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Feminist Research on Violence against Women in Humanitarian and Development Settings:
A Snapshot of Best Practices and Challenges

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. BACKGROUND

Feminist research and theory can be applied across disciplines and uses a range of methods- from quantitative and qualitative data collection to arts-based approaches (Harris and Leavy, 2019; Leung et al., 2019). At the heart of the different theoretical approaches to feminism, is the relationship between gender and power: of shifting, transforming, and re-distributing power at multiple and intersecting levels- all of which is foundationally intertwined with efforts to end violence against women and girls (VAWG) (Batliwala, 2020). However, the funding allocated to research on VAW is disproportionately low. Less than one percent of total Official Development Assistance (ODA) goes to research or programming on VAW and even less, (0.05%) is spent on research to understand what works and what does not.[1]

The research question at the heart of this study is, 'How is feminist research on VAW currently being conducted in development and humanitarian settings? What are the best practices that emerge? Concomitantly, what are the challenges that researchers face in doing this work?'

2. METHODS

Our approach to the study was qualitative in nature, comprising a literature review and interviews with key informants.

2.1 Literature Review

A preliminary literature review shed light on feminist research epistemology and methodology. We prioritised literature written by researchers from and operating in humanitarian and developmental contexts and engaging with questions of representation and power in academic and research settings.

2.2 Key informant interviews

One-on-one interviews were conducted with eight researchers working in and from humanitarian and development settings, covering eight countries. Key informants were identified by putting out a call through COFEM and SVRI networks. Broadly, we focused on the ways in which feminist research was conducted (best practices and challenges), how resources are accessed, and the needs of the researchers in doing research.

2.3 Limitations

In a context of having to conduct the study in a relatively short period, we primarily relied on reaching out to key informants in our networks. Our key informants are the ones who responded to a call- those whom we were able to access and who were able to make time to talk to us.
We do not presume that a literature review and eight key informant interviews are able to paint an adequate picture of how feminist research on VAW is conducted in humanitarian and development settings. However, it does provide a snapshot into the ways in which some researchers are working, the challenges they face, and the ways in which they try to circumvent these.

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1 https://www.svri.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2022-03-15/Trackingfunding.pdf

3. FINDINGS

Our findings are organised broadly into two categories- best practices emerging from our key informants on conducting feminist research on VAW in development and humanitarian settings and the challenges that researchers face in doing this work.

3.1 Challenges in conducting feminist research on VAW

The risk of framing research as 'feminist'

One of the foundational challenges we encountered was with the term 'feminist' itself. Half of our key informants expressed concerns in labelling their research as feminist due to the ways this label:

- limited opportunities to access resources and policy spaces; and,
- limited access to research participants given cultural understandings and conceptions of feminists.

Physical risks, well-being, and security concerns for researchers & research participants

Researchers working in humanitarian and development settings told us that their research participants face many risks. These include the risk of physical assault, retribution while conducting research and after publishing, and the emotional and psychological effects of repeated exposure to stories of violence and trauma, including vicarious trauma. Despite these risks, few functional and holistic care practices exist to support them.

The lack of organisational & institutional support for researcher well-being

Key informants spoke about their experiences of vicarious trauma, its effects on their lives, and the inability to separate their work from their lives. All our key informants said that there was very little support for the wellness of researchers from the commissioning organisations. Where support for researcher care did exist, it was generally felt to be a tick-box exercise or inadequate. Many researchers shared the strategies that they and their communities had developed to take care of each other.

The continued hierarchy of whose voices matter in policy & research spaces

Many researchers spoke about the continued challenge of having outsider knowledge prioritised over local knowledge and lived experience. Representation and access to spaces to disseminate research and influence policy came up as a structural tension for researchers in low and middle-income countries (LMICs), even in feminist spaces. Key informants were unanimous in saying that there was a need to think more creatively about how to platform and amplify the work of researchers in LMICs.

Resourcing feminist research on VAW in development & humanitarian settings

In addition to financial resources, key informants spoke about the need for other resources, such as trauma-informed and gender sensitive translators, infrastructure support, computers, mobile phones, access to the internet and to the global scholarship databases that drive and influence the direction of conversations and thought leadership. Many identified time as a critical, limited resource.

3.2 BEST PRACTICES

Feminist research & reflexivity

An active reflexive practice- the ability to examine and be aware of one's own bias, preconceived ideas and positional power is important to feminist research principles. Our key informants spoke about a range of strategies to operationalise reflexivity in their research practices including 1) The skills of the research team 2) The speed and pacing of the research process and 3) The ways in which researchers used their positional power to amplify the voices of people around them.

Feminist methods as a tool of power shifting: Keeping women, girls, & communities at the centre

A common theme in our participants' conception of feminist research methods is that they are participatory in nature, seek to subvert power dynamics, and strive to create meaningful ways of participant engagement. Operationalising these values meant centring lived knowledge, a recognition and respect for community protocols, and taking the time to build trust and relationships. The use of local advisory councils can play a pivotal role in promoting accountability and power-shifting.

Honour the value of emotions in research

Feminist research recognises emotions as a source of knowledge. The researchers we spoke with felt that holding space for emotion led to better data collection processes and ultimately better data. Holding emotion in research processes requires skills, and training in mental health and psychosocial health practices.

Self-care & researcher wellness

Key informants talked about how self-care practices positively influenced their sense of safety and wellness in their work. All the researchers had experienced the ensuing harm when self-care strategies were not in place. While some researchers took it upon themselves to initiate self care practices, it is important to think about researcher wellness at a communal and structural level.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Our recommendations focus on promoting human rights principles, better funding, and adhering to ethical guidelines for research in development and humanitarian settings.

Research must be rights-based, and guided by the ethics of causing no harm.

• Conducting feminist research in humanitarian and development settings must be cognisant of the social, political, economic and cultural context.

• Take into account the strategic and practical gender needs[2] of those participating in the research. These include the effects of food insecurity, poverty, poor health (including mental health challenges), intimate partner and other forms of gender-based violence, as well as the lack of or destruction of infrastructure on people's lives. While producing knowledge is a strategic need, it

should not override practical needs such as the provision of health-care and psycho-social support for victims of VAW, as well as referral systems for access to justice and legal aid systems, and other basics, such as food, where required.

• The safety of those participating in the research process should be a primary concern. This includes ensuring that participants are safe- both in the sense of being physically safe as well as in the sense of participating in a 'safe' space that is respectful of their lived reality and actively strives to ensure that their voices are heard in an empathetic way.

Fund your values: Directly support researchers from and working in humanitarian and development contexts.

• Ensure that local researchers lead in research projects in their countries and provide funding to address the structural barriers they face in disseminating their research and in accessing platforms to talk about their work.

• Fund psychosocial self and collective care support for those participating in the research as well as for the researchers involved in the project.

• Fund the convening of feminist researchers from LMICs to come together and share strategies, approaches, and experiences in knowledge production based on their specific challenges. This includes creating spaces for feminist researchers from LMICs to gather; such as the SVRI Forum, to exchange experiences, strategies and techniques; to digest and metabolise their work, and to build solidarities and relationships that lead to greater power and influence in academic and policy spaces.

Participative research enhances knowledge production.

• Consider the ethical implications of participation in the research project in all its constituent phases from the development of the research question to the writing up of the final report. Good practice includes the involvement of those being researched in deciding on research questions and methods as well as in giving feedback on findings.

• Research should contribute towards social change, even if it is small scale and a stepping-stone to larger-scale change.

• Shift the ways in which people think about "expertise" by valuing the contributions of local advisory councils comprised of community members with situated knowledge.

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2 Molyneux (1985) distinguished between strategic and practical gender needs. Strategic gender needs are the needs related to women's subordinate role in society (and may include issues such as legal rights, control over their bodies and income equality). Addressing strategic gender needs challenges women's role in society and works to achieve gender equity in the long-term. Practical gender needs are the needs that women have in terms of their practical day-to-days needs and can include access to food and water, employment, and access to services such as healthcare and legal aid.

DEFINITIONS

WHAT MAKES RESEARCH FEMINIST?

Feminist research centres the experiences of women. We included the following in our understanding of what makes research feminist:

• Feminist research is grounded in the reality of girls and women. It seeks to give voice to women and girls' experiences and is conscious of the inherent contradictions in so doing.
• Is a commitment to social transformation and improving the material conditions of women's lives.
• Brings the subjectivity of the researcher to the fore and includes aspects of reflexivity-researchers place themselves under the analytic lens and consider how their own positionality influences the research process.
• An intersectional framing takes account of the many ways in which different sites of identity intersect with inequity.
• Is conscious of not reproducing relations of power and privilege.

It is possible for all types of research and evidence projects to be feminist. No research is value-free. Feminist research can be applied across many different disciplines and has space for a range of methods. It involves scrutiny of who defines the research question, how the research methods are decided upon, how data is collected and analysed – in fact, all stages of the research project involve an assessment of the choices made in the research process, including:
• Purpose
• Funding
• Design
• Data Collection
• Analysis
• Distribution of findings

While the focus of this study is largely on participatory and mixed method approaches, feminist research tools can be applied in both quantitative and qualitative studies. It involves a commitment to doing research ethically, safely, and based on the principle of doing no harm.

DEVELOPMENT & HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS

Development and humanitarian contexts are distinctly different settings. A development setting is not necessarily a humanitarian context, and a humanitarian context is not necessarily a developing one.

