

The impact of the closure on poor women in the Gaza Strip

OXFAM GB

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Executive Summary

The research paper is based on the ethnographic/qualitative research of women's everyday life experience. The main concern of the investigation was to explore in the present context of family livelihoods' crisis what does "empowerment" constitute for poor women. What opportunities are there in a situation where women's participation is expanded to the public sphere of life, and to enhanced issues of gender equality and gender justice?

The research provides a historical and political context to better understand the current situation of Gaza and examines the effects of the current livelihoods' crisis on changing family and gender relations and attitudes. The contextual changes in the socio-economic, political and cultural situation in Gaza have interplayed with the hierarchical structure of the Gazan family and its function to shape the coping actions and interactions undertaken by both women and men to respond to necessity. The power produced and reproduced by poor women to fulfil their families' needs during the crisis seems to be a provisional and situational way to respond to the scarcity of resources and to the slim opportunities. The power of women to take actions and to change their gender roles and behaviours to cope is embedded in their history under the Israeli occupation as 'shock absorber of male breadwinner's crisis and it has not been apparently transformative.

The findings and conclusions of this research relied on how women themselves narrated their everyday experiences and how they analyzed their actions in relation to the needs and interests of others. This research, supported by extensive literature on Palestinian women by Palestinian and international scholars, can assert that poor Palestinian women throughout the historical context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, have failed to shift their coping mechanisms into opportunities for self-transformation. The ethnographic methodology used in this research served to understand the relational aspects of poor women's exercise of agency, and the structural constraints they often encountered to practice as free agents pursuing their personal goals. The research attributed the non-transformative character of the process of women's coping with poverty to three interlinked factors:

- The hierarchical male dominated structure of the Palestinian family, which has been, for protective purposes, maintained and enhanced as the functional and symbolic unit of resistance against the occupation.
- Society's formal and informal institutions have constituted women's continuous reiteration of their performance as 'shock absorbers' to be the dominant discourse of women's development.
- Women's desire and intentions at the personal level have not developed enough to transgress the social construction of their consciousness and their inner self in a situation of extreme poverty and scarcity of livelihoods' means.

The locations chosen for the selection of the research sample were the Al Shatti/Beach refugee camp and Al Sheja'ia neighbourhood. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 60 poor and vulnerable married women with large number of children who were selected in a purposive manner. The qualitative and ethnographic data and analysis compiled was also cross-checked by a number of focus groups to obtain further in-depth analysis related to women's self perception of the changes occurred and how they conceptualize their empowerment and disempowerment.

The research subjects were classified into two groups according to the physical existence of male breadwinners, particularly husbands and sons: women heads of households (sick husband, divorcees or widows) and women with able-bodied husbands or sons. This classification has been useful for understanding and analyzing the gender relational aspects of women's coping mechanisms throughout their marriages' life cycle taking into consideration the intergenerational changes based on women's age, marital status, number of male and female children, and their income earning experience.

The research focused on three forms of gender changes occurred within the two groups responding to the task of providing families' means of support:

- The shift in the mothers and daughters-in-law's relationship from contestation to cooperation. Both cooperate to provide for the survival of the family as they both recognize their main role as primary family providers.
- The increased women's mobility as a result of livelihoods' crisis. Women's almost unrestricted mobility has become socially legitimized, as it is the only option available for poor destitute women to provide sustenance for their children. Women's mobility has transcended the traditional forms of relations and networks with relatives, neighbours and friends, to expand into the public realm to relations and networks with charitable formal institutions responsible for food assistance (coupons) and other humanitarian aid.
- Livelihoods' necessities have reinforced women's bargaining techniques, taught them new skills and a new language of communication including deception that enhance their access to humanitarian aid. The scarcity of humanitarian resources together with the collective impoverishment of Gazan's low and middle classes has also led to an increased individualism. Women do not feel secure about their ability to fulfil their families' livelihood requirements through cooperating with other women and they choose to keep the limited resources they know about for themselves. The full reliance on non-productive humanitarian aid have gradually, pushed women gradually to reduce and to stop their home-based productive activities, which has become economically unprofitable.

The research findings highlight the problematic relationship between women's *doing* and women's *being*. The intensive exercise of women's agency activated in response to continuously changing contexts in the case of women in Gaza, their *doing*, that seems to include the reconfiguration of gender roles and responsibilities and the changing dynamics of survival, has to a large extent, not transcended the functional perspective of human action and has not produced apparent structural changes in gender roles and women's notion of their own self. All the coping mechanisms used by poor women presented in this research and the changing gender roles and dynamics have failed to create a tangible degree of personal desire and will among women to effect changes in

the traditional construed perception of their social self or being. This fact does not negate the increased capacity of poor women to communicate, negotiate, and manoeuvre the existing relations of power within society's micro-entities. But these elements of power used by women, not only during family crisis but also during times of relative stability, are further adapted to suit the better "functioning" of women within their traditional domestic roles and responsibilities.

The harshness of the social reality and the feeling of insecurity about the children's future have sharpened and developed women's rationality directing it towards the attainment of the families' stability. The rationalization of women's actions in relation to the existing unavoidable structural constraints restricts the freedom of agency, as women evaluate the cost and benefit of their actions in relation to the immediate and strategic benefits gained for others (the family and the children), but not for themselves.

1. Introduction:

Since the start of the Second Intifada in September 2000, the lives of most Palestinians in the Gaza Strip have become increasingly precarious. The worsening socio-economic, political and security situation has had a marked effect on the wellbeing of all its residents especially women. After the Hamas government took office in March 2006, Gaza has experienced an economic blackout with a situation of almost "siege", especially harsh after the Hamas takeover of the Strip in June 2007.

Livelihood options are more and more limited. All forms of formal humanitarian assistance have become scarce and are not easily accessible to the poorest sectors of society. In the midst of the present situation, women are bearing the brunt of keeping their families going; and for the very poor, it is women's survival strategies that are keeping entire households and communities going.

This research explores the everyday life experiences of very poor women in Gaza city and their struggles in their search for survival. The research aims to analyse in the present context what does "empowerment" constitutes for poor women; what opportunities are there in a situation where women's participation is expanded into public life, and to enhanced issues of gender equality and gender justice?

The research is up to date one of the few ethnographic researches done on Gaza's poor women, focusing on women's own interpretation of changes occurred in their gender roles and their social imaginary. In the process of interviews and meetings, poor women are given the space to conceptualize their empowerment and disempowerment away from the mainstream standardized measures used by development agencies international as well as local.

The findings will contribute to strategizing women's development interventions, also providing a strong base for a re-conceptualisation of women's empowerment in the specific context of the Gaza Strip. The nature of the research will also help development practitioners working in the field to shape their modalities of work based on the local reality instead of applying other models developed in a different context.

2. Research aims and scope of work:

Coping strategies undertaken by poor women in Gaza are shaped by the interplay of individual actions and institutionalized opportunities and constraints. In the midst of a situation of crisis, gender relations are constantly changing. Women's coping behaviour has come to be more closely associated in the past 8 years with the inability of men to carry out their socio-economic family obligations because of loss of jobs and livelihoods' sources than with previous domestic models.

Women's struggle to obtain the means for the survival of their households are the motivating factor pushing poor women to break down some of the gender stereotyped

social norms and behaviours, although this may not be a conscious goal. Being forced by circumstance into taking a far more active role than they otherwise would have done has provided an opportunity for poor women to communicate, negotiate and manoeuvre in the public realm.

Have these “actions” created an opportunity for the development of a sense of being amongst poor socially isolated women? By Following Kabeer's description of the space between ‘to do’ and ‘to be’ as the main element of the process of empowerment¹, the central question is: to what extent does women’s “doing” lead to women’s “being”.

The context of the situation of poor women in Gaza raises questions about the kind of assumptions made in feminist literature about how women exercise agency and especially whether this is always purposive. In the Gaza setting, increasing threats to survival push women into taking action. This in turn pushes women into the public arena. Such actions do not necessarily reflect how they want their lives to be in the future, but may create opportunities for “being” *because of* “doing”. How far do actions taken out of consciously made choices but out of responses to impossible circumstances and constraints have an effect on women’s capacity to imagine themselves as agents? Do forms of self reflexivity come into play that then create opportunities for women to exercise agency in ways that cease to be simply responses to the situation, and become strategies in their own right? Or are pressure and economic deterioration so intense that these apparent empowered actions are not transformative?

3. The context in Gaza

The Gaza strip has a population of around 1.4 million people and is one of the most densely populated regions on earth; there are more than 26,000 people per km² most of them living in urban areas. This population density puts enormous pressure on the limited natural resources, which is further compounded by the effects of the Israeli occupation. The Gaza Strip is completely surrounded by a Separation Wall (in some parts there is only barbed wire) restricting access of people and goods exclusively through designated Israeli-controlled crossings.

The disengagement carried out unilaterally by Israel in August 2005, has removed the Israeli presence from inside the Gaza Strip but has not solved the problems that 38 years of occupation have left behind. The occupation forces control the air, sea and access to the Strip that can only be done with “difficult to get” permits. The Strip is usually described as “the largest prison on Earth”.

The effects of the Occupation have extended to the internal socio-political structure prompting a process of decomposition and uprooting of the communal collective national goals that all Palestinians stood for during their history of national struggle. This erosion of the Palestinian common goal related to their nationhood leads to the fragmentation of their societal collective features which enabled them to challenge all forms of constraints and pressures experienced during the previous years of occupation. Nowadays Gaza

¹ Kabeer, N. ‘Resources, Agency, Achievement: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment’ Development and Change Vol. 30 (1999), (435-464)

society is largely fragmented into small social and political entities, each with its own constituencies and its own interests.

Various identities have emerged since the beginning of the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip following religious beliefs as well as tribal and factional interests. Palestinians in Gaza have lost much of their economic and social capacity to manage their livelihoods and to secure their life. This is not a sudden occurrence but rather the result of the prolonged policies of continuous collective punishment imposed by the Occupation on the Palestinians.

Since the beginning of the second Intifada and the enforcement of the closure regime, Gaza people have been living in economic, social and cultural isolation. First it started with the elimination of work-permits so that Gazans could not work in Israel anymore, then the international boycott to the Palestinian Authority after Hamas won the democratic elections in January 2006 (which also resulted in the halt of payments to the PA employees). The situation has further degraded with indiscriminate attacks to civilians in Israel via rockets launched from Gaza and the frequent Israeli targeted killings, air strikes and incursions. The Israeli occupation forces have imposed tight restrictions to the movement of people and goods going in and out of Gaza. This has resulted in the collapse of the private sector, disruption of the local market with high prices for basic products, lack of basic services and degradation of physical and social infrastructure.

The continuous aggressions on Gaza have led to a serious erosion of people's livelihoods with the depletion of people's savings and social capital, making people's management of their livelihood untenable. A recent field assessment conducted by Oxfam in several communities of the Strip showed that the average income of Gazan families have been reduced by 75% since the year 2000. A WFP report published in December 2007 revealed that almost 70% of families in Gaza are below the poverty line of 1.2 USD/person/day. 61% of the non-refugee population is food insecure with a sharp increase in the prevalence of underweight and anaemia amongst children. The unemployment rate was 32.9% in the third quarter of 2007 and increased by 6% in the fourth quarter due to the closure.

The exposure of an increasing number of families to the threat of Israeli incursions and bombings as well as the internal militant chaos is an additional factor for the increase of vulnerability amongst the Gaza population. Israeli military incursions result in the destruction of many houses as well as the death of innocent civilians. The internal conflict between political factions and family clans also resulted in a high number of deaths amongst the local population.

The growing poverty has not only increased livelihoods' vulnerability but also crime and deviance, especially amongst children and youth. The use of drugs has become common and the different factions use them as a tool to mobilise young people and involve them in crime or disputes with other clans. The reported cases of crimes by the Gaza police for the year 2006 show more than a 100% increase in the number of certain crimes. For instance, robbery cases increased from 35 cases in 2005 to 106 in 2006, attacking shops and banks increased from 702 cases in 2005 to 1,002 in 2006. It is also noticeable the growing phenomenon of child labour, associated with children dropping out of schools. Children in the Gaza Strip are exposed to violence inside their homes, in schools and in the streets. The Palestinian Central Bureaux of Statistics' report on

violence for the year 2005 showed that 32.2% of Gaza children between the ages of 5 to 18 are exposed to violence and this phenomenon increases, as they grow older. With the increase of family vulnerability, the use of violence becomes the dynamic for self-expression and self-defence.

Poor women are the most disadvantaged group in relation to the humanitarian crisis and in the context of the conflict-ridden environment of the Gaza Strip. Poor women in Gaza have the responsibility of coping with poverty basically by reducing the household expenditures and increasing the support they receive from family, friends and charities. This usually means that the quantity and quality of the food women have is decreased whilst their domestic workload is increased. The spare time poor women used to have available for self-care and socializing has decreased as a result of the growing feeling of insecurity from the continuous Israeli incursions and bombing. Women cannot leave their young children alone for any personal purposes, even in case of urgent need. In the current situation of poverty and insecurity, poor Palestinian women often sacrifice personal needs for the sake of their children. For instance, according to the 2006 hospitals records, poor pregnant women always decided to leave the hospital too early after delivery putting themselves at risk. They do this so that they can go back home as soon as possible to take care of the other children they have.

3.1 Cultural and behavioural consequences of poverty in the Gaza Society:

The loss of hope and the uncertainty to secure a source of family livelihood have been associated with an increased mistrust among poor people on their political leadership, which has repeatedly failed in achieving any political and economic solution to the Occupation. Mistrust and the breakdown of connections between people and their official leadership leads to social apathy reflected in individual actions and relations. An aspect of the widespread apathy dominating Gaza's society nowadays is seen in the mass militarization of the public, the violence between individuals and groups, the loss of community's social values, and the increase of extremism amongst the poor youth vis-à-vis the fatalism of the rest of the poor population.

Militarization is the way certain social or/and political groups in Gaza use to reorganize themselves in order to obtain power or to maintain their power over others, ignoring as well as destroying the moral values characterizing Palestinian society. Since the Palestinian government lost its legitimacy by its inability to enforce law and discipline, groups tend to organise their own social and political entities to emulate the dynamics for self-governing but by the use of violent instruments². Militarization and the lack of a communal content and vision have broken down the social cohesion and sense of community pushing people towards self-destructive behaviours.

Militant actions in Gaza are easily used for sorting out any family disputes. In the past this disputes used to be resolved peacefully by the exercise of customary law implemented with traditional leaders³. The constitution of multiple militant groups with

² Malki, Shalabi and Ladadwa (2004) 'The Palestinian society in confronting the Occupation: The sociology of coping during the second Intifada'

³ The World Bank community study (June, 2005) 'Socio-Political Dynamics of Community Justice', (unpublished draft copy)

specific factional or/and tribal loyalty, divides Gaza society into many entities, creating constant conflict and undermining the faith of its constituencies. Youths who constitute around a third of the population are the most vulnerable social group that is being militarised. Militarization of youths used to be more common amongst the less educated and unskilled young men, but recently, it has become the only option for a large number of the educated and skilled who have lost hope to find jobs or any meaningful source of income. Youth militarization in Gaza is part and parcel of the effects of poverty and socio-economic deprivation that fragments society. The real danger is the long-term effects of youth militarization for the coming generations.

Before the Intifada the determinants of youth identity in Gaza were related to education, their participation in cultural and political initiatives as well as their involvement in the job market. Nowadays, youth in Gaza have lost all options to manage their future livelihood or achieve their ambitions through their education and market-based skills. They have found themselves useless, unable to fend for themselves by providing income to their families or by using their training and thus feel worthless. This has serious effects on their self-confidence and self-respect. The socio-economic deprivation caused by the ailments of Israeli Occupation first and then by the internal conflict has encouraged the mainstreaming of the fundamentalist Islamist ideology, which legalizes the use of violence in the name of *el jehad* even against Palestinian brothers. Most Gazan youth respond to their vulnerability by searching for new meanings for their life by following such extremist ideologies, rejecting ordinary life and its unfair rules.

Young men in particular are mobilized to be detached of social and family responsibilities. Loyalty to family and community is replaced by loyalty to God as understood by those who claim the representation of Islamist ideologies. Religious extremism becomes the dominant discourse while the secular democratic one loses its main constituencies. Extremism amongst the youth is paralleled with fatalism amongst the older section of the poor who has lost hope for better days to come. The poor become passive and unsure of their ability to effect changes in daily life.

Palestinians in Gaza are not extremists or fatalists by nature, their history has proven the opposite. But they have reached an unprecedented level of vulnerability and stress that make them lose hope of developing creative ways to find sources of livelihood. In the present situation and without serious attempts from the International Community, the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian political parties to sort out and deal with the root causes of the conflict, any irrational actions and reactions taken by Palestinians in Gaza become, in the eyes of many of those involved, totally justifiable.

Recent reports show that 85% of Palestinians live on humanitarian aid⁴. Aid and temporary job creation interventions do not suffice to confront the culture of apathy, the result of loss of human dignity rather than the loss of basic sources of physical survival. Humanitarian and material support to poor and vulnerable people in Gaza has become the burden of the international community but it is not a substitute for a permanent political solution. Only then, will Palestinians be able to find the means and the strength for remaking their own long-term arrested development.

⁴ The socio-economic report in Gaza for the year 2007, Institute for Development Studies, Gaza

The critical contextual element, focus of this research, is the capacity of the Palestinian family and its relational structure to constantly exercise coping mechanisms for survival. It has been said that throughout Palestinian history the prolonged oppressive and devastating Occupation has failed to affect the Palestinian household and its family dynamics, process and survival economy. The Palestinian family has proven its resilience in the many previous economic crisis and conflicts always utilising apparently endless resources, whether material or symbolic to respond to the changing and often threatening circumstances⁵. The specific and tragic difference of the current crisis is that it has the capacity to destroy such historical image.

The current crisis is the crystallisation of a 40 years' process of integration of Gaza's economy into the Israeli⁶ that has culminated in a sudden separation of both economies without alternatives for Gaza. The prolonged total closure and the devastation of all forms of economic sanctions have made the Palestinian family's coping strategies no longer possible, as the basic means for subsistence are simply not available.

Traditional coping mechanisms are now showing signs of strain. The majority of Palestinians in Gaza live in debt and are totally reliant on humanitarian aid and charity. This change from relying on the traditional sense of integrity for family's survival to reliance on others' mercy as a source for livelihoods' security leads to fundamental behavioural changes in both men and women turning them towards individualism, opportunism and passivity. The loss of the Palestinian family's capacity to survive relying on their sense of dignity exemplified in their 'embodied history'⁷ is the real threat not only against their national identity, but also in relation to the social identity of both men and women which has traditionally distinguished Palestinians.

The present research examines and tries to clarify the effects of the current livelihood crisis on changing family and gender relations and attitudes. It relates these changes to the "circulation" of power within the extended and nuclear family and in society at large; the power that women produce and reproduce to maintain or to transform the gender-based hierarchal system of the Palestinian family and the wider society. Thus the research aims not only to present the detailed dynamics of coping mechanisms that poor women use but also to understand the gender relational aspects of these coping mechanisms.

The research is based on an extensive review of the body of international and Palestinian literature generated about family and women dynamics of coping. Nevertheless, the real understanding of Gaza's context can only be achieved by the ethnographic and empirical analysis of field data compiled from the in-depth interviews and focus groups, and by the interpretation of women's narratives.

4. Background of the research site:

⁵ Malki, Shalabi and Ladadwa (2004) 'The Palestinian society in confronting the Occupation: The sociology of coping during the second Intifada'

⁶ Sara Roy 'The Economy of Gaza' October 2006, The Palestine Centre

⁷ As described by Penny Johnson in Taraki, L. (ed) (2006) 'Living Palestine: Family survival, Resistance and Mobility under Occupation'

Gaza is the largest city in the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian territories. Its area covers 45 km² and the number of inhabitants together with the Beach refugee Camp is of 353,632, according to the 2007 PCBS (179,870 males and 173,762 females).

Gaza city is a good representative of the socio-economic and cultural diversity of population in Gaza Strip - refugees, non-refugees, rural and urban forms of life and livelihood.

There are 11 neighbourhoods in Gaza city as shown in the following map:



The research field investigation targeted two communities, largely representative of the refugee, urban⁸ and peri-urban population in the Strip. The main factor of population classification in Gaza Strip is between refugees' localities-the camps-and non-refugees' localities (where non-refugees and refugees live together but not enclosed in the formal definition of the camp) Gaza's society has become increasingly urban as a result of the destruction of the agricultural sector as well as the urbanisation of people's life style due to the prolonged dependency on Israeli economy (Roy, 1999). There are nevertheless a number of localities which are officially classified as rural with the lowest percentage of population (only 5% of the Gaza population is considered rural) Nevertheless in many cases the urban rural divide is blurred by the style of urban development that has taken place and livelihoods' activities of Gazans.

⁸ There are also in Gaza the rural and per urban camps in the middle of Gaza, in particular.

Most of these rural communities are located near the borders of Gaza Strip and they are frequently damaged by the Israeli incursions. Their inhabitants have become the most vulnerable in Gaza strip since 2000 because their only source of income from agriculture is always threatened by the Israeli land uprooting. Information on local Gaza neighbourhoods specifically the two communities selected for the research, depended mainly on conversations with old people, stories and researcher observations. The neighbourhoods in Gaza city can be divided into two groups according to their time of establishment:

1) Newly established in the late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Some of them were part of the Israeli civil administration housing projects established in 1970s and early 1980s aimed to re-accommodate some of the refugees out of the camps. Those refugees although living out of the camps, obtain their basic social services from UNRWA. The other new neighbourhoods are those, which were established by the Palestinian Authority (PA) in early 1990's to accommodate the PA low and middle-income employees. Their inhabitants are a mix of refugees and non-refugees and their areas can be classified as urban middle and low middle class. All these neighbourhoods are administered by the larger cities local governments' like Jabalia, Gaza city, Khan Younis and Rafah.

2) Old neighbourhoods like Al Zaitoun, Al Tufah, Al Sabra Al Shaja'ia are part of the urban core of the old city extending into agricultural lands. These were the areas where the "original" non-refugee inhabitants of Gaza resided up to 1948. The majority of the population was engaged mainly in farming and agriculture with the presence of some service workshops and other traditional craft shops like wicker, pottery, cotton cloth or rug making. This situation remained until 1967, which marks the Israeli/Arab war and the beginning of the Israeli occupation.

Native Gazans were concentrated in these neighbourhoods living in a close-knit support group. Wealthier members moved out of these areas long time ago to residential neighbourhood like Tel el Hawa or Rimal closer to the sea, leaving the majority of the areas in the hands of poor relatives, tenants and squatters. These neighbourhoods were largely urbanized after the beginning of the 1967 Israeli occupation, and many farmers and small landowners left their land to work as wage labourers in Israel, or got involved in trading.

Since the beginning of the Israeli policy of borders' closure in the mid 1990's, as a collective punishment strategy against Palestinians, the population of the old neighbourhoods of Gaza has become increasingly impoverished. Their change of livelihood after 1967 made the majority, totally dependent on salaried labour in Israel. Agricultural land was abandoned, or urbanised and women or older people who did not join the Israeli labour market mainly tilled it. Palestinian labour force turned into skilled and unskilled labourer in the Israeli sectors of construction and agriculture. What the labourers learnt from more than two decades of work in Israel is mostly not applicable to the ailing and dependent Gaza of today.

