

'Working with Sensitive Subjects'

DSA Women and Development Study Group Workshop, 6th November 2015, 10-6pm

London International Development Centre, 36 Gordon Sq, London WC1H 0PD

Convened by Jasmine Gideon (Birkbeck), Ruth Pearson (Leeds) and Katy Jenkins (Northumbria)

10-10.30am – Registration, tea & coffee

10.30-10.45am – Welcome & Introduction (Ruth Pearson)

Session 1

10.45-11.15am – Nina Laurie, Newcastle *'Doing sensitive research and 'doing' impact'*

11.15-11.45am – Jelke Boesten, Kings College London *'Sexual violence in post conflict settings: researching silence'*

11.45-12.15pm – Lorena Fuentes *'Ethics, Accountability and Standpoint Feminist Epistemology: A reflection on methodological choices in research on representations of femicidal violence'*

12.15-12.45pm – Pia Jolliffe, Oxford *'Visualizing shifting power configurations in participatory research exercises with Karen refugees'*

12.45-1.45pm – Lunch

Session 2

1.45-2.15pm – Polly Wilding, Leeds *'Locating the sensitive in contexts of insecurity'*

2.15-2.45pm – Gabriela Alvarez *'Researching conservatism'*

2.45-3.15pm – Kate Jehan, Liverpool *'Researching Dowry in South India'*

3.15-3.45pm – Tea & Coffee

Session 3

3.45-4.15pm – Pat Holden *'How Development is Framed By or Frames the Sex Work /Prostitution Debate: Some reflections from a development practitioner.'*

4.15-4.45pm – An Van Raemdonck, Ghent University, Belgium *'Researching "personal" and "political" sensitive subjects.'*

4.45-5.30pm – Discussion and Closing Comments (Introduced by Jasmine Gideon)

'Working with Sensitive Subjects' – Abstracts

Nina Laurie, Newcastle *'Doing sensitive research and 'doing' impact'*

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This paper explores some of the challenges and possibilities for co-producing research working with sensitive subjects. It is set in the context of research on anti-trafficking advocacy where the focus is on moving from engagement to promoting a rights-based and social justice agenda. It seeks to bring to the fore the tensions between doing research and also reporting on that work for academic auditing processes, which in the UK context means specifically the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and end of grant funding reports and evaluations.

The paper draws on 'evidence' provided in an article "Anti-trafficking Activism: Collaborating on Transforming Citizenship", jointly produced by a Nepal-based anti-trafficking NGO, Shakti Samuha, founded and directed by women who have returned from trafficking situations, and four feminist researchers (three British – two in current academic positions, one an emeritus researcher and one Nepali, now working in a high-level donor policy setting in Nepal). The paper targeted an international development policy journal in order to make an 'impact' by getting post-trafficking scenarios onto international development agendas. (Most trafficking research addresses its causes and characteristics, feeding into policy frameworks targeting the 'rescue' of those experiencing diverse trafficking situations. Post-trafficking, starts when these scenarios end.) Drawing on research in Nepal, the article presents four types of co-produced data that indicate how collaboration can be woven through research design, data collection and analysis in order to prioritise returnee women's voices and engage in changes around citizenship access. Had it been accepted on first submission (it wasn't), this article could have been used as evidence in two REF Impact case studies. This paper is therefore also an opportunity to reflect upon some of the challenges that the systemisation of impact oriented ways of doing research has posed for me recently as a feminist academic committed to wanting to do work (and in ways) that makes a difference including through work on and with sensitive subjects.

Jelke Boesten, Kings College London *'Sexual violence in post conflict settings: researching silence'*

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This presentation sets out some of the difficulties with interviewing women who have experienced extreme violence, the responsibility of the researcher, and ethical considerations. The paper argues we need to think carefully about the objectives of ethnographic research in relation to sexual violence, and the potential harm or good it may bring. Based on research looking at war and peacetime sexual violence in Peru, the paper suggests alternative sources to research such violence, instead of interviewing victim-survivors.

