introductory session to introduce the group to the analysis process and to split the group members into small teams of two to three so we could analyse the data in a more focused way and more thoroughly. We provided printed copies of the transcripts and asked one of the team members to read one transcript, then another, aloud, extracting themes collectively and filling in the memos that were also available in printed copies.

Group intervention

During our meetings, we realized that group members expressed a need for professional counselling; they were explicit about their desire to receive some psychosocial support related to stress relief and counselling activities. Psychosocial support was of twofold importance: to enhance group members' self-confidence, provide them with the needed support on the one hand, and help them design the group intervention in which they will convey their messages to policymakers on the other hand. To do so, we recruited a counsellor specializing in art therapy with experience working in various Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank, who joined and co-facilitated our group meetings and worked individually with some members on their own based on need. The counsellor worked gradually on building the group members' self-esteem and self-confidence, on helping them discover their internal strengths, and preparing them to think about and develop the group intervention. Feedback about the counsellor's work was very positive and gave the research group energy and momentum to work on the intervention.

The techniques used by the counsellor were based on art methodologies deemed effective for use with a group of people with different types of disabilities. According to the counsellor, using these techniques is preferable to traditional methods, as art is considered a safe space for people with disabilities to express their feelings, needs, and fears indirectly. This also helps them realize their strengths and weaknesses and motivates them to work on their weaknesses. It is also a way for those who cannot express themselves orally to do so through art. The counsellor used various techniques, including therapeutic stories that increased the research group's hopes and aspirations, painting, using play dough, and role plays. The focus of work with the research group was on the notions of relationships, boundaries, and privacy, enhancing the positive view of oneself and life through realizing one's inner strength, and finally, how to express and manage feelings of happiness and anger. These approaches are supported by the literature, which has shown that the use of art in participatory methods with people with disabilities provides them with the space to express themselves in different ways (Stafford 2017) and enables a powerful atmosphere for them (Geiger, Shpigelman, and Feniger-Schaal 2020).

Collecting and analysing the group's reflections on the PAR process and their involvement in research

During our sessions, we collected the group's reflections on the process as a whole and different parts of the research. Sometimes, we needed to focus the discussion on smaller subgroups, especially for the members who have learning disabilities and feel more encouraged to share their reflections in small groups. We consistently discussed and confirmed the group members' reflections throughout the sessions. We coded and analyzed all discussion notes using a thematic analysis approach, transforming all codes into main themes. We also produced analytical memos for each member individually and collectively for all members, where we extracted the quotes and then translated them into English. We also had an evaluation session toward the end of the group sessions, where we discussed the themes with the group members and received their confirmation. The structure of the results section is arranged based on the themes we derived from the analysis and supported by verbatim quotes from the group members.

Results

Reflections of group members on their experiences as co-researchers'

Creating space and drawing boundaries

The research group members were committed to group sessions during the whole period of the project. The sessions' atmosphere was meant to be

welcoming and ensuring of privacy and the freedom for expressing their ideas and views. For this reason, when some participants indicated that the meeting space inside the refugee camp did not allow them to express their thoughts freely, we moved the venue of the meetings to the university to ensure a comfortable environment. A young man with a physical disability noted:

I feel more comfortable and secure when we meet at the university. If the place here (the university) is not safe, we would not come.

A female group member with a visual disability emphasised the importance of respecting the confidentiality and privacy of the group:

I felt annoyed when I saw our meeting photos shared on the Facebook page of the (refugee camp) community center. People in the camp know each other, and some of my relatives ask me out of curiosity about the meetings, and I don't want to answer because I respect the rules of the group and that we need to keep confidentiality.

Realizing hopes

Some members noted that regular visits to the university fulfilled their earlier hopes of actually visiting the university, and they felt proud and confident when they told their parents they had a meeting there.

Building confidence and relieving stress

Some co-research members, especially young women who spend most of their time at home, viewed sessions as an opportunity to get out of their houses, obtain stress relief, and rely on themselves.

One woman group member with a learning disability said:

Group meetings are an opportunity to meet people and feel good instead of staying bored at home.

On feeling confident, empowered, and taking responsibility for oneself, a woman group member with a visual disability added:

I started to rely more on myself for going outside the camp and coming to the university for the meetings, and my self-confidence increased.