For the purpose of this study, we have defined humanitarian and developmental settings as follows:

Humanitarian Settings[3]
• Entails the disruption of a society and can include human, material and environmental losses.
• Places significant resource constraints on a country.
• Often, international support is required to meet the basic needs of a population (including food, water, shelter, protection and other life sustaining measures).
• Can be the result of a natural disaster that has occurred suddenly (such as floods, landslides etc.) or one that is slow in onset (e.g. droughts, famine, environmental degradation, deforestation). Natural disasters include epidemics or disease outbreaks that can evolve into disasters.
• Human-made disasters, which can include industrial/ technological disasters (such as the explosion at port in Beirut or the Chernobyl nuclear accident).
• Human-made disasters include complex emergencies, which are associated with war and conflict.

Development Settings[4]
Defining a development context is complex, and there are multiple ways of doing so. For the purposes of this publication, a development context is, in general, a country facing slow economic growth, economic vulnerability and high levels of poverty and food insecurity. Many receive development aid to support economic, political and social growth.

Whilst development aid can exist within humanitarian contexts and vice versa, there are important differences between humanitarian and development aid. Humanitarian aid is short-term; delivered in disaster zones; responds to an incident or event and is focused on saving lives. Development Assistance is longer term. It responds to systematic problems and is focused on economic, social and political development.

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3 Based on the definition contained in 'Towards Better Humanitarian Support: Twelve Lessons from DAC Peer Reviews, OCED accessed at https://www.oecd.org/dac/peer-reviews/12lessons.pdf
4 https://www.humanitariancoalition.ca/from-humanitarian-to-development-aid

INTRODUCTION

Feminist research and theory can be applied across disciplines and while methods are a site of debate, feminist research has space for a range of methods- from quantitative and qualitative data collection to arts-based approaches (Harris & Leavy, 2019; Leung et al., 2019). At the heart of the different theoretical approaches to feminism, is the notion of gender and power: of shifting, transforming, and re-distributing power at multiple and intersecting levels- all of which is foundationally intertwined with efforts to end VAW (Batliwala, 2020). But what does it look like to actualise the shifting of power in our work, research, and institutions? How can we turn theory into practice in our research methods, encouraging the development of knowledge that challenges lingering colonial and patriarchal hierarchies of what is valued, who is valued, and how? Feminist researchers seek to bridge this gap between theory and practice through the methods they use. There is considerable opportunity to see feminist research as both a more effective way to generate diverse knowledge on VAW as well as an opportunity to embed moments of social change into the research practice itself.

However, as demonstrated in the 2022 Sexual Violence Research Initiative's *"Tracking Funding for Research on Violence against Women in Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs)"*, the funding allocated to research on VAW is disproportionately low.[5] Less than one percent of total Official Development Assistance (ODA) goes to research or programming on VAW and even less, (0.05%), of total ODA is spent on research to understand what works and what does not (Ibid). The SVRI's *Funding Ethically: Better Funding for Violence against Women and Violence against Children Research in Low and Middle Income Countries[6]* proposes guidelines on how to better fund research on VAW and VAC in LMICs in a way that acknowledges, and addresses power dynamics and creates accessible and equitable processes that support priority-driven research conducted by LMIC-based researchers.

This study seeks to compliment this work by looking at the specific nuances of feminist research on VAW in development and humanitarian settings – with a view to identifying the challenges facing feminist researchers in these contexts and how to best support and advance this work.

Research question and objectives

The research question at the heart of this study is, 'How is research on VAW currently being conducted in development and humanitarian settings? What are the best practices that emerge? Concomitantly, what are the challenges that researchers face in doing this work?'

The specific objectives of the study include:
• Identify evidence of what works in doing feminist research on VAW in humanitarian and development settings.
• Shed light on the challenges experienced in conducting feminist research in development and humanitarian settings, including the structural challenges faced by researchers engaging in this work.
• Provide recommendations for researchers, funders, governments, humanitarian organisations, and organisations commissioning feminist research in humanitarian and development settings.

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5 https://www.svri.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2022-03-15/Trackingfunding.pdf
6 https://www.svri.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2022-01-20/FullReport_Ethical_Funding.pdf

METHODOLOGY

Our approach to the study was qualitative in nature, comprising:

LITERATURE REVIEW

A scoping review of literature on feminist research epistemology and methodology was undertaken. We focused specifically on a high-level review of literature on feminist research in development and humanitarian settings. We were particularly interested in looking at the topic through the lens of decolonising knowledge production. We identified papers through a combination of google scholar searches and reviewing feminist thought leadership grounded in Global South and indigenous feminist spaces and theory such as Feminist Africa, Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action (CREA), the Association for Women in Development (AWID), the Equality Institute and VOICE Amplified. We then reviewed bibliographies to identify further relevant literature.

Our examination of literature included a focus on who holds power in global policy and academic spaces, the evolution of VAW research in development and humanitarian settings, and the risks in conducting this research. The literature review sought to amplify the experiences, needs, and realities of researchers in LMICs, with the aim of supporting their work. As a result, we prioritised studies, articles, worldviews, and methodologies led and written by researchers from and/ or with significant lived experience in LMICs. We identified whether researchers were from and/ or had significant lived experience in LMICs through researcher self-identification either directly in papers they had written or through biographical information. We also kept an eye on institutional affiliations and location.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

One-on-one interviews were conducted with eight (n=8) researchers working in humanitarian and development settings, covering eight countries. Key informants were identified by putting out a call through the Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM) and SVRI networks. We also reached out to researchers working on innovative feminist research projects learned about through the literature review process. Seven of the key informants were based and worked in development settings. The eighth was a Samoan researcher from Aotearoa (New Zealand). Two of the eight researchers did not explicitly identify as feminist researchers (something we discuss later on), despite embracing feminist values of inclusivity, equity, responding to, and challenging patriarchal norms. In both cases, the researchers centralised a gender analysis in their research work.

A distinguishing feature of this project was that most of the key informants were working on research initiatives in and with the communities where they live/come from. Most key informants, except for one, requested that they were named in the study.[7]

Seven interviews were conducted in English and one interview was conducted in Hindi and translated to English. Our translator, Karen D'Mello, sought, as far as possible, to preserve tonality and context. Some parts of the translation were intentionally kept literal, especially the syntax and choice of certain words. As far as possible, the oral tone of the interview was maintained.

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7 Refer to Annexure A for a full list of key informants

TOOLS

We developed a guiding set of questions for the interviews, but our approach was to keep the interviews semi-structured and iterative. Broadly, we focused on the ways in which feminist research was conducted in development and humanitarian settings, how resources are accessed, and the needs of the researchers doing this work.

DATA ANALYSIS

Our approach to analysing the data was to do a discourse analysis of the research interviews, looking at the emerging narratives that researchers shared. In working with the data, we were interested in the 'stories' that emerged from it. Our approach was twofold. First, we were interested in 'longer stretches of talk'- to engage with the narrative and perspective that emerged. In so doing, we were conscious that narratives are not just 'individual material,' but are shaped by the formats available to those telling the story and reflect the perspectives and values from their communities- that human agency is at play within social structures (De Vault and Gross, 2014). Second, we sought to extract broad themes from the interviews. We looked at the discourse primarily from the perspective of identifying best practice in feminist research in humanitarian and development settings and its associated challenges and coded all the material that related to these broad thematic areas. The narrative material was split into these themes and coding evolved as we became more familiar with the text. Similar issues that cut across the interviews were used to form sub-text, which we used as the basis for analysis. Given the interconnectedness of the sub-themes, we parallel coded the text where the same text was classified in two or more categories. Each category was then used to elicit trends and tensions in the dominant discursive frameworks.

LIMITATIONS

In a context of having to conduct the study in a relatively short period, we primarily relied upon reaching out to feminist researchers within our networks. Our key informants are the ones who responded to a call- those whom we were able to access and were able to make time to talk to us. All data collection was done online, given the context of COVID-19, as well as wanting to reach out to informants in different parts of the world. Another key limitation is that all except one interview was conducted in English and the literature review only included English language literature.

We do not presume that a literature review and eight key informant interviews are able to paint an adequate picture of how feminist research on VAW is conducted in humanitarian and development settings. However, it does provide a snapshot into the ways in which some researchers are working, the challenges they face, and the ways in which they try to circumvent these. The researchers we spoke to all operate in places of leadership in their specific context. In many instances, they are creating spaces by developing feminist networks (Feminist Africa, Feminist Friday in Peshawars) and / or publishing on violence against women. They all have a sharp analysis of local and global systems and were able to talk about their individual experiences in doing feminist research in developmental and humanitarian settings. This dual positionality may give them relative access to power and resources that other researchers in their ecosystem may not have.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist research in development and humanitarian settings has to hold the consideration of power and material inequalities in the centre of the research frame. Decolonising knowledge production in in these contexts includes several things (Keikelame and Swartz, 2019):
• Engaging with who has control over resources and the ways in which resource power is used.
• Considering who gets to define and frame the research problem and methods and the extent to which local knowledge is used or undermined.
• Seeking to ensure that local worldviews, cultural values, and languages are used to drive the research process.
• Reflecting on how research findings are translated into actions that do not cause harm and seek to promote social justice (Ibid).