Lorena Fuentes *'Ethics, Accountability and Standpoint Feminist Epistemology: A reflection on methodological choices in research on representations of femicidal violence'*

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A feminist epistemological framework connotes a rejection of the premise, or assumed desirability, of neutrality or objectivity when undertaking research, not least on the subjects of violence, bodies, language, and representation (Das et al. 2000; Letherby 2002, 2003; Llewelyn 2007). Critical feminist epistemic approaches foreground the "standpoint" (Hartsock 2003; Smith 1985) of the researcher in relation to her empirical research (process), laying bare the performative dimensions of fieldwork, analysis, and writing. This suggests that it is the responsibility of the researcher to disclose her relationship to the material, and thus to claim "responsibility for [the] enabling practices" that facilitate (and constrain) the descriptions, findings, or "partial realities" that emerge (Haraway 1991: 190, 193).

Because my research explores the premise that representational practices linked to *femicide* in Guatemala help reconstitute regimes of disposability and invisibility, I locate neutrality as an impossible horizon for analyses of violence. In this presentation I discuss how my methodological practices required me to make choices about what to include/exclude as objects of (re)presentation in my 'write up'—choices which I insist ought to be rendered visible as part of a feminist ethics of accountability. As researchers of violence (Das et al. 2000; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004) note, working through issues of representation and ethics seems condemned to produce inadequate solutions. However, as recently noted within critical development studies (Radcliffe 2015; Wilson 2015), feminist researchers must demonstrate “a willingness to challenge hegemonic paradigms” and “patterns of knowledge production” through which exclusions (re)emerge across seemingly benign policy interventions and representational practices—a necessarily political process. I therefore explore how my decision to exclude visual depictions of femicide victims (which I nonetheless analyse and describe) at least momentarily interrupts the deeply problematic hegemonic frames of representation that circulate for victims of gendered violence in Guatemala.

Pia Jolliffe, Oxford *'Visualizing shifting power configurations in participatory research exercises with Karen refugees'*

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In this article, I examine participatory research methods for the analysis of shifting power configurations in the lives of refugee youth from Myanmar in Thailand. Ethnographic research practices are often discussed in terms of monolithic notions of power. It is often taken for granted that researchers are more powerful than the researched. However, feminist anthropology challenges and expands fixed ideas of power relations experienced during fieldwork. In contrast to an idealised notion of a stable researcher-host relationship, scholars insist that power configurations shift as fieldwork evolves. Emphasis is given to the mutual shaping of the researcher and her fieldwork setting (Caplan 1988; Fruhstuck 2007; Robertson 2007; Scheper-Hughes 1995).

Based on ethnographic fieldwork with refugee youth, I analyse their life course drawings in light of gendered experiences of armed conflict, displacement and life in and around refugee camps. I explain how this methodology improves my understanding of how these young men and women experience social inclusion and exclusion. Moreover, I documented by photography the whole research process. Based on this visual data, I discuss the working of shifting power relations during fieldwork and argue that only if we are aware of the unequal structures that permeate society, including our academic research, we can work towards empowerment of the weak and poor.

Polly Wilding, Leeds *'Locating the sensitive in contexts of insecurity'*

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Researching women's experiences of violence is commonly understood as researching a sensitive topic¹. My research has been carried out in areas of extremely high levels of criminal, institutional and interpersonal violence, which have tended to overshadow other more mundane forms of everyday violence, including domestic violence. Placing the nitty gritty of the research process in the broader context of insecurity is an essential factor in understanding and analysing the research data. This paper will focus on the difficulties of carrying our research in the favelas of Brazil, the consequences for data collection, and the practical obstacles to translating feminist ethics into practice. I will also discuss how I as a researcher have dealt with the telling of violent acts and histories, and the mixed emotions I have experienced when encountering the stories of violence that I am looking for. I also ask how a feminist methodology might help us moving towards a gendered understanding of (all) violence.

