

THINKING ABOUT FEMINIST RESEARCH ETHICS

DISCUSSION BRIEFS FOR RESEARCHERS ON ZUBAAN/IDRC'S
SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND IMPUNITY PROJECT

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The project to research and write about sexual violence in South Asian countries needs, above all, to be sensitive to issues of ethics. Thus, this discussion has formed a major part of the project, and guidelines for interviewing survivors as well as victim families, have been framed keeping in mind the ways in which sexual violence is looked at in South Asian cultures. For researchers, it is important to keep in mind the ethics of research purpose; the ethics of research roles and conduct, the ethics of representation, the ethics of care of the research subject as well as the ethics of dissemination. However, ground realities are extremely complex and political compulsions, ethnic divides, social and economic vulnerabilities bring to bear further complexities. Below is a set of guidelines developed by the project in consultation with researchers and experts from all South Asian countries.

ETHICAL GUIDELINES

The safety and well-being of participants and researchers must be paramount and guide all decisions during the course of research. With standards of feminist research in place, the process of research itself has the potential to be transformative for both researchers and participants and also contribute to transformative social change. Needless to say, sufficient consideration, time and resources must be dedicated to ensuring rigorous ethical standards are met including informed consent; voluntary participation; confidentiality; physical safety; no harm from research participation; provision of crisis intervention, and mechanisms to attend to researcher needs, including vicarious trauma.

- 1. SENSITIVITY OF RESEARCH TOPIC:** Prime importance of confidentiality and safety; the need to ensure that the research does not cause the participant to undergo further harm (including not causing the participant further trauma); the importance of ensuring that the participant is informed of available sources of help; and the need for the interviewers to respect the interviewee's decisions and choices. A woman is often not making choices in a vacuum – family, community and political considerations interplay in her choices. The political moment in that particular country affects the social and official acceptance of sexual violence as a topic to be researched.
- 2. PERSONAL SAFETY:** Participation in research poses risk to women victims/survivors. Participants must be made aware of potential hazards of participating in the research. The principle of

'do no harm' must operate to promote the safety of research participants and researchers. Again, the political context determines the level of openness possible. Some safeguards:

- Research on SVI might be framed under a neutral title and will be introduced at the official level in this manner.
 - Interviews must be conducted in a private setting. Where necessary, locations outside the household where the interview can be conducted in private will be identified.
 - We all know that this is near impossible in the settings in which we work.
 - Group interviews often help to build up a narrative about incidents. It might not be the individual story of one victim, but a community/group re-telling which might provide valuable insights.
 - Ideally, researchers must be well connected to teams that can respond to immediate legal, medical or psycho-social support.
 - This is a difficult task, and often, women might not want to be further exposed by seeking help.
- 3. INFORMED CONSENT:** Ethical feminist research must be rigorous in its efforts to ensure genuine informed consent on the part of women who have experienced sexual violence. At the outset, interviewees must be informed of the purpose and nature of the study through an informational handout and consent form. The context can decide whether written or verbal.
- *Not just the purpose of the research, but the possible outcomes must be shared before women can decide whether or not to participate.*
- 4. RESPECT FOR PERSONS:** A basic respect for human dignity must include honesty between researchers and research subjects. All questions will be posed sensitively, in a supportive and non-judgmental manner. When approached by researchers (issues related to 'outside' and 'inside' researchers), women victims may be cautious about providing full and frank answers. This may stem from fear of exposure to harm, the desire for acceptance or embarrassment. Researchers can attempt to overcome this challenge by: working through local organisations to shape the project and how the research will be used; openness about the motivation and assuring confidentiality. The impact of the research process, including the consequences or possible misuse of data both for the individuals and collectives, must be evaluated. The research should avoid undue intrusion into the lives of the individuals or communities and the welfare of the informants should be prioritized at all times. Their dignity, privacy and interests should be protected at all times.
- 5. CONFIDENTIALITY:** Privacy and confidentiality are particularly important to this study given that identification as a victim of sexual violence can lead to stigma by one's own community or

threats and intimidation where perpetrators are from dominant castes/in official positions. Participants should be informed of any potential limitations to the confidentiality of any information supplied. Procedures should be put in place to protect the confidentiality of information and the anonymity of the participants in all research materials. Where case-study findings are presented, sufficient detail must be changed to ensure that the source of the information cannot be identified.