A political agenda of decolonising research together with that of the consideration of the ethics of the research is particularly important in development and humanitarian settings, especially so when colonialisation is inextricably linked to the socio-economic contexts of these settings. Power, trust, cultural competence- respectful research processes that are culturally appropriate-and the recognition of individual and communal assets at local level are pivotal to designing research projects in development and humanitarian settings.

INSIDER/ OUTSIDER: THE TENSION OF 'GIVING VOICE' TO OTHERS:

Feminist theorists (e.g. Harding 1991) argue that to hear voice, we have to 'begin with experience,' making experience 'hearable' and subjecting it to systematic analysis. Some feminist researchers, however, point out that in so doing, it is impossible to represent others in a way that is not tainted by a researcher's own needs and desires (Clough, 1992). The construction of similarity and difference influences every aspect of the research project – shaping the questions researchers ask and those that they do not, the ease or difficulty in recruiting informants, the kind of rapport that develops in the encounter and the lens through which researchers produce and analyse data. In the context of development and humanitarian settings, this calls into question what the constraints and advantages are of having either insider or outsider researchers conduct research work. Bahkru (2008) reminds us that we need to understand how we can simultaneously be an insider, an outsider, both, and neither in the research process. Subjectivity in the research process plays an important role, especially so when different aspects of a researcher's self become more prominent in some contexts than in others. Social class, positioning, age, ethnicity and sexuality are foregrounded in some interactions, but remain muted in others (Ibid).

INVOLVING LOCAL RESEARCHERS

Social constructivism on VAW in development and humanitarian settings would benefit epistemologically from ensuring that local researchers are involved in the research process. In particular, the research design process must take into account the problem of transferring or imposing conceptual and linguistic categories and their content across intellectual, relational and social spaces, which are not similar or interchangeable (Zavos and Biglia, 2009). It is therefore important to build research capacity in LMICs and to tap into this capacity, recognising that there is much to learn from local researchers and knowledge-based practitioners. They have much to offer in speaking local languages, are cognisant of cultural sensitivities, community protocols and how to navigate them, and can provide contextualised insight into findings (Keikelame and Swartz, 2019).

UNEQUAL POWER DYNAMICS IN RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

In line with the historical legacy of high-income countries (HICs) dominating and controlling resources, including intellectual resources, (Ghosh, 2016), researchers from LMICs are often given less access and legitimacy, even when they hold a higher position in their associated institution (Jok, 2011). This unequal power dynamic affects how researchers are perceived in the field, and by extension, their ability to safely access and work with communities (Jok, 2011; Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018). Researchers, even very junior ones coming from institutions located in HICs, have easier access to research subjects, local partners, and labour when working in fragile states and humanitarian contexts, which can result in ethically tenuous scenarios (Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018).

Given the dependence on foreign donors in development and humanitarian settings, foreign researchers from HICs often benefit disproportionately from access to resources given that they have greater access to high-level government officials, donors and other leaders. Jok (2011) describes, for example, that Western aid and development workers appeared to have greater power with the local population as they frequently have greater proximity to needed resources and power structures in comparison to local researchers. He describes how he expected to hold legitimacy with the community as someone who was more capable of accurately translating their culture. Yet, he was perceived as being subordinate to his European colleagues. This was partially linked to the fact that they controlled relief items that everyone wanted and needed (Ibid). Donors who support researchers from HICs doing work in LMICs have to think carefully through the concomitant implications in relation to research ethics and accountability, particularly so in conducting research on VAW with women who live in conditions of poverty, conflict, and other intersecting challenges. The research process therefore has to pay particular attention to normalised hierarchies in the production of knowledge.
Sibai et al (2019) also point out that in global research partnerships, regional academics are often relegated to the role of securing institutional review board approvals and data collection and are marginalised from contributing to the interpretation of findings, write-up, and academic authorship. Even amongst organisations seeking to 'decolonise' or 'localise' research through partnership processes, there remains a clear hierarchy in both presumed and imagined roles between institutions located in HICs and their 'partners' in developing and humanitarian contexts (Zimmerman et.al., 2016).

The tendency to structure research partnerships around existing global power dynamics is no less prevalent in feminist research contexts. Leung et.al (2021) note that often the attempt to 'fit' feminist questions into research tools, or seeking input from local women's organisations, is a mere afterthought and that the commitment to feminist principles is merely symbolic. Genuine commitment to taking a feminist approach to research begins by applying a feminist lens to all stages of the research process – from study design all the way through to communication and dissemination of findings and where and how the money flows (Ibid).

RESEARCH DESIGN AND ETHICS

VAW researchers are working with women who have experienced significant trauma in terms of their experiences of gendered violence and are often contending with other conditions that induce high levels of strain. Issues such as food insecurity, the lack of access to basic services, the destruction of infrastructure, poor health, and living in tenuous circumstances play a critical role in how key informants can participate in research, especially so in humanitarian and development settings.The security risks faced by key informants and researchers have to take centre stage in the research design. Issues of access, including the related logistical challenges and working in a context where people have been displaced, also play a critical role in participation (Jok, 2011). In 2001, the World Health

Organization (WHO) published guidelines that emphasised
the safety of the research team and respondents above all else (World Health Organization, 2001). In 2007, the WHO standards for research were adapted further for VAW research in emergency settings. The primary adaptation focused on ensuring both proper risk management and methodological soundness and ensuring that one does not come at the expense of the other (WHO, 2007). Both of these resources provide measures for ethical research practice and design and emphasise that researchers and donors have an ethical responsibility to use research to advance policy and intervention strategies for women and girls.

VICARIOUS TRAUMA

Increasing attention has been given to the psychosocial impact of working in humanitarian contexts and repeated exposure to traumatic stories through the research processes. In 2009, at the SVRI Forum, researchers raised the need for better support structures to minimise the risks faced by researchers, including the prevalence of vicarious trauma (Coles et.al, 2010). The notion of vicarious trauma emerged in research on burnout among social workers (Bell, Kulkarni, Dalton, 2003). Defined as "the transformation of the researcher's inner experience as a result of empathetic and/or repeated engagement with sexual violence survivors and their trauma material," vicarious trauma can be as debilitating as primary experiences of trauma (Bell, Kularni, Dalton, pp.464, 2003). It can have a wide range of manifestations, including shifts in sleep patterns; fundamental changes in how researchers view the world and their sense of safety; and physical stress manifestations such as depression and anxiety. Manifestations of vicarious trauma vary from person to person and appear to be influenced by a range of overlapping factors such as personal histories, research contexts, and organisational and community support structures (Coles et.al., 2010).

FINDINGS

Our findings are organised broadly into two categories – best practices emerging from our key informant interviews on conducting feminist research on VAW and the challenges that researchers face doing this work. A common thread between both best practices and challenges was the multi-layered analysis researchers shared in the interviews – weaving together the personal and structural as a reflection of their feminist values repeatedly during our conversations.

5.1 CHALLENGES IN CONDUCTING FEMINIST RESEARCH ON VAW IN DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS

One of the core objectives of this study was to shed light on the challenges experienced in conducting feminist research on VAW in humanitarian and developmental contexts. Our key informants named a wide range of challenges- from a lack of mental space to do research (i.e. working in strict time constraints with limited space for conceptualisation and imagining research design), limited resources (money, time, access, power) and structural barriers such as limited access to global strategic platforms and forums to disseminate their research, including publishing outlets.

A key emerging issue was that failure to account for the multi-layered, intersecting realities that the researchers face in humanitarian and developmental settings can result in a defaulting to an individualistic, western, care-centred framework

5.1.1 THE RISK OF FRAMING RESEARCH AS FEMINIST

One of the foundational challenges we encountered was with the term 'feminist' itself. Half of our key informants expressed concerns in labelling their research as feminist. They said that it was detrimental to their access, positionality, and understanding of their work- even though some continued to use this grounding. For those concerned about identifying as feminist researchers, their concern was rooted in the stigma attached to the term 'feminist.' Three of the researchers who identified publicly as feminists echoed the experience of the negative connotations associated with feminism. Nidžara Ahmetašević explained it as follows:

> *"I have a feeling that this feminist approach and having a feminist lens on the world is more trouble than it helps you, even though we are living in the present time where everyone is talking about feminism. It's really, really difficult. I sometimes feel that it's exactly because of the feminist approach that some of these resources I need - I don't have... if you are openly feminist - if you call yourself a radical feminist - even not radical, any feminist, if you do that very openly - many doors in front of you will close down."*

Key informants noted two significant access issues in using the label 'feminist researcher.' The first is the way it could shut down opportunities to access funding and policy spaces and the second is in gaining access to research participants. Yet, importantly, even in the instances where researchers opted not to identify as 'feminist,' they were committed to the core principles of feminist research. All the key informants saw the value in producing knowledge centred on the telling of experience, one in which the centring of women's narratives are integral to how women make sense of their worlds.