Our participants also showed enthusiasm and happiness by participating in the group sessions. Each one of them expressed their excitement and reasons for the feelings about meetings they exhibited. A female group member with a physical disability explained:

Coming and participating in the group gives me positive energy and happiness. When I know there will be a group meeting, I make my preparations in advance to be able to join the group meeting.

Another fellow group member with a physical disability explained:

Group meetings at the university gave us momentum and hope... The meetings also gave us the opportunity to get out of the refugee camp, where we feel choked.

Sharing experiences in a respectful and safe space

The group sessions were also an opportunity for the co-researchers to share their experiences and gain insights from each other. They also viewed the discussions in the sessions as a chance to express themselves freely without concerns about violating confidentiality and to feel heard, listened to, and understood.

A female member with a visual disability explained how the group's sessions helped her to learn from other members' experiences:

You helped us make our voices heard and talk about the difficulties we were afraid to discuss before without being criticised. I liked the confidentiality here in the group and that we are all the same. We learn from each other's experiences, think, and let what is inside us go outside in a supportive environment.

Likewise a fellow group member with a physical disability noted:

The group meetings motivate us to talk freely about our experiences.

Another young man with a physical disability added:

Even though we are from the same refugee camp, we didn't know each other well before joining the group regarding feelings, ideas, and experiences.

Learning about oneself, one's abilities, and gaining skills

Some group members reported that they were worried about conducting interviews with other young people with disabilities, given that this was their first interviewing experience. Some group members were more confident than others, especially those who could read and ask the interview questions to interviewees without our support. We, the university team, assisted the members who could not read by reading the questions for them first before they asked the interviewees.

A woman co-researcher with a physical disability noted:

I knew we would meet other young people with disabilities, but I was worried since it was my first time interviewing somebody. I have never done something like this before. However, when someone (from the university research team) is with me, I feel encouraged.

Conducting interviews helped some members gain self-confidence and provided them with interviewing skills at the same time. They thought this would help them with job interviews in the future, especially in terms of overcoming job interview anxiety.

A woman group member with a physical disability shared her thoughts about interviewing:

Interviewing somebody gives us self-confidence, and we learn how to talk to people. Such interviews are beneficial for job interviews because we gain the interviewing skills.

Learning about other young people with disabilities and their experiences

The fact that the co-researcher group members had similar experiences to the interviewees facilitated the interview dynamics and helped in building rapport between the interviewers and interviewees. Additionally, conversing with other young people with disabilities and asking them questions made some group members appreciate their situation in comparison with others whose situations were worse than theirs. It was also good to learn about the experiences of other young people with disabilities and how some faced and overcame difficulties. This was reflected by this woman co-researcher with a physical disability:

Interviewing other young people with disabilities is a good experience. It made you feel like your disability is nothing compared to some of the interviewees.

Another woman with a visual disability added and noted:

We got to know the experiences of other young people with disabilities and what difficulties they face, what helped them, how some reached their aims and dreams, and how they depended on themselves.

And a young man group member with a physical disability expressed his insights from the interviewing experience and said:

It is good to know others' experiences, and I realized that a person with a disability can do anything even if he or she has a disability, and whoever has desires should not give up in life.

These reflections on interviewing other young people with disabilities were complemented by their experiences in analyzing the interviews they conducted.

A woman group member with a visual disability commented on the analysis process:

What we missed to understand during conducting the interview, we understood when we analysed the interviews.

This was also illustrated and confirmed by one woman and one man co-researchers, who both have a physical disability:

We concentrated, were happy during the analysis of the interviews, and got the main ideas of the interviews.

Group intervention

The group intervention that the co-researchers decided to perform as one of the main components of this project was a video-recorded drama sketch consisting of messages the group members wanted to convey to their community and policymakers. The professional counsellor who had experience in art therapy facilitated the sketch. The messages focused on the co-author group members' dreams and demands to have employment training and decent employment opportunities that suit their disabilities, in addition to their need for environmental adaptations, especially in the refugee camp and health demands such as medical aid and assistive devices, and the provision of physiotherapy and occupational therapy services. The drama sketch was performed using hand puppets which was divided into two parts. The performed sketch was video-filmed with captions made available in both Arabic and English. The video ended with messages concerning young people with disabilities rights in being provided with assistive devices, their need for environmental adaptation, the availability of employment opportunities, protection from abuse at workplaces; and, more importantly, demanding that organizations would help them instead of discouraging them. The group had the opportunity to practice their roles over several sessions, and they drafted the text of their roles. The video is intended for awareness-raising and educational purposes in order to highlight the rights and needs of young people with disabilities in the Palestinian context in general and in Palestinian refugee camp settings in particular.