The majority of men in their 40's and 50's living in these old neighbourhoods are now unemployed. Most of them did not complete their education and got married early with young uneducated women during the 1980's. Despite the relatively higher income of the wage labourers in Israel comparing with the civil service employees and the local agricultural labourers in Gaza before the PA establishment, the wage labourers used to spend their income on their family needs, especially in house construction and marriage,

and they rarely invested in sustainable productive assets. It is evident that most houses in these poor neighbourhood were built in the 80's and 90's and belong today to owners that have joined the numbers of unemployed workers unable to provide sources of livelihoods to their families and have become the poor and vulnerable households living on humanitarian aid and social support networks. Currently the standardized indicator of housing cannot be separately used as an indicator of poverty and vulnerability of the family, especially in the old neighbourhoods where the traditional rural family customs are reflected in families' patterns of investment, mostly in the construction of high-rise multi family buildings to shelter the extended family.

Two communities from Gaza city were chosen for the research: the Beach camp or El Shatti camp (79,853) as a representative of refugees, and El Sheja'ia neighbourhood (19,800) as a representative of non-refugees. These two communities are inhabited by a diversity of poor population also representative of other areas in the Strip.

4.1 The Beach/AI Shatti camp:

It is located on the western coastal part of Gaza city. The Beach camp is one of the 8 officially recognized refugee camps in Gaza under the UNRWA administration. This means it is UNRWA, in coordination with the municipality for the camp infrastructure, which provides basic services, health and education as well as food and cash aid.

The major employment source for refugees used to be wage labour in Israel and sewing contracting or sub-contracting with Israeli factories. Nevertheless a large part of its population has been traditionally (from before 1948 in their pre nakba villages) engaged in fishing, trading and also UNRWA employment⁹. However after the PA establishment, a good percentage of the public employees came from the camps, although they constituted the employees with the lowest salaries.



⁹ Lang and Muhanna, (1992) 'Women and Work in the Beach Camp' Arab Thought Forum

The beach camp is inside Gaza City, which facilitates access to the city services and opportunities. Its inhabitants are more influenced by their central location in terms of their social and economic mobility, as it follows the life-style of the urbanized middle class. The Beach camp has been the least affected by the Israeli bombings and incursions during the second Intifada due to its safer location far from the borders with Israel.

Refugee women of the Beach camp between the ages of 35 and 55 widely participated in the political armed struggle against the Israeli occupation, especially during the 1970's and 1980's. The historical vitality of the Beach camp women's involvement in the national resistance enhanced their sense and experience of voluntary work and sense of community at the local level. The social and political networks and relations resulting from refugee women's involvement in grassroots mobilization and political activism in those years have recently been activated as a source of support to cope with poverty and vulnerability. The refugees' sense of collective spirit is negatively influenced by the overall scarcity of economic resources and the deinstitutionalization of the society, which pushes families towards individualism.

4.2 Al Shaja'ia Neighbourhood:

Al Shaja'ia gathers a diversity of work experience in multiple sectors, although the majority of its people had chosen wage labour in Israel as their main livelihood before the border closure.

Al Shaja'ia is located on the far eastern part of Gaza city bordering Israel. Since the beginning of the second Intifada it has been continuously exposed to Israeli incursions and its infrastructure as well as services has been badly damaged. Similar to other rural border neighbourhoods in the Strip, Al Shaja'ia has lost its ability to use much of its land for farming (it is now part of the buffer/security zone that cannot be approached by its owners).

A large number of homes have been demolished and people killed or injured by the Israelis. Many families were displaced and forced to live with other family members.

As a result of its proximity to the border, Al Shaja'ia people live in permanent insecurity. This situation has created both a sense of solidarity from relatives, but also a source of conflict between clans and political groups. This inter-clan fighting undermines the traditional social cohesion of the community. During the interviews, people in Al Shaja'ia have mentioned that they see growing passivity, frustration and fatalism among the population that are undermining community support in favour of individualism and opportunism, even amongst the same family members.

Al Shaja'ia represents the common hybrid and distorted urbanization process common to Palestinian rural communities in the Strip throughout the Israeli occupation. Thousands of refugees coming as a result of the 1948 Nakba settled in Al Shaja'ia and large numbers of them worked in agriculture as labourers for Al Shaja'ia landowners. Before 1967 the main source of income, in addition to some traditional handcraft economic activities, was agriculture. Al Shaja'ia, like other neighbourhoods in Gaza, was extensively urbanized by the change from local agricultural labour to wage labour in Israel.

Women of Al Shaja'ia are known as active in the agriculture sector, and have recently got largely involved in petty-trading. Women's large involvement in the family agriculture was however part of the original peasant structure of rural families. Women's agricultural involvement after the war of 1967 turned to be a replacement of men's work, in order to maintain the vitality of the families' land. Many Al Shaja'ia men between the ages of 40 and 50 are skilled farmers, but they do not necessarily practice it as a source of income. Before the second Intifada, Al Shaja'ia women used to sell agricultural products in the local market at cheaper prices than Israeli products¹⁰. This past experience of agriculture home production has been re-used by poor women for the survival of their families during the humanitarian crisis of the second Intifada and the unemployment of men.



Despite the changing mode of production from farming to wage labour and trading as a result of the integration of the Palestinian economy into the Israeli economy, Al Shaja'ia kept its social practices, dominated by the tribal culture. People did not sell their lands to invest in education as landowners in other areas of Gaza city have done. On the contrary selling land is considered shameful, even in the current time of crisis. Kin and early marriage is still common as well as life within the extended family. Families are characterized by large number of children, and the tribal traditional leaders/elders are still acting as judges for resolving family and neighbourhood's disputes.

Extended families are still dominant and mainly controlled by mothers in law, especially those who have been involved in agriculture production and trading¹¹. Large numbers of

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that while Gaza produce is not allowed to be exported, the market continues to receive plenty of Israeli products like fruits vegetables and dairy.

¹¹ This is similar to other rural communities in the north and south of Gaza

middle age women from Al Al Shaja'ia are still seen in the local market selling agricultural and dairy products or trading clothes.

5. Sampling and research methods:

The research does not attempt to reach generalization of women's individual actions. These actions can never be standardized as they are always changeable responding to the type and forms of structural constrains, and the scope of women capacity to exercise their agency to cope or to challenge poverty and vulnerability. It is more ethnographic and qualitative aiming to understand the actual life experience of poor women and how their lives' experience shape and reshape their actions to constitute their own meanings, and their sense of agency. The sample cases provide precise as well as in-depth detailed information about the relational, attitudinal and behavioural processes of change women have been using through their lives' experiences. The sample size in the case of this research¹² refers to two concepts:

- *How precise do we need to be in estimating the characteristics of the research target (subject); and*
- How variable is the population with respect to the characteristics of interest

Pursuing the research objectives a number of criteria are predefined for the selection of the most appropriate cases of poor and vulnerable women taking into account the national standardized measures of Palestinian family poverty and vulnerability in Gaza Strip. The criteria for women's selection for the fieldwork served to select women whose families are classified as absolute poor and vulnerable following the main national measure of poverty, which is the absence of income sources where families are basically reliant on humanitarian assistance from the formal and informal institutions¹³. The historical analysis of families' poverty trends is important in order to understand the root-causes of the families' production and reproduction of poverty linking it with women's coping mechanisms of livelihoods' means and management throughout their lives' experiences.

Below are the criteria for the selection of women:

- a) Women's ages - minimum 25 to maximum 55, who are married, divorced or widowed and live with their children. This wide age range is important to highlight the two generations of women: mothers and mothers in law in their productive and reproductive age, which serves to compare women's actions and self-perceptions in the past with their actions and self-perceptions in the present within the historical contextual analysis of the Palestinian family and the wider society.
Single women are purposively excluded from the sample as it is socially recognized that single women at different ages are either reliant on parents/ older brothers while at younger age waiting to be married, or reliant on formal and informal institutional support as they may have lost the opportunity of

¹² Barahona, C. L., S (2002). How to generate Statistics and Influence Policy by Using Participatory Methods in Research, Statistical Service Centre Working paper.

¹³ PBCS, 2007

marriage at older age. Single women are not widely entitled to carry out the family responsibilities, except in the cases of absence of both parents and adult males.

- b) Women heads of household in case of husband chronic sickness, death or in the case of divorce. Those women are mostly registered as hardship cases following the criteria of the Ministry of Social Affairs safety net program as well as UNRWA;
- c) Women living with their able-bodied husband and/or sons with no regular sources of income as a result of the increasing unemployment. These women, refugees and non-refugees have mostly have access to domestic-based productive assets and skills (small plots of land, sewing machine, a handcraft, cooker, taxi...etc) that are utilized in hardship situations, not necessarily successfully;
- d) Women have no formal employment status except as a housewife; that is who have not been formally registered or involved in the national labour force, but they are most likely involved in the informal economy (home or local market). The specification of women to be classified as housewives serves to narrow the scope of the research to focus on women who have historically been “domesticated” regardless of their level of education and access to modernity as a result of the commoditization of the Gaza economy during the Israeli occupation.



The family/household in this research is perceived as the mediating significant structural entity from where to analyze the relationship between the individual women's capacity to shape and reshape their actions and interactions and the wider formal and informal institutional opportunities and constraints emerged as a result of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza after the second Intifada.

The choice of the household in the Gaza society as the main research unit in development and planning studies is perceived by many as the way in which individual differences in the dynamics of its members is concealed. As a result policies and strategies of humanitarian aid are often gender biased. Although the household unit provides the essential context within the community at large, this research views poor women as individuals who are the central unit of research and analysis. The basis for the present research and the analysis will be constituted by the women's narrations of themselves and their lives. Women's self-perceptions and their objective and subjective interpretations of the different actions and interactions they undertake throughout their lives' experience is the critical element for understanding the dynamic interplay between women's individual agency and the structure, and for clarifying or redefining the different notions related to women's autonomy and empowerment.

The research sample consists of 60 women from the two selected sites: 30 refugees from the Beach camp and 30 non-refugees from Al Sheja'ia. They belong to 60 very poor and vulnerable households. It is worthwhile mentioning here that although the 60 women from the two sites are not quantitatively representative of the overall population, for the ethnographic purposes of this research, reliability and validity of the research findings are more reliant on the wide level of socio-economic and cultural diversity between the 60 cases purposively selected and their worthiness to compile precise as well as in-detailed process-based information serving the objective of the research. The comparison between the different cases - based on the factors of locality, age, marital status, poverty trends, and dynamics of actions - is another important element providing reliable research analysis and findings.

The data has been collected using three methods: semi-structured interviews (SSI), narratives of women's lives and focus groups. These three qualitative approaches better serve the research, as they are contextual methods¹⁴, with the potential to capture a social phenomenon within its social, economic and cultural context.

Despite the sensitive timing of the fieldwork (Oct.2007-April.2008)¹⁵, which was done in a situation of insecure and restricted mobility in and between the research sites, the high level of interest and desire of poor and vulnerable women to open up to dialogue and conversation about their lives was touching. This may be attributed to the high level of frustration and exhaustion women have reached as a result of the prolonged period of living in poverty, uncertainty and threat. Women in Al Shaja'ia and the Beach camp showed similar level of willingness to speak. The relationship between the researcher and the research subjects has been easy and informal, providing ample space for mutual socialisation.

¹⁴ Booth, D., J. Holland, J. Hentschel, P. Lanjouw and A. Herbert (1998), "Participation and Combined Methods in African Poverty Assessment: Renewing the Agenda," Social Development Division, DFID, February

¹⁵ Aitemad Muhanna had recollected part of the interviews and narratives already in the period between October 2007 and January before the actual agreement with Oxfam to do the present research.

Common ethical difficulties often encountered by researchers doing qualitative research have not been present and all research subjects have been ready to talk openly about their lives. On the contrary the research subjects were interested in bringing up even personal sensitive issues and share them with others. The qualitative methodology used in this research centres on the structured dialogue using a variety of methods to share knowledge and analysis.¹⁶ The dialogue between the researcher and the research subjects allowed the participants to raise new questions and images of reality.¹⁷ In addition, the common language and culture of the researcher made the researcher welcomed and emotionally in tune with the research subject eluding the formality and increasing the trustworthiness of the information collected by the methods of SSI and narratives of lives' stories.

5.1 The fieldwork methods were used in three phases:

5.1.1 First:

Semi-structured interviews (SSIs) were conducted with 30 women in each site aiming to have a profiling of women's poverty and vulnerability and the different actions and interactions taken by them to cope with or to confront against the poverty and vulnerability of their families. The SSIs also serve to make a comparison between women based on their age and social status that very much served the analytical and historical context of the research.

Around 60% of the SSIs were accomplished in one meeting, the rest were done in two or three meetings. The reason behind the differences is that some women were not comfortable to speak about themselves while family members were around, so a number of interviews were not completed and postponed to another time until women arranged for the proper time. Not all the SSIs were conducted at women's homes. Nevertheless, the majority of women were visited in their homes, not necessary for the conduction of the interview, but for social visits and general communication with family members, which served in an indirect way to crosscheck many of the information collected.

Many of the individual interviews in Al Shaja'ia were conducted in two community-based women's organization where poor and vulnerable women visit regularly and are registered as members to gain humanitarian assistance (food coupons, temporary jobs, and home-based production projects or grants and agricultural assets). Differently the majority of women's interviews in the Beach camp were conducted at home, and few were interviewed in one of the women's community based organization similar to the Al Shaja'ia ones. This served to a large extent to understand the formal and informal institutional constrains and opportunities women encounter through their interactions. Mutual home visits between the researcher and the research subjects, especially the ones who provided the women's cases stories, were made. The informal visits and interaction between the researcher and the researched women contributed positively in building trustful atmosphere facilitated women not only to understand and analyse their

¹⁶ Holmes, T. (2001). A participatory approach in practice: Understanding fieldworkers' use of participatory rural appraisal in Action Aid the Gambia, IDS working paper 123, Institute of Development Studies.

¹⁷ Schrijvers, J. (1995). Participation and power: A Transformative Feminist Research Perspective. Power and Participatory Development. N. Nilson and S. Wright, International Technology Publications.

social being, but also with some cases, to change their attitudes and perception about self and about the society.

5.1.2 Second:

The selection of women's cases for the narration of lives' stories was done after the accomplishment of the SSI. Three women's life stories were selected from each research site. The six cases were from the 60 women interviewed considering the outstanding factors of commonalities and differences between them. The six women selected are two married women in their early thirties with large number of dependent children and living in nuclear families; one divorced woman early 50's with large number of children and living in an extended family with her married children; one widow living with her married children in an extended family; one woman in her late 40's married to a chronically ill husband; and one married woman early 50's also living in an extended family with her married sons¹⁸.

In both phases during the Semi structured interviews and the life story narratives, no obvious differences were noticed among the refugee and non-refugee women in terms of their openness and readiness to communicate their life experience in detail. Slight differences were present based on age and economic status; older women with long experience in the local market and who have develop easy communication in a public sphere were more open and smooth in their dialogue than the younger ones who mostly have a domestic-based experience. Women's formal education did not reveal as a significant factor during the interactions.

In both, Al Shaja'ia and the Beach camp, men have not been an obstacle during the interviews. On the contrary they were very hospitable. This may be explained by the mainstream practice of relief institutions that send field-workers to make regular home visits to supervise or select families in need for humanitarian assistance (distribution of coupons or any other forms of assistance). The field-workers often meet women at home, particularly the older mothers, rather than men because it becomes socially recognized that women are more knowledgeable about the actual needs of the family members, and they have recently become the actual managers of the family expenses. Some men, mostly husbands, intervened friendly by confirming women's better capacity to manage the family expenses in a situation of financial crisis where men are incapable of earning money. Other men made positive remarks about their wives thinking probably that this would encourage institutions to give more humanitarian support to their families.

Despite of the researcher serious attempts to break down any image of unequal power relation with the research subject, many women interviewed thought that the researcher was involved in job creation programs or in the humanitarian relief assistance work¹⁹. This made some of them asked the researcher several times to facilitate their access to jobs or coupons. The researcher however was not reluctant to ask and check women's cases with the head of relief –based local organizations which were responsible for coupons distribution, and to make recommendations supporting women and families who are really in need, but not to interfere in the institutions' decisions and strategy of food or assistance distribution. This no doubt enhanced the trust and the feeling of security in the relation between the researcher and the research subject encouraging

¹⁸ Two narratives of women's life stories are presented in an annexe at the end of the research.

¹⁹ This idea became justified when Oxfam's' FS and L officer in Gaza joined in the visits.

poor women's straightforwardness to speak out openly about personal and family relations.

5.1.3 Third:

After reviewing the preliminary data collected by the SSIs and the life story narratives in the first two research phases, the researcher found that some of the information and analysis available on specific topics about women was not sufficient and precise. Therefore, a number of focus groups were conducted with groups of poor women (10 women each) who came from different geographical areas of Al Sheja'ia. The women participating in the focus groups had not been interviewed before, and they were selected on the basis of the same criteria of the research sample selection. Focus groups served to gain more information and analysis for comparison purposes and to cross check women's views about their empowerment and disempowerment resulting from the coping mechanisms they used during the crisis. The researcher did not find that there was a need to do the same with Beach camp women.

6. Research Findings Analysis:

6.1 First session:

6.1.1 Family poverty and gender-based coping mechanisms

The 60 women selected for the present research are either from the Beach camp or the Al Shaja'ia neighbourhood. They all live in extreme poverty and currently have no available sources of income. They are all relying on emergency humanitarian assistance provided by formal and informal institutions, particularly food coupons distributed regularly by UNRWA and other aid organisations. (Aid from UNRWA is scheduled every month or every three months but in relation to the government aid and other organisations, aid is not regular even in the hardship cases dealing with the chronically sick).

Only two cases in Al Shaja'ia, and four cases in the Beach camp have one to two sons employed by the Palestinian Authority with an average monthly income of NIS 1000-NIS1200 (£142-170 nearly half of the national poverty line²⁰), and only three women from the Beach camp work part time/temporary jobs as hairdresser, teacher and one as facilitator with a local relief association. A few husbands are involved on casual work with local employers (in sewing, construction or trading), receiving a daily wage of NIS 20-30 (\$ 2.8-4.2). This represents the only source of income for extended families/households composed of two to three family units constituting a total of 9 to 15 members.

The type and quality of housing is no longer an indicator of a household's poverty. Gazan men that used to work in Israel were able to build nice looking cement houses, a

²⁰ UNDP poverty report of 2007, the measuring of poverty line based on income

priority always for a Palestinian family. In both targeted communities most of the family houses are made of cement. Around half of the refugee women who were interviewed suffer from the difficulty of keeping their houses clean; in particular those living within large extended families composed of 12 to 15 members. In these cases each family unit (a married son with his wife and children) lives in one to two rooms and shares the kitchen and bathroom with the whole extended family. The majority of women's families in the camp have no other land or properties that would provide an alternative for housing. Houses in the camp are attached to one another with no space for children to play, except in the streets, and no appropriate place for women to rest during the day except their bedrooms.



Al Shaja'ia's housing is slightly different. Most families live in separate small apartments attached to the husbands' extended families' houses (either as an extension of the parents' house or in an apartment-building of several floors that provides each family a separate apartment).

Two out of the 30 women included in the research in Al Shaja'ia, had their houses demolished by Israeli incursions. At the time of the fieldwork, they lived in miserable housing partly rehabilitated, without windows and doors and without sewage facilities or proper water supply. These two families have become extremely vulnerable and have no sources of income.

Although all cases confirmed that they used to own washing machines and refrigerators, it was observed during the home visits that currently some families do not have them or they were broken, lying in disrepair.

In Al Shaja'ia, families have relatively larger space of land around their houses compared to the Beach camp, women have built mud oven for baking bread and they also used it for cooking in order to reduce gas consumption. In some cases women also raise poultry for the family's consumption and sometimes for sale in times of distress. In the Beach camp some women have managed to find a corner to build a mud oven especially for bread baking or when they run out of gas. Six cases of middle-aged women from both Al Shaja'ia and the Beach camp asked their teenage sons to work as hawkers (selling cigarettes, sweets or potato chips for school children).

One third of women's families have been registered for many years as hardship cases with the Ministry of social affairs and UNRWA for reasons of husband's chronic illness, death, or divorce (7 widows, 2 divorced, and 10 have sick husbands). They are classified as extremely poor as a result of the loss of the main breadwinner following the formal institutional criteria²¹. These families receive regular food and cash assistance for the survival of their families²². The remaining 41 households have become extremely poor and are in a vulnerable situation. This has happened as a result of the jobs lost by husbands and sons in Israel and/or in the local market following the Israeli policy of border closure since the start of the second Intifada which has further deteriorated after Hamas won the elections in January 2006 and the Hamas takeover of the Strip in June 2007.

It is significant to note that only four women in their mid 30s and early 40s who have able-bodied husbands or sons, classified themselves as economically better-off before the full Israeli siege against Gaza (early 1990s). The better off families before the Intifada are those where their male breadwinners (husbands and/or sons) used to be permanent skilled labourers in Israel or in the local Israeli-Palestinian subcontracting factories, largely in garment factories. The rest of women with able-bodied husbands and sons considered themselves poor before the closure and the economic crisis in Gaza Strip, but before the closure at least they were able to manage their basic needs including their children education and health expenses by the low wage earned with casual work in Israel or the local Gaza market.

All these households are now more exposed to food insecurity and vulnerability than the households headed by women classified as hardship cases, since they are not regularly entitled to humanitarian assistance from official institutions. Since the Israeli total closure, these families have mainly relied on resources provided by relatives and friends (social capital²³), in order to have access to food and cash assistance. All these women confirmed that they are in debt to various people such as shop owners, relatives and neighbours. House utilities have not been paid since the beginning of the Intifada. (Electricity in particular is paid by families who live in rented housing, in particular in the Beach Camp, where owners are abroad and rely on the tenants' fulfilment of certain requirements in a contract: the payment of rent and utilities).

²¹ See detailed information about the criteria and the sufficiency of the formal social safety net program in Hilal and Malki (In Arabic) (1997) Palestinian Economic Policy Research (MAS)

²² UNRWA's aid is distributed regularly whilst aid provided by the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) is not regular due to problems faced with the transfers coming from the Ramallah office.

²³ Social capital is defined by Lin (2001) and used by Krishna in his article 'Understanding, measuring and utilizing Social capital: clarifying concepts and presenting a field application from India' Journal of Agricultural Systems (2004), 82: 292, as the resources embedded within social network that are used by individuals to facilitate particular actions'

The dramatic deterioration of the household's economy has an important influence on increased stereotyped gender behaviours. Able-bodied husbands and sons who previously were working in Israel or locally and have been unemployed for a long period of time were described by respondents as careless and socially isolated. Women justify the males' attitudes explaining that their husbands and sons do not have the necessary knowledge of the local context or personal relations with influential local stakeholders because they started working in Israel at a very early age (16-18). Most of their work experience was shaped during their direct relations with Israeli employers. Women complained that their husbands have refused several times to work with local employers because they feel humiliated to work for them as they do not offer a contract and abuse employees (low wage and unpaid overtime).

One woman said:

"My husband did not used to be lazy. While he was working in Israel, he used to leave home at 4:00 am and come back at 7:00 pm. Since he lost his job, he became lazy and careless and not encouraged to talk to anybody. He worked one time as a daily labourer in Gaza and his local employer did not pay him for months. The local employers exploit workers by asking them to work more than 8 hours a day for a wage of NIS 30 (£4.2). For my husband this is dehumanizing and it is better for him to stay at home".