5.1.2 PHYSICAL RISKS AND SECURITY CONCERNS FOR RESEARCHERS AND RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Researchers working on VAW have played an essential role in gathering the data needed to platform VAW as a human rights issue. Yet the process of researching VAW can be a heavy burden to carry. Researchers doing this work in humanitarian and development settings face many risks – including the risk of physical assault, retribution while conducting research and after publishing, and the emotional and psychological effects of repeated exposure to stories of violence and trauma, including vicarious trauma. The risks of doing feminist research in terms of its implications for safety and well-being are important at two levels- namely, the potential risks for the researcher as well as for the research participants. A researcher who works as an 'outsider' in active conflict zones described this:

> *"I stick out in most places that I work in, I don't blend. So, you know, when you're in a place that is not secure, you are conscious every hour that you are on the ground and the fact that people know that you are there. It's never relaxed. Every single nerve ending in your body is on hyper alert. I've got people looking after me, people who organise my day and my security and transit and stuff. But, I have to hand over my trust to them. They tell me what time to get in a car, and I get in a car and arrive at a place. My job is to get out of the car, get the data, do the work, listen to women and then have people tell me when it's time to leave.*
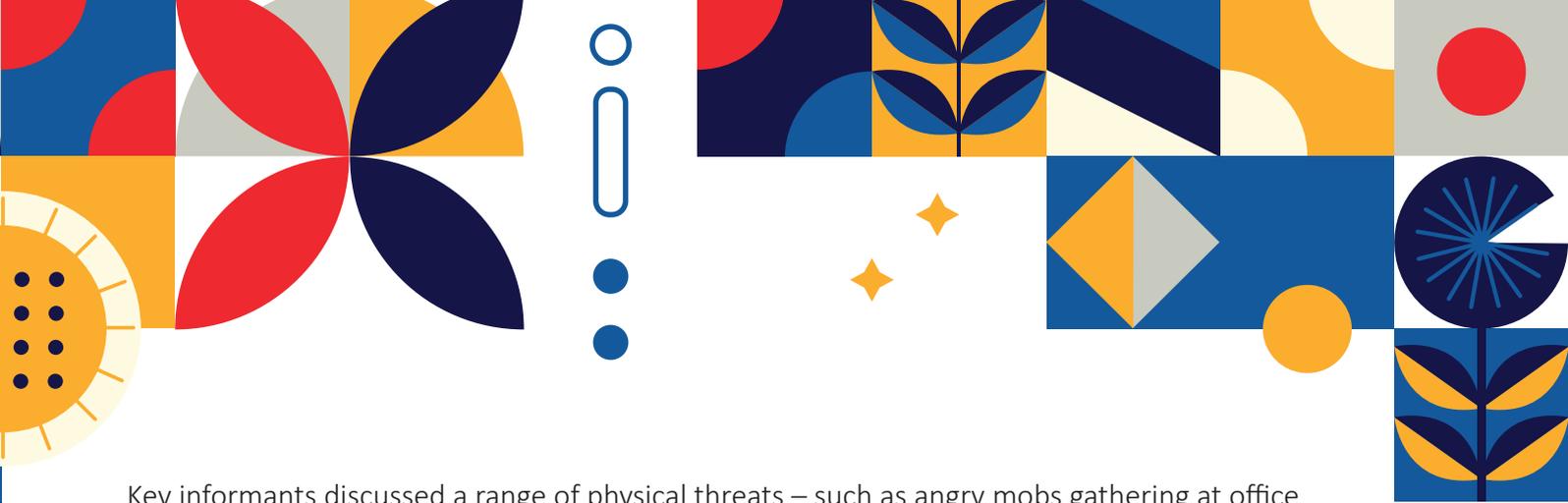
Key informants discussed a range of physical threats – such as angry mobs gathering at office gates, persistent threats during fieldwork, and detention and arrest by the police. Michele Batende, a Cameroonian land activist and VAW researcher, shared an experience while documenting environmental and labour abuses with women in palm plantations:

"One day, I was chased by the security guards of one of these enterprises and I had to escape on a motorbike. I knew I had to because if they caught me, they would have arrested me or something like that - it's not easy to be in the forest and take information. You must be careful of your life."

Key informants also talked about their concerns in keeping their research participants safe during the research process. One of our four key informants sums this up:

"You are constantly guided by 'do no harm.' For me, the biggest consideration is making sure that my interviews are comfortable and safe. Safety is a big issue when you are talking about sexual exploitation and abuse. Whether people are being abused by military actors or humanitarian workers – it can be really dangerous for them to speak to me. So, you know, there is also a lot of consideration around – is anyone able to hear? How do we minimise risks to them? There are a whole bunch of different things that you are thinking about and you have to put very careful plans together. For a day that I spend in the field, weeks go into prepping it, but once you're in, it doesn't go according to a careful plan. It just doesn't."

Implementing rigorous ethical and safety protocols and minimising the risk of re-traumatisation for participants extends beyond individual interview practices to broader methodological issues that accompany the research design and who, ultimately, does the research. Esther Cowley-Malcom emphasised the importance of following cultural protocols in ensuring the safety of researchers as a form of safety, especially in communities- such as New Zealand's indigenous communities:

"As you know, some population groups have been researched… And there's a lot of mistrust in these communities about research, and researchers. For us in the field, the way that we have combatted this is by getting people who have a reputation within these communities….people that are trusted within the community, and it's also about putting protocols together, that actually talk about that relationship. You need to know that there will be people who will be there from your community, who will know your community."

It was clear from key informant interviews that the lack of awareness and implementation of existing safety and trauma protocols by organisations, coupled with the lack of organisational prioritisation of psychosocial support, often exacerbated the risks of this work. In light of the underlying risk that accompanies research on VAW, institutions commissioning and conducting research in development and humanitarian settings have a responsibility to ensure that researchers, and the teams that work with them, have the resources; training; and protocols in place to mitigate unnecessary risks even if it requires more budget; more time; and more planning.

5.1.3 LACK OF ORGANISATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR RESEARCHER WELLBEING

Our interviews with key informants showed that, on the whole, very little support was provided to researchers from the organisations that they work for. Despite some examples of instances when organisations seemed to show support for researchers, it was generally felt that this was done on an ad hoc basis and was mostly inadequate or initiated by researchers themselves as a way of taking care of each other. All the researchers interviewed shared stories about times when their organisations left them to their own devices to figure out how to care for themselves and stay safe while doing their work.

A common narrative shared by researchers was the initial shock of beginning to do data collection as young women and the rapid transformation it had on their understanding of the world, the politics they held, and the work they continue to do. Many spoke of how unprepared they were for what they would encounter. Michele Batende explained it as follows:

> *"When I was in the field for the first time and seeing those women mistreated, those women with little children suffering, one day I cried. Not just one day, many days. The impact of when you are first to see and face those kinds of problems and issues. I was crying. Crying, crying, crying for five minutes or ten minutes before beginning my interviews. It was traumatic. Because we are in a town without knowing what is in the village - what women are facing. When you face those kinds of issues, if you don't cry, if you aren't traumatised, then it means you aren't a human being. I was really shocked."*

In addition to age playing a factor in initial experiences of trauma and shock, the ability to separate oneself from the field of research was also a factor in psychosocial risk and wellness. For researchers working in active or post-conflict societies or working with the communities they were from, the notion of pausing to reflect and digest what they were experiencing was not possible. It required a combination of both being 'present in the moment' to do the research, but also putting a layer of distance between themselves and the urgency of a rapidly unfolding contextual situation. Nidzara Ahmetašević describes this:

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8 See, for example:
Antares Foundation (2012) 'Guidelines for managing stress in humanitarian workers'
https://www.antaresfoundation.org/filestore/si/1164337/1/1167964/managing_stress_in_humanitarian_aid_workers_guidelines_for_good_practice.pdf?etag=4a88e3afb4f73629c068ee24d9bd30d9 accessed Nov 2021
World Health Organization (2007) Ethical and Safety recommendations for researching, documenting, and monitoring sexual violence in emergencies
World Health Organization (2001) 'Putting Women First- Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Research on Domestic Violence Against Women and Girls'. Geneva, Switzerland.

"We are talking about life in post-war countries - deeply traumatised people and places where there is nothing. Literally nothing. Just colleagues dealing with colleagues out of friendship and understanding and because we were going through the same things. I never ever had any kind of professional support - we didn't even think of that as a problem- we were just, like, dealing with it in the moment...we didn't have proper chairs. I've never had a chance to live in that kind of country where people can take care of themselves in that way."

Another researcher who worked with women in active conflict zones described having to place her focus entirely on her research participants while remaining 'hyper-vigilant' of the situation around her. This lack of space or capacity to remove oneself from a state of constant urgency inevitably has ramifications on people's long-term mental health, sense of self, and life beyond the research. Rajni, who works in the region she is from, talked about how her work permeated her life, that it was difficult to draw rigid boundaries between the two:

"I was always preoccupied and thinking about my cases. Always thinking about what I needed to do the next day for a particular case - what should be my next steps, what strategy will work best, where should I go, who should I go to, should I approach the police. I would spend a restless night contemplating what I need to work on to help the woman whose case I'm working on to get justice."

Most key informants said that their organisations could be doing much more to support feminist researchers and frontline workers responsible for gathering the stories, information, and data that made transformative policies and research possible. Friederike Bubenzer, a South African researcher and project leader in peace-building interventions in humanitarian settings, explained:

"I think we totally underestimate and under-prioritise and pay too little attention to the psychological impact of the material that we engage with at an organisational and institutional level. And I know this for a fact because I do some research on this - organisations don't yet realise the long-term damage that - whether you call it vicarious trauma - or whether you call it the so-called 'truth threshold,' which is this notion that you can only absorb so much difficult information until your own compassion and empathy reserves are sort of empty."