After filming the video, the co-researchers reflected on their group intervention. They maintained that they enjoyed working on the video and were proud of their production. They all agreed that the sketch using the hand puppets was a great, enjoyable and powerful way to represent their ideas.

A woman with visual difficulty noted:

It is nice to express your messages through drama because the ideas reach people quicker in this way. All that we covered in the video is from our experiences, and we show it in a nice way.

Another woman with a physical disability added:

It is a new and interesting experience to me, and doing the sketch gave us strength to talk bravely about our messages, and it became easier with practice.

In comparison to producing a video filmed with themselves appearing in it, using hand puppets made them more enthusiastic and willing to share the video and present it on varied platform, in contrast to being hesitant about sharing a video with themselves appearing in it. They also thought that conveying their messages through video was more accessible to people. They suggested using this drama style to raise awareness about other rights-based social issues in the community.

A man with a physical disability commented:

It was a joy for me to participate in the sketch, and I felt that the hand puppet was talking on behalf of us and conveying our messages. I think this kind of work can reach people quicker.

Another man with a physical disability agreed and added:

I felt comfortable acting through the hand puppet instead of showing my face, and I was encouraged and able to express myself through it.

The art therapists confirmed the group members' reflections and preference for employing hand puppets in the drama sketch to convey their messages. She considers using hand puppets a safe way for the group members to express themselves. She added that all group members who participated in the sketch were great, even though they were not familiar with moving the puppets, especially since some of them have physical disabilities, and keeping the puppets raised upwards during the play was not an easy task for them. They successfully collaborated on the content and complemented each other in the sketch.

The University's researchers' reflections on working with the PAR group

The journey and experience of working with the participatory action group were unique, including mutual learning and reflection throughout the process. This confirmed to us university researchers that a genuine benefit of involving people who have experienced issues related to the research in the research from the beginning includes bringing about new understandings which university researchers gain from such an experience, which may not be possible using classical methods of conducting research.

This approach also taught us how to be patient while conducting research, and the importance of using several group facilitation strategies and communication skills as needed. Although the main university researcher had previous experience working with a participatory action group, every experience is unique and requires continuous reflection and follow-up. Since the PAR approach is a process that requires continuous reconsidering and revising of planning, we tried to keep the co-researchers comfortable throughout the process with ongoing consultation and making sure to consider all suggestions, even if they necessitated changes in plans or requiring additional time to complete these suggestions.

We realized in the course of the project that the venue where meetings took place between the university researchers and the co-researchers was important to consider and make sure it was appropriate. In this sense, it was important that the institute where the university researcher is based was very cooperative and provided the venue and other facilities for the group's

meetings. This provided a comfortable space for both the researchers and the co-researchers, as was also expressed by them and noted earlier.

One of the pillars of the PAR approach is to build and maintain trust with the co-researchers, encouraging, supporting, and facilitating members to participate. Some members were a bit dominant, while others, especially those with learning disabilities, participated less than others. Still, we dealt with this through delicate facilitation techniques and by respecting the contributions of all members. It was a challenging task and required extra effort and trials. Related to this challenge is the fact that most co-researchers could not read or write, which we accommodated by supporting these members during specific research components, such as interviewing other young people with disabilities and organizations where we read the interview question first to the co-researcher conducting the interview.

A challenge that at times arose was the tension among some group members, which we needed to address immediately in a way that did not harm any of them. This required energy and creativity from the university researchers, who were aware that this could happen in group settings. One of the difficulties we also faced was the extra attention that some members seemed to ask from us until we realized that an adequate response would require specialized counselling skills that we, as researchers, did not possess. In responding to these needs, the professional counsellor specializing in art therapy joined us, participated in our meetings, and offered individual sessions based on the members' needs.

A persistent context-specific difficulty was the unstable political situation and the escalation of Israeli army and Israeli settler violence against Palestinians, especially the continuous invasions of Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank and the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip, which made planning a difficult task. We sometimes needed to cancel or postpone meetings based on the political situation because we did not want to put the group members or ourselves at any risk.

Working with PAR induced us to reflect on the process throughout, especially making adaptations based on the group members' expressed needs. This helped us realize the importance of the flexibility needed to ensure the incorporation of the voices of people with disability into the research. To achieve this, we made sure to provide a supportive environment so that everyone in the group could participate in the way they find appropriate, and work toward achieving the research objectives.