Most male workers have not gained any meaningful work experience in the local market, not only because of the unavailability of work opportunities, but also because of the mistrust on the local job-market system, which has historically been unregulated and unreliable. This is however the consequence of the long history of dependency of Gaza's economy on Israel. The Gazan work force has been for years fully reliant for their income on jobs in Israel²⁴ that in turn relied on the availability of cheap labour from Gaza. The main source for male Gazans of socially recognized and valued jobs was Israel or the export and manufacturing sector within Gaza. In both Al Shaja'ia and the Beach camp, most women tell that during the time when their husbands worked in Israel, they were largely involved in home-based income generating activities or unpaid family work²⁵ like land cultivation, food processing, fishing, sewing and handicrafts. Some of them still continue doing the same but to a lesser extent.

Women, regardless of the amount of income they earn, perceive their work at home as secondary to men's work or as a supplementary source of income. This assumption has always been reflected in women's definition of their work-status as housewives²⁶. All women interviewed confirmed that their home-productive activities are never perceived as the central main source of the family survival due to the fact that the income earned or the food produced is limited and never sufficient to fulfil the family's basic needs. The traditional home-production economy, as asserted by most women, has recently become un-productive as a result of the destruction of the Gaza local market (higher costs of production, low purchasing power and unavailability of raw materials).

²⁴ See Sara Roy 'The Economy of Gaza', the Palestine Centre

²⁵ See Lang and Muhanna (1992) 'women and work in the Beach camp', and Hammami, R. (1994) 'Between Heaven and Earth: Transformation in Religiosity and Labor Among Southern Palestinian Peasant and Refugees Women, 1920-1993' PhD thesis

²⁶ Haj, S. (1992) 'Palestinian Women and Patriarchal Relations', Journal of women in culture and society, vol.17, no.4

Women as a result have reduced their involvement in home-based productive activities and searched for other livelihood alternatives, basically the emergency food assistance distributed by formal and informal institutions. Experience of poor women in the subsistence economy shows that the traditional home-based economy has been used repeatedly under the occupation, particularly during livelihood crisis, for three main purposes: political mobilization of poor women²⁷; maintaining the social and cultural identity of the Palestinian family through the recreation of the original gender division of labour²⁸; and within the discourse of the first Palestinian uprising (1987-1993), enhancing national resistance and steadfastness²⁹.

Nevertheless, the long and intensive experience of subsistence economy using multiple social and economic dynamics has failed to enable Palestinians in Gaza to produce long-term economic and social stability. Subsistence economy by itself cannot succeed as a way of livelihood management under closure and the absence of a free-market economy. The history of Israeli occupation, land confiscation and house destruction; the integration of the cheap labour of Palestinians into the Israeli market; the inability of Palestinians to develop basic infrastructure and economic growth; as well as the full reliance on the Israeli imports, by the continuous closure of the Israeli borders, destroyed the capacity of the traditional sources of livelihood to suffice for family's survival. The traditional home production economy, by being fully dependent on Israeli materials and tools has lacked the ability to create the foundations for autonomy coupled with the large losses related to the destruction of agricultural lands.

Comments from a 50 years old woman:

"I used to sew clothes and sell them in the local market since the 1980s. I used a manual sewing machine in the beginning and then I bought a modern electric one. The income was to a great extent supporting my family's needs, but it was never sufficient for the big family I have. The difference now is that although I have the machine and the skills, I don't have the raw materials, which only come from Israel. And even if I had the raw materials, the ready-made clothes from Turkey, China and Egypt are much cheaper than our products. So what is the point of spending 4-5 hours on the sewing machine if I will not earn a reasonable income?"

The breakdown of women's traditional income generation activities has changed their priorities and preferences. After the first few years of the Intifada, women started to feel uncertain and insecure about their household's livelihood. One of the mechanisms currently used is to move back to the extended family's house, to live or at least, to share the main meal with the parents-in law. Often, women had to re-build their relationship with their husbands' family, and facilitate reconciliation, especially with the mothers-in-law. The research findings show that 18 women in Al Shaja'ia and 23 women in the Beach camp³⁰ live currently with the extended family. 15 of the refugee women

²⁷ See Frances Hasso 'the women's front: Nationalism, Feminism, and modernity in Palestine' *Gender and Society* (1998) v.12, no. 4: 441-465

²⁸ See Rema Hammami, PhD thesis (1994)

²⁹ Taraki, L. (ed) (2006) 'Living Palestine: Family Survival, Resistance, and mobility under Occupation'

³⁰ The strengthening of the choice of living in extended families housing, especially in the camps, has been a result of the increased poverty, which forced married sons to move back to live with their parents.

and 8 of the non-refugees asserted that they decided a few years ago after the second Intifada to have joint meals with their mother-in-law's family in order to reduce the food expenses. This was not however what women wanted, but it was a coercive choice against the absence of other alternatives.

Through the presentation of women's marriage life stories, the main preference and priority of women, before the current crisis, particularly those in their 30's, was to live in a separate house with their husband and children, away from their mothers-in-law "sight" and control. In most cases they had struggled for over a decade to achieve this goal. Because of the worsening economic situation, women's preference has reversed towards the choice of the extended family as a strategy for survival. Again, this is not the women's free choice, but a rational option that serves their household's priority for survival in a situation of absence of alternatives³¹. Dinez Kandiyoti interestingly conceptualizes these changing mechanisms used by poor women in a situation of crisis and insecurity as the 'patriarchy bargains'. For Kandiyoti, women negotiation and strategizing of their actions and interactions 'do not merely inform women's rational choices, but also shape the more unconscious aspects of their gendered subjectivity, since they permeate the context of their early socialization, as well as their adult cultural milieu³². It is obvious from women's life experiences that the notion of gender roles within Palestinian families has always been resilient and a subject of contestation, conciliation or/and cooperation responding to the changing context of family and the wider society³³.

During the time of the research which was conducted after around 7 years of continuous deterioration of people's livelihoods reaching its peak after the Hamas takeover in June 2007, all women interviewed asserted that they felt they had exhausted their capacity to cope based on their traditional home-based economy and the collective kinship social relations and networks. The only option available to them, despite of its irregularity, is to rely on the food coupons distributed by formal and informal institutions. This situation has forced poor women to become more individualistic and more passive in the exercise of their coping mechanisms. The current reliance of poor women in Gaza on the emergency food assistance is above all influenced by the specificity of the economic and political context in Gaza. The research revealed that among the interviewed women there is awareness of the reasons for their families' crisis. Women realise their families are impoverished by the never-ending closure and siege imposed by the Israelis and the international community. Women feel also that those responsible for the current crisis should provide the means of survival for the poor and vulnerable families in the Strip.

This is an additional factor that influences the shift from dynamic productive coping mechanisms to passive and un-productive ones. It is important here to relate the passivity and the individualism of women's coping mechanisms with their increased vulnerability, as a logical consequence of a sensed reduction of resources and their efforts to maintain their social identity always confined within the domestic sphere.

Extended family according to the definition provided by the Ministry of Planning (1998) is the family that may have multiple breadwinners but share the same meal.

³¹ Kabeer (1999) mentioned earlier

³² Kandiyoti, D. 'Bargaining Patriarchy' *Gender and Society*, Vol.2 No. 3 (1988) p 285

³³ See Samira Haj 'Palestinian women and Patriarchal relations' *Signs: Journal of Women in culture and society*, (1992) vol. 17, no. 4, and also see Taraki, L. (2006) (ed) 'living Palestine: Family Survival, resistance and mobility under Occupation', Syracuse University press

6.1.2 Female Headship and the Able-Bodiedness of Men in the situation of family crisis

Among the research's main concerns is not only to feature women's poverty and the diversity of coping mechanisms they use but also to understand the arrangement and rearrangement of gender behaviours behind these mechanisms.

The concept of "the feminization of poverty" has received large attention by many feminist and development scholars, it has yet been debated how the interplay between poverty and gender is processed and what outcomes achieved; and why the neo-liberal discourse of development concentrating on the elements of women's access and control over economic resources, changing gender stereotyped roles, and women's participation in decision making³⁴ has yet failed to break down the structural causes of the perpetuation and reproduction of poverty and gender inequality. In this section, we will try to go beyond the economic bargaining techniques women use to cope with poverty (utilizing traditional and non traditional economic sources), to understand the inter-subjective and relational dimensions of women's agency³⁵.

The focus of this research is to analyze the relational dynamics women as individuals use through their married life experience in order to achieve their social being. The achievement of women's social being within the family and the wider society should not always be associated with their success to reduce or eliminate poverty. This may also contribute in answering the mainstream question of many feminist and development literature: 'does the exercise of women's agency to cope with poverty have the merit to set ground for challenging the prevailing social order?'³⁶. Poor women often bargain with the prevailing order to align their social being within the prevailing system. According to Denis Kandiyoti (1988), Samira Haj (1992) and Naila Kabeer (1999), power for poor women is circulated through their life experience to empower them in certain phases of life and disempowered them in others.

Power analysed here as expressed by Foucault's theory, is not static. It circulates around all social categories and does not remain in one specific social group³⁷. Power is reproduced within the micro-entities of the wider patriarchal gender-biased system. The redistribution of women's power to shape the gender inter and intra-household relations is a product of women's negotiation and bargaining skills within the same system that impoverish them. This power poor women acquire does not necessarily lead to concrete outcomes serving the ultimate goal of gender equality and social justice; on the contrary, it may contribute in reinforcing the normalization of diverse forms of women's subordination.

³⁴ See Alsop, Ruth And Nina Heinsohn (2005) 'Measuring Empowerment in Practice: Structuring Analysis and Framing Indicators' World Bank Policy Research working paper No. 3510. Washington: World Bank.

³⁵ Cornwell, A. 'Choice, Chance and contingency: Career Strategies and Tactics for Survival' *Social Anthropology*, 15, 1 27-46

³⁶ See Singerman, D. (1995) 'Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics and Network in Urban Quarters of Cairo' by Princeton University Press & Taraki, L. (ed.) (2006) 'Living Palestine: Family Survival, resistance, and mobility under Occupation'

³⁷ See Kothari, U. And Minogue, M (ed) (2002) 'Development Theory and practice: Critical perspective'

Sources of power held by poor Gazan women are in most cases invisible. Women's power is not recognized publicly, but it is attained during the process of women's functioning within the existing gender division of labour. In the context of the present research it will be explored how poor women in Gaza wield power by using the same elements of their social exclusion in certain contexts and at certain times; to find out how "women's doing" is used as a strategy in the shaping of women's social being traditionally and particularly in relation to women's identities as wives and mothers.

The narratives of six women's life stories as well as the 60 in-depth interviews conducted with poor women in Gaza provide enough information to begin answering the research questions. According to the field data compiled, the critical factor of classification is the social positioning of women in relation to men's physical existence and able-bodiedness. By the use of this singular factor of classification we may argue against the tendency to equate poverty and vulnerability with female headship,³⁸ and women's well being with the existence of able-bodied men within family. In the current Palestinian livelihood crisis, it is observed that females' heads of households are less exposed to vulnerability compared to women under male headship. On the contrary, the physical existence of able-bodied men in many cases restricts poor women's ability to provide for their families. As sharply quoted by a married woman from the Beach camp in her late 30's, with 9 dependent children:

'I just hope my husband was dead, at least I would be relieved from people always gossiping about the fact I do not stop going around trying to get coupons and aid while I have a strong man in the house who is supposed to feed me and my children. If I were a widow, I would be the head of the family and no one will gossip about me. It is shameful to go and borrow money from neighbours and relatives while my husband is staying at home doing nothing. Instead of helping, he costs me more money for his cigarettes. I used to say in the past "the shadow of a man is better than the shadow of a wall", but now, I have stopped saying this because the existence of the husband in the present circumstances becomes a real burden.'

(An interview conducted in January 2008)

Another married woman from Al Shaja'ia in her early 30's with 7 young children said:

'It is not new for me to do everything at home. Since I got married, I have been doing everything: taking care of the children, cooking, and sewing with my mother in law, doing the shopping. My husband was not even firm enough to prevent his mother from making troubles against me. He was very violent and used to beat me every day. His mother controlled all income and my children and I were deprived from our basic needs...people think of me as a married woman, but to be honest, I don't really feel it. I would feel better doing all my work on my own if he were not around me'

(Interview conducted in December 2007)

It is clear from the two quotations and from the experience of other poor women that it is inaccurate to determine the family's poverty based on the singular factor of the physical existence or absence of an able-bodied man. The meaning of the existence of an able-

³⁸ Razavi, S. (1999) 'Gendered poverty and Well-Being: Introduction' *Development and Change Journal*, vol.30 (413)

bodied man (husband, father or son) however transcends the purely economic function, affecting the social status of women in the society. The critical question remains: how do the economic and social functions of both men and women interweave responding to the given context? We will see in the following section an analysis of the commonalities and differences between the two main categories of women identified through the research sample: women's head of households, and married women with able-bodied husbands.

6.1.3 Women's heads of households

Vicious cycle of poverty

Women's heads of households are around one third of the research sample (19 women). They are visibly and socially recognized as the head of their families as a result of husbands' sickness, death or divorce and the unavailability of able-bodied sons over the age of 18. Although around half of these families have sons over this age, they are all married and mostly live in their mothers' house. According to the eligibility criteria of hardship cases registered with UNRWA and the Ministry of Social Affairs, having single sons over 18 stops the families' eligibility for support. This may be the reason, often expressed, for mothers in hardship situation to marry their sons at an early age, request their individual UNRWA card and keep them living under the same roof.

All women of this group are between mid 40's to mid 50's, except one widow in her 30's and one divorcee in her late 20's. They started leading their families as early as 30. They attended only up to 6th to 8th grade and very few of them finished high school obtaining their degree (*tawjihi*). They all got married at an early age (15 to 18) and have large number of children, a minimum of 5 and a maximum of 12. The older ones of this group encouraged their male children to drop out of school in order to work in menial jobs to support the family's livelihood. The younger women are more enthusiastic about their children's education, but in certain cases, they were forced to take their male children out of schools to help them support and manage the family's livelihood, especially with women who were involved in income-generating activities. Most women in this group became mothers in law at mid 40's. Mothers encouraged their uneducated sons to marry as early as 18 or 20 to maintain their eligibility for humanitarian assistance. With women's head of families, its not only their individual preference to have their married sons living with them in the same house, but it is socially expected for sons to show the appreciation for their mothers by not living in a separate house away from them, even if she is in good health and relatively well-off.

Women at different ages showed their interest in educating their daughters since they feel it gives them better opportunity of marriage. Nevertheless their first preference is to marry them off when a good man comes around. In a situation of scarcity of resources, early marriage is encouraged in order to secure the daughter's life and to protect her from being in contestation with brothers' wives in case of the death of the mother, but also in some cases to reduce the economic and social burden. The marriage of daughters at early age is common among female-headed families to maintain and strengthen kin and social networks for future safety³⁹. It appears in the research sample that 45 out of the 60 women are married to cousins or close relatives. In the case of

³⁹ Conner, S. (1996) 'Cultural Sociology and cultural sciences', In the Blackwell companion to social Theory, edited by B. Turner. Oxford: Blackwell

female-headed families, kin marriage for the daughters is the ideal. Kin marriage is preferable as asserted by Penny Johnson (2006) 'for the reasons of insecurity and the risk of strangers'⁴⁰.



The majority of women's head of households who are between the ages of 40 and 50 suffer from health problems like high blood pressure, diabetes, anaemia, and bone diseases. The interesting finding appears to be that these women perceive the worsening of their health as a natural consequence of their position as the head of their families. Women in this position are in a continuous conflict between what they need for their well-being, and their responsibilities for securing the children's future. Most women head of households live in a context of scarcity of resources that forces them to prioritize their children's needs at the expense of their personal needs including food intake. Women's self-victimizing attitudes and altruism is one of the common behaviours that mothers have been practicing across generations for the sake of their children's livelihood security. This is the rational cause for the worsening of their body, but this factor has not to be taken separately from the social perception of women's self. Their sexuality and their social positioning as married, widow, divorced or a wife of sick husband, by no means influence women's use and care of their body. Most women say that they used to take care of their appearance, mostly their weight and their physical appearance in the early years of their marriage to satisfy their husbands. When husbands are pressured and not aroused sexually, women's care of their reproductive health in particular is reduced to the minimum and her care shifts to satisfy her children needs to make them physically and mentally strong. This is very much related to a woman's value of self as it is always determined by her social positioning as wives and mothers. (And of course there are many exceptions!) This is noticed repeatedly on a number of the women's quotations: *'for whom do I tend for my body'; 'I feel shy visiting the women's clinic as a divorced woman'; 'We have a health centre for women in the camp and it has a gym. I would love to go, but I feel scared of women's gossip: they*

⁴⁰ Taraki, Lisa (2006: p97) mentioned earlier

would ask: why does she want to loose weight and take care of her appearance? I do walk a lot while fulfilling the needs of my children, and this is a good exercise'.

Women as head of their household allocate resources to fulfil their role of wives and mothers as best as they can. In a situation of scarcity of resources, women's food intake is often reduced in quantity and quality⁴¹. Nevertheless, the women interviewed, particularly those that are head of households, asserted that the worsening of their health is not caused by the reduction in the quantity and quality of the food they eat. The main reason, as they all confirmed, seems to be the continuous stress and anxiety due to their concerns about their son's safety. Mothers participating in the research have repeatedly asserted that although the shortage of food is a serious problem, it is always manageable. There is a traditional saying in Gaza that says 'no one goes to sleep hungry'. Women's fear of loosing their sons during the Israeli incursions or due to internal conflicts between families is what seems to have the highest impact on their health. One of the women heads of household from Al Shaja'ia expressed her perception of her well being by saying:

'You believe... I can work 24 hours at home and outside the house and never feel tired, if my children are safe. I have two sons, one is 24 and another one 18 and they are always moving around. I am not sure if they are involved with the militant groups. Since the start of the Intifada, I remain awoken most nights feeling scared of the Israeli incursions or being worried when my sons return back home late. I have been struggling all my life to make them adults. This is the day I have been waiting for all my life, to see my sons as grown-up men'.

Another factor influencing the health of poor women heads of households is the low priority their well-being has within the family needs. Women care for their health is not perceived as a priority in the management of the family's livelihood which makes them often postpone it to a later stage in life. Poor women repeatedly mention this: *'one day I will rest when my children are adults and I will look after my health'.*

Salwa, 55 year-old divorced woman from the Beach camp, said:

Since I got divorced, I have never thought about my health. How can I do this with the responsibility of 9 children? I remember, several times I had pain in all parts of my body and only had paracetamol. I visited the health clinic several times and the doctors there did not care about us; that made me reluctant to return and decided to treat myself. When I felt sick I used herbs or I visited my neighbour to read Qur'an on my head. All my life tiredness has accumulated until I become seriously sick with diabetes and high blood pressure, but thanks be to God, sickness comes now when my sons are adults and responsible. They really look after me and take me to the clinic'.

6.1.4 Female headship and the circulation of power:

The level of poverty of most female-headed households has not changed dramatically since the loss or the sickness of the male head of the family. A number of women

⁴¹ 'West Bank and Gaza Strip: Comprehensive food security and vulnerability analysis' A report of WFP, Jan. 2007

asserted that their household's economic and social situation became better after their husbands' death, especially those whose husbands or sons died as martyrs or were injured by the Israelis. The widows of martyrs and the mothers of injured husbands and/or sons are treated differently than women who lost their husbands or sons by sickness or any other reason, as the government gives them a monthly allowance (sort of compensation) and regular food assistance. It appears that the female-headed households (but refugee women in particular) are less exposed to extreme poverty and vulnerability during the current economic crisis since they are socially recognized as persons entitled to humanitarian assistance by formal and informal institutions. Humanitarian assistance provided by UNRWA to refugees is more stable and regular than the assistance provided to non-refugees by the official government institutions and other NGO's. In the case of the hardship cases helped by the Ministry of Social Affairs, the assistance received has always been distributed irregularly and its scale is influenced by the politics of the Palestinian government and its relation with the international aid agencies.

Female-headed households categorised as beneficiaries of humanitarian aid, special hardship cases according to the official cannons, is an advantage in certain contexts. The social recognition and the policy support provided to female-headed households are based on the traditional social perception of women as non-productive agents, and incapable to provide enough for their families. This perception is a facilitating factor and an incentive for women heads of households to better manage their livelihood during time of crisis. From an economic perspective, women head of households are always entitled to humanitarian assistance according to the cannons of formal and informal institutions. It is not shameful for a widow, a divorcee or a wife of a sick husband with dependent children to move around in search for livelihood sources. Moreover, the social legitimization such women receive in the case of the absence of men at productive age, give mothers a wider space to practice their authority over the family members, but without necessarily transgressing the boundaries of social norms. Women's authority in such situations is encouraged in order that the women will be able to maintain the traditionally male dominated hierarchy of the family.

This is an outstanding phase in women's life struggle to reshape their subjectivity from the perception of being irrational, emotional and lenience to one of being rational and rigorous in her choices. Otherwise, it will be unlikely that she will succeed in rearing empowered men for the future of their families. Women in such position act precisely as the men (husbands and sons) "making factories" and not as the 'human making factories'⁴². In the case of poor women head of households in Gaza, it is not the formal education that influences the success of their role but rather the women's acceptance and valuation of the existing hierarchical male dominated structure, and their acknowledgment of the norms, codes and relations constituting society. This argument is supported by the repeated saying used by mothers in Gaza to their sons: *'you need to be a strong man to maintain the name of your father...don't scandalize us and let people gossip that you are controlled by a woman.'*

⁴² As it is described by Afsaneh Najmabadi (1998) in her presentation of the effect of formal education on Iranian women's role as managers of their houses. See Najmabadi, A. (1998) 'Crafting an educated housewife in Iran' in 'Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East' edited by Laila Abu-Lughod: pp 91-114

Poor women unconsciously use the devaluation of women's status as head of household as an instrument for arranging new forms of male domination based on the mother-son relationships. Women being solely responsible for raising their children are given the social legitimacy and the wider virtual space for shaping power over their own male sons and their wives within the family⁴³. Within the gender biased patriarchal system "... the female life cycle is crucial in shaping gender identity. Power is acquired through seniority and by bearing male heirs. A young bride enters her husband's household at an extreme disadvantage as she will be subordinate not only to all men in the family but also to senior women, especially the mother in law. She first starts to wield power after giving a birth to a son. Once her sons reach manhood and take brides, her power and influence comes to full bloom."⁴⁴

Not only women head of households who have lost their husbands experience this process of reproduction of gender domination and patriarchy through their married life cycle, but also this practice of wielding power is commonplace among the majority of married women with healthy husbands. However the absence of an adult male's physical presence during the period of child rearing (when children are socially recognized as dependent) gives women a motivating social environment to create their own social networks, growing less dependent on men within the marriage relation; and communicating and negotiating openly in public situations. These indicators of power are however always framed within the structural and cultural boundaries of family and the wider society.

The only women in the research sample who decided to study at university are the widows of martyrs who, during their husbands' lives, used to be totally dependent on their husbands and/or family. Despite the personal changes occurred as a result of their higher education, their ultimate goal in life remains tied up with her capacity to rear her daughters to be married and sons to be socially recognized men. The activation of women's exercise of agency in these two cases by taking a decision that supposedly contributes in shaping their subjectivities differently is instead used to preserve the social functioning of their identity as mothers. It is important to note here that the issue of presentation is critical in the interpretation of women's practice in relation to the society perception of women as a widow, and also in understanding how women negotiate the relationship between their agency and structural constrains. The precise interpretation of women's presentation gives a clear understanding of the hidden part of women's subjectivity while not all what a woman says or does actually reflects how she thinks about herself. The issue of presentation is a form of political (and social) legitimacy, which is intentionally used by the powerful to suppress power, and by socially excluded and powerless to bargain within the existing unequal relations of power. Women's head of families whether widows, divorcees or wives of sick husbands usually direct personal achievement towards the benefit of others, mainly children, in order to obtain societal support smoothing their social context for upgrading and additional progress.