Key informants shared the many ways, materially and culturally, that organisations fail to demonstrate the leadership; understanding; and the empathy required to support researchers in the ways that are needed. This covered a broad spectrum of issues, such as not offering risk insurance, data refills for phones, securing safe transportation, and failing to make space or to develop timelines that allowed for debriefing, processing, and psychological support. Only two of our key informants worked at an
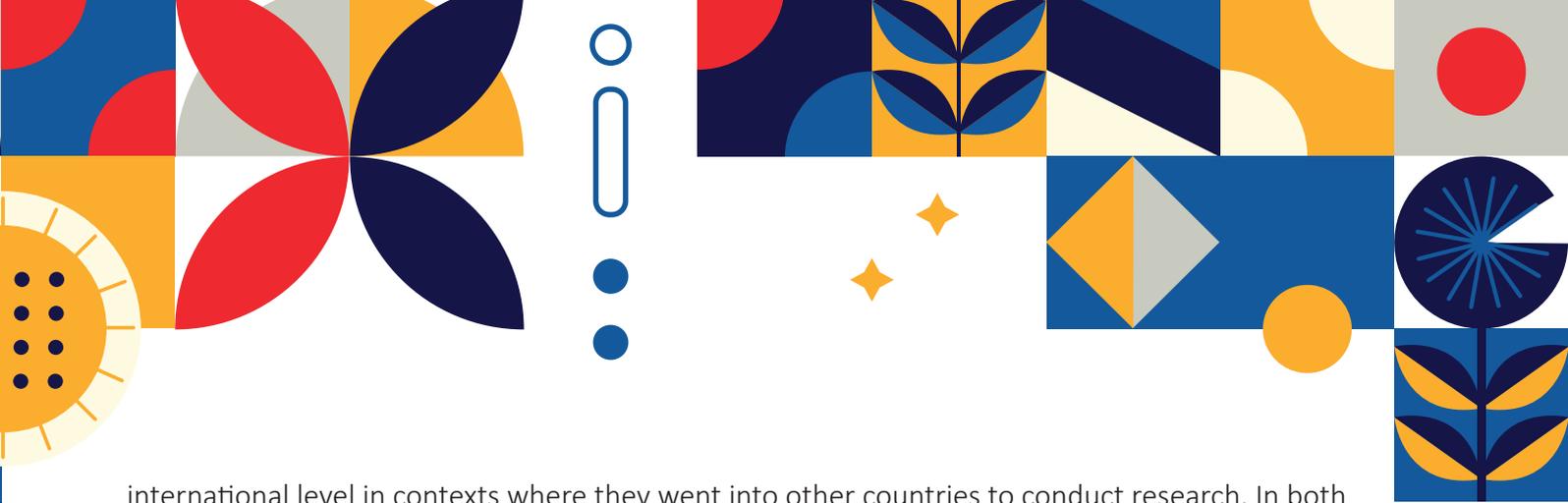
international level in contexts where they went into other countries to conduct research. In both these instances, the organisations who employed them sought to ensure that they were safe, but both agreed with the view that psychosocial support for researchers doing this work was lacking. Many researchers spoke of how inadequate, or non-existent their initial training or preparation was and how, in retrospect, access to training (including security protocols and how to handle trauma in the field), would have been helpful in mitigating harm.

For feminist researchers working as consultants, the lack of support was even more acute- with no consideration for mental health or psychosocial support built into contracts or project timelines. Researchers spoke of the complete lack of empathy from clients to the challenges of this work and their failure to create and maintain timelines that were supportive and respectful of their labour.

Key informants identified a number of reasons as to why organisations were failing researchers in implementing effective safety and care mechanisms. These included, inter alia, a mixture of limited resources, limited understanding of the impact of the work on researchers, and the continued de-prioritisation of psychosocial support as an area to invest in. Furthermore, while many researchers spoke of the need for psychosocial support, a few also shared that a continued over-prioritisation of western conceptions of individualised self-care (such as therapy) created an unrealistically expensive image of self-care protocols that were difficult to implement at any sort of scale.

5.1.4 CONTINUED HIERARCHY AS TO WHOSE VOICES MATTER IN POLICY AND RESEARCH SPACES

Many researchers spoke about the continued challenge of having outsider knowledge prioritised over local knowledge and lived experience. Representation and access to spaces to disseminate research and influence policy came up as a structural tension, even in feminist spaces. Nidžara Ahmetašević talked about how researchers from HICs are often seen to have more credibility to talk about VAW in LMICs, while the local researchers who live and work there are ignored:

"They dismiss me as potentially biased because I am coming from that part of the world and that background. Even for topics like migration, but also for sexual violence like war violence I am seen differently, I am listened to differently...Even if I have the academic background, even if I use hundreds of names, I will still be a Bosnian woman with a certain type of heavy past. I will be biased and she will be an academic and proper researcher, and I will be a survivor."

At times, feminist researchers have to find strategic ways of presenting their work that makes it more 'palatable' for those engaging with it. Michele Batende, for example, explained how, even though her research was eventually beginning to gain traction among Cameroonian parliamentarians, they were cognisant of using 'softer' language as a strategy to generate buy-in.

Researchers were clear that feminist spaces were not immune to replicating the harm of exclusion, racism, and ongoing processes linked to colonisation. Silvia Salinas Mulder talked about an experience of working with feminist researchers during an evaluation with a powerful indigenous women leader.
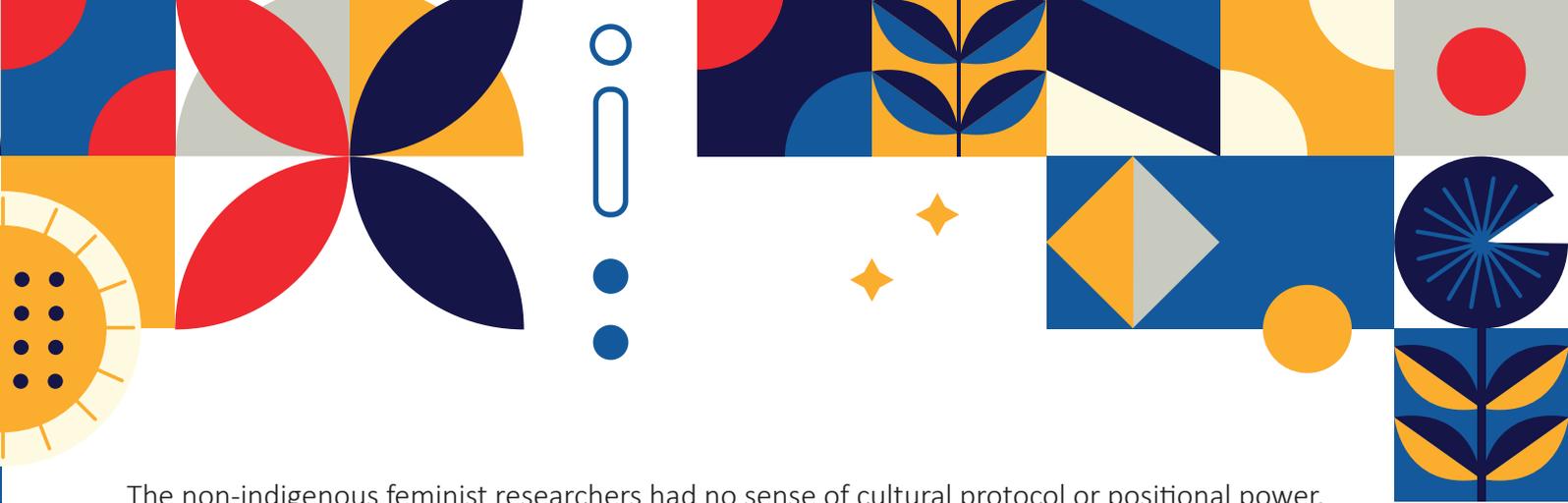
The non-indigenous feminist researchers had no sense of cultural protocol or positional power, displaying in their body language a lack of hospitality and a complete ignorance of indigenous protocols and practice:

"And I was just pale and started to sweat because you could see the power and I could see the power relations and the disrespect there….I don't think we can avoid thinking that we women are very, not only diverse, but we are also very unequal and we need to face it, you know, we need to acknowledge it and we need to be conscious."

Esther Cowley-Malcom described the structural hierarchies that continue to dominate research spaces as an ongoing struggle:

"You're not just struggling at one level; you're struggling at multiple levels to give your research that credibility…Because we know that the hardest thing is to change a system. And those systems, once institutionalised, are even harder and we can see how abusive those institutions can be towards different communities. You know, within the feminist framework of research, there is also a lot of racism and oppression. And that's another layer. Another layer of work to resolve and to rectify. To deconstruct."

Key informants were unanimous in saying that there was a need to think more creatively about how to platform and amplify the work of researchers from humanitarian and development contexts. Where research partnerships are formed between researchers from HICs and LMICs, these have to be equitable and led by researchers from LMICs. Esther's example of indigenous research advisory councils provides a replicable model for providing contextual support for researchers operating in contexts that they are not familiar with.