Discussion

This paper aims to shed light on the methodology of working with a group of Palestinian young people with disabilities employing participatory action research in order to understand the lived experiences of young people with

disabilities with a focus on education, employment, and social participation in the Palestinian context. To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the first research pieces which is focused on the process of working on PAR with young people with disabilities in the context of political instability and war-like conditions. It also describes what we have learned from our experiences, both from the perspective of university researchers and co-researchers, and how this could provide helpful insights to other researchers wishing to use the PAR approach.

The need to document this kind of research stems from the lack of available literature on the active inclusion of young people with disabilities in research in general and as co-researchers in particular (Liddiard et al. 2019) and is especially relevant for LMICs (Kuper et al. 2021). Furthermore, involving young people with disabilities in research is also essential from a rights-based perspective, where participants are directly engaged in knowledge production that explicitly relates to their own lives (Mathias et al. 2020; Nind 2011). In contexts where people with disabilities are deprived of the opportunity to engage in matters that impact their lives and are usually approached with a charity perspective, their direct involvement in research can help to build their autonomy and agency as co-researchers (Kuper et al. 2021; Liddiard et al. 2019). We, as university researchers, aimed to accomplish this by allowing the research plan to evolve and develop based on continuous consultation with co-researchers and their direct involvement in the preferred techniques revealed during group discussions.

To be as inclusive as possible, we aimed to include all types of disabilities in our participatory action research group, which consisted of young people with physical, visual, learning, and multiple disabilities. Nind (2011) highlighted that people with physical disabilities are usually the ones who are presented the most in research on disability, with less inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities. The lack of inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in participatory action research is attributed mainly to the difficulties encountered in working with them as co-researchers (Harrison et al. 2001). However, with adequate support, they can participate and provide valuable insights (Buettgen et al. 2012; Ollerton and Horsfall 2013). In our experience, working with participants with learning disabilities was indeed not easy. Nevertheless, we used various approaches to encourage and include their participation. Indeed, the contributions of people with intellectual disabilities were truly appreciated by the group, and clearly demonstrated with the welcoming atmosphere which the rest of the group expressed towards them.

The inclusivity of research also applies to the level of involvement of people with disabilities in the research process (Kuper et al. 2021). In our study, we involved the participants in all the research components, from engaging them and having them share their own experiences all the way to completing

the group intervention. Based on the literature, this involvement in research usually differs among studies. In some studies, co-researchers participate in research planning and setting up research tools (Mathias et al. 2020). In other studies, they get involved in data collection (Liddiard et al. 2019; Mathias et al. 2020) and or data analysis (Kramer et al. 2011; Liddiard et al. 2019; McGrath 2022). Our findings show that our participants' engagement in all research steps particularly enriched this research with added value and produced more insightful and relevant inputs in each step of the process. This is consistent with what Kuper et al. (2021) and Nind (2011) indicated, namely that including people with disabilities in all research stages can produce more valid results and democratic and equitable knowledge production.

Our findings showed that one of the main successes of conducting participatory research with young people with disabilities is the space this kind of work provides for all group members, where they feel respected, trusted, and listened to. Even though the group sessions aimed for working on the research itself, the participants considered these sessions an opportunity for stress relief, enjoying the activities conducted with other members, getting out of the house, and adding a new valuable component to the experience. The group members also reported sharing and exchanging experiences with each other and felt they all had experiences that could be exchanged and benefited from, similar to what the literature found (Stevenson 2014). Moreover, the group sessions helped build self-confidence for some members who felt that their experiences were important in feeding and developing the research components, mainly the interview guide for the interviews with other young people with disabilities. This too was noted by Liddiard et al. (2019) when working with a young group of women with disabilities.

The experience of interviewing other young people with disabilities by group members was an empowering and unique experience. This helped the co-researchers learn about the ethics of conducting interviews, gain the experience of interviewing other people with similar circumstances and create a good dynamic between the interviewer and interviewees, as found elsewhere (Kuper et al. 2021). It also helped the co-researchers learn about others' experiences and realise that other people's experiences overlap with theirs (Stevenson 2014). While the co-researchers perceived the interviewing process as a new and beneficial experience, they also considered the joint analysis of the interviews as an enriching experience leading to in-depth understanding of the interviews they conducted. As researchers, we followed a simplified way of co-analysis, taking into consideration the educational level of the group members, knowing that participatory analysis is challenging (Kuper et al. 2021) but is also missing in most participatory research (Nind 2011), and therefore a component which we were keen to include.