To avoid generalizations, there are some women in the sample who realise the dilemma present in the attachment of the women's self-identity to their identity as mothers and wives. Throughout the fieldwork dialogue, it appears that these women try to utilize their

⁴³ This circulation of power in women's married life cycle is attributed by a number of feminist scholars like Deniz Kandiyoti (1988), Samira Haj (1992) and Naila Kabeer (1999) to the internalization of women's subjective identity as a subordinate agent.

⁴⁴ Haj, S. (1992: 763) mentioned earlier

exercise of agency for the survival of their families to achieve something for themselves as well, not necessarily contradictory with their role and responsibilities as mothers. This realisation is most likely based on the woman's ability to differentiate between what she wants for herself and what she wants for her children and when the strategies selected serve both purposes equally and strategically. Although women's subjectivity is hardly presented openly, the intense dialogue with women during the presentation of their life stories helped greatly to clarify and to uncover the intentions and desires of these women as individuals in relation to their performance as wives and mothers.

Um Ahmad from the Beach camp (35 years old) and Samira and Kawther (33 and 32 respectively) from Al Shaja'ia are three good examples of poor women who have succeeded in developing their own personal goals not only determined by their role as mothers. The balancing efforts of women with multiple identities and their ability to achieve each separate goal for the benefit of all may be a good model in theory, but represents in practice a great challenge and it also implies high risk. If women succeed to achieve their personal goal without achieving equal success to raise their sons as good men, the first to be blamed will be the mothers. The common model of poor women head of households acting, consciously or unconsciously, as a reproducer of the male dominated system is by no means smoother and less risky in implementation.

Um Iyad from the Beach camp presented her life experience as widow of a martyr by saying:

"I spent the first 8 years of my marriage in one room with my husband's family. He was working as a daily wage labourer in Israel. My brother-in-law was in control of my husband's income and I was not allowed to use one Shekel of it for my children. My life continued like this until the beginning of the second Intifada. My husband stopped working in Israel and daily disputes took place amongst the brothers. My husband eldest brother decided to give us my husband's share in the family's house in order to allow me to buy our own house away from my brothers in law. I sold the gold of my dowry to complete the price of the new house...one room and a small kitchen, always in the camp. One year later, I asked my natal family to help me to buy a bigger house with three bedrooms. After my husband stopped working in Israel and became jobless, he got involved in the resistance groups and the Israelis killed him in 2004

I was shocked...I thought that my life had ended. I had not learnt anything about managing life on my own, I never went out. I thought about my 7 children and I wondered who would feed them. Their uncles don't care about us. After a few months, I calmed down and begun to organize myself. I first applied for the allowances of my husband as a martyr, then, I applied to UNRWA to get food assistance. My sons (12 and 14 years old) helped me to get some cash by selling the UNRWA rations in the market. I felt sad that my children had to do this. One day a friend of mine told me that the wives of martyrs could study in the university without paying fees. I thought about the idea and my children supported it. I applied and I am now studying. I feel different now. I feel that my studies at university will open new opportunities for my children and widen their possibilities for a better future. Before my husband died I was not able to speak with men or strange people, but today I do.'

(Um Ahmad was interviewed in her home in October 2007)

Apart from the cases of the widows of martyrs, female heads of households are not able to provide enough food and cash to meet the families' basic needs despite the assistance received from formal and informal institutions. They all live with extended families composed of 7 to 15 members. All women in this group have been involved, regardless of the changing economic context, in informal economic activities such as agricultural production, sewing and petty-trading in the local market or for neighbours and relatives, in addition to their reliance on the material support provided by relatives and neighbours, in particular during religious holidays and social occasions. Only 5 of them mentioned that they were involved in paid labour working from home, especially through subcontracting with sewing manufacturing workshops or in fishing (cleaning fish and selling it to whole traders) as it is the case of women in the Beach camp. Female heads of households registered with formal institutions as hardship cases used to hide their paid economic activities to maintain their eligibility for humanitarian assistance. These women have been able to meet the basic needs of their families and have not really been exposed to vulnerability during the second Intifada; nevertheless they have failed to achieve any degree of sustainability and security in their sources of food and income.

The main source of security they have successfully achieved is to own a decent house for themselves and their married male children. In most cases they have either built a separate apartment for their married sons, or extended their own houses to have a separate section of one or two rooms and a kitchen, to accommodate their sons' families. Refugee women rely on UNRWA for the renovation and for the extension of their houses. The women who are still worried about the fate of their families are the few cases who still have daughters of marriageable age. Women's heads of households care a lot about their daughters' marriage and they are concerned to marry them at an early age to avoid them losing the opportunity of a good marriage and stay the rest of their lives under the control of the brothers' wives. All women heads of households regardless of differences of age and education assert that the real power of a woman is manifested if she is able to marry and have her own children (especially male ones). Otherwise the woman is most likely exposed to humiliation and lack of respect from other men and women in the family and will become the caretaker of other women's children, especially the children of her brothers who are supposed to provide support and shelter for their single sisters if they do not get married.

Female headship as a result of a woman being divorced is socially recognized but in this case, the women's social standing is less valued than that of a widow. To be a widow happened without her control, not like in the case of divorce. People feel more compassionate towards a widow. The lower value attributed to a divorcee has in many cases to do with the thought that she has not been a good wife. Women often divorce at an earlier age than women who become widows (apart from the young martyrs), which puts them under double confrontation between her identity as a mother and her responsibilities as a woman to herself (she needs to align and keep her social status in the society as a respected wife). The experience of divorced women in Gaza shows that the final decision of divorce taken by women is never a free choice. For a woman to break out of her social position as a wife indicates that she has exhausted all mechanisms of compromising and sees no possibilities to remain in that position. With the practice of early marriage in the Gaza Strip, to be poor and divorced, usually over the age of 20, widely implies she will not be able to marry again.

The two cases of divorced women are representative of two different generations. Neither of them complains about the material aspect of poverty and the economic burden of children rearing. The two confirmed that the low income is manageable “we are used to live in poverty all our lives”. The first who is 55 years old now and with 8 children; she was divorced at the age of 35. The second one 28 years old, has 3 children and was divorced at the age of 24. Although the two have successfully managed their livelihoods (the first relied on the institutional assistance and her petty -trading whereas the second one worked as a hairdresser), they have contrasting views about themselves as divorced persons. The younger who has a high school degree (Tawjihi), fewer children and more contact with public life through her type of work; the older has no education and her social contact is bound by her family and neighbourhood’s surrounding. Despite these significant differences, the attitude of the younger woman towards herself is less “empowered” than that of the older one.

The young divorcee says:

‘I would have never thought of divorce until I discovered that my husband was a drug addict. I could bear he had no job, but he used to beat me every day until I got sick. He was also beating my children. I could withstand his daily violence and manage, but he became dangerous to my children. It is then that I decided to get divorced. My brothers refused because they were worried about where I was going to live with my children. I threatened them to kill myself if they didn’t divorce me, and they finally agreed to my request. The makhateer (traditional leader) put pressure on my husband’s family to make a separate room and a kitchen for my children and myself. I live in this room with no support from anybody, my brothers are very poor and my ex-husband’s family doesn’t like me as I made public the secret of their son. Through a friend, I found a job as a hairdresser earning NIS 600 (£85) a month and use it all for my family’s expenses. I have a good relationship with all my neighbours; they support me. I don’t really feel tired from the load of work, but to be a divorced woman at my age makes me exposed to men’s harassments, and other people deal with me with disrespect. I really hope that my ex-husband gets back to his mind and overcomes his addiction so we may go back together. I don’t need a man to feed the children and me, I can do this by myself, but I don’t like to be divorced.

(An interview conducted in the Beach camp in January 2008)

When the researcher asked the young divorced woman: ‘Would you like to get married again, she was shocked by the question, as it seemed to touch a prohibited area in her mind. She replied: “Of course not, do you imagine that I can leave my children for the sake of marriage?” If a divorced woman with very young children gets married, which rarely happens in Gaza, she has to leave her young children with the in-law’s family including the breastfeeding one. This adds to her stigma as a divorced woman. It may be socially accepted and legitimized for a widow to get married, but with a close relative, a brother in law as it often happened during the second Intifada with the wives of martyrs. In Gaza like elsewhere in many Arab and Muslim societies, divorced women are not allowed custody of their children, not for legal restrictions, but because it is considered shameful for the father and his family to allow the new husband of the ex-wife to raise their own children. As noticed with the two cases mentioned, divorced women are intentionally located with their children in a place very much attached to the children father’s family, as this increases the restriction on mobility and reduces the possibilities of communication with strangers of the divorced women.

The older woman, Salwa, has presented her life experience as a divorcee under a different light:

'I don't need a husband to humiliate me. I have my sons and since I got divorced I have been waiting for the day when my sons will reach adult age and will become real men. I didn't care about people's gossip. I was like a man with men and a woman with women. No one could harass me because I respect myself. I refused to get married again and I sacrificed myself to rear well my children. I was thinking how can I get married and leave my young children suffer at the hands of their father's wife. No man accepts to marry a woman with young children'

Salwa however expresses herself from the point of view of an older woman who has behind her a full-life experience of hardship and suffering to raise her children. She asserted that she is always proud of what she has done for her children. Salwa thinks that being a successful mother; able to raise her children in a respectful way obscures the cruel memory of divorce. Power in this case, the power of divorced women is something that circulates, which functions as a chain⁴⁵. Although Salwa does not deny her devaluated status as a divorcee, she perceives herself now as a powerful mother who has accomplished her goal of raising her sons as socially recognized good men. Salwa has however not succeeded in building up a reliable source of income for her children. They all dropped out of school and rely on intermittent work in fishing, but from her point of view, she gave them the basic things: she arranged their marriage, constructed a separate house for each, and raised them to be supportive of each other. In her opinion what she achieved ensures the long-term stability of her family in which gender relations are intact.

Salwa takes all family decisions and she is the senior person to be consulted in any dispute within the family. Salwa decided about the marriage of her sons and she selected the proper brides for them. For Salwa the proper brides for her sons were '*banat Aisha*', young girls who are able to cope with the family poverty and not to be demanding or rebels. Salwa's desire was to find educated girls for her sons to better their future, but as she acknowledged, no educated girl with ambition would accept to marry an illiterate person.

Salwa tries to be rational in her choices in order to maintain her power over the family members, especially her sons. Mothers in law who live all their life in poverty do have different priorities than educated middle class women. They prefer to select a destitute girl as a bride for a son, in order to avoid tension or conflict that could be caused by the addition of an educated woman, who may have different attitudes and habits in everyday life. Here is where the poor are blamed as responsible for the perpetuation of poverty and women's subordination from the perspective of mainstream neo-liberal feminist and development discourse which most likely individualizes and depoliticizes the process of development and change in order to leave the structural causes of poverty intact⁴⁶. For poor women in Gaza, this dynamic is a reflection of the wide common life experience of poor women who used to live in fear and uncertainty and mostly dependent on others to maintain the basic material needs of life. It is rather a rational dynamic that is basically

⁴⁵ In Cheater, A. (ed.) (1999) 'The Anthropology of power: Empowerment and disempowerment changing structures'

⁴⁶ Kothari & Mingogue (2002) mentioned earlier

shaped not by women's ignorance, but by the absence of alternatives⁴⁷. The rational choice made by women like Salwa is also a strategic one for maintaining the long-term stability of their family within a patriarchal male dominated structure and culture. The authority of mothers here to decide the future of their sons' families is not only socially legitimized⁴⁸, but it is also used as a strategy based on the constant context of poverty and uncertainty, and as a consequence, power in gender relations within poor families circulates from mothers to sons and from sons to mothers, but does not circulate beyond. Women's rationality never wholly displaces the strategic components of the exercise of power.

The third group of women's heads of households is the wives of disabled husbands (men suffering from chronic diseases or retired after 65 years of age). Those are also entitled for humanitarian assistance by formal and informal institutions. The only difference noticed between this group of women and the widows and divorcees is that these women feel more socially secure by the physical presence of their sick husbands. Women do everything related to the management of the household's economy (sewing at home, selling in the market, shopping, communicating with traders and other in the public). In their opinion the lack of income from their husbands is not an issue but the disabled husband provides a symbolic/social protection and status. Um Haitham from Al Sheja'ia, aged 46, with two male children aged 18 and 24, presented her life experience as a wife of a chronically sick husband for around 25 years. She said:

"My husband used to work in Israel as wage labourer until the late 1980s. He became ill and developed a serious heart problem and he was not allowed to work any longer. I had bought gold and saved some money but after he stopped working, all the savings were spent. I didn't intend to have only two sons, but that was the will of God. I learnt sewing while I was at my mother's home before marriage. All girls at that time used to learn sewing and handicrafts. I borrowed my mother's manual sewing machine and started to sew babies' clothes and sell them in the market. I was so embarrassed to sit in the market when I was 30, but my mother encouraged me, as there were no other sources of income for my family to live on. I continued working and started to earn money to provide enough for my family's needs. I had good relations with people around me- men and women, traders and shopkeepers. Through my registration as a hardship case with the Ministry of Social Affairs, I was offered two soft loans and bought an electric sewing machine, which improved my production.

My husband made lots of troubles at first, but he then realized that we had no other options to survive. Before the second Intifada, I used to earn enough money from sewing. Since then, I reduced my sewing and the income is not enough for the basic needs. The cloth is not available because of the closure, and people don't have money to buy. Since the beginning of the Intifada, I began doing volunteer work in a women's association and would go everyday for around 5 hours. I received coupons and sometimes also cash from the association. I tried to find a job for my son through my relation with the head of the association, Um Samer. She found work for him as a guard in a wealthy man's farm. He gets NIS 20 (£2.8) a day. He spends half of the money on his cigarettes. My second son decided to leave school and train with a mechanic in his shop.

⁴⁷ Kabeer (1999) mentioned earlier

⁴⁸ See Skalnik, P. (1999) in Cheater, A. 'The Anthropology of power', pp: 163-173

Despite my husband's sickness and inability to bring any money home, I consult him on everything I do. This makes me feel better, reassured as a married woman. I encourage my husband and my two sons to go visiting. I always try to save some money for my husband to give his sisters in the religious feasts (according to tradition). I also make sure to fulfil all social obligations towards his family. This has made my husband's family very supportive of me and my children." I have recently started to feel tired. I can't see any hope for a better future. I feel sick most of the time and no one can replace me at home. I am thinking seriously to marry my son and I have already found a good bride for him."

The researcher had a more in-depth conversation with Um Haitham trying to understand how she can take such a risky decision-from the researcher's point of view- to marry her son at this particular difficult time. She is already in debt, and she can hardly manage her family's livelihood. But Um Haitham offered a very convincing argument for her decision.

The researcher

Why did you take this decision at this particular time?

Um Haitham:

'Abu Haitham is getting increasingly sick and the children are out of the house working. I can't stop my work with the women's association since it is an important source of income for the family's survival. If I get sicker and I cannot manage all these tasks by myself what would happen? My son is restless and uncertain about the future. No one knows for how long I will be here for them.'

The researcher:

Who is the bride you selected?

She laughed thinking that what she will say would not convince the researcher.

Um Haitham:

'I have been thinking for a while until I decided to select his cousin. She is 17 years old and her family lives very close to us. I know her very well and she likes me, she used to come to help me in my domestic work. Her family is very poor and she has another 5 sisters. Her parents want to marry the older daughters to reduce their burden. I don't think I can find a better bride who can care for my sick husband and look after him. At least she won't be restricted in her mobility as she lives with her uncle. The girl is very polite and obedient and her mother is not a troublemaker. This girl knows our life and she can cope with it.'

The researcher:

How are you going to cover the expenses for the marriage as you plan to marry him this summer (after 5 months)?

Um Haitham:

'God will not forget me. Throughout my experience with the women's association, I succeeded in making many friends. They all respect and appreciate me and know of my family's situation. I also have a good relation with the head of the association (Um Samer), and she won't hesitate to help. I will borrow from my friends. My mother also has promised to give me some money. About the dowry, it won't be so much as both families know the situation. The bride's mother doesn't care about the dowry; she just wants her daughter to have a stable marriage. So we may agree to pay only 2000 Jordanian Dinars (£1,503) while the normal dowry paid now is minimum 3000 JD (£2,256). Everything is getting expensive after the border closure, but I can manage this. I also need some money to paint his room and to buy a bed. But you know God will help me!

The last question by the researcher:

Are you not afraid of increasing your debts? How are you going to repay the money?

Um Haitham:

'I am a believer and God will not forget me. I will keep selling clothes in the local market on Friday. I also earn occasionally a little money from the association. I am not obliged to repay all the debts at once. My mother and Um Samer can be left for later as they are not in urgent need of repayment. Um Samer trusts she and me can wait a little longer. I have also made with some of my friends a saving's group (jama'ia), paying NIS 5 (£0.71) or more every week. One of the friends can use the amount saved in case of an emergency. This will also help. Who knows, my son may find a job with a better income and he can repay the debt of his marriage. This is not new to be in debt, I have been in debt several times before, but I never disappointed those who lent me money and I always pay back. What makes me scared is that the situation of my friends and relatives from whom I borrow money may become more difficult because of the current situation. I always pray for them. But you know, I believe that my friends and my mother will never ask for their money and will wait until I will be able to repay them.

Um Haitham emphasized several times during the interviews that the strongest source of livelihood's security is not the little money she earns, or the food she receives from the Ministry of social affairs, but it is rather the strong social network she has developed with people around her. She believes that her social network facilitates her access to material support. Otherwise, in a situation like the present one of her son's marriage, she would not find any source of immediate support from a formal institution.

Although coping mechanisms are considered to a large extent to contribute to the perpetuation of women's poverty, it is obvious that the poorest women in a situation of scarcity have no other options but to stop things getting worse. Um Haitham from Al Shaja'ia and Salwa in the Beach camp would have liked to choose an educated bride for their sons, and would have preferred their sons to be educated and have a career, but they had no resources to achieve this. It is noticeable that none among the women in the research sample complained about their simple way of living imposed by their poverty. They all claimed that throughout their lives poverty has been a chronic and unchangeable reality, regardless of all the actions undertaken against it. The strategic options women adopt to cope with the perpetuated poverty are: first, to accept their situation as chronic and as their fate, limiting their life's goals to the social stabilization of their families based on their own economic and social limitations (*no one dies from*

hunger, and God never forgets us); and second, to maintain and enhance their social network around them (neighbours, friends and relatives) as social capital is the only attainable source for livelihood security, while the material capital is not attainable.

Social capital is a constraint for the chronically poor to alleviate their poverty⁴⁹ as 'the material and social support it provides is not systematic, sustained or regular, but partial, intermittent, and related to specific events'⁵⁰. This analysis of the constraints of social capital to support the livelihood of the very poor and/or to empower them is relevant to the situation of crisis for the very poor in Gaza. Relatives, neighbours and other social networks, by the increased collective impoverishment threaten to lose their potential for mutual material benefiting and social security.

The forms of social capital spoken about by poor women heads of households as it appears with Um Haitham and other cases in the research are not only used to provide an immediate economic benefit; they also provide moral and spiritual support to women's actions and interactions, cared for and maintained as a resource reserved as protection for the unpredictable future. This is why it is noticed among all women heads of households a keen interest in maintaining good relationships with family members, and to be committed with family and neighbours' social obligations, especially weddings and funerals, regardless of the high cost of these obligations and the immediate benefits. With the increasing harshness of the situation in Gaza, social capital has increasingly become an additional burden on women. Thus it is now rearranged but it is increasingly overstretched and at high risk of being abandoned if the situation further deteriorates.

6.1.5 Women with able-bodied husbands and sons:

Family Poverty and a profile of gender relations:

These 41 women represent two thirds of the research sample. They are all married with able-bodied husbands and some of them have able-bodied sons 18 years old and over. These women used to rely on their husbands as the main source of income for the families before the Israeli border closure. Husbands and sons in 36 out of 41 cases used to work as wage labourers in Israel (skilled and unskilled, mainly in the construction and agriculture sectors). Few husbands were involved in family business like sewing, fishing and trading. Women of this group always define themselves as purely housewives responsible only for raising their children and caring for the elderly of the family. 27 out of the 41 women asserted that they were largely involved in home-based economic activities with their husbands and mothers in law, especially in sewing, fishing and agriculture in order to complement and support the family income.

Refugee women were more involved in home-based work for the fishing sector whereas women in Al Shaja'ia were more involved in agriculture and petty-trading in the local market. The involvement of women in informal economic activities has declined to the minimum as a result of the lack of viability of home-based production (agriculture and sewing) due to the lack of raw materials (all used to come from Israel) and the rapid

⁴⁹ Frances Cleaver in her article on 'The inequality of social capital; Agency, association and the reproduction of chronic poverty' presented at the conference 'Staying poor: Chronic poverty and the development policy' University of Manchester, April 2003

⁵⁰ Ibid: p12

deterioration of people's purchasing power. Women confirmed that they realized the economic value of their home-based production during the current crisis when they were urgently in need of the extra income.

The age distribution of women with able-bodied husbands ranges from 28 to 55. Only six of them completed their high school degree (*tawjihi*) and the rest dropped out during the early school years. All women got married at early age between 15 and 17 and only those who finished their *tawjihi* got married at 18 and 19. These women have a large number of children, similar to the former group of heads of households, and all those in the age group of 47 and over have one or two married sons living in the same house or in a separate house attached to the parents'. Age appears as a critical element in the marriage life cycle of women, especially in relation to the style of housing. It seems that in the early stage of women's marriage (5 to 8 years), most women lived with their parents in law until they saved enough money to build a separate house. The separate house is either an extension of the parents' house in the case of poorer families, or a separate apartment in a family building in better-off cases. Although, the older women of this group presented and resented the harshness of their life by living in extended families, they repeated the same pattern with their male children when they grew up. The visible reason given by mothers is the deteriorating economic situation and their inability to make a separate home for their sons. The economic reason does not hide the mothers' preference to accommodate their married sons in the same house or attached to it in order to maintain the mothers' seniority. All cases of married women interviewed have lived all their married life either in extended families or physically and socially attached to it, by which the interaction between women and their mothers in law has never been dissociated, except 5 cases of women whose parents in law died and their sons are still single or young.

These families have invested the income of their work in Israel in housing and in children's marriage, while very few invested in education. Despite the reality that the Palestinian family in general has invested in the children's education, especially boys, as the only sustainable source of livelihood under the occupation, both amongst middle class and poor families, the chronically poor were not able to afford this investment. Another important reason for the lack of interest of poor families to educate their children has been the seduction of wage labour in Israel providing a relatively high income. Only in 7 cases, women with able-bodied husbands mentioned that their male and female children studied/or were studying at the university. In both the Beach camp and Al Shaja'ia, the sons of older women between 50 and 55 left school early to join their fathers' work in Israel in the 1980's and early 1990's before the full closure of the Israeli border. For the women in their late 30's and early 40's however their main concern has been to educate their children, supporting them to follow higher education. University attendance came at a time of livelihood crisis, when savings were spent on the family basic expenses and no more income was being earned. Nevertheless, in some cases of the researched poor women, their sons and daughters with great support from their parents succeeded to continue their high education. They relied on the assistance of formal institutions, universities, government departments and NGOs. In some cases, the mothers were responsible for communication and negotiation with the formal associations to ask for support while in others, it was the sons and daughters who were pushed to search for financial support for their university studies. In the process, some became loyal to a certain institution or a political party to have the opportunity of support. Others proved their eligibility for support by their excellent performance.