5.1.5 RESOURCING FEMINIST RESEARCH ON VAW IN DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS

Most key informants had trouble in accessing the resources they needed for their work. This is supported by the findings of the SVRI study that tracked aid flows to research on VAW from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD's) Creditor Reporting System (CRS) database.[9]

While some key informants were associated with institutions that had relatively good funding compared with others, their experience was that it was easier to source funds for programmatic work on VAW than for research. Two key informants, who worked as practice-based knowledge practitioners, added that there were significant gaps in resources and that some organisations refused to pay basic costs such as phone bills or refused to take care of those who took ill during fieldwork. Michele Batende talked about the critical role that funders could play in encouraging community-based organisations to adapt resource allocation practices that more comprehensively centred the needs of community researchers:

9 https://www.svri.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2022-03-15/Trackingfunding.pdf

"Some organisations don't have much funds to take care of basic care. Others might have money but not think about this. The one who gives money can control you. We know our organisations sometimes don't have these ideas to take care of who they employ. The funder can have influence on the organisation to say the person you employ should have basic protection."

Michele's point drives home the reality that donors wield significant power. If they place an emphasis, for example, on care for feminist researchers, then this is more likely to be taken seriously. Our key informants also talked about how it seemed that it was much harder for researchers working in humanitarian and development contexts to access funding for research than it was for researchers from HICs to access funding to do research on VAW in the same context.

In addition to financial resources, key informants spoke about the need for other resources, such as more trauma-informed and gender-sensitive translators, infrastructure support in the form of computers and data, and increased access to the global scholarship databases that drive and influence the direction of conversations and thought leadership. Many identified the need for both the time and space to work on longer-term research projects. This was also a finding in the SVRI study on tracking funding flows to research on VAW in LMICs.[10] Our key informant interviews showed that there is a need to think about how to better prioritise and resource research on VAW in humanitarian and development settings, particularly the work of researchers who are from LMICs.

5.2 BEST PRACTICES

5.2.1 FEMINIST RESEARCH AND REFLEXIVITY

Reflexivity- the ability to interrogate our own positions in the research process and let go of the false idea that we are the all-knowing authority (Leavy and Harris, 2019) was a frequent reference point for our key informants. Reflexivity is widely accepted as a core feminist research practice. In development and humanitarian contexts, where unequal power dynamics are heightened by violence, rapidly shifting social contexts, extreme poverty, and a lack of safe spaces for victims of VAW, an active reflexive practice is critical is minimising the extractive aspects of doing research. In this context, the ability of a researcher to recognise their bias, power and position within these contexts is particularly important.

Part of a reflexive practice for the researchers we worked with included thinking holistically about the composition of the research team, including the ecosystem of community members (such as community health workers, elders, translators, interpreters, and people who held local leadership positions) who give researchers the access and contextual insight needed for good quality research. Esther Cowely-Malcom, reflected on how, too often, these contributions are rendered invisible due to their lack of 'formal' academic credentials and how, in the process invaluable opportunities for community-led analysis and knowledge production is missed:
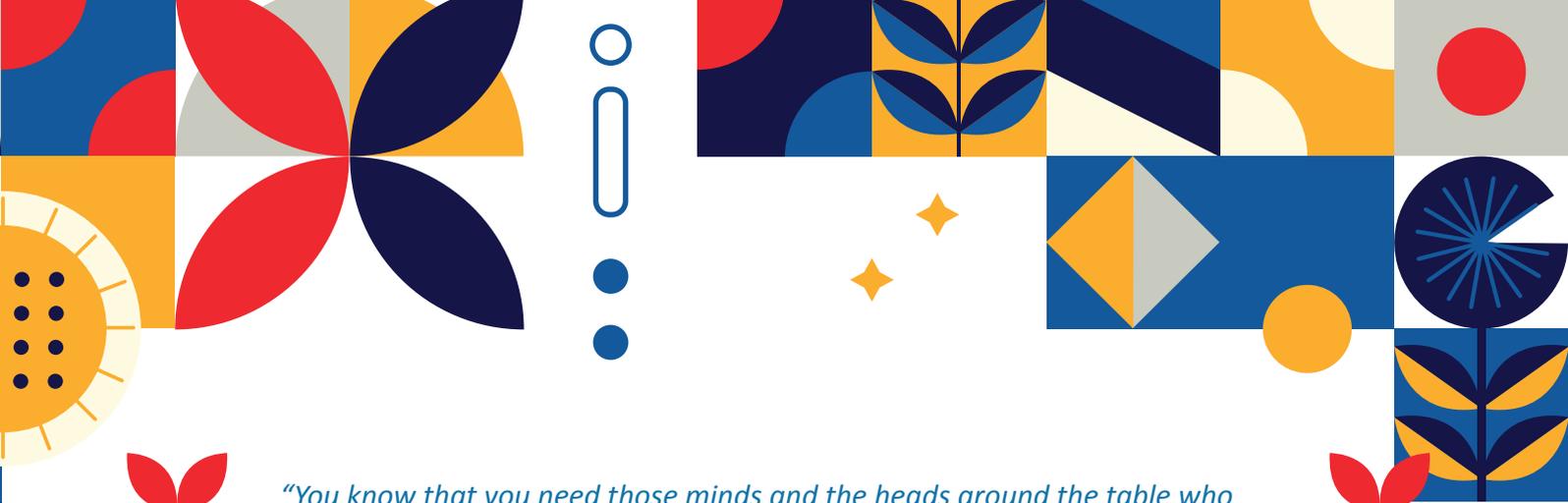
"You know that you need those minds and the heads around the table who really know their community and who have gone out to get that data. When you're doing peer-to-peer interviews with, you know, women survivors ...about what types of violence have the greatest impact on their lives. Those are really close and deep meaningful conversations that you're having. So having somebody from that culture and that understanding and that awareness of how to actually facilitate that process is really, really important. And to have the people to do that is fundamental to research."

Another key theme to emerge in relation to reflexivity was the ways in which feminist theory became embodied in praxis. In this relationship between thought and action, feminist researchers situated their feminism as a moral compass of sorts and used it to make decisions about the choices they make and the lives they try to live both in the research process and outside of it. Generally, this seems to manifest in a deep appreciation of social justice and asking questions about normative processes. Tahira Kaleem, a feminist researcher, organiser, and development practitioner in Pakistan talked about how her feminism was an integral part of who she was:

"I am trained and nurtured by this South Asian ideology of sisterhood and equal rights, a feminist methodology can't be separated from myself and my life. I think of myself as a feminist. I might not be radical in my words and actions but I'm making a space for myself in the context that I live. Making sure my voice is heard. Making sure other people's voices are heard….it's a way of life and living and without it I might not recognise myself."

As discussed in the literature review, feminist methods are interested in power and the ways in which it plays out during the data collection and analysis process. Our key informants talked about how reflexive practices (both individual and peer-to-peer) was an instrumental part of their research process and accountability protocols in trying to mitigate against the re-traumatising effects that researching VAW can have in development and humanitarian settings. Friederike Bubenzer, talked about the importance of using an intersectional analysis as part of the process of reflexivity, to bring to the surface the multiple, intersecting ways in which constructions of identity are linked to power:

"I think another key thing is the fact that our work and our research is very much focused in the Global South. And I have a very unique position as a South African woman, a white South African woman who as a result of my privilege can express and articulate and access corridors of power in a way that others can't. That allows me to translate what I witness and observe and learn on the ground in countries like South Africa, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Kenya in high-level spaces that are still predominantly dominated by international organisations led by people from the Global North and often elderly white men. And so, I guess the bottom line is that I try to use my power in order to represent- and be very aware of the fact that I can't speak and - won't speak on behalf of… But I'm very aware that when I speak, people listen and that is not the case for some of the colleagues I work with in the South and I have a deep commitment to them."
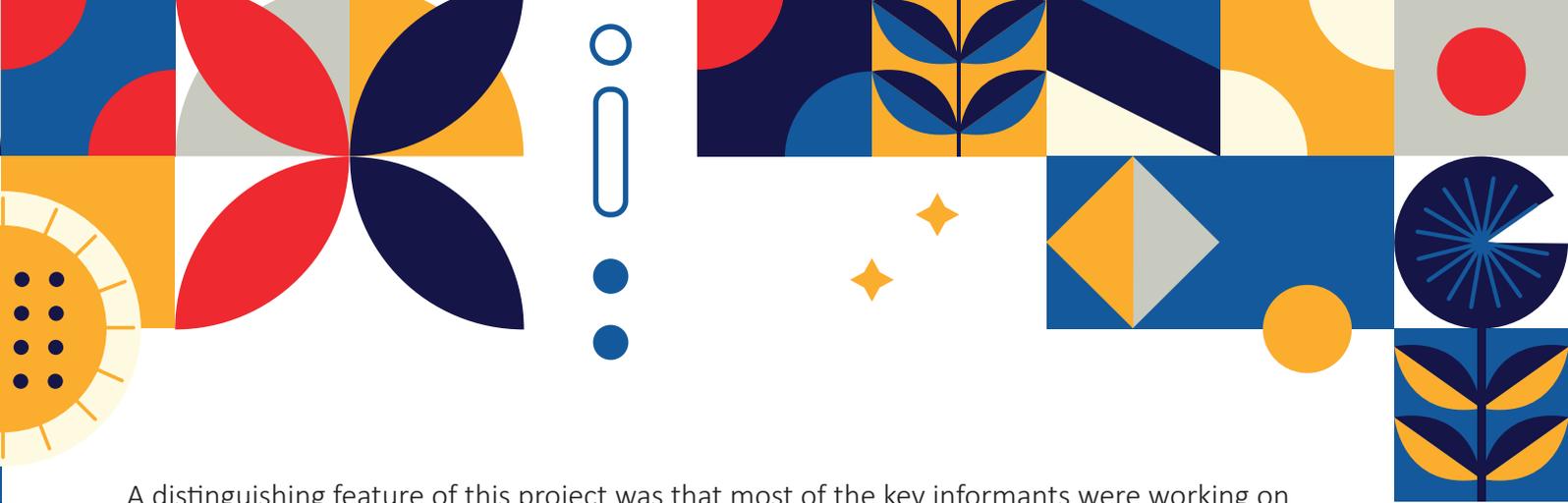
A distinguishing feature of this project was that most of the key informants were working on research initiatives in and with the communities where they live/come from. They talked about how this greatly benefited the research process. In instances where researchers were working in different communities/ countries, the notion of identifying with those who were being researched and an accompanying sense of accountability to them, and subsequently a commitment to contributing to change, was a key theme. This commitment to accountability to communities- and an adeptness at locating themselves reflexively in their research contexts- emerged as a best practice model that added value and depth to the evidence gathered.