Through the group intervention consisting of the drama sketch, the group members undertook what was the most enjoyable and practical part for

them. They considered it a celebration of their whole journey of working on the research and were proud of their production, representing their messages to the policymakers. The literature confirms that interventions designed and implemented by the affected people are more effective than others (Mathias et al. 2020; McGrath 2022), contributing to the social change that PAR aims to achieve (Kramer et al. 2011; Ollerton and Horsfall 2013; White, Suchowierska, and Campbell 2004).

The researchers of this study acknowledged the experience of PAR as interactive, methodologically stronger, facilitating new understandings coming from direct participants' involvement, and entailed mutual learning and adaptation throughout the process, which is similar to what others have noted (Minkler et al. 2002; Nind 2011). Building trust and respect between researchers and co-researchers is considered essential to the success of the PAR process, as confirmed by the literature (Tilley et al. 2021), in addition to providing a comfortable environment for co-researchers and accepting that plans might be changed in line with group suggestions, as has happened in this study where the art therapist was included in the project based on the group's needs and desires.

Although overall, we were successful in completing PAR with a group of people with disabilities from a Palestinian refugee camp on the West Bank, we also encountered some difficulties. Several tensions took place among the co-researchers, which needed to be resolved in a way that preserved the group's spirit and cohesiveness and with the assistance of the professional art therapist. In addition, since the group consisted of members with various disabilities, we had to use different facilitation techniques to encourage all members to participate, which required additional effort from our side. Another difficulty was responding to the fact that most of the group members, our co-researchers, needed help reading or writing. We accommodated this problem by reading aloud, especially during the data collection and analysis phase. Such difficulties and obstacles to PAR research with people with disabilities required commitment and continuous planning from us, as this too was indicated in the literature (Kuper et al. 2021; Liddiard et al. 2019).

A main difficulty researchers need to take into consideration is that the PAR takes more time, which needs to be considered throughout the process, and can sometimes be difficult to predict within a project funded by funders requiring a clear time frame, identified available resources, and specified project lifecycle (Liddiard et al. 2019; Minkler et al. 2002). Funders need to take this into consideration when funding this type of research projects that need more time and money (Minkler et al. 2002; White, Suchowierska, and Campbell 2004). Needing more time is also very relevant to working in the Palestinian context, especially with the acceleration of the Israeli army and Israeli settlers' violence in the West Bank and the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip. This is considered a continuous and persistent challenge that makes planning and

conducting the research a challenging task. Although Palestinian university researchers have been able to continue working on research during such difficulties, they require understanding from funders about delays and the need for additional contingency funds to cover unexpected events.

Finally, the PAR process was also influenced by the ongoing Israeli military occupation and colonization, and the violence the Palestinian population is exposed to, including the harsh living conditions in the refugee camp where our co-researchers were born, grew up and live, compounded by their disability experiences. These considerations were highlighted by the psychosocial support our co-researchers asked for, which responded to their needs. This became especially important with the beginning of the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip in October 2023 and the concurrent escalation of Israeli violence in the West Bank.

Because of Israeli-imposed restrictions, academic researchers from the West Bank are unable to reach the Gaza Strip. We hope, however, that our study can be used as an example of PAR specifically in the Gaza Strip, where researchers could use it to work with people with disabilities, orphans, people who have lost family members, and people who have lost their homes resulting from exposure to severe political violence in this current 2023–2025 war and previous wars.

Conclusion

By employing participatory action research to work with a group of young people with disabilities in a conflict and war-like setting where, in the main, their active participation in research is usually missing, we aimed to give a live model of how they can be active research participants. At the same time, we sought to shed light on the process of using such a methodology, which stems from the justice research and human-centered approach. With the mutual learning we, the researchers and the people with disabilities co-researchers, acquired through this research experience, we managed to overcome many of the difficulties encountered in the process. Our experiences can be used as lessons for future research while providing insights for researchers working in similar contexts. This is of particular interest to our colleague researchers in other parts of the oPt, notably the Gaza Strip, with the increasing number of young and old people with disabilities there.

Acknowledgments

We would like also to thank our co-researchers for their crucial contribution and participation in the research study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The authors thank the 'Disability Under Siege' network for funding this research project. Disability Under Siege is a Network+programme funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council through the Global Challenges Research Fund [grant no. AH/T007826/1].