All women of this group claimed that they were not living in a better situation, except for five cases. Women described their standard of living before the closure as *mastoreen*, i.e. able to provide for the basic needs of the family and not to be in need for outside support or indebted to anyone. They basically relied on the husbands or, in a few cases on sons' intermittent work in Israel or in the local market as the main source of income. Their family income was basically spent on food, education, health and necessary social visits. The main priority for these women before the crisis was to save money by reducing their family expenses or by getting involved irregularly in sewing or trading to be able to build a house and live separately from their parents in law. They mostly succeeded to have a separate extension next to their in-laws house (one or two independent rooms and a tiny kitchen), or to have a small house on the roof. The main reason for this group of women to get involved in paid or unpaid home-based work was to live with their children away from the continuous conflict with their mothers in law.



It is interesting to note that around 18 women between the ages of 30 and 40 years old are wives of husbands who used to be, in the early years of marriage, under the control of either their mothers, or under the control of fathers or older brothers. These husbands used to give all their income to their mothers to decide about its distribution according to the extended family's needs. Mothers in law were responsible for the whole family's social arrangement (what to do and where to go). Gendering the family responsibilities and authority to be on the hands of the mothers/mothers-in-law was a social necessity emphasised by family men (husbands and sons) being fully occupied with their work in Israel for long hours, and sometimes even staying overnight. Another factor is that men between the ages of 20 and 30 years old in such situation trusted their mothers more than their wives to manage and protect their families. The control over their husbands and sons income by women in the position of wives/mothers/mothers-in-law extends also to control of all social arrangements of the extended family including marriage, mobility of women of the extended family, and social visits. This legitimizes mothers' authority both over the sons and the daughters in law.

In such a context daughters in law do not have any alternative but the acceptance of the authority of their mothers in law until they become able to "resist", most likely based on the power they gain through their own male children and through their income. In a situation of family stability based on male or mother in laws' domination, daughters in

law use the *phases-based*⁵¹ strategy to resist the oppression of the hierarchy of the extended family. Some women have a conciliating relationship with mothers in law until they have their own sons and once they grow up these women are empowered by them. Others resist by deceiving the family members (husband and mother in law) to save enough money to attain autonomous living quarters where they will feel more able to exercise the power of motherhood over her children, and sometimes over her husband. The practice of power in such context is most often invisible and more domestic.

Women in such contexts are consciously or unconsciously reproducing the existing hierarchal structure⁵². This is basically done by the reiteration of women's performance of their roles as wives and mothers through their married life⁵³. Despite of young women's realization of the disadvantage of living in an extended family, they present it as a short necessary phase of married life by which they learn to practice the circulation of power within the family. The traditional skills and knowledge poor women acquire through their purely domestic life experience enabled them to play the game of cooperation and contestation with the husband family members, especially the mothers in law. The material aspects of poverty with women living in continuous inter-family contestation did not appear as the main concern for women in the research sample. They rather dealt with it as a manageable matter. The majority of women confirmed that they have been living in poverty for generations, and they traditionally cope with poverty by using similar economic and social mechanisms. The main constrain of women with able-bodied husbands, particularly women in the reproductive age, is rather the lack of '*rahet el ball*'; emotional calm, stability or tranquillity that allows women to have their own space to be good wives and mothers.

Married women who live in continuous contestation with their mothers-in-law or other family members confirmed that they would be able to manage their children's basic needs from "nothing", if only their minds were free of the interference of the husband's family. Poor women with husbands under the control of their mothers are in permanent clash between their position as wives and daughters in law, trying to satisfy both their husbands and their mothers in law. Their preference would be to have powerful independent husband's organising their personal life rather than having to be under the control of their mothers in law. The multiple forms of hierarchy under which married women live are shaped by their prioritization of preferences that form their strategies and timing of resistance to achieve the stability of the family. Poor women in the early phase of their marriage accept the legitimacy of the husband's authority to resist the authority of their mothers in law. In a later phase, they would prefer the authority of sons as a powerful source to legitimize their resistance to their husband's authority. If people accept authority, then the tension is reduced and power can be made less predatory. Authority has to be associated with legitimacy to achieve power (p 173)⁵⁴. Powerless women cannot initiate conflicts when they are totally dependent on others for the basic

⁵¹ Daughters in law usually prefer to have male children, as when the sons grow up, they constitute a power for their mothers to stand against the domination of their mothers in law. Women in Gaza who don't have male children, keep giving birth to children until they get male children, even after 9 or 10 daughters. Women's power within the extended family increase when the male children earn income and their mothers have a control over this income.

⁵² Lovell, T. (2000) 'Thinking Feminism with and against Bourdieu' in Fowler, B. (ed.) (2000) 'Reading Bourdieu on Society and Culture' Blackwell Publication

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Cheater, A (ed.) (1999) 'Anthropology of power: Empowerment and disempowerment changing structures' 173)

material and social means for their children existence⁵⁵, but they do not stop exercising their agencies to enhance their power as wives and mothers by reproducing the power of the mother-son relationship.

Married women considered that the major achievement attained during their marriage life was their ability to live in a separate house with their children. The physical separation in living does not necessarily mean an end to the extended family's/mother-in-law's interference in women's personal life, but to some extent give women a more private space to be wives and mothers independently. Women with husbands who are characterized as dependent on their mothers took longer to be able to move to a separate house and to get rid of the continuous oppression of their mothers in law. One of these women said: *'deprivation from food was more bearable than the torture of my mother in law (Hamati)'*. Another woman said: *'I prefer to work 24 hours, but not to be exploited and humiliated by Hamati and my brothers in law. I need the money of my work for my own children not for Hamati to decide for us what to eat and what to wear'*.

These women did not only suffer from their lack of access and control over material resources, but they were also not allowed to go out without their husbands and their mothers in law's permission. They admitted that they were working as servants for the whole family, cooking and cleaning for all, but without receiving any appreciation or respect from the family members. One woman asserted that she was not informed about the marriage of her daughter who was engaged while she was *'hardana'* (angry staying with her natal family.)

Women's priority towards achieving the goal of living in a separate house is achieved by using several economic and social actions and interactions including negotiation and bargaining within the family. All married women who lived with their extended families in their early phase of marriage (7-10 years) were exposed to several forms of prejudices, which forced them to exercise all options or resources available around them to challenge such prejudices. They sold their dowry gold, borrowed money from their parental families or friends; got involved in sewing and fishing; and reducing their children expenses. Simultaneously, they negotiated and bargained with family relations by using the traditional norms and customs. One of the common bargaining techniques women use to achieve their goal of having a separate home is to leave their young children with the mother in law and to stay away with their parents or brothers *'tehrad'* for a period of time. Women thought that by leaving 4 to 5 young children with the mothers in law to look after them might be an effective technique to pressurize husbands and their mothers to respond to their demand. Around 12 women mentioned that they left their husbands homes more than 8 to 10 times during their lives in extended families. The period of their stay out of their husbands' homes ranged from one week to three months. Women who had reached the peak of despair and felt they had lost all options of further negotiation took this action. In most cases the absence of a strategy proved ineffective since the women suffered from the separation from their young children and would not leave them for longer time without their care. Another reason why married women go back to their children without achieving any specific goal was their fears that their mothers in law would encourage their sons to marry another woman. This is usually a bargaining technique mothers in law use to put pressure on their daughters in law to go back to their children with no demands. The common saying mothers in law use in such situation: *'if she doesn't come back to her children and accept living as we all live,*

⁵⁵ Ibid

there are hundreds of other women who would accept this life'. Although women confirmed that all negotiation techniques based on family customs and relations were mainly oppressive and inefficient, they never stopped trying to come up with new mechanisms to achieve their goal of living independently.

The failure of family based negotiations to stop family conflict between women and their mothers in law pushed many women to create deceptive and bargaining techniques in order to resist the mother in law's authority. Um Sami is a 42 year's old married woman, from Al Shaja'ia; she had suffered for 8 years from her mother in law's interference in each aspect of her life. Um Sami was fed up and finally decided to deceive her. She said:

'I used to work long hours with my mother in law in cultivating the land and picking vegetables, but she never gave me any money for my children. Then I decided to take the products, without her knowledge, to sell them in the local market. I also borrowed my mother's manual sewing machine to sew clothes for sale. I hid the money, and when she asked me where I was going, I used to tell her that I was going to the clinic or to do some shopping for my children. I continued like this until she knew. She made a lot of trouble at first, but I decided at that time to completely ignore her and to continue selling stuff in the local market to save money for my separate house. I also tried to mobilize my husband against his brothers and mother and insist in having his share in the family's land. Day by day, I earned more money from my work in sewing and trading in the local market, and gave it to my husband to buy building materials for our own house in the small yard attached to my mother in law's house. That was the first time for my husband to have full control over money, due to the fact that he used to give his mother all his income from work in Israel and left himself just a little for his personal expenses. I made my husband feel like a real man. This changed his behaviour towards me; he became more attentive and responsive to my decisions. Now he sees the difference. We live in our own house and control the life of our children'.

These techniques would be threatening to a woman's status as a wife unless she already has a good number of growing sons to minimize the risk. This is why it is noticeable that despite of poverty associated with continuous contestation with husbands and mothers in law, women's desire and intention to have more children has remained intact. Poor married women who are part of the research intentionally used the strategy of 'man making' or procreation of sons, as the only available choice within the given context. These quotations are good examples of how women process and strategize their resistance against family forms of oppression:

'My children are my only support in the near future'; 'my husband and mother in law will hesitate to hurt me in front of my sons'; 'the effective way to bind the husband and make him exhausted is to have more children'; 'the children are growing up and they know only their mother will look after their career, thus they become more loyal to me and obey my orders'

The analysis and interpretation of poor married women's case studies as well as the individual in-depth interviews show a coherent conclusion. Poor married women with able-bodied husbands, across generations, have been acting similarly like the former group of women's head of household aiming to circulate their power within family by focusing on the strategy of procreation of male sons. The difference is only in the scale

of social legitimization that gives more and wider space to the women heads of households to make their actions and interactions more visible to achieve the same goal.



The case studies of poor women show that women never act as a ‘capital-accumulating subjects’⁵⁶, but merely as ‘capital-bearing objects’. Women’s goal in life is shaped by their identity as mothers, legitimized by social status. The social construction of women’s meaning of self, and as a result, their performance will remain most likely unchangeable across generations unless poor women will have opportunities to experience being somebody else besides the wife and the mother of others. This does not mean the undermining of the tradition of family and family relation. Rather, it’s the need for decentralizing the effect of family hierarchal system by the existence of an overall civilized democratic governing system. This system not only acts as provider of basic needs for families, but more importantly frames the gender family relations to be equitable rather than self-victimizing of women. This may open a larger space for women to think and act for their personal needs without necessarily, from women’s view, threatening the needs, interests and priorities of their children and other family members. Poor women both head of households and married with able-bodied husbands need interventions that facilitate them in a process to replace their rationalized strategy of ‘men making’ as the only option available, to a strategy of ‘self making’, in which poor women learn how to exercise their agency as a free agent equitably for the benefit of themselves and others.

⁵⁶ See Terry Lovell (2000) in ‘Reading Bourdieu on Society and culture’

6.2 Second Session:

6.2.1 Livelihood crisis and changing gender roles

Women in Gaza have historically been shaped to act as ‘shock absorbers’⁵⁷. Women for the purpose of her family’s survival and stability revitalize all traditional economy, family and social norms and networks. The mechanisms by which poor women cope with poverty and family’s vulnerability are not sudden or unexpected; but rather a reflection of the internalization of certain forms of coping mechanisms in women’s mind to maintain the dominant structure and norms of the family.

Throughout the historical context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the non-transformative character of the process of women’s coping with poverty can be attributed to three interlinked factors:

1. The hierarchical male dominated structure of the Palestinian family, which has been for protective purposes maintained and enhanced as the functional and symbolic unit of resistance against the occupation.
2. Women’s continuous reiteration of their performances as ‘shock absorbers’ has been constituted by the society’s formal and informal institutions to be the dominant discourse of women’s development.
3. Women’s desire and intention have not developed enough to transgress the social construction of their consciousness and their inner self.

6.2.2 From contestation to cooperation:

Women’s actions and interactions directed to cope with poverty have mostly been developed to serve immediate purposes or to respond to necessity, but not to strategically transform gender relations of power. This entails the elastic re-prioritization of women’s gender multiple identities responding to demands of the context of the family’s livelihood. In a stable livelihood situation where a man normally functions within his role as the breadwinner, the priority for a married woman is to merely be under the authority of her well-recognized husband, and therefore her main concern is to improve her performance as a wife. The obvious indication of what was mentioned earlier about women’s struggle to live away from the extended families in order to have larger space to be a good wife, as is socially and religiously legitimate.

In a changing context and the exposure of the small family unit to vulnerability as a result of men’s loss of income, women who succeeded to live in nuclear families after long years of contestation with the extended families, reconfigure their preferences and are ready to go back to live with their extended families. The harshness of livelihood insecurity and the absence of material resources are the main cause forcing married women to go back to their extended families. Few were the cases of women who actually moved in with their parents in law, but the rest who already lived attached to their parents in law house, returned to share meals and other family expenses with the

⁵⁷ Taraki, L. (2006) (ed.) mentioned earlier

extended family. Again, it is the need to provide for the family's survival that makes a woman consciously accept to lose the main outcome she achieved through her marriage life (to live independently from her in-law's family). The shift of women's priority from her wifehood identity to her motherhood identity is however not interpreted by poor destitute women as self-victimising. It is the unconscious aspect of women's gender subjectivity that makes women able to endure such changes without feeling self-victimised by them⁵⁸.

Cooperation and contestation have always existed between mothers and their daughters in law in the process of power circulation within the family. The changing context of women's return to live with their mothers in law during the livelihoods crisis shifts the gender relations from contestation to cooperation. One of the main sources of mothers in law's seniority and domination was the ability of their sons to assert their gender roles and to practice their masculinity. The loss of this source of power within the life cycle of a mother in law has been associated with her aging and losing her physical power to manage and provide for the family as before. The present situation in which the sons have stopped been able to provide for the families' survival, creates the need for mothers in law to cooperate with daughters in law for their mutual goal of the survival of the family. The case of Samira el Dabba from Al Shejaia is a good example of how the loss of the male sources of power contributed halting the cycle of power circulation for the benefit of a married woman. Married women in their 20's and 30's, as mentioned earlier, remain in conflict with their mother in law until they succeed in giving birth to their own male sons and those sons become adults.

Samira is 32 years old and has 7 young children; her eldest boy is 11 years old. She tells her story:

'I got married when I was 16 years old. My husband was 20 years old. He was working in Israel as wage labourer. I lived in one room in my in-law's family's house. In the first month after marriage, lots of tension started between *hamati* (my mother in law) and me. She was sewing and trading in the local market and she wanted me to do all the housework for 15 members of the family: cleaning and cooking. I was very young and didn't know what to do and how to do things. My husband's personality was weak and his mother controlled everything. After two years of marriage, *hamati* bought a sewing machine. I did not realize that she bought the machine to use my labour. She taught me sewing and I worked every day for her and she was responsible for selling. She was the head of the family and all my husband's money was under her control. I tried several times to convince my husband to keep his money for our own children but he couldn't confront his mother. This situation continued for 13 years until I had 5 children. One day I could not take it any longer...

I started to make daily troubles with my husband and *hamati* to pressure them to make a separate house for me, but it did not work. I left and went to my natal family several times and I "threw" my children to them as a source of pressure for 10 to 15 days... but I always ended coming back to the same situation. Finally I told my husband either to divorce me or to rent me a separate house away from his mother. He agreed and we rented a house close to his mother's house. But *Hamati* did not stop interfering. She forced me to go back to work for her paying me NIS 20 (£2.8) a day. I agreed to work for her and started to plan for my own family. I sold my gold (dowry jewellery) and after

⁵⁸ Kandiyoti (1988)

some years, I saved enough money to build a separate small house. I also put pressure on my husband to keep his income from his intermittent work in Israel to invest it in the construction of the house and he did. Finally I succeeded to move to a separate house.

But what to say about my fate...In 2005, my house was demolished by an Israeli incursion and we moved back with *hamati* for a year until our house was more or less rebuilt through the support of the Palestinian government. I decided to move back to my house and lived in it without windows and doors, and without water and sewage connections.

Ever since my husband stopped working in Israel, he has become despondent and careless and has left all burdens on my shoulders. I raise rabbits and chickens and continue sewing with Hamati, but all these activities do not suffice to provide the basic needs for the children. The increasing harshness of life made Hamati in the last two years more compassionate. She saw her son not working and careless about his children. She also noticed how much work I do to feed her son's children. She started to send me food from time to time; encouraged me to sew for myself and use the income for my children. She told me about where to go to bring food coupons, and she does not interfere in my mobility. I have also become much nicer to her. I ask for her advice and even join her in some social visits. We are now cooperating in sewing and we both earn money. She does not interfere with my income or in the up bringing of the children as before. If she doesn't support us, people will scandalize her, as she is still powerful.

Despite all the problems I had with *Hamati*, I have learnt a lot from her. I am now doing what she has done, sewing and selling clothes in the local market. I bought my own sewing machine. My husband has become more responsive to my decisions, not like before."

The narration of mothers in laws and their interpretation of their relation with their daughters in law confirmed Samira's views. Um Jihad, a 54 years old mother in law, lives in the Beach camp. She has 5 daughters in law, each living in a separate one to two rooms house as an extension of the in-laws' family house. Um Jihad is a mother of 5 sons: one died as a martyr, the Israelis injured the second one, one is a wage labourer with the government, and the younger two are married and jobless. Um Jihad expressed her view about her daughters in law by saying:

'My married sons used to manage their children needs before the Intifada. They were fishing intermittently. Since the Israeli restricted fishing in the Gaza sea, they have almost stopped working and we have become dependent mainly on the small income of my older son and the monthly allowances of my martyred son and the injured one-. The total monthly income of our family is NIS 1700(£241). This is not enough for 17 persons living in the house. The first thing I thought about was to ask my daughters in law to share one meal and to function as one single house in terms of expenses and food consumption. My daughters in law did not reject the idea. They are rather happy and cooperate together to make one meal for all.'

Um Jihad admitted that she used to be very harsh with her daughters in law, but she wanted them to learn about life since they were married very young. Um Jihad explains:

'Yes I used to be very tough with kanayni (daughters in law) in the early years of their marriage, but that was to teach them how to manage their families. Now, they all have grown up children and they know what to do and how to do things to satisfy their

husbands and children. I will not be alive forever. I used to get all the coupons and sell stuff in the local market and manage everything at home. I am older now and my sons are not working in stable jobs. Now it is their turn to continue what I have done for the benefit of their children. I support them to go in search for coupons from institutions. I encouraged one of my daughters in law to sew clothes and I sell them in the market. I also helped the youngest daughter in law to finish her education to support her husband. Kanayni are happy with me now and they say to me 'you are like our mother'. We are cooperative with each other, not like before. Before, they were young and immature, but now they are much better. They do what they want but they still consult me about their decisions and for their mobility. It is hard times when sons are staying at home and we are the ones to move around in search for sources of livelihood.'

It is obvious that the changing priorities and behaviour of young and middle aged married women are all classified as tactics to manage their household's survival in a situation of scarcity and with no other alternatives. Four focus groups conducted with poor women in the Beach camp and Al Shaja'ia aimed at gaining in depth analysis about women's interpretation of their coping mechanisms and their level of satisfaction with what they do. All married women expressed their dissatisfaction and tiredness from the work they have to do, and they just wished their husbands could find a stable job in order for them to go back to a stable life where men are the mains provides for the family. The changing priorities of gender roles as expressed by women are humiliating rather than empowering because they are all desperate measures taken in order to survive.

6.2.3 Liberating women's mobility as a consequence of 'male breadwinner's crisis'⁵⁹:

Another remarkable change of gender roles during the crisis is the "liberation" of women's mobility. The fundamental change in women's mobility is simply an indication of poor women's need to access a larger space for communication and negotiation within the world surrounding them. Although increased women's mobility is largely used by Palestinian development planners as a standardized indicator of women's empowerment⁶⁰, it would be an over simplification and even a reduction of meaning in the context of Gazans' family crisis to make a proportional link between the increased women's mobility and their increased self-autonomy. It is not possible to state that the increased mobility of Gaza's poor women to respond to the immediate need for family survival has contributed to their empowerment and in changing gender roles within the family. The change as interpreted by poor women has been the only rational option to respond to the 'crisis due to the inability of the male members to remain as breadwinners. Poor women in the situation of livelihood's crisis take the role of primary provider of resources, while men employ the strategy of isolation, avoidance, aggression, and assistance refusal striving to maintain their status as heads of household⁶¹.

⁵⁹ A term used by Liza Taraki in her introductory chapter of the book 'Living Palestine: Family Survival, Resistance and mobility under occupation' (2006)

⁶⁰ Palestinian Human development report, 2004

⁶¹ Lamis Abu Nahla (2006), in Taraki, L. (2006: 181)

Reconfiguration of gender roles in war/crisis situations however opens possibilities for challenging gender and age hierarchies within the family⁶². The transformative nature of this change is most often restricted by the complexity of the relationship between women's performances and women's meaning of self. Unless women's performances are embodied in the social structures and norms which authorize them⁶³, women's self will not find a space for real transformation, and the process of coping within crisis will not transcend its immediate functional purposes.

The social reality of Gaza women revealed in this research shows that the increased mobility of women is a mere reflection of men's loss of their "normal" traditional role as the primary providers and decision makers as a result of family livelihoods' crisis. All women interviewed in both the Beach camp and Al Sheja'ia asserted that their mobility has fundamentally increased as a consequence of the inability of males in the family to provide an income and the exhaustion of savings. Women's increased mobility trend has largely increased after the full siege of Gaza implemented since Hamas won the legislative election in January 2006, and sources of employment within Gaza have been reduced to their minimum. This growing mobility has also been influenced by the increase of humanitarian assistance in the form of food coupons, which are distributed in an *ad hoc* basis via associations and NGO's for families in need. All the married women of the research sample considered themselves eligible for the irregular humanitarian assistance that push poor women to visit the institutions several times a week in order not to lose an opportunity. Women mentioned that they learnt how to be demanding and how to communicate their family situation in order to convince staff of institutions that they are in need for a coupon.

In the first few years of the Intifada, poor women's mobility was not a necessity compared to the last 2 years. Women utilized all the traditional coping mechanisms based on home-production and social kin networks and relations until these mechanisms lost their potential for family survival as a result of the collective impoverishment and the lack of viability of the subsistence economy to provide for their survival. The full siege against Gaza made the basic resources needed for home-based production unavailable. Lack of raw materials for agriculture and home-made production, power cuts, lack of maintenance of traditional machines since there are no available spare parts, buying on credit due to the rapid reduction in people's purchasing power and insecurity for outdoor livestock rising, have forced women to stop or to minimize their home-based production and their informal trading and to search for other sources to feed their families.

The context of family crisis has forced young and middle aged married women to transcend the stereotypical gender roles and go outside their homes several times a week to search for sources of food and income. Both men and women did not easily accept this change, but it seems that women, refugees and non-refugees, are more flexible in adjusting to the new context than men. It took men a while longer until they became able to respond to the rapid deterioration and the increasing uncertainty of the economic situation. All women asserted that their husbands made lots of troubles for them at the beginning to let them go out to search for food and income sources, which made them, feel humiliated. Women mentioned different psychological reactions their husbands used to express the loss of the sense of their masculinity associated with the

⁶² Suad Joseph, S. (2004) 'Conceiving family relationship in post-war Lebanon'. Journal of comparative family studies vol. No. 2

⁶³ In 'Reading Bourdieu on Society and culture' (2000).

increased women's mobility. Some of the husbands who used to be cooperative and calm in their marriage relation became aggressive, violent and troublemakers towards their wives and children. Um Muhammad, 29 years old from the Beach camp, was not allowed to leave home except for the clinic, to visit her family and her children's kindergarten. She started to move around to search for coupons after her husband became jobless. These outings made her brothers in law gossip about her. She said:

'For my husband to show his brothers that he is still the man of the family, he became violent and has beaten me several times. He did not prevent me from going out to bring coupons or to borrow money from neighbours or relatives, but he wanted to control everything I brought. I just wish he would be able to work again so I may stay at home and he will not feel the need to beat me in front of his family.'