Of interest is how feminist research entrenched and added to the construction of feminist identity. Nidžara, a Bosnian feminist researcher, human rights defender, and journalist currently working on issues of migration through a feminist lens, shared that her work with Bosnian survivors of genocide and war fundamentally expanded her definition of what it means to live a feminist life:

"It's amazing what these women survived and managed to achieve through their life and the lessons and what one can learn from them about feminism without mentioning feminism. And that's a big thing...The strength that these women are fighting for their rights and for others is really important. It is the most important lesson in my life. I learned from these women that I should not give up – that I need to look at everything to seek and insist on justice. To insist that we are equal and have the right to know, to say, to do."

Key informants demonstrating reflexivity in their research placed their own identity, positionality and relationship to their work as a site of inquiry in the research process. Holding accountability through processes of reflexivity- and the deep attention that reflexivity requires- became a broader personal practice that permeated other aspects of researchers' lives. Rajni[11] - a gender-based violence social worker and knowledge based practitioner with over 18 years of experience in rural North India, explained

"Over the years, listening to so many cases day in and day out, I have developed a stamina to be able to listen to women and girls for hours. I'm not distracted and only focused on listening, whether it's two or three hours. I have developed the skill to listen deeply. And this skill of deep listening is something I also carry to other parts of my life. I believe this is a strength that I now have."

Reflexivity requires an examination of our biases, lens, and personal histories and the ways in which this shapes how we do research. In this process, reflexivity places the self as a site of potential transformation and broader social change. The location of the self within broader research subjects emerged repeatedly as being ethically required in doing research in development and humanitarian settings.

11 Note that Rajni asked to be identified by her first name only.

5.2.2 KEEPING COMMUNITIES AT THE CENTRE

A common theme emerging from the interviews was the ways in which feminist research is participatory in nature, seeking to subvert power dynamics and create meaningful ways of participant engagement. Key to this was the question, 'What is meaningful participant engagement?' What does it mean to listen and how does one move from listening to supporting a woman to be seen and heard? At the heart of this is a sense of trust between the researcher and research participants. Building trusting relationships does more than just contribute to the collection of 'good' data. When operating in volatile humanitarian or development contexts, the construction of an intentional empathetic space was one of the most fundamental tools researchers had to dismantle power hierarchies and reduce the possibility of potentially re-traumatising research participants to relive some of their most traumatic life moments.

### 5.2.3 CENTRING COMMUNITY PROTOCOLS, PRACTICES, AND KNOWLEDGE

One of the extractive tendencies of research has been a lack of engagement with community protocols that build relationships and trust. This has entailed the undervaluing and dismissal of the implicit value of the lived experience and knowledge of people living in development and humanitarian settings. For researchers who are outsiders, getting to know community protocols takes time and intention. Given the constraints of time when researching in these contexts, local researchers and advisory councils with deep-rooted knowledge of a community are a key resource.

Esther Cowley-Malcom shared a range of participatory practices used by Pacific researchers rooted in culture, care, and a recognition of community protocols. For instance, in her community, where hospitality and the ability to serve food to a house guest is important, researchers often travel with tea and biscuits to incorporate this community practice without taking away from a family's next meal. Another strategy used by researchers was building relationships with community members during initial research visits, even in conflict zones, and then staying in touch. The ensuing personal interactions helped to reveal more about a context and place than preliminary conversations. Core to this was the creation of a community advisory panel that surrounded and advised on research. These panels, composed of trusted members of the community where the research is taking place, supported researchers in implementing ethical protocols. In this way, both the communities participating in research and the researcher carried the responsibility for reducing harm together.

Both Rajni and Títílopẹ Àjàyí, a feminist researcher based at the University of Ghana and a member of the Feminist Africa editorial board, spoke about the importance of spending time answering preliminary questions from research participants and community members to help develop a sense of ease and lay the initial seeds of trust.

5.2.4 HONOUR THE VALUE OF EMOTIONS IN RESEARCH

Feminist epistemology recognises emotions as a source of knowledge. The tension of conducting research on VAW entails the re-engagement with traumatic and painful memories for research participants. Key informants talked about how to mitigate against harm in this process and how to centre humanity and connectivity in their research approach. A challenge for researchers was how to engage with emotions in a way that was supportive without proper training. Títílopẹ Àjàyí described this engagement with a research participant:
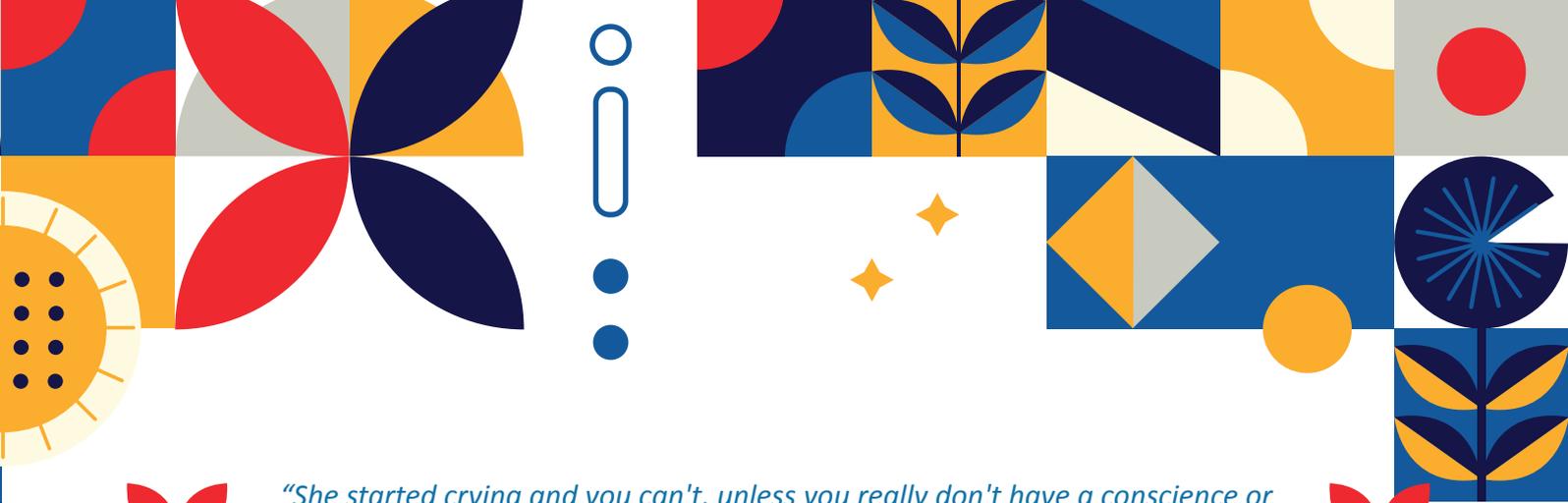
"She started crying and you can't, unless you really don't have a conscience or human feeling, be in that situation and not feel something. Now, if you start crying, obviously you're contributing to the person's trauma right? If you don't cry, it kind of looks like you don't care, you're just there for what you can get. I was conflicted. At some point I shifted from researcher to a sort of counsellor. I was trying to encourage her and I couldn't tell her everything would be all right, but I just tried to say something that would make her feel better."

The researchers we spoke with felt that holding space for emotion led to better data collection processes and ultimately better data. Silvia Silinas Mulder, a Bolivian evaluator and researcher, describes this as follows:

"I feel this is something good - to express feelings in the conversation, right? I don't pretend to be this strong, very rigorous evaluator. I think rigour lies in other places. I like to talk with people and I also like to express empathy... I think that for me it is good if I feel sad or, you know, express empathy. And I can still be a good evaluator in a way, it's still doing a good job. I think in a way this has been part of my, let's say, success... specifically with women in field work. I think that, you know, expressing - trying to build empathy...I think it has to be a healthy relationship if it tackles hard things and hard situations, right?"

In recognising the emotions of both the researched and the researcher, we step away from viewing the research process as being 'objective.' Instead, we acknowledge them and try to think through how they contribute to the research process.

5.2.5 SELF-CARE AND RESEARCHER WELLNESS

Experiences of vicarious trauma can be debilitating and can have a wide range of manifestations, including shifts in sleep pattern; fundamental changes in how researchers view the world and their sense of safety; and physical stress manifestations such as depression and anxiety.[12] Symptoms vary from person to person and are influenced by a range of overlapping factors such as personal histories, research context, and organisational and community support structures.[13] As demonstrated by the SVRI's research on the subject, care strategies are an important part of ameliorating the effects of vicarious trauma. Many of our key informants talked about how they sought to integrate self-care strategies into their lives to manage the effects of working in the area of VAW in the context of a lack of more systemic support. This revealed the extent to which a trauma-informed response for researchers working on VAW in development and humanitarian settings was lacking.