- *Need to think through the tensions between maintaining confidentiality/anonymity, with the pursuit of justice through the criminal justice system or even interventions like Tribunals, Truth Commissions etc, where the identity has to be revealed.*

6. ATTENDING TO RESEARCHERS' AND FIELD WORKERS' NEEDS: Mechanisms to support the needs of researchers must be evolved. Processes such as regular debriefing meetings might work towards reducing the stress of the field work, and avert any negative consequences on the individual as well as research quality itself.

- This is not always possible, given the momentum of field work.
- What is the trade-off between being too emotionally involved and identifying with the women interviewed, and “neutrality”?
- The debate has moved beyond “objective” and “neutral” research to examining and identifying biases and taking stands.
- In politically volatile or polarised political environments, researchers run real risks as they are identifiable, more so than their “respondents” whose identity they protect.

7. JUSTICE: Ongoing review to ensure that the benefits of study outweigh the risks. The larger picture of justice for victims must be kept in mind.

- *When research is not ‘classic’ action research, weighing the beneficence of the research process and outcomes is tricky. What are the ethical considerations that must be kept in mind*

THE POLITICS OF ORAL HISTORY

There is an assumption that testimonies will challenge dominant discourse in a positive way because the interviewer empathizes with the interviewees. What are the risks of betraying one's narrators by misrepresenting or disagreeing with them in writing. What are the challenges of the power dynamics in an interview, challenges that have preoccupied feminist and other politically committed interviewers for decades

- Complexities of empathy and emotion in the interview setting
- An ethical oral history practice requires, among other things, that the interviewer be aware of an overly close identification with victims of past violence. As oral historians, we can continue the necessary practice of 'recovering' voices of the marginalized and remembering past atrocities without naively assuming that these projects are motivated purely by progressive political aims. An important part of this process of reassessing the relationship between ethics and politics in oral history is an interrogation of the relationships between empathy, identification and solidarity.

ETHICS OF USE OF ORAL TESTIMONIES

Use of oral narratives of victims/survivors represents an ethical dilemma with which sensitive researchers through the ages have grappled.

- What do the horror stories and personal pain, the cries of despair or anger, and the desperation of revenge, add to our understanding of the narrative of rape/sexual violence or the politics of silence?
- Do the anguished words of women kept confined and raped repeatedly by enemy soldiers drive home the reality of violence more effectively?
- How comfortable are the women with having their lives exposed, and can their vulnerability and/or desperation for redress/revenge/justice enable them to give genuine informed consent to the interview and its subsequent publication?
- What is the long-term impact of the interview process on already traumatised women having to recount the horrific past? Some evidence says it can be cathartic, some say it reinforces trauma especially if expectations are not met.

METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES

At a meeting of the advisory committee of the project, considerable discussion took place on the issue of ethics and a number of methodological and ethical issues were identified that are important to keep in mind. These are listed below:

1. The two key terms in our project are sexual violence and impunity. Both are not easily or precisely defined but it may be useful to have some broad parameters that help us to better understand what we are looking at. In this project, we do not plan to look at individual cases of sexual violence unless they become emblematic of a larger cause as in the individual cases in Gujarat. Rather, we want to look at sexual violence as a collective and ongoing phenomenon across South Asia. This will necessarily involve looking at war, political, ethnic and religious conflict. The other aspect that we need to define more precisely is our understanding of impunity – here we want to look not only at the kind of impunity perpetrators of such violence are able to enjoy because of weak legislative practices on the part of the state, but also the entire network that enables such violence to go unpunished, unchecked, for example the mismatch between law and medical regimes and protocols, the focus on evidence, notions of justice and reparation, the cultural context which legitimizes stigma, acts against reporting.
2. Some points that may be useful to keep in mind: How do we do this? How to research this most difficult and most sensitive of subjects, how to break the cultures of silence around it? Over the years, feminists have developed different methods to look at such research, methods that preserve the integrity of the research, while at the same time not endangering the lives of people on the ground. Some of these techniques, often developed in the course of asking questions whose answers are difficult to access through traditional methods – include: dramatization through role play, which allows research subjects to collaborate in research and to find their own voice; genealogy and network tracing, which draws on the networks in which individuals are embedded; multiple person stream-of-consciousness narrative, which removes the voice of the author by offering multiple perspectives to communicate possibly conflicting research findings; conversation, which presents multiple voices as a way of gathering and displaying data; identification, which ‘breathes life’ into the person being studied through the personal reflections of the scholar doing the study; use of unplanned personal experience, which begins as a study of other people’s experiences but eventually draws in the author, who unexpectedly finds herself part of the group being examined; structured conceptualization, which entails synthesizing information in the form of a map in order to display how ideas are related to one another; photography, which compiles images of the research subjects to tell a visual story of their lives and experiences, sometimes involving their participation in the presentation of findings; and taped self-interviews, which enable respondents to answer questions at their convenience in the privacy of their own homes.