References

- Alshammari, Shahd. 2022. "Disability as Metaphor or Resilience: A Palestinian Poetic Inquiry." *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 15 (4): 362–373. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2022.2114528>.
- Ángeles, Sophia L., Michele J. Wong, Janna Shaddock-Hernández, and Preeti Sharma. 2022. "Empowering Workers and Learners Through a Combined Participatory Action Research and Research Justice Approach." *Social Sciences* 11 (2): 60. <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/11/2/60>. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11020060>.
- Birks, Melanie, Ysanne Chapman, and Karen Francis. 2008. "Memoing in Qualitative Research: Probing Data and Processes." *Journal of Research in Nursing* 13 (1): 68–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987107081254>.
- Buettgen, Alexis, Jason Richardson, Kristie Beckham, Kathy Richardson, Michelle Ward, and Manuel Riemer. 2012. "We Did It Together: A Participatory Action Research Study on Poverty and Disability." *Disability & Society* 27 (5): 603–616. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.669106>.
- Cornish, Flora, Nancy Breton, Ulises Moreno-Tabarez, Jenna Delgado, Mohi Rua, Ama de-Graft Aikins, and Darrin Hodgetts. 2023. "Participatory Action Research." *Nature Reviews Methods Primers* 3 (1): 34. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43586-023-00214-1>.
- Geiger, Anat, Carmit-Noa Shpigelman, and Rinat Feniger-Schaal. 2020. "The Socio-Emotional World of Adolescents with Intellectual Disability: A Drama Therapy-Based Participatory Action Research." *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 70: 101679. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2020.101679>.
- Harrison, Lyn, Kelley Johnson, Lynne Hiller, and Ria Strong. 2001. "Nothing About Us Without Us": The Ideals and Realities of Participatory Action Research with People with an Intellectual Disability." *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 3 (2): 56–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15017410109510776>.
- Hawkins, Karen A. 2015. "The Complexities of Participatory Action Research and the Problems of Power, Identity and Influence." *Educational Action Research* 23 (4): 464–478. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2015.1013046>.
- Hemming, Laura, Daniel Pratt, Peer Bhatti, Jennifer Shaw, and Gillian Haddock. 2021. "Involving an Individual with Lived-Experience in a Co-analysis of Qualitative Data." *Health Expectations: An International Journal of Public Participation in Health Care and Health Policy* 24 (3): 766–775. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hex.13188>.
- Holt, Louise, Jayne Jeffries, Edward Hall, and Andrew Power. 2019. "Geographies of Co-Production: Learning from Inclusive Research Approaches at The Margins." *Area* 51 (3): 390–395. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12532>.
- Jacobs, Steven Darryl. 2016. "The Use of Participatory Action Research Within Education-Benefits to Stakeholders." *World Journal of Education* 6 (3): P 48. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wje.v6n3p48>.
- Kramer, Jessica M., John C. Kramer, Edurne García-Iriarte, and Joy Hammel. 2011. "Following Through to The End: The Use of Inclusive Strategies to Analyse and Interpret Data in Participatory Action Research with Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities." *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities* 24 (3): 263–273. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-3148.2010.00602.x>.
- Kuper, Hannah, Shaffa Hameed, Veronika Reichenberger, Nathaniel Scherer, Jane Wilbur, Maria Zuurmond, Islay Mactaggart, Tess Bright, and Tom Shakespeare. 2021. "Participatory