Other husbands have steadily become calmer and socially isolated and act hopelessly and feel useless. Um El Abed is a 37 years old married woman from the Beach camp, she said:

'I feel very sad for my husband. He stays at home all the time. He stopped sitting with his friends in front of the house as he used to do. He cannot stand speaking to anyone.'

Few cases illustrated that women's increased mobility turned their husbands into more cooperative and consultative partners within the home. This is more common among women who live in nuclear families and not socially attached to or continuously observed by the members of the extended family. Men's cooperation with women occurs within the home, it is not publicly presented. This is reflected by the insistence of around 7 young married women to present their husbands as the central decision maker despite of their joblessness. Samira Heles from Shaja'ia said:

'Despite all I do, the final decisions are still taken by him in consultation with me. The man is the man...should we reduce his value because he becomes jobless? Money is not everything, if he does not work today, he will work tomorrow. That he is around for me and the children is enough.'

Women's presentation of the changing gender roles and gender relations during family crisis is very cautious, as they do not see these changes as constant. Consciously or unconsciously they select specific language, consistent with the dominant culture to present the changes occurred which does not necessarily reflect the reality. Women's fear of presenting the actual changes in the practice of gender roles inside the home can also be attributed to the unchanging image of women's self, as it is repeatedly asserted by the researched women: that their husbands will not stay jobless forever. They do not want to create a bad image of their husbands as if they were *'mahkoomeen min el mara'* under a woman's control. Women with able-bodied husbands, young and middle aged, showed their intention and desire to maintain the social image of their husbands as the 'real man' and they were hesitant to talk openly about their leading role in the household. All women interviewed confirmed that since the beginning of the total closure, they have become solely responsible for the household's survival and their husbands are helpless. They, nevertheless, did not show their satisfaction with this change. On the contrary, poor women of the research wished to go back to their purely domestic role based on the traditional/normal gender division of labour, which is perceived as a fair distribution of responsibilities.

The common behaviour among husbands of the women in the sample, as expressed by them, is laziness, passivity and carelessness. With the absence of male-based sources of income and the social legitimacy of married women's mobility to search for their children survival, many men left the burden of providing for the family on women's shoulders without interfering positively or negatively. This may reflect men's realization that the only sources of survival available at the present time are within the domain of women. The laziness, carelessness and passivity of men are an expression of their hidden refusal to share with their wives in a low status domain, which undermines their sense of manhood. This reaction was most common among husbands who used to work permanently in Israel as skilled labourers, whose money earning power was basically shaped by their history of work with the Israeli employers. The wives of these husbands complained about their husbands' refusal to take jobs offered in the Gaza market or through the job creation programs implemented by national and international agencies. These jobs offered are seen by them as humiliating due to their low wages and low status.

Kawther from Shaja'ia is a married woman of 32 with 7 children. She narrates her story about her husband:

'My husband used to be very active working more than 12 hours a day with his Israeli employer. He became the boss of 12 unskilled labourers and responsible for his employer's work. At that time he was powerful and we were all scared of him. I was just busy the whole day cooking and taking care of the children. The only thing I thought about was how to make him treat me respectfully and stopped shouting and beating me for no reason. But he was a strong man who secured the family's needs; this I miss today. Since the Israeli borders closed, he refused to accept any job in the Gaza market. Friends came and asked him to work as a day labourer paying him NIS 30 a day (£4.2), as he is skilled in construction. I tried to convince him to work because we did not have any other source of income. He always said to me: 'I don't work with those people 'Gaza contractors' not only because of the low wage, but because they are humiliating. They don't pay the money on time and they asked me to work for longer hours without respect'. I felt fed up and realised the only option for me was to go out and search for coupons and borrow money from here and there. He refused in the beginning and he hit me each time I asked him to go out, but then he just became careless and, just wanted to find food ready for him. He is despondent and stays the whole day in front of the TV, or makes troubles with the children and me. He just thinks of himself. Two years ago, he got a second wife that had a job so she would feed him. I tried to kick him out of home, but what will people gossip about me if I humiliate him when he became jobless?'

It is interesting to note that most husbands have only had work experience within the Israeli job market, and have not really interacted in the local job market and economy with its irregular relations and regulations. This may be one of the reasons behind the contradictory behaviours of men becoming careless and despondent while at the same time keen to maintain their image as the head of the family without being the providers any longer. Many men in Gaza do not see as shameful the fact that their wives have to search for food and income sources by moving around institutions, friends and neighbours. Indeed, in men's minds, this is preferred to accepting low status jobs with local employers even if they are available.

Women's elasticity is greater compared with that of men, to be able to take on new gender roles. This is most likely related to the types of coping mechanisms used, which

are still perceived as an extension of women's domain. Women's activities in search of food coupons would be considered as shameful if carried out by men. This belief is rooted in the gender traditional culture that expects that women's altruism will allow them to accept almost anything, bearing the humiliation for the sake of their children. The case studies of many women presented in this research also have shown that women accept their husbands' violence in order not to leave their children without care. Altruism for the sake of the children seems to be internalized by women to sometimes justify their loss of dignity. Women at different ages confirmed that their increased mobility in search for coupons made them feel like beggars and not respected, but who else would do this except women? One young woman from Shaja'ia aged 34 with 5 children said:

'I never thought that a day will come when I would be in such situation, having to go out to search for a coupon. I lived all my married life as a respected housewife. My sister in law convinced me to go and I agreed because my husband had no money to buy flour to make bread for the children. I was embarrassed to show myself as destitute. My sister in law talked about my situation since she has developed experience in communicating with staff of associations distributing coupons. My shyness made the head of the association think that I was not in need for a coupon.'

Sometimes women's views of their mobility are divergent, but they are mostly bound by the dominant male oriented hierarchical culture. Most wives expressed their tiredness and dissatisfaction with their increased mobility as the material benefits are much less than the social cost they pay. Some women asserted that the family crisis and the necessity to go out opened an opportunity for them to know the world around them, to participate in public life and to develop a strong network of people, but they believe that their participation would not continue if it is not associated with material benefit towards the stability of their family. It is the women and charitable association's discourse that is used to seduce poor women to participate in their awareness and public activities versus distribution of coupons. Poor women however responded positively in practice, but the actual effect of this practice on women's attitudes cannot be predicted until women's prior motive for receiving coupons or other forms of material assistance is removed. In many conversations with poor women actively participating in institutions, women showed their preference to return to the old traditional life-style, the women at home and the men working to earn an income.

Women's participation in public activities with institutions distributing food and other forms of humanitarian assistance is more instrumental while the primary aim of their participation is the survival of their families. This may also reflect the lack of trust that grows between poor women and their community-based association. The only women who became active within institutions and visited them on a daily basis are those who received monthly allowances or coupons from the institution. Mobility and participation are not women's desire or their free choices; they are rather the only option available to fulfil their families' minimum survival needs. Um El Abed 37 years old from the Beach camp said:

'In the past I was demanding to go out once a week to visit my sisters or brothers, and my husband refused. I wanted to go out to have a rest, away from domestic work. Now, I am forced to go outside several times a week and my husband doesn't even ask me where I am going, but in fact I miss my life before where I was a respected wife and mother, only taking care of my house and children, cooking and feeling secure.' Um Sefian from Shaja'ia 48 years old said:

'I was very satisfied with my life, sewing at home around my children for 7 hours a day, and my husband and sons were selling the products in the market. I never complained. Life was stable. Now, I visit every institution in the neighbourhood or far away. Since my son died as a martyr in 2004 and my husband and my eldest married son became jobless, life has become unbearable. I decided to cover my face with 'el nekab' because my martyred son was Hamas. El nekab made my mobility much easier since it is not easy for people to recognize me. I do not only visit Hamas' associations, I don't care. I participate in the activities of all associations that support me with coupons. How do you think my family survives? It is from the coupons I receive here and there. My eldest son with his two children stays at home doing nothing and my husband puts pressure on me to buy him a box of cigarettes every day and he also does nothing. I hope to go back to my previous life when I was sewing at home and men went out to their work. I just want to have a rest, I really feel tired.

6.2.4 Bargaining, passivity and individualism:

All women interviewed asserted that they often visit several charitable associations (*Jami'at*) to ask for coupons or to search for temporary jobs for their husbands or sons⁶⁴. The good woman is the one who succeeds to convince *el jami'at* that she is vulnerable and thus that she is in need for a coupon or any other form of humanitarian assistance available. Searching for coupons has developed women's skills of communication, negotiation and bargaining with formal and informal institutions. Through women's socialization in *el jami'at*, they listen to each other stories and they developed their language and techniques supporting their goal to receive coupons. Um Sufian 48 years old from Al Shaja'ia only finished her 9th class. All her knowledge has been accumulated through her domestic life and partially from the local market. She had never had any experience with formal institutions. Such world was totally un-familiar to her. Her family's vulnerability forced her to get involved in this realm and she learnt to manoeuvre through it. Um Sefian has succeeded in using the language of formal institutions in order to become closer to the head of the association and to gain more humanitarian support.

The researcher noticed the clear difference between the language Um Sufian used in the group meetings in the association, and the language she used during the researcher's home visits. In the group meeting, Um Sufian used the women's institutional discourse: talked about women need to work on developing their self-esteem and to participate in community activities; their need to work for the association not only for receiving coupons but also for changing their life to the better; encouraging women not to marry their daughters at early age...etc. In the individual meeting with the researcher, she used her "natural" language of communication and was clear and honest about her actual motives and practices. This is in line with what many social researchers claim about the changing behaviour of the poor as bargaining techniques to achieve what they immediately want⁶⁵. It is argued that poor 'learn to adapt their behaviour in anticipation and they can predict potential benefit...some develop skills in

⁶⁴ Temporary job-creation programs are mostly implemented through CBO's as they are in contact with the local poor and responsible for selecting the beneficiaries based on criteria identified by the international agencies like UNRWA, WFP, UNDP, CHF...etc.

⁶⁵ Emma Crewe and Elizabeth Harrison (1998) 'Whose Development: An Anthropology of Aid' Zed Books LTD

manipulating...through the adoption of particular aspect of language⁶⁶, but “what is said is not always the representation of reality”⁶⁷. For women in Gaza, they used several deceptive and bargaining techniques within the family and in the wider community when their normal stereotypical ways pertaining to their gender role are not sufficient for the successful fulfilment of meeting their family’s basic needs.

Women’s socialization through their wide participation in el *jami’at* has to some extent replaced gradually the traditional forms of social networks with relatives and neighbours for material benefiting. The social network of relatives and neighbours has recently been put to test in relation to the provision of material support since the impoverishment of Gazan families has been massive. A woman from Shaja’ia said:

“I reduced my visits to my sisters and brothers to the essential ones as these visits cost money and I sometime don’t have one Shekel at home. I feel embarrassed to visit any of them without having something to give them, at least a bag of biscuits for the children”.

Many women interviewed have expressed their sadness due to the weakening bounds with relatives and friends because they could not afford the cost of social visits. Women presented stories of family disputes resulting from the collective impoverishment among families. Kawther from Al Shaja’ia said:

“In the first years of the Intifada, I used to borrow money from my brothers, sisters or neighbours. The debts have accumulated to become thousands of Shekels. Two years ago, my brother spent all his savings and he was not able to earn any money. He kindly asked me to repay the money I borrowed from him. I of course couldn’t repay any money, but my husband was very tough with him. They had a fight and I found myself between them, useless, unable to defend my brother. Since then, my husband has prevented me from visiting not only my brother’s family, but also all my natal family. I could say ‘No’ to my husband, but this ‘No’ will cost me being away from my children, as he always threatens me with divorce if I visit any of my brothers. I don’t care about divorce, but I don’t want to be deprived from my children.”

Kawther is very sad of this dispute because she considers her brother as her main source of support. The scarcity of resources and the increasing vulnerability weakens collectivism and enhances social exclusion of the poorest⁶⁸.

Other poor women act and interact with el *jami’iat* in a different way. The scarcity of resources and the irregularity of the distribution of coupons and other goods in el *jami’at* make some poor women, particularly those who do not have a strong relational network, more hesitant to inform their closest relatives and neighbours about the availability of resources, assuming that this would reduce their share. The woman who receives a coupon in one month is not confident to receive another one the next month. This makes many poor women hide their limited resources to avoid sharing them with close relatives and neighbours as they themselves do not feel secure about the future of their family’s livelihood. In addition, it was repeatedly noted during the interviews that there are many women who cannot make ends meet despite the basic coupons they receive. They are

⁶⁶ Ibid (1998:157).

⁶⁷ Ibid (1998: 157-160)

⁶⁸ In Frances Cleaver article (3003) ‘The inequality of social Capital: Agency, association and the reproduction of chronic poverty’

deceitful in order to be able to get more coupons from other associations in order to secure resources for the coming months regardless of the actual needs of others. The lack of networking and coordination between the local *jami'iat* has reinforced individualism and opportunism among poor women as a mechanism for survival.

Women affirmed that the provision of food coupons by *el jami'iat*, although maybe irregular, is pre-conditioned by their membership and their participation in the organized cultural and social activities conducted. Few women showed their interest in the lectures and social activities they attended, but the majority are only interested in the religious lectures conducted in *el jami'iat* or in the mosques. Poor women perceived the attendance to lectures or any other activities organized by the association as obligatory. Otherwise, they would be deprived of the coupons provided. Throughout women's experience with *el jami'iat*, they have learnt how to bargain with the community-based organizations in order to achieve their immediate goal for the main need of their families.

Um Sufian is a good example of a poor woman's ability to bargain within the institutional discourse. Um Sufian is from Al Shaja'ia and she is in her late 40's. She has been involved in many associations and she admitted that she does this for the sake of the material basic needs of her big family (14 members). Um Sufian used all the coping mechanisms other women used. She sews clothes; processed food; borrowed money from relatives and neighbours, but all this failed to provide enough for her family. After her son was martyred in 2003, Um Sufian was encouraged to move around more, as if having a martyred son gave her the social legitimacy to move around. Um Sufian started with the Islamic associations led by women. She participated with them in demonstrations; food distributions and social visits to injured and martyrs' families. This was not enough and she expanded her involvement in other women's associations not caring about the political affiliation of these associations (if they are Fatah or Hamas as they are the main conflicting political parties in Gaza). She tried not to make any association angry with her, as she believes that the personal relation is the critical factor in obtaining aid coupons and temporary jobs from all associations. After three interviews with Um Sufian, she felt very relaxed and able to speak openly about her actual feelings towards *el jami'iat*:

'To tell you the truth, I several times felt humiliated by these jami'iat. They only use me to do the tiring work, but if there is anything serious, they don't call me. Sometimes I think of stopping visiting them and go back to my sewing, which I used to spend all my day in. When I think about my family, I changed my mind. My family depends on the coupons I receive precisely from all these jamai'iat.'

Only three women from the Beach camp and none from Al Shejaia mentioned that they were involved in women's institutional activities or heard about their existence before the current crisis. The main motive for women of any age to currently get involved in the institutional work and activities of *el jami'iat* is their urgent need for humanitarian assistance. This is associated with the community-based organizations loss of capacity to function in a sustainable manner. Most of these community-based organizations (CBOs) are affiliated to political parties, basically the two mainstreamed factions of Fatah and Hamas, and few are branches of developmental NGO's. The local associations operate on an *ad hoc* basis responding to the relief fund available⁶⁹.

⁶⁹ See the world Bank report on the shrinking role of NGOs in Gaza and West Bank (2004), and the Oxfam report on Gaza (2007)

An increasing number of CBOs has emerged during the second Intifada and mostly managed by women's activists aiming to implement humanitarian assistance projects. They basically rely on poor women membership fees and some food and money donations from wealthy people or formal institutions. Hundreds of poor women in both Al Shaja'ia and the Beach camp pay annual fees of NIS 20 or 30 (£2.8-4.2) for their membership. Poor women think that their eligibility for support is conditioned by the payment of their membership fees. It appears from communications with poor women that the intention of most women's activists to establish or to activate a CBO has been basically to earn some income for their families whose sons and husbands are jobless.

The three women of the sample who are involved in CBOs claimed that the original idea behind the establishment and the activation of women's CBOs was for them to manage their families' livelihood. They have never received a regular income from their *jami'at*, they rather have their share from the temporary jobs or the food assistance provided by formal institutions like UNRWA, the government, or large NGOs. Although these women call their activism with el *jami'iat* voluntary work, they repeatedly mentioned how much their families benefit from el *jami'ia*. Um lyad from the Beach camp had three temporary jobs in three years (three months each with a salary of around £150 per month); Um Ashraf in Al Shaja'ia had two temporary jobs in one year. The main tasks women do in el *jami'at* include preparing lists of families in need, visiting homes to check the families' eligibility for support, monitoring the families use of the support provided, and informing women in the camp or the neighbourhood about el *jami'a* activities. Women spend hours walking around to visit large number of houses. These tasks however make these women well known and to a certain extent respected by the local community, they also expose women to many embarrassing situations and gossip. This is reflected by what Um lyad from the Beach camp tells:

"I lead el jamia and I do all the families' visits by myself. I in fact prefer poor women to come to me instead of walking around and knock the door of tens of families. Several times, I found myself in front of close relatives and neighbours who embarrassed me. They put pressure on me to give them coupons. They threatened that if I didn't, they would make troubles for me with my husband and his family. My work in el jami'a is sometimes a real headache as well as it makes me suspect by other women. Some women in the camp think that I am haramia (a thief), giving the coupons and the temporary jobs to my own family and to my closest relatives and neighbours excluding people I do not know well. Women think that I have control over the distribution of the humanitarian assistance and decide by myself to whom I give the assistance. They don't really know that the donors precisely supervise me. But at the end I can't convince or satisfy all people in the camp on how fair I am trying to be."

Although these charitable associations are officially registered with the government, in the present situation they are not accountable to any official body and they work in a situation of absence of law enforcement after the split of the Palestinian government into two, and the domination of Hamas over Gaza. These associations are operating based on a minimal level of institutionalization. The board members of these women's CBOs are poor women from the local community, in their majority with no experience of institutional work. One person who is registered as the head of the board manages them all and the other women involved are named volunteers. The 4 women's associations visited during the field work (three in Al Shaja'ia and one in the Beach camp) are all located in the women's activists' homes by using empty rooms or a basement to

operate. These women are usually middle age and have a strong network of formal and informal relations at the local level. They have learned how to manage CBO's from their previous experience of being involved with political factions and grassroots organizations during the first intifada 1987-1993 (women's committees)⁷⁰.

Husbands and male members of the family do not object about women's participation in *el Jami'at*, solely involved in food distribution to poor families. Some husbands support their wives participation in *el jami'at* as they themselves benefit from the temporary jobs provided. It is noted by many women that men's support or rejection to women's mobility and participation is mostly pre-conditioned by the benefit they gain from the associations. In a situation of livelihood crisis, men as well as women follow the theory of cost-benefit analysis in shaping and reshaping their actions and interactions within the society's institutions including the family and, as a consequence, gender roles are reconfigured. One of these women argued that establishing *Jami'at* is much easier than establishing a business:

"It becomes a fashion now for poor women to establish Jami'at, with the shifting of most institutional funds to immediate humanitarian assistance. This does not need high qualification or hard physical work. It only needs a woman who knows her people in the local community. Hamas' women are also doing the same. If you have a strong social network with official figures in your family or from neighbours in the local community, it is easy to manage a jami'a. It only requires a woman who is brave enough to collect donations from here and there. If it works then it will be good for me and for other poor families, if not, I would search for another association to share in".

In the research sample, very few women who are beneficiaries of the CBOs mentioned that they still face opposition from the family members when wanting to visit the *Jami'at*. This only happened to the few young married women in their 20's. Jobless husbands, mostly middle age, encourage their wives to visit *el jami'at* and to get involved in their activities as long as material benefits are obtained. One active woman from the Beach camp said: *"my husband would not allow me to spend all this time in el Jami'a (association) if he doesn't see any coupons or cash assistance received. He doesn't care where I go and how long I spend out of home if I come back with something in my hand. Of course it was hard at the beginning to convince him to let me stay out for long hours, but he has recently become convinced of the need specially since he has no options to earn any money".*

Another critical reconfiguration in gender roles occurred in the mother-daughter-in-law relationship. Mothers in law, especially those who used to be in control of all family members, have become more sympathetic towards their daughters in law. Mothers in law's control over their sons' income were one of the main factors of their power. The loss of this source of power and the failure of the traditional forms of subsistence-economy led by old women to suffice for the survival of the family, forced mothers-in-law into a relation of cooperation rather than contesting with their daughters in law, to succeed in managing the family's livelihood. They stopped restrictions on their daughters in law's mobility since this mobility is for the benefit of the whole family. Women in their 30's in such situation have started the process of "reproduction of domination" as it begins with them having the social legitimacy of free mobility through their involvement in associations, considering also the factor of women's physical

⁷⁰ Lang and Muhanna (1992) to review women's involvement in grass roots women's committees.

endurance to walk long distances to reach the associations or to participate in the associations' activities. Mothers in law support their daughters in law to visit *el jami'at* as this is their time to learn how to manage their families' survival. One woman from the camp said:

"My mother in law who used to make daily troubles for me is now silent since her son stopped earning money. I am not asking her now to buy food for my children because she has no money and she is also getting older. I do this by myself. She says to me 'now you are my Hamati (mother in law)'".

In conclusion, the individual he or she, as well as institutionalized actions and interactions, whether passive or positive, individualistic or collective are always rationalized to simultaneously serve two purposes: first, to fulfil the basic physical needs of the family; second to maintain the male domination intact. This is by no means a conscious reflection of men and women about their gender roles⁷¹. It is obvious from the life experience of Gaza's poor women, that poor women's participation in community associations has been used as a bargaining technique to achieve their immediate purposes of livelihood survival and management, but there are no evidences showing that it has enabled women to change their consciousness or their views about their gender roles. This also leads to a critical look at mainstream approaches on gender and development in which women's mobility and participation are presented as a critical measure of empowerment. To substantiate the previous statement, all women interviewed were asked about their desire to keep their mobility and involvement in *el jami'iat* in case their husbands and/or sons could find jobs again; all married women with able-bodied husbands asserted that their dream was to be able to stay at home as before the crisis. Being at home fulfilling her domestic role and responsibilities for these women is the normal respected position for women. The physical mobility needs to be associated with women's inner desire and goal of mobility in order to decide about the transformative outcomes achieved. Poor women ultimate goal is to normalize gender relations rather than to transform them.