The researchers we spoke to shared that self-care practices positively influenced their own sense of safety and wellness in their work. While all the researchers had experienced the dangers of not having self-care strategies in place, some mentioned how difficult it was to keep them up consistently in the face of other demands and the realities of conducting research in humanitarian crises and war-zones.

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12 See Coles J, Astbury J, Dartnall E, Limjerwala S. (2014) Violence Against Women
and http://www.svri.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2016-06-02/SVRIVTguidelines.pdf Accesses in November 2021
13 Coles J, Astbury J, Dartnall E, Limjerwala S. (2014) Violence Against Women

For researchers who had regular self-care strategies, both those who conducted research in conflict zones and those operating in development contexts, many expressed how instrumental a community of practitioners, peers, and friends were in helping them develop, normalise, and maintain these practices. Títílọpẹ Àjàyí explained the importance of a connection with an intergenerational community of feminist practitioners:

> *"Feminist Africa... I think because of the kinds of people we have and the experiences that particularly the older women have had, this self-care issue is a very important one and even in the work that we do in our various meetings, you know we are reminded constantly to take care, to take care of ourselves."*

The importance of a community- colleagues doing similar work, partners that provided listening ears, friends that held space for work they didn't always understand – repeatedly emerged as one of the most important sources of support researchers relied on. Communal care was seen as being critical, and there was an acute sense of the isolation that accompanies the heaviness of VAW research, especially in humanitarian settings. Nidžara Ahmetašević shared the challenges of talking to friends, even supportive ones, about the inexplicable- the feeling of entering a mass grave or site of horrific violence. Tahira Kaleem, a feminist researcher from Pakistan, talked about a community initiative called 'Feminist Friday'. This initiative was started by feminists to create a space for them to come together to combat the isolation of doing feminist work in a context where feminism was dangerous.

Key to creating supportive institutional and organisational cultures are normalising the emotional and psychological challenges of doing research on VAW. In addition, there is a need to develop research budgets and timelines that allow for breaks from the research process as well as resources for staff care. Building supportive institutional cultures includes, inter alia, creating internal staffing structures that focus on sharing power between managers and researchers, amplifying the provision of leadership that models self and collective care practices, opening communication channels, and creating realistic workloads that allows researchers to feel seen, heard, and supported in their work. As discussed in the literature review, despite the recognition that organisational cultures should support the psychosocial health of their teams, there remains a significant gap between theory and practice.

Two researchers talked about instances where their organisation had created space in the project timeline and budget for debriefing and processing. In one case, the support came from a feminist funder who built self-care practices into their grantmaking and held workshops for all grantees to participate in ongoing conversations on community self-care in conflict settings. In another, an organisation had assigned a manager who supported team members in processing their experience as soon as they returned from the field and helped match them to more formalised support resources if needed. Notwithstanding these examples, all our key informants emphasised that individual and collective care was generally lacking in their organisations.

COMMENTARY

The question at the heart of this project was how to enhance support for feminist researchers working on VAW in development and humanitarian settings. The key informants who shared their challenges with us showed that research on VAW is rife with structural, personal, and social challenges that impede upon the ability of researchers to conduct feminist research. However, what emerged from our conversations with key informants is the deep sense of meaning, hope, and profound commitment that the researchers have to platforming the realities of women who experience violence. For decades, feminists from LMICs have said what is at the heart of the findings of this study- we need more support, we need more resources, we need more spaces.

Critical to the scope of transformative redistribution, and how to better support feminist researchers from LMICs working in humanitarian settings, is the recognition of feminism as being inextricable to personal experience. This is significant in thinking about how to better support feminist researchers because it links the support of feminist researchers to their ability to live full, abundant, and secure lives. This intersection of professional and personal identities has implications for the level of consciousness needed to craft effective guidelines, support structures, and political re-imaginations that substantively meet the needs of feminist researchers. This includes how research is funded (and how researchers and the ecosystems that surround them are resourced), but also includes the non-financial resources required to support feminist research. Pivotal to this is the resourcing of spaces for feminist researchers from LMICs to gather; to exchange experiences, strategies and techniques; to digest and metabolise their work, and to build solidarities and relationships that lead to greater power and influence in academic and policy spaces.

While our key informants talked about experiences of marginalisation being othered in global policy and academic spaces, including in feminist spaces, there are nuances pertaining to relative and positional power that are important to note if we seek to untangle the many different threads that compose where, how, and who holds power and influence. For the researchers we spoke with, being a feminist researcher also enabled certain privileges that came with having a PhD, influential networks, and / or access to a modicum of professional security and stability. Rajni encapsulates this:

> *"I think I have benefited from working in my community. I have been able to create my own identity through this work. People recognise me as someone who works on DV cases. I get calls from the police and people working in various government offices....This work has got me a lot of recognition."*

The lessons learned in conducting research on VAW in development and humanitarian settings mirrors similar lessons in feminist research principles drawn from the critiques of euro-centric, western epistemologies: the need to support the work of indigenous scholars, the importance of hyper localisation and the adaptation of the research design to fit specific contexts and histories. In addition, it is important that the research process is participatory and it should challenge the power dynamics that can arise between the 'researcher' and 'research subject' by creating pathways for stakeholders to be involved at every part of the research process. To this end, it is important to think about the development of local, relevant and ethical protocols that enables research to be transformative in the lives of women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our recommendations focus on promoting human rights principles, better funding for research, and adhering to ethical guidelines for research in development and humanitarian settings.

7.1 RESEARCH MUST BE RIGHTS-BASED, AND GUIDED BY THE ETHICS OF CAUSING NO HARM.

• Conducting feminist research in humanitarian and development settings must be cognisant of the social, political, economic and cultural context. The research process must be adapted to suit the contextual realities and the effects on those participating in the research.

• Take into account the strategic and practical gender needs[14] of those participating in the research. These include the effects of food insecurity, poverty, poor health (including mental health challenges), intimate partner and other forms of gender-based violence, as well as the lack of/ or destruction of infrastructure on people's lives. While producing knowledge is a strategic need, it should not override practical needs such as the provision of health-care and psycho-social support for victims of VAW, as well as referral systems for access to justice and legal aid systems, and other basics such as food where required.

• The safety of those participating in the research process should be a primary concern. This includes ensuring that participants are safe- both in the sense of being physically safe as well as in the sense of participating in a 'safe' space that is respectful of their lived reality and actively strives to ensure that their voices are heard in an empathetic way. There should also be consideration of the potential repercussions for women in having participated in the research (such as an abusive partner finding out). Safety mitigation is critical and appropriate support should be put in place.

7.2 FUND YOUR VALUES: DIRECTLY SUPPORT RESEARCHERS FROM AND WORKING IN HUMANITARIAN AND DEVELOPMENT CONTEXTS

• Ensure that local researchers lead in research projects in their countries and provide funding to address the structural barriers they face in disseminating their research and in accessing platforms to talk about their work. Funders should work collaboratively with research partners to engage with the questions of what should be resourced and how.

• Fund psychosocial self and collective care for those participating in the research as well as for the researchers involved in the project. This should include researchers working as consultants.

• Fund the convening of feminist researchers from LMICs to come together and share strategies, approaches, and experiences in knowledge production based on their specific challenges. This includes creating spaces for feminist researchers from LMICs to gather; such as the SVRI Forum, to exchange experiences, strategies and techniques; to digest and metabolise their work, and to build solidarities and relationships that lead to greater power and influence in academic and policy spaces.

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14 Molyneux (1985) distinguished between strategic and practical gender needs. Strategic gender needs are the needs related to women's subordinate role in society (and may include issues such as legal rights, control over their bodies and income equality). Addressing strategic gender needs challenges women's role in society and works to achieve gender equity in the long-term. Practical gender needs are the needs that women have in terms of their practical day-to-days needs and can include access to food and water, employment, and access to services such as healthcare and legal aid.

7.3 PARTICIPATIVE RESEARCH ENHANCES KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

• Consider the ethical implications of participation in the research project in all its constituent phases from the development of the research question to the writing up of the final report. Good practice includes the involvement of those being researched in deciding on research questions and methods as well as in giving feedback on findings.

• Those participating are giving their time in sharing their knowledge. The link between this and the impact on their social, political and economic realities is important. This means that there is an onus on those doing the research to use the knowledge generated to contribute towards social change, even if it is small scale and a stepping-stone to larger-scale change.

• Subvert the conceptualisation of "expertise" in the research process by creating advisory panels comprised of people that are familiar with the research context. The advisory panel serves as a form of researcher accountability as well as emotional and psychological support .

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ANNEX A: LIST OF KEY INFORMANTS INTERVIEWED

NAME	COUNTRY
Anonymous	South Africa
Esther Cowley- Malcom	Aeotoria (New Zealand)
Friederike Bubenzer	South Africa
Michele Batende	Cameroon
Nidžara Ahmetašević	Bosnia
Rajni	India
Silvia Salinas Mulder	Bolivia
Tahira Kaleem	Pakistan
Títílọpẹ Àjàyí	Ghana