3. Preliminary research results indicate that lack of a collective identity for these women, formed around the specific violence they face as women (and are often shamed into suppressing), may create holes in the memory the 'ordinariness' of violence is unable to penetrate. A collective imaginary – an ensemble of conceptions surrounding the political uses of women's bodies during and after war – would provide women with a history of sexual violence a collective language with which to express their individual experiences.
4. Researching the invisible, and focusing on invisibility as the main category of analysis, requires that one remains attentive to each woman in the context of her collective and objective experience of militarization and patriarchy, which play out against the backdrop of colonialism, a violent political economy and the inequities of globalization and racism. To do so, researchers must engage with the past (mainly the history of injustice, including the ongoing effects of the Nakba on Palestinians) and how this impacts the lives of women. They must look carefully at the ways in which women locate themselves in the meanings they attribute to their experiences, in the memory of the collective consciousness of their families, community and nation. Building a feminist methodology to research invisibility in conflict zones requires that one be attentive to and be able to document women's resistances and struggles against power relations, in their daily acts, on their way to school, in their work, in their care-giving, and in their strategies of survival.
5. Information is one of the first casualties in conflict ridden areas, and that the 'other' is further invisibilized as a result both of the inability of the oppressed to come forward and explain their positions and their suffering, and of the ability of those in power to manoeuvre and silence influential actors in the media, the economy, the law, and even human rights defenders. We also have to be alive to the possibility that information about women's lives, education, health and movement under conditions of vulnerability can well be used as a tool of oppression. The challenge to feminist scholar-activists is consequently to understand the politics of invisibility, particularly viewed through the prism of the trauma of violence and constant loss.

Oral history is another method which is used: intensive one to one interviews.

These are only some things to get the discussion started. Such research also raises a host of ethical questions, not only about its politics, but also about issues of privacy, autonomy, responsibility etc. Some of the points to discuss on that are:

- How far does the researcher probe? How use her 'power' or 'access' to 'extract' the story?
- Where does her responsibility lie, with the 'truth' of the research or with the researcher and the impact that the making public of her life may have on her and those close to her (eg the questions in relation to Yasmin Saikia's work)
- Is it enough to just change names to ensure privacy or are here other issues that need to be addressed?
- How do researchers approach the issue of silence? Is it possible, is it even desirable to break silences?

DISCUSSION

- On ethics, we need to be clear why we are doing what we are doing. Is it generating knowledge, is there some element of political action built into it, will we take it further, will we fight for justice. Are we directly linking it to exploring justice, to case work on ground, who is doing it?
- We are not really talking about sexual violence per se, but about where people have got away with it. Impediments. Military court system. Systemic getting away. Adding to the discourse. With serious in-depth research, adding to a body of knowledge, can be useful. Moving not only to a body of knowledge but also towards a purpose. Not going to use to litigation but the material can help people to use the material for such work.
- Utility of such work – research (in Bangladesh) had led to someone's father being recognized as a freedom fighter and the daughter getting a pension.
- The aim is to unravel the systemic nature of impunity, and examine 'truth' from this perspective.
- As researchers we need to understand the difference between individual memory and collective memory. Also the memory of someone who was not necessarily there, when something took place, but who is part of a community and then memorializes it and speaks of it on behalf of the community.
- Collective memory in some ways strengthens the truth claim, in methodologies where they feel the question of memory and recall is essential to the pursuit of justice.
- We need to see whether people want their names exposed and others who don't. If we are publishing in a book though we need to see if we can go back to the person. Question is, how do you talk about your life without talking about everyone else in your life, so who do you expose and who not. Even in autobiography or memoir this question comes up. Without abandoning the veracity of a political project, and your responsibility to people on the ground, that is what is important. Quite often younger researchers do not know this because of lack of long experience.