6.3 Third session:

6.3.1 The Exercise of Women's Agency in relation to their "Being"

The problematic relationship between women's 'doing' and 'being' has often surfaced in feminist literatures⁷². The critical debate is the issue that it is not possible to reach a definite and fixed conclusion but answers to contextual cases and generalisations, due to the diversity of women's actions and interactions and their lack of fixity and homogeneity. Women's agency is activated in response to continuously changing contexts. The analysis carried out during this research adds to the debate. The intensive

⁷¹ Kandiyoti, D. 'Emancipated but un-liberated? A reflection on the Turkish case' *Feminist Studies*, 1987, Vol.13, no.2

⁷² See Naila Kabeer (1999); Shahra Razavi (1999); Andrea Cornwell (2007); Chris Shilling in 'Towards an embodied understanding of the structure and agency relationship', *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 50 No. 4 (1999) pp. 543-562; Lukes book review on 'power and agency', *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 53, Issue 3 (2002) pp.491-496.

exercise of women's agency in the case of women in Gaza, their '*doing*', that seems to include the reconfiguration of gender roles and responsibilities and the changing dynamics of survival, has to a large extent, not transcended the functional perspective of human action and has not produced apparent structural changes in gender roles. The redistribution of individual responsibilities in space is not more than a technology of power used to pursue the objective of the existing structure⁷³.

Poor women in Gaza strategise their coping mechanisms to respond to the urgent need to provide for their families' survival by manoeuvring with available sources of economic and social capital. No clear evidence indicates that the time and effort invested by poor women in the traditional and non-traditional resources and capacities like home-based production, management and constant modification of household expenses and consumption, living by having debts with neighbours and relatives, selling household assets, remittances, reliance on emergency aid and job creation⁷⁴ have succeeded to create a tangible degree of personal desire and will among women to effect changes in the traditional construed perception of their social self. This fact does not negate the increased capacity of poor women to communicate, negotiate, and manoeuvre the existing relations of power within society's micro-entities. But these elements of power used by women, not only during family crisis but also during times of relative stability, are further adapted to suit the better functioning of women's domestic roles and responsibilities.

Destitute women interviewed for the research are consistent in their expression of their ultimate goal in life: to return to the former position as respected wives and mothers. This is particularly true for those who considered themselves better off before the closure and Hamas take-over. Women have expressed their wish to return to their traditional gender roles consistent with the traditional family structure. Poor women's struggle for the survival of their families has meaningfully functioned as a process consistent with the traditional moral of Gaza society and thus also consistent with the goal of women's accomplishment of their "social selves"⁷⁵, as stabilizers of family gender relations enforcing their status within the family instead of paving the basis for possible social change in their roles and the development of their identity.

The research shows that poor women are always ready and willing to wield power, but for the benefit of their families. Women exercise and gain power as a source of empowerment of others, particularly husbands and sons, and not usually for themselves. Their personal life goals are circumscribed by those of their families and not produced or shaped separately/differently. As it appears from women's life stories, women are always ready to sacrifice their personal desires, needs and interests if they are consistent with those of their children and the short as well as the long-term stability of their families. Women's social being has traditionally been constituted as altruistic and thus perpetuated without any fundamental changes occurring in such practice. Agency is exercised and considered positive as long as it does not threaten the overall features of the gender hierarchal system predominant within Gaza society. This somehow explains

⁷³ In Angela Cheater (1999: 68)

⁷⁴ See the details about the coping mechanisms Palestinian women used during the second Intifada in Kuttab, I. (2006) 'The Paradox of Women's Work: Coping, Crisis, and family Survival' in Taraki, L. (ed) 'Living Palestine: Family Survival, Resistance, and Mobility under occupation'

⁷⁵ Goffman, E. (1983) 'The Interaction Order' American Sociological Review 48:1-17

the wide but invisible practice of women's power within the entire family relations, and their persistence to maintain the strong and positive masculine image of their men for others. Samira Dabba from Al Shaja'ia, similarly to many other women of the research sample, is a good example to understand the relationship between women's "power to Do" and their "power to Be".

Samira, a 32 years old woman from Al Shaja'ia, married at the age of 16. She had a few years of formal education, until the 9th class. She has 7 dependent children and lived 13 years of her married life in a continuous conflict with her mother-in-law. She was forced to work for her in-law family sewing business without earning any money. She was not able to take any decision at home while her mother in law controlled all affairs of the extended family. Samira struggled for 13 years to achieve her goal to attain autonomous living quarters. She used, as many other poor women living in similar contexts, a combination of strategies ranging from compromising to resistance in order to achieve her goal. At the end Samira succeeded in having her own separate house as an extension of the extended family house. After a year, her new house was demolished during one of the Israeli incursions in 2005. The destruction meant for her the end of her efforts and dream in life. Few months later, she realised that life had to go on, and that the only way to retrieve her dream of having her own separate house was to continue her search for means to rebuild it.

Samira began a series of visits to formal institutions and she searched to meet political figures in her neighbourhood explaining her case and trying to obtain financial support to renovate her demolished house. Finally with £1,503 she received from the Palestinian Authority and other charitable associations, Samira succeeded to rehabilitate her house enough to move in. Still unfinished, she moved in with her 7 young children and her husband, using old tools available to make the water house connection; to set up a sink and a toilette and to make a small desk for her children to study. She got blankets and mattresses from charitable organisations. Having run out of money and materials, she covered the windows and doors with blankets to stop the cold. The floor is still sandy, although she has lived in the house for three years already. Her priority was, no matter what, to provide stability and autonomy for her family.

Samira's husband was working as a wage labourer in Israel and since he stopped his work due to the closure he has been doing intermittent work locally. As she described him, Samira's husband is not really *Shater or mudardah*, he doesn't know how to manage a crisis situation. He has become careless and has increasingly become more reliant on her wisdom to manage everything at home. In a conversation with Samira's 16th year old daughter, the young woman said:

'My mother is the brain of the family, she decides and plans, and her decisions are always better than my father's. My father is lazy and careless. I am proud of my mother. Without her, we would have died from hunger.' Samira repeatedly said: *"I am the person who thinks how to do things because I think about the future of the children. My husband only thinks about today. When money comes in, I sit with him and tell him how the money should be used. In the past, he was not responsive to me because we lived with the extended family. He listens to me now as he recognises my ability in managing our family affairs."*

Samira nevertheless asserted that she does not want to be acknowledged by her family in-law and by her neighbours as the person who plans and takes decisions for her

family. Samira tries to maintain the integrity of the image of her husband as a strong man in her social surrounding while she keeps managing all family affairs.

When she was asked 'and what is wrong if people know that you are the leader at home? Samira answered: *'this is not important for me. The important thing is to direct and manage the children's life, and for my husband to listen to me and not to make troubles. What I want in this life is to live in dignity with my family and not to be humiliated by anybody. If people know, especially my in-law's family and my neighbours that I lead everything at home, they would begin to gossip and they would pressure my husband. This would not be good for my children and me. I don't mind bearing the load of household's responsibilities. I already do everything at home: sewing, cooking, cleaning, teaching my children, and visiting associations, managing our relation with my in law's and with neighbours. I don't care about being tired as long as my children are secure. I don't need any body to interfere in rising up my children or upsetting my husband against me. I sacrifice for my children. I always imagine the day when my children will complete their education. I do not want my daughter to marry early. I really want them to complete their education so they may have a different life than mine. But no one knows what the future holds'*.

Samira sees herself as an empowered woman able to manage and direct her families' members to achieve her goals in life. Samira is proud that she succeeded in achieving her autonomy. A separate house allowed her to be a wife and mother, independently, without the interference from others. This is the end she has been struggling for.

Samira's narration implicitly articulates the link between women's doing and being. What Samira and other Gaza women do, not only during the family crisis, but also, according to their narration of life stories, during the time of family relative stability - the reconfiguration of gender roles and relations and the changing dynamics of coping to survive- can be referred to the concept of 'performativity' used by Bourdieu and Butler. Bourdieu sees that women's performances are 'embedded in the social structures and norms which authorize them'. For Butler, 'the socially embedded performances of women may be dislodged and their meanings transformed by inspired performances which transgress with authority'. Bourdieu analysis is very much consistent with the reality of poor women in Gaza. According to Bourdieu, women's recognition of the power of the family- where women's performance derives from-, is in a process of continued reiteration of performances, constitute their '*habitus*'. *For Bourdieu's, although women's habitus is acquired, their 'doxa' (the taken for granted commonsense understandings of the world and ourselves) are difficult to shift which are deeply rooted in the structures. For him, women's 'doxa' 'are not simply negated by simple naming and are not to be abolished by the act of performative magic'*.⁷⁶

The repetitive actions of women to handle most family's responsibilities, including their access, management and control over household resources is always bound by their identity as wives and mothers with some insignificant differences across generations. Women have often been authorized and legitimized by their "habitus" their practice of 'self', while their "doxa" is socially constructed all the time during families' relative stability as well as during crisis.

The difference in women's performances of their socially constructed identity as wives and mothers during the family crisis is more related with the scope and techniques of

⁷⁶ In Reading Bourdieu on Society and culture' (2000)

women's exercise of their agency 'what they do and how they do things' to fit the goal of family survival and stability. Nevertheless, it doesn't appear that the difference in women's performances has succeeded to accumulate through long experience of life a fundamental change on women's perception of their feminine identity. The feminine identity of women in Gaza has stayed functioning to 'produce and reproduce social capital, creating ties between men which serve men's interest'.⁷⁷

The misrecognition of women's identity reveals most often the inconsistency and contradiction between women's presentation of self and their actual practice. It appears from women's narrations that poor women, with no significant difference of age and education, always justify their efforts to keep intact the image of the man as the breadwinner in its traditional gender role. Thus, the recognition of change in women's self chosen identity should not be simplified relying only on 'what they do', as many post-modern and individualist feminists follow. It is critical to consider women's presentation of self as a reflection of the political power they achieved within family and the society by which women's doing has succeeded to create new meanings and values of women's self that openly and positively presented. Sumaya is a 28-year-old woman from the Beach camp with 3 young children. She was "forced" to use the competences given to her by her high school degree (*Tawjihi*) to give private lessons to school children in her neighbourhood's kindergarten in order to earn money to feed her children:

"All the money in the world is not worth leaving my child sick alone for one day, but what can I say about the needs that we have that are humiliating me. It seems that it becomes our fate to do everything while men are staying at home doing nothing. Home is not the place of the man. Wallahi (for God's sake/believe me), I feel so embarrassed when I say that my husband stays at home. I just want him to work in any job, inshallah, even if he is paid only NIS 10 a day (£1.4), better than him staying at home. I would be able to manage my family with very little money and it would be much better than me having to go out from home on a daily basis in search of a coupon or other source of income. I want to be able to feel like a woman, with a responsible husband who takes responsibility for wife and children. Wallahi it is shameful what is happening in Gaza these days... women go out and men stay at home'.

Um Sami, 42 years old, from Al Shaja'ia expressed her view of changing gender roles by saying:

'People around me, especially women, say that I control my husband (jouzha mahkoom). I think they feel jealous because I work, earn money and move around without him rejecting me. But I find it strange, why they should be jealous of me? I wish I were able to rest and not to have to take upon me the daily load of work; I wish my husband was a strong man able to earn an income. I would be delighted to stay home and only take care of my children. What I have been doing through my life is supposed to be done by my husband, not by me...but I have been forced to do it for the future of my children'.

Poor women in Gaza have however proved their ability and capacity across generations not only to cope with the material aspects of the family poverty, but also to create the proper mechanisms for stabilizing and normalizing families and relations. This entails the ability of poor women, particularly in a situation of great necessity, to go beyond the

⁷⁷ Ibid (2000: 41)

stereotyped gender roles within the family and in the wider community, and take upon themselves, efficiently, the role of men. Nevertheless, the functioning ability (they believe that they can do it) and capacity (they know how to do it) of poor women to exercise their agency has often remained restricted by the unchanging desirable perception of women's 'self' traditionally construed as a domestic being.

To have further understanding of the dilemma of the link between 'what women do' and 'what they want to be', it is important to refer to Naila Kabeer article on women's empowerment (1999), which interestingly presents the inter-dependence of individuals and structural change in processes of empowerment. Kabeer sees that the critical point for understanding women's empowerment is to distinguish between strategic life choices and second order life choices. She considers the transformative consequences of choice as a determinant in the process of empowerment, but not the choice itself. Empowerment for Kabeer occurred when women's choices taken have the potential for challenging and destabilizing social inequalities. Structures for Kabeer shape individual resources, agency and achievements. Women definition of their goals and values in life reflect their social positioning as well as their individual histories, taste and preferences. Women's empowerment for Kabeer is the expansion in women's ability to make strategic life choices with availability of alternatives that make the consequences of the choices potential for transformation.⁷⁸

Although the experience of poor women in Gaza agrees to a larger extent with Naila Kabeer's framework of analysis, there is one critical sign that appeared in Gaza women's narrations that is not accounted considerably in Kabeer's analysis. The number of poor women in Gaza, despite the contextual opportunity given to them by the necessity, stayed resisting the transformative consequences that may be achieved by the availability of choices. Strategic choices and the potential for transformation are not only influenced by the alternatives the structure provides for women in relation to the three dimensions of resources, agency and achievement, but they are also affected by women's ideology. The Islamist ideology and "Islamisation" in Gaza is a critical factor that restricts the process of women's formation for transformative strategic choices. Leaving the structure aside, women's insistence to maintain the self-recognition and valuation of their identity as wives and mothers, and to enhance and upgrade the practice of this identity is a free strategic choice for women without disregarding its historical structural underpinnings. It is a free choice because it is consistent with their ideological Islamic beliefs. Religion in Gaza has recently become a reinforcing factor used by poor women to maintain their role as a reproducer of social inequality. This is a reflection of the Islamist discourse that is mainstreamed and internalized in women's perceptions and practices, particularly amongst the poor, as a political strategy to confront the westernized patterns of women's liberation⁷⁹.

Poor women in Gaza have not been brought up with the expectations of liberal educated middle class women of their western counterparts. Other patterns are familiar to them through their communications with formal institutions and their encounter with situations and norms of the free market economy. Poor women interviewed in the research seem to believe that poverty and scarcity of resources is their fate and they have to settle for it.

⁷⁸ Kabeer, N. (1999: 437)

⁷⁹ It is interesting to note the articulation and overlapping elements Jamil Hilal points out between conservatism in relation to family and gender roles but with no political agenda and Islamist movements with a very clear political agenda. 189-194 Jamil Hilal in 'Living Palestine', Ed. Lisa Taraki, 2006

Within this social reality, going back to Naila Kabeer dimensions of power, poor women in Gaza have proven their ability and capability to utilize, manage and re-arrange all available socio-economic and human resources in a positive beneficial way for the survival of their families' livelihood. Women have accomplished this success by engaging their ability and potential to exercise their agency as wives and mothers in order to achieve their strategic goal or desired outcome towards increased family stability, creating a strong ground for the reproduction of the family⁸⁰.

Following Naila Kabeer, empowerment entails a process of change towards gender equality. Poor women in Gaza do not see that their oppression is caused by the existence of traditional gender inequality. Women in Gaza through their life experience supported by their interpretation of Islam rather see the traditional gender division of labour more tolerable and equitable than the new reality they are forced to face in search for their families' fulfilment of their minimal subsistence needs. . The changing of gender roles and the decomposition of the stereotypical gender divisions of labour, either by the effect of integration into the contemporary economy or by the effect of livelihood crisis, disturbs in their opinion the family stability and harmony. The prolonged conflict situation in Gaza as a result of the Israeli occupation and the absence of a functioning government body has defeated all attempts of formal institutionalization, and people, especially the poor, are left to fend for themselves. Their search for their own alternatives is apparently centralized in the family institution. The Palestinian family has been acting as the central and the crucial site for individuals and groups to maintain as well as to practice their identities and to elaborate their social⁸¹ as well as their ideological imaginaries. Identity is the meanings and values of individuals' gain through their life experience. Identity is the self in relation with others. Thus women's ability and potential to maintain their socially and ideologically constructed identity is perceived by poor women in Gaza as their real power. Here are some religious-based quotations repeatedly used by poor women in Al Shaja'ia and the Beach camp:

'God satisfies the woman who satisfies her husband'; 'money and sons are the beauty of life'; 'God asks us to be obedient to our husbands'; 'we have to raise our daughters based on the Islamic believes, to respect their husbands and not to communicate with strange men'; 'its not us who change our circumstances, its god who select this life for us and we have to be patient'.

7. Conclusion:

Changing gender roles and the circulation of power in the intra-household relations aiming to confront the threat against family's survival is a process experienced both by men and women. Each one shapes the techniques to maintain his/her social being/identity. However, women are the actors who carry out the heaviest load of coping because of their traditional experience in coping with family crisis (as shock absorber), and because of the type of resources available that are more within the realm of their

⁸⁰ Naila Kabeer defines resources as the various materials, human and social resources used by women that served to enhance the ability to exercise choice. Agency is the ability to define one's goals and act upon them including the meanings, motivations, the sense of agency, or the power within (Kabeer, 1999: 438)

⁸¹ Taraki (2006)

domestic sphere. Its not only women who are blamed for the reproduction of hierarchy through their goal of family stabilization, but it is both men and women in the situation of family crisis who are victimized for reinforcing the hierarchal system⁸². Adult men struggle to maintain their masculine image, and women struggle to maintain their femininity.⁸³

To avoid misleading and misreading of the changing gender roles during the second Intifada, it is crucial to distinguish between changing gender roles as an instrument to stabilize social structure and as a tool for women to develop as individuals with the ability to act as a free agent able to shape and control her own life⁸⁴. The coping strategies that poor women in Gaza have used in the situation of family crisis are products or an extension of their traditional social differentiated gender role exclusive of women and not acceptable to men, if the integrity of the male provider's image is to be maintained. The destruction and or total erosion of the contemporary sources of power men have attained, especially through their integration in the Israel labour market has forced poor women to activate their traditional reserve resources sending them outside their domestic sphere into the public realm but always within the limits of social acceptability.

Supporting Penny Johnson analysis of Bourdieu's conception of 'embodied history', the domesticity of poor women in Gaza during the relative economic stability of the 1970's and 1980's, a result of men's involvement in the Israeli labour market, has not concealed women's memory of their history. On the contrary, in a situation of threat against the family, poor women unconsciously utilize the historical embodied memory and its 'symbolic capital' as the only available sources attained through generations to maintain the survival of their families. The family relations and the economy of symbolic goods (home production, early and kin marriage, accommodation of married sons in an extended family) utilised during the current family livelihood crises...are not solely products of the present moment and contemporary economic and social realities. Instead, they contain the "active presence" of the past, embodied by the practice of family members as they act to meet their present needs, interests and yearnings.⁸⁵

Apart from the benefit of women's revival of the family embodied history to cope with the current crisis, the use of the social and cultural capital resources enhances women's feeling of integrity as individuals and within the family. The sense of integrity of women and their families has recently been influenced negatively by the collective and prolonged livelihood crisis, which has undermined the mutual economic and social benefit of the symbolic capital goods. Poor women have become more reliant on the humanitarian assistance (food coupons distributed by local agencies) to fulfil their families needs for survival which have required the exercise of new techniques of communication and negotiation entailing at times deception and opportunism. The undermining of women's sense of integrity is associated with their increased mobility out of their homes to ask formal institutions for support where they are obliged to uncover the family private affairs. Showing vulnerability while healthy men sit at home used to be shameful. Poor women preferred to use the word '*mastoreen*' as an expression of their poverty to maintain their family's dignity. The harshness of the livelihood situation in the

⁸² Drawing on Lamis Abu Nahla's analysis of Palestinian family narratives (2006) in Taraki, L. (2006) (ed.)

⁸³ Ibid (2006: 183)

⁸⁴ Lukes (2002)

⁸⁵ Taraki, L. (2006: 60)

last two years in Gaza has seriously threatened women's ability to maintain their identity by endangering the loss of self-respect and consequently their status as dignified housewives and mothers.

The necessity to provide for the family's survival has further forced poor women to lose their capabilities to act⁸⁶ as potential agents to 'achieve valued ways of being and doing' as they experienced before by their reliance on the social and cultural capital. Women's shaping and reshaping of their actions and interactions are in most cases characterized by compromise rather than resistance, manoeuvring rather than straightforwardness, and deception rather than honesty. For poor women to use these techniques effectively to ensure material benefit, they have to utilise society's perception of women's inferiority. Society's legitimization of these forms of actions /strategies by the pressing needs for family survival has nevertheless given poor women a power to manoeuvre and manipulate challenging their own inferiority. This practice of agency by no means undermines the possibility of women's questioning of the self and enhances the internalization of the socially construed image of women's self.

The loss of effectiveness of the valued ways of doing through the utilization of social capital and women's increasing reliance on the humanitarian assistance is a motivating factor for poor women to activate their sense of inferiority as an instrument for negotiating their poverty and vulnerability within the societies' organisations. The presentation of their inferior gender characteristics as widow, divorcee, wife of sick or jobless husband, mother of a large number of children, unproductive, emotional, illiterate, ...etc is used by poor women when they become the socially eligible factors for humanitarian support. Women's presentation of the self as destitute has proved an effective strategy of coping by which women are not threaten to lose both the immediate benefit for family's survival, and the social legitimacy of their mobility. It may be true that the changing of gender roles as a response to poverty and vulnerability opens an opportunity to transgress the structural constrains⁸⁷. But in the Palestinian case, the changing gender roles, on the contrary, have undermined women's respect of self, since what they are doing is not totally consistent with their valuable status as stabilizers agents for family life. The relation between women's doing and being has become more complicated with the increasing need for them to provide for their family's survival in the Gaza Strip. This context of crisis does not only restrict women's agency to transform the social structure, but the real threat is the effect of the crisis to decompose the valued elements of women's functioning as socially recognized wives and mothers.

Which of those institutions legitimize the power of doing and being? Women's power of 'doing' by exchanging gender roles as a necessity is legitimized by the institutional relations and culture of the family and the wider society, and thereby the process of women's exercise of agency is always restricted by the legitimizing authority (family structure and culture), even when women have succeeded to have control over all livelihood sources and decision making. Palestinian feminist literature on poor women's coping mechanisms in war and post war situation: after the catastrophe/*Nakba* of 1948, war of 1967, the second Intifada of 1987-1991 have emphasised that the extensive exercise of poor women's agency (an ability and capacity to assume male gender roles to provide for their family's livelihood) is by itself not sufficient and efficient to achieve

⁸⁶ Sen, A.K. (1985a) 'Well-being, Agency and Freedom' the Journal of Philosophy 132 (4) 169-221 & Sen, A.K (1985B) 'Commodities and Capabilities' Amsterdam

⁸⁷ In Suad Joseph (2004)

women's 'being' as free shapers of self⁸⁸. Instead women's dynamics are restricted by the legitimacy of their socially constructed identities of being 'housekeepers', 'house managers' and 'home-makers'. Even when power is circulated in certain stages of women's life or it is given to them because of necessity it is deployed for the reproduction of the hierarchy of the family based on gender.

Poor women to transcend the dilemma of the relationship between⁸⁹ a 'capital-accumulating object' by the "making" of men and a 'capital-accumulating subject' by the making of self, need to go through a reversal process of self constitution. Poor women as individuals living in particular contexts, need to learn how to utilize the instrumental opportunities given to them in the context of livelihood necessity to develop their desire, intention and consciousness to create new meanings of 'being' and to develop their performances/ practice to make their personal meanings and values recognized by the family and the wider social institutions. This would lead gradually to replace the dominant process, where the existing system of the family as a constituent of the wider society has defined and legitimized women's actions or practices to serve the stabilization and normalization of the gender-based hierarchical functionality of the family and of society at large. Much more analysis in fact is still needed to grasp the problematic of the relationship between women's 'doing' and 'being'.