Gabriela Alvarez 'Researching conservatism'

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This paper will look into the challenges of researching conservatism without bias getting in the way of a real understanding of social life. Using research on backlashes and resistances to the advancement of sexual and reproductive rights in Chile as a starting point, I will look into the challenges of researching conservative advocates and policymakers' views and strategies. The challenges for a qualitative research in these issues - I would argue - are not to get the information needed to sustain a feminist critique of social and political processes, but to understand the conservative discourse and its rationale, and convey them with a rational and balanced critique, without bias. This poses several problems to the researcher, mainly to do with ensuring real communication in topics that are not only neutral but highly contested. In this scenario facts can be distorted to convey a message, power relations are salient and the social place that the researcher and interviews have, acquire meanings of their own. The challenge is then to understand the subtext of these manipulative strategies, without entering confrontation that will end the exchange of information. The paper will further pose questions into the relationship between social research and researcher and subjects' moral values.

Kate Jehan, Liverpool 'Researching Dowry in South India'

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The giving and taking of dowry has been at the forefront of concern for feminist organisations and poverty campaigners in India for decades. Activists argue that dowries represent the social and economic dependence of women, increase a vulnerability to gender-based violence and exacerbate poverty. In spite of legislative attempts to curb the practice, it is flourishing. In South India, a hitherto 'dowry-less' region, marriage is increasingly contingent on transfers of money, goods or property from the bride's party to the groom's. Dowry is a sensitive topic and researching it presents multiple challenges. As a widespread and yet illegal practice, dowry is a social taboo. Wherever the state legislates against complex issues with widespread social sanction, the status quo is often, therefore, 'Do as I say, not as I do'. Getting to the heart of the matter of how men and women feel about dowry can be a challenging task. At the same time, researching dowry brings with it all the challenges that come with exploring an issue associated with unequal gendered norms, roles, relations, resources and human vulnerability. This presentation takes a brief look at how one researcher approached the task, methodological and ethical challenges she encountered, and what she would differently if she had her time again.

Pat Holden 'How Development is Framed By or Frames the Sex Work /Prostitution Debate: Some reflections from a development practitioner.'

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The fierce debates between feminists over the issue of 'all prostitution as violence v sex work as work' continue to rage (see the recent Amnesty International debate). This debate, at times, appears to divide 'northern' and 'southern' feminists with the voices from the south less frequently heard. Sex workers 'survivors', abolitionists and rights activists have all contributed to the debates and to development practice through research.

International development largely ignored 'prostitution/ sex work' until the late 80s, early 90s when funds became available for research into 'sexual practices' because of the prevalence of HIV/AIDS. As a DFID Social Development Adviser I was involved in assessing and commenting on various methodologies created for this research by sociologists, anthropologists, health workers, demographers and mathematicians etc and on their validity in their potential for solving the 'problem'. The presentation reflects on some of the above issues and considers some of the ways development practice has been framed by these debates.

An Van Raemdonck, Ghent University, Belgium *'Researching "personal" and "political" sensitive subjects.'*
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My PhD research examines campaigns against FGM/C in Egypt and how they are received and translated locally across religious and cultural fields. This means that I looked at the local debates concerning gender, sexuality, culture and religion in which the topic of FGM/C is discursively embedded. I employed ethnographic research methods and spent all-together more than 15 months in the field, working consecutively with a series of relevant actors: feminist activists, NGOs, church-based initiatives and state employees.

The sensitive nature of my research exceeded the sensitive and violent character of FGC practices and the associated personal experiences and (religious and cultural) beliefs that people hold. My situatedness as a white European researcher of a subject with a history that goes back to the colonial era forced me to reflect on my own position and the conditions that made such research possible. In this paper I want to discuss how I attempted to deal with both forms of "personal" and "political" sensitivities by 1) theoretically incorporating them in my research agenda and by 2) methodologically attempting to deconstruct hierarchies during fieldwork and interviewing.

The development context inevitably highlights existing unequal power structures. It conjures up the narrative of linear progressive development and its concomitant binaries of modern versus traditional, developed versus backwards etc. My fieldwork experience first of all documents this overall structure but also showed that spaces and occasions can be created when hierarchal structures are felt less present (from the researcher's side). In these instances, a sense of equality or reciprocity prevailed over existing symbolic hierarchies. In the paper, I want to illustrate this experience by two cases of encounters with NGOs.