- Research in Disability in Low-and Middle-Income Countries: What Have We Learnt and What Should We Do?" *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 23 (1): 328–337. <https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.814>.
- Liddiard, Kirsty, Katherine Runswick-Cole, Dan Goodley, Sally Whitney, Emma Vogelmann, and Lucy Watts Mbe. 2019. "I Was Excited by The Idea of a Project That Focuses on Those Unasked Questions' Co-Producing Disability Research with Disabled Young People." *Children & Society* 33 (2): 154–167. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12308>.
- Mathias, Kaaren, Pooja Pillai, Rakhal Gaitonde, Kakul Shelly, and Sumeet Jain. 2020. "Co-Production of a Pictorial Recovery Tool for People with Psycho-Social Disability Informed by a Participatory Action Research Approach—A Qualitative Study Set in India." *Health Promotion International* 35 (3): 486–499. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daz043>.
- McGrath, Colleen. 2022. "Setting Research Priorities in Age-Related Vision Loss: The First Step in A Critical Participatory Action Research Approach." *British Journal of Visual Impairment* 40 (2): 351–359. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0264619620984219>.
- Minkler, Meredith, Pamela Fadem, Martha Perry, Klaus Blum, Leroy Moore, and Judith Rogers. 2002. "Ethical Dilemmas in Participatory Action Research: A Case Study from the Disability Community." *Health Education & Behavior: The Official Publication of the Society for Public Health Education* 29 (1): 14–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/109019810202900104>.
- Mitwalli, Suzan, Dina Kiwan, Lina Abdul-Samad, and Rita Giacaman. 2022. "The Double Burden of COVID-19 and Israeli Military Rule on Persons with Disabilities in the West Bank of the Occupied Palestinian Territory." *Frontiers in Psychology* 13: 955828. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.955828>.
- Morwane, R. E., S. Dada, and J. Bornman. 2021. "Barriers to and Facilitators of Employment of Persons with Disabilities in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Scoping Review." *African Journal of Disability* 10: 833. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v10i0.833>.
- Nind, Melanie. 2011. "Participatory Data Analysis: A Step Too Far?" *Qualitative Research* 11 (4): 349–363. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794111404310>.
- Ollerton, Janice, and Debbie Horsfall. 2013. "Rights to Research: Utilising the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as an Inclusive Participatory Action Research Tool." *Disability & Society* 28 (5): 616–630. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.717881>.
- Rix, Jonathan, Helena Garcia-Carrizosa, Simon Hayhoe, Jane Seale, and Kieron Sheehy. 2021. "Emergent Analysis and Dissemination Within Participatory Research." *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 44 (3): 287–302. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2020.1763945>.
- Sample, Pat L. 1996. "Beginnings: Participatory Action Research and Adults with Developmental Disabilities." *Disability & Society* 11 (3): 317–332. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599627633>.
- Snounu, Yasmin, Phil Smith, and Joe Bishop. 2019. "Disability, the Politics of Maiming, and Higher Education in Palestine." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 39 (2). <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v39i2.6381>.
- Stafford, Lisa. 2017. "What about My Voice': Emancipating the Voices of Children with Disabilities Through Participant-Centred Methods." *Children's Geographies* 15 (5): 600–613. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2017.1295134>.
- Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. 2011. *Disabled Individuals Survey: Main Findings Report*. Ramallah, Palestine: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.
- Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. 2019. "The International Day of Refugees 2019." Accessed July 20, 2024. <https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/512/default.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=3486#:~:text=PCBS%20%7C%20PCBS%3A%20The%20International%20Day,%2C%2020%2F06%2F2019>
- Stevenson, Miriam. 2014. "Participatory Data Analysis Alongside Co-researchers Who Have Down Syndrome." *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities: JARID* 27 (1): 23–33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.12080>.

- Tanabe, Mihoko, Emma Pearce, and Sandra K. Krause. 2018. "Nothing About Us, Without Us': Conducting Participatory Action Research among and with Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Settings." *Action Research* 16 (3): 280–298. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750316685878>.
- Tilley, Elizabeth, Iva Strnadová, Sue Ledger, Jan Walmsley, Julie Loblinzk, Paul Anthoney Christian, and Zara Jane Arnold. 2021. "Working Together is Like a Partnership of Entangled Knowledge': Exploring the Sensitivities of Doing Participatory Data Analysis with People with Learning Disabilities." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 24 (5): 567–579. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2020.1857970>.
- UNRWA. n.d. "Palestine Refugees." Accessed July 10, 2024. <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>.
- UNRWA. 2023. "West Bank Atlas 2023." https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/wb_atlas_2023_for_external_use_a4-v2.pdf
- Vaughan, Cathy, Liz Gill-Atkinson, Alexandra Devine, Jerome Zayas, Raquel Ignacio, Joy Garcia, Krissy Bisda, Joy Salgado, and M. Jesusa Marco. 2020. "Enabling Action: Reflections Upon Inclusive Participatory Research on Health with Women with Disabilities in the Philippines." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 66 (3-4): 370–380. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12468>.
- White, Glen W., Monika Suchowierska, and Margaret Campbell. 2004. "Developing and Systematically Implementing Participatory Action Research." *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation* 85 (4 Suppl 2): S3–S12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apmr.2003.08.109>.