The last critical and analytical remark apparent as a result of the research is the astonishing level of consensus among poor women, with very slight differences based on age and education, reflecting their unwillingness and/or rejection of changing their historically/traditional social construction of their self-image as primarily determined by the 'normal' gender division of labour. For women, normalization of gender division of labour at home as well as in the public life does not necessarily denies the occasional need of women to support men and to share with them the responsibility of decision making, as long as this support remains within the boundaries of the gender division of labour. Poor women in Gaza coercively accept the changing of gender roles and responsibilities as a necessity for their families' survival, and to some degree consider the situation as degrading of their social status as housewives and house managers. This is interestingly reflected in women's attempts, as it appears in wide number of cases, to present their able-bodied husbands as sick and unable to work. What are behind poor women's unwillingness to free themselves from socially constructed constrains? Why they don't perceive the changing gender roles as an opportunity for long-term autonomy and empowerment?

To answer these two questions, we need to understand the link between women's power as an active agency and their personal freedom to change their self. According to Foucault, only free agents exercise power⁹⁰ and women in the context of family livelihood crisis are not free, as their needs and interests are shaped by the needs and interests of others. Even if women in certain context become able to shape new consciousness of their self, different from the dominant trends, they are not free to "practice" it. The harshness of the social reality and the feeling of insecurity about the children's future make women, mothers in particular, always take a step back before thinking about themselves. Since marriage, not only in a situation of family crisis, women

⁸⁸ See Rema Hamami (1994) and Sayegh R. 1989, 'Palestinian Camp Women as Tellers of History', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, no 2, 42-58

⁸⁹ In 'Reading Bourdieu on society and culture' 2000

⁹⁰ Lukes (2002: p495)

have begun to rationalize their actions and interactions towards the stability of the family. The rationalization of women's actions restricts the freedom of agency⁹¹, as women evaluate the cost and benefit of their actions in relation to the immediate and strategic benefits gained for the family and the children, but not for themselves. It appears from the narration of Gaza women that the strategizing of women's power within family is shaped based on resources gained or produced by the dominant structure and culture, but not as a result of women's resistance to this structure. Thus any challenge of the dominant structure becomes threatening. This cannot be attributed to women's ignorance or lack of consciousness, but it has not to be forgotten that women's consciousness is a by-product of the structure and it is unlikely to produce competing or in this case, liberating actions.

8. Annexes: Women's life Stories and Narratives

Annex 1 - Salwa Abu Amera Narrative of her life, Al Shati Camp

I asked Salwa during our first meeting what was she doing with her life in the current situation. Salwa summarized her life in a short sentence saying:

'Al hamdu li'llah (thanks be to God), since we live in our own house and my sons are growing up well and around me, the worries of everyday life like looking for what to eat and drink and how to buy clothing for the growing children is rather manageable...after all, no one dies of hunger.'

She continued speaking about the details of her life in a calm and restrained way.

I was divorced when I was 35 and I had 8 children. Now I am 55 years old. I insisted to divorce my husband when he fell in love with another woman and took her as his second wife. I could not accept this. I left my 7 children with their father and accompanied only by my youngest daughter (aged 6 months). I went to stay with my natal family.

The new wife and her children treated my children badly. My children only saw me briefly while they were coming back from school. After 4 months, I couldn't bear being away from them. They suffered a lot at the hands of the father's new wife. I rented a very small-unfurnished camp house near my ex-husband's place; it consisted of two small rooms, a tiny kitchen and a bathroom.

⁹¹ In Angela Cheater (1999)

I insisted at that time to dedicate myself to raising my children. The eldest was in the sixth class (12 years old) and the youngest was 6 months old. The father never asked about his children for fear of irritating the new wife. People around me were very sympathetic and they thought that what the father had done was shameful, but this did not bother him.

Thus, in the mid 1980's I started a new phase in life as head of my household relying on my relatives and neighbours, getting flour to bake bread and pulses from my sisters in law and other neighbours. Then I went to register in the UNRWA's hardship program as a divorced head of household. I copied the names of all my children in my UNRWA refugee ID. Based on official documents I proved that I was now the head of the household. From then on I lived relying on the coupons from UNRWA and from other charitable associations. I used to sell some of the relief items to get money in cash to meet other expenses. Schools and medical treatment were for free with an UNRWA refugee card. I also used to buy stuff on credit and repay the debt later when I sold parts of the items received with the coupons.

I was young and beautiful, and as a divorced woman I faced lots of harassment from men. I always said to men: I am a man with men and a woman with women and ignored all those who tried to take advantage of me as a woman. I was able to impose my self-respect on all people around me. The children grew up in a difficult situation. When my eldest son became older, he dropped out of school and I found him a part-time job in a bakery. He used to bring a pack of bread every day. In the mid 1990s, the other sons also grew up and went to work and began earning money. They dropped out of school and started as teen-agers to work in fishing (the only type of work available as we live close to the beach). My daughters, daughters in law and me (by then I had arranged the marriage of my sons) used to help my sons in cleaning the fish before sale. Their work increased and they started to save some money. At that time, I was saving every penny for my children in order to renovate and widen the house for them. I contacted UNRWA and applied for the program of house rehabilitation in order to change the ceiling of the small house from asbestos to cement.

Despite all the humiliating behaviour of my ex-husband wife towards the children and towards me, I tried to smooth the relationship among the children. I treated her children kindly since in the end they are the half brothers and sisters of my children. You don't know what the future holds for them; let them love each other in order to be a support for one another. I have three boys and she has two, they are five altogether. (Salwa does not count the daughters during her narration as they are at the end married and protected by their husbands).

Since my sons became 18 years old, I found a bride for them. I did this in order not to lose the UNRWA support. When my son got married, I removed his name from my UNRWA ID and made a new ID for his own family. In this way, I get two coupons instead of one. The coupons became not sufficient to meet the needs of a bigger family. I started to visit women's organizations and other charitable associations working in Gaza city. In 2000, I got support from the Palestinian working women's organization and made a petty trading project in the small yard in front of my home, selling sweets and chips for the schools children. It was good to earn a little extra money to cover the basic needs of the family. Since 2000, the whole situation became much harder. The women's association stopped their support; the sea was closed and it was prohibited for fishermen to fish.

The first years of the second Intifada were miserable. I had days without one Shekel at home. My children stayed at home most of the time. My sons' families and I had meals together. The meals also became different; before we used to eat fish, but now we only cook the pulses and the other foods we receive from UNRWA; most of the time we could not afford meat or chicken. My sons tried to fish once in a while and we modified our expenses accordingly.

Thank be to God, I succeeded with the assistance of UNRWA and some savings from my sons, to turn the small refugee house of two rooms into a three floor house, the ground floor for myself and my youngest married son and the second and the third floors for my elderly sons living with their families. Nevertheless we still ate as one family. My daughters in law respect and love me; I deal with them in a kind way. My daughters also got married with their relatives. Thanks God, I am very happy with my children, their wives and their children. I have never asked my ex-husband for any support, while it is his legal responsibility to pay for his children. My ex-husband is my cousin and I felt embarrassed to take him to court for alimony. I don't want him. I just want the satisfaction of my children and their happiness.

Recently, my ex-husband tried to come back to me, but I refused. He wanted to come back to me after the children grew up and became my real support in life. My sons are my real men, I am proud of them. I get older and pray to God to protect my children who are my "power". I am sick now; I suffer from diabetes and high blood pressure, but thanks God I eat every thing and I am still moving around.

Annex 2 - Um Sami narrative of her life story, from Al Shaja'ia neighbourhood

"I insisted not to rely on anybody, but only on myself," said Um Sami

I got married at 18 years of age, just after finishing my Tawjihi (the final schooling year) in 1982. I chose to marry an educated man (with a university degree) assuming that his education would make him a "powerful" husband. My parents did not care about the husband's education; they just wanted me to get married. I discovered later that I was wrong. University education doesn't make a man. My husband is not sociable and not able to take a decision or to protect me from his family members.

My husband decided not work as a teacher (his field of education) but rather to work in Israel to earn more money. (Wage labour in Israel in the 1980's attracted educated as well as non-educated men as the income provided was much higher than wages and salaries in Gaza) He worked in Israel in the construction sector from 1984 until 1992 and he earned a lot of money, but all his money was spent on his own extended family/ his mother and brothers. His mother was in control of all family affairs.

I was born into a peasant family and used to help my father in cultivating his small piece of land located in the eastern part of Shaja'ia, very close to the Israeli border. My mother was a hard-working person and she sold agricultural products in the local market. She encouraged me to learn sewing. My mother always said to me: 'the good girl is the one

who learns a trade (san'a). You don't know, one day, maybe, life will test you, and then you can use this sa'na to manage your life and support your family'.

When I got married I moved in with my husband's extended family of 12 members. I was an obedient wife, not responding to any harassment from my mother and brothers in law. I thought this was the way to be a good wife. When the harassment and the sense of suffocation reached the peak, I left the home to stay a few days with my natal family until the situation calmed down and I felt better. Leaving home was not really useful; it was rather painful for my children who spent all the time of my absence without any care. But that was the only option available at least to get some rest away from the daily tension with my mother in law. I used to take the decision by myself to go back to my children and to bear my mother and brothers in law oppressive behaviour against me. My father would have not been happy to have me living in his home for long with my children. So, I don't want to be a burden on him. At the end, I realized that I don't have anything in life except my children, so I decided to cope with my husband's family until I was able to have my own house.

My in-law family was not really poor. They owned big land and they used to cultivate olives and vegetables for sale. I was working in agriculture with my mother in law, but she was the one who sold the products in the local market. She never gave me any money for my work and she always said that the land is for all and its income is for all the family members. The distribution of the agricultural income was totally controlled by my mother in law and she decided how to spend it. My mother in law used to control not only her daughters in law, but also her sons. If I needed any thing for my children, I didn't ask my husband, but I rather asked my mother in law.

I was thinking all the time how to free myself from the control of my husband's family in particular the control of my mother in law. I decided to earn money by myself. I convinced my husband to use his share of land around our home and to cultivate it with okra, pepper and other vegetables. Of course this made lots of troubles with my mother in law and the brothers in law and they began to speak of me as the cause of tension among the family. I didn't care. I began to sell produce in the local market and I also raised poultry in the small yard in front of my house and sold the eggs. I used the old sewing machine of my husband's family and made some children's clothes to earn more income. Later, when my husband became jobless by the closure of the Israeli borders, my mother in law started to encourage me in order not to be responsible for the expenses of my children. Nevertheless, she had not stopped interfering trying to control my income and my mobility. I remember, every day, she was stirring my husband against me by telling him 'your wife left home the whole day leaving your children without care and food'. My husband was very weak in front of his mother. To satisfy her, he used to shout at me and to restrict my movement outside the house, but I didn't care. I started to ignore everything they did against me. I was only thinking what to do to succeed in leaving the communal house and live in a separate house with my children.

I realised that I couldn't save any money from my work because it was going to the support of extended family's expenses. So what to do? To put pressure on my husband to use his income (from the work in Israel) for the building of our house, I decided to deceive. I told my husband and my mother in law that I had stopped my work and all the money of my husband was then directed to the building of the house. My husband became slowly interested in having a separate house, so he started to support me. I

went back to work in sewing and agriculture and put all the money I earned to complete the house. I even cut from my children's expenses to be able to finish the house.

I sold all the gold I owned to pay for the remaining details until the house was almost done! I decided to move in even before it was fully finished. Any discomfort was better than my mother in law's constant nagging. My children and I spent a year in "my" new house without windows and doors until we were able to finish it. I used to cover the windows with blankets in winter. Thank be to God that we finally succeeded to be in our own house! Now anything else is manageable.

Since I moved to my own house with my children in 1992, my main concern was my children's education. I have 9 children (4 sons and 5 daughters); the youngest is 10 years old. They used to help me when possible but never at the expense of their studies. They are all studying in schools and in universities. I am the decision maker at home. The children come to me, not to my husband when they need anything. The children do not see their father as strong and they don't give him much relevance in decision-making. Of course I do not mean to imply that, they do not respond to his orders as father, they do obey him. The children blame him for the oppression I experienced while in the extended family's house since he was never supportive or protective of me in relation to his family. He is weak, not a brave man. I have been in control over my family expenses and consumption. He tries to interfere, and I encourage him sometimes because I need to change the children's image towards their father. I want the children to see him as a strong father.

I have always been responsible indirectly or directly for everything related to my family's livelihood since the first years of my marriage: cooking, cleaning, taking care of the children, cultivating the land, selling the vegetables in the market. My day's schedule can be described as follows: I wake up every day at 5:00 am to pray. Then I go to the land to pick the available produce for the market. I sell vegetables in the market from 10:00 am to 12 noon. I return home and try to rest a little, around 30 minutes. Then I begin cooking and cleaning up till 5:00 pm. I read the Qu'ran and summarize the religious lectures I attend for one hour on daily basis. From 7 to 10:00 pm I prepare dinner and wash up; then I go to bed. I have gotten used to this routine and I never complain. One day when the children will be grown up and make their careers, I will be able to rest. They will definitely look after me and appreciate what I have done for them.

I can't really rely on my husband. He doesn't know the market and what needs to be planted for the next season. I was doing all this while I was pregnant, and after only three days of giving birth, I used to get up for work. Since the start of the second Intifada in 2000, my husband's work stopped and my agricultural work has been reduced because of the costs for cultivating any seasonal vegetables has become very high. Sewing has also become not profitable because my clients have no money to buy new clothes. Life has become even harsher than before, and the low income I earn from the seasonal agriculture and sewing is not sufficient now to cover the minimum needs of the children and their education. I have two children studying at university. I began searching for assistance, first by visiting the Islamist associations, mosques and other charitable organizations. I succeeded in getting coupons here and there. In fact, the coupons helped me manage the family's needs in relation to food, and the little money I earn from my agricultural work is paid for my children's education.

People around me, especially women, say that I am in control of my husband (jouzha mahkoom). I think this is an expression of their jealousy because I work, earn money and move out without him rejecting me. But it is strange, why they have to be jealous of me, I wish I was able to take a little rest and not to have to take upon me the daily load of work; I wish my husband was a strong man able to earn an income. I would be delighted to stay home and only take care of my children. What I have been doing through my life is supposed to be done by my husband, not by me...but I have been forced to do it for the future of my children.

By the way, my mother in law does not hate me, but she wanted to keep me under her control. It was her desire to assert herself as the head of the whole family. Amati (mother in law) was always saying that I am the best daughter in law she has; I am a good cook and I am good at housework and at earning money. This is the nature of my mother in law- authoritative- as she is accustomed to own a large parcel of land and work in it. Amati considers herself from a better social class (land owner) than me who grew up in a relatively poor peasant labourer's family (Um Sami's father was working as wage labourer in Israel). Despite all the prejudices of my mother in law, I admit that she was the motive for me to manage my household by benefiting from her life experience. My mother was also a good motive as she encouraged me to work for the sake of my children. I had never thought about my education because it was impossible for my husband's family to accept sending me to study in a university or to let me work outside home. But thanks god that my children are now studying at university, this is my real achievement, what I have successfully done through my married life.

I feel shy to say that I am pregnant now at the age of 42, but it happened. I did not expect it, as my youngest child is already 10 years old. I never used contraceptives because it is Haram (prohibited in Islam), and I can't have an abortion. God will provide for the new child.

No worry. My eldest daughters help in looking after their youngest brothers and sisters. Although my children sometimes help me, they always ask me to stop going outside for long hours in order to take care of the home as my eldest daughters are at university and busy with their studies. My children do not really care about their father and they don't trust his ability to do anything for them. My husband is not capable to take a decision as he has been under the control of his mother and brothers. He mostly relies on me to manage the children affairs.

I started working one year after my marriage. My husband was not spending money on me, so I was forced to earn money. I have been struggling to manage my life with little support from a husband. Nevertheless I need him for the security of my children's life and for my status as a married woman. I have never had a rest in my life or eaten well, but I have gotten used to such life. It is my fate to have such life. Despite of all what I have done, my husband still interferes in my social life, if I want to visit my brothers or sisters. He says 'no' for no reason just to prove his manhood. I am like my mother an obedient wife and not really able to confront or to stand against my husband. I also don't need any additional gossip about me from my relatives and neighbours, so I try always to compromise and follow his orders in the things that are not essential. Otherwise, he may interfere in my work and in my mobility to the mosques and to the institutions that provide support for my family. Till today I have to consult him wherever and whenever I go out, except when I go out to earn money or get coupons. He just recently has become smoother as he gets older. He shares with me the planting of seedlings and the picking of the produce and he does not argue a lot about my decisions nowadays.

Since I started to visit the mosques and learn more about Islam, I feel a different person, more calm and confident. I now know more the Islamic rules and regulations, but I realized that I was not practicing them properly. Through my searching for sources of livelihood, I have gotten more involved in religious lectures, and I got training on the techniques of preaching. As I also have wide relationships with many women in the market as well as my neighbours and relatives, I felt encouraged to act as a preacher and I was encouraged by our local mosque administration. They started to ask me to do lectures on the Islamic virtue. I liked the idea of being a preacher. It creates a feeling of self-respect and satisfaction. In the lectures I do, I basically talk with women about the ethics of women to be committed to God commands like the veil, shyness (Haya'), obedience, tolerance...etc of the basic Islamist principles.

My daughters have become very religious; they have different views than mine. I believe that the man has to be superior over the woman and the woman has to be an obedient wife in order to stabilize the family. On the contrary, my daughters will not accept having a dominating husband, and they need to work outside and to participate in the public life as they are already active in the Islamist student movement, but they don't encourage communication with men in public. I myself have been communicating with men in the local market and I did not have any troubles. But this is because I am a poor mother seeking her children's livelihood. For my educated daughters, I prefer them to find jobs in schools or in official institutions and not to be in communication with strange men at their young age.

9. Conclusions and recommendations for possible interventions

The research conducted revealed clear trends in gender roles and power relations in the Gaza Strip prompted by the tight closure imposed on the Strip by the Israeli Occupation forces. Development planners and managers in Oxfam GB should carefully consider this.

Main conclusions:

- The changes in gender roles and power relations are no more than tactics/ or instruments poor women use for the survival of their families. It is evident from the narrations of women's life experiences that their perceptions and values (and those of the other family members) are still traditional and centralized mainly around their domesticity.
- Poor women's reliance on social capital (social solidarity and mutual economic exchange through relatives and neighbours) although it has contributed to the survival of the families it has had a disempowering effect on women by reinforcing

the perpetuation of gender-based hierarchy within the family and in the wider community.

- Most reversible coping mechanisms used by women for the family survival have been exhausted and women over rely on humanitarian aid. This has increased individualism; opportunism and passivity amongst women and the positive social values of the traditional social safety net system are progressively dismantled.
- Poor women in Gaza have proven that they have a massive capacity to exercise their agency by utilizing the traditional and non-traditional sources of survival. This capacity is based on women altruism which has produced negative effects on their well-being physically and mentally, and as a result has also reduce their capacity to achieve a positive outcome for themselves and for others.

These main trends are expected to continue and even worsen in the immediate future. The continuation of the crisis most likely will lead to further deterioration in women's capacity to resist against poverty and vulnerability, and as a consequence it will also worsen their social isolation.

Main Recommendations:

The following recommendations may contribute in helping women mitigating the negative effects of the closure and to re-strategize gender interventions for longer-term change in the status and role of women in Gazan society:

- Avoid the myth of women's ability to survive with scarcity of resources, or by relying on the social capital and the humanitarian aid. Consider also the additional burden women hold to cope with their families' survival, and the disempowering effects of the mechanisms women use. This should be reflected in the design of the projects to enhance women's self-integrity and self-respect by doing something really productive and profitable. For example, Oxfam has to contribute in finding viable trading mechanisms for women's productive activities at the local and -when it will be possible- national and international levels. Poor women need to rebuild their self-respect as producers and not as passive recipients.
- Humanitarian aid for poor women has to be accompanied with activities aiming to enhance women's solidarity, reciprocity, organization and gender consciousness. The design of these social activities should incorporate the knowledge and life experience of those women. This may include opening dialogue between poor women to talk about their daily problems and to cooperate together for solving these problems; women initiate ideas to organize themselves/ demonstrate their resources. Women should be trained to analyze their poverty and to understand its root causes and effects; to learn how to use techniques related to the process of their empowerment. The knowledge and skills gained from repeatedly conducted

dialogues are accumulating change in women's perceptions and practice of their gender roles and power.

- Local CBOs in Gaza lack good facilitators who have knowledge and experience of the local dynamics and gender relations that should be the ground for their communication and negotiation with poor women. Having well-skilled women's facilitators is a crucial element in the process of women's mobilization and empowerment. Poor women in their local communities have usually not experienced good models of development practitioners. Women's oppression and subordination is not only caused by their lack of access to resources and income, it is also enhanced by the alienated professional discourse of women's development used by NGOs and community based activists.

This may be an opportunity to learn from the *ad hoc* mobilization strategy used by the Islamist associations and their preachers. They build up their constituency by using the heritage of the Islamist culture. Women's facilitators need to appropriate their development discourse from women's traditions and daily experiences in order for women to realize its empowering and disempowering effects and act accordingly. Gender-sensitive practitioners in the field are very influential in changing women's attitudes and values about themselves, and consequently, enhance their sense of collectiveness to resist rather than to reproduce their social isolation.

- The approach of projects concentrating on short-term provisional effects does not affect women's positioning within the family and in the wider society. Poor women need to be continuously attached to institutional activities respondent to their actual problems and needs in order to achieve long-term effects related to women's gender behaviours and attitudes. When new values of gender are constituted in women's minds, their capacity and willingness to resist the root causes of their poverty are increased, and women's practical gender needs become associated with strategic personal goals. This includes how women in their marriage life cycle contribute in the reproduction and perpetuation of poverty and vulnerability without ignoring the macro-political and economic factors of poverty. The ability of development interventions to change women's attitudes on fertility, boys' preference, and early marriage by no means contribute in breaking down the structural causes of women's subordination and poverty. Institutional activities have to be appropriated to deal with the actual experience and skills poor women have, and to design the activities accordingly, but not the opposite. Income generation activities like home gardens and animal breeding are very important but not enough in the struggle for women's empowerment.
- Gender mainstreaming is an important and an effective strategy for community based organizations. The local partners need to change their perception and practice of gender in order to consider the differentiated impact of their activities on both men and women. In addition, the promotion of poor women's participation in the design and implementation of the institutional activities is crucial for creating a long-term

empowering atmosphere, where poor women gradually get rid of passivity and isolation. This may not be necessarily done by formal training, but by an ongoing participatory consultative process within institutions and between institutions and poor women in the local community.

- Oxfam does not necessarily contribute in humanitarian aid assistance as a priority, but it can act as a complementary agency aiming to strengthen networks and partnership between civil society formal and informal institutions to demonstrate their efforts and resources to bring poor women out of the mainstream survival strategy and its disempowering effects. This definitely includes the enhancement of the strategy of gender advocacy at the local, national and international levels where poor women are motivated to be organized and to advocate for their basic needs and rights for living in dignity.
- Poor women in Gaza need to use the proper tools to advocate against the mythical perception of poor women as “a good survivor” and the need for changing the macro-economic and political policies, which benefit from this myth. Poor women in Gaza need to know that their survival mechanisms despite of their immediate effectiveness, never free poor women and their families from poverty and social isolation, unless poor women redirect their coping agency and power to resist the actual causes of their poverty. This primarily entails changing women’s consciousness of the link between what they do for survival and how they want their lives to be.
- To avoid the negative effects of survival mechanisms middle aged women used, particularly in relation to marriage patterns and education, it is important that interventions target young men and women (the daughters and sons of poor mothers) in order to raise their consciousness about the causes and effects of their poverty and social subordination, as well as, to build up their self-esteem and capacity to overcome their poverty in a more transformative manner.
- Constituting youth groups in the local communities in order to initiate collective efforts to encourage young girls and boys to finish their education and to avoid early marriage can do this. Income generating projects should be encouraged to enhance youth utilization of their education resources, and for educated youth to help the uneducated.