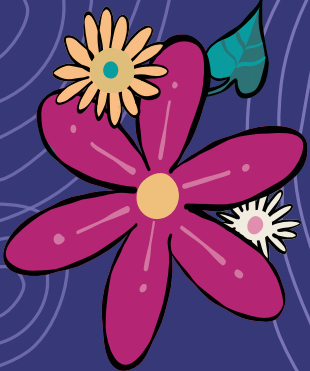
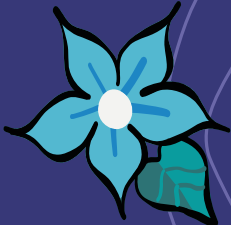




Research as movement building:

A feminist perspective on
researching technology-
facilitated gender-based violence

By the Feminist Internet Research Network / Tigist Shewarega Hussen and Serene Lim / Sharin Dsouza, Eesha Lavalekar and Joshua Mark George / Carl and Dany Araújo / Karina Núñez Rodríguez and Analía Lavin / Bárbara Paes and Ester Borges / The Hub for Decolonial Feminist Psychologies in Africa, TFGBV research team / Gulbakhor Makhkamova / Aya ElHusseini / Sabiha Allouche and Ghiwa Sayegh / Martha Tadesse and S.A. / Aretha Asakitkpi



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INTRODUCTION

For many, a feminist approach to researching technology-facilitated gender-based violence is a process of retaliation, resistance and reclaiming power. Through the process, researchers disrupt the hierarchical structure of knowledge formation, offer a different perspective on who gets recognition as a knowledge producer, communicate violence/resilience in their own terms and use research as an entry point to network, connect and organise the community. Central to this deeply meaningful process is a researcher's emotional connection and level of care for their research. Employing feminist research methodologies helps us understand that our knowledge about a specific topic is deeply connected to how much we care about the subjects we are exploring and the communities we work with, rather than for.

This GenderIT edition is a collection of reflections and analytical essays by FIRN and FIRN's research partners on what it means to do research at this critical juncture, while having to go through the unbearable pain of witnessing genocide, conflict and war, gross and persistent human rights violations, criminalisation of sex work and LGBTQIA+ communities and intensification of anti-gender mobilisation, as well as operating under spectacularly failed international law, solidarity and transnational feminist movements. Together, these articles show that care should not be framed as an ethical framework in a research process, but to inform the epistemological interest, from shaping the research agenda to reporting findings that, even imperfectly, capture the narratives, discourses, and insights acquired during the process.

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CARING TO KNOW AND MAKE A DIFFERENCE

By Tigist Shewarega Hussen and Serene Lim



Illustration by Catalina Alzate

The third cycle of the Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN) occurred when protests, wars, conflicts and genocides plagued the world. More than ever, it has become evident that justice is as much an illusion as our sense of freedom. The ongoing armed conflict and humanitarian crisis in Myanmar following the climate crisis and devastating earthquake are among the crises on our radar. Although the establishment of the network, similar to the other two cycles, was designed to facilitate technology research through intersectional feminist practices with ethics of care, knowledge building and activism, we find ourselves asking, "What does it mean to conduct research at this time of crisis?", "How useful is our work in this historical period?", "How does research contribute to our collective liberation and transformation?" These questions are not unique in the sense that "since when have we not been in crisis?" Perhaps what makes this different for the network is that most of our researchers are conducting research that is directly affecting them; and some while they are going through the painful crisis witnessing genocide, conflict and war, gross and persistent human right violations, criminalisation of sex work and LGBTQIA+ communities and intensification of anti-gender mobilisation, as well as operating under spectacularly failed international law, solidarity and transnational feminist movements. So yes, in a way, it feels even more critical this time.

FIRN's lead, Tigist recalls her discussions with our partners at the inception meeting regarding research and the framing of research topics. One partner stated, "No matter how we frame the topic, people are still dying, bodies are buried under the rubble, people are starving to death, and we are witnessing all international and national systems crumbling beneath us." Another partner remarked, "We are here because we are tired of being research subjects, with our experiences narrated by detached and unaffected individuals who use us for their professional growth." Yet another partner expressed, "It's time we document what has been done to us through narrative building and archive these cases properly." Although these comments originated from different local and regional contexts, they share a common value, ethical rooting, request, and expectation from the network: to actively shape the network, their space and stories, and to have the autonomy to articulate how they experience technology-facilitated violence in their own words. They desire their words to be respected as embodied experiences without being caught up in the complexities of elitist language codes. For many, the work is not "output oriented" but a process of retaliation and resistance. There is also an appeal for solidarity, active listening, and observation of processes as they unravel despair, resist writing within the structure, and push back against packaging narrative in a digestible way, instead of merely communicating violence in an unfiltered manner – why should the most marginalised also bear the responsibility of shaping narratives to appease oppressors?

This is precisely what happens as we work through this edition. We have attempted to offer a different perspective on who gets recognition as a knowledge producer and how research can be a political act that disrupts knowledge formation, serving as an entry point for networking, connecting and movement building.

THIRD PHASE OF FIRN: DEEPER APPLICATION OF INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST ANALYSIS

Partnering with 10 new research partners from a diversity of locations in Africa (Ethiopia, South Africa), Asia (India, Tajikistan), Latin American and the Caribbean (LAC) (Brazil, Uruguay) and Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) (Egypt, Palestine), the third phase of FIRN was launched in early 2024, alongside a renewed sense of urgency to tackle technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) by governments, civil society organisations, activists, donors, researchers and advocates. Despite the growing interest in research to unravel the magnitude of violence experienced by women, the scope and discourses of TFGBV remain narrowly heteronormative, perceiving women as a monolithic group and as victims without any agency, which is symptomatic of a broader power asymmetry and structural inequalities in the politics of knowledge. Such a fixated gaze on the subject matter has the effect of producing knowledge that perpetuates the othering and essentialisation of an already marginalised group and poses a considerable obstacle to policy making that could bring lasting change for victims/survivors of TFGBV.

FIRN centres on a deeper application of intersectional feminist analysis. This approach emphasises bringing together the various historical contexts and current political realities that reinforce the lasting effects of coloniality in our daily experiences and interactions with technology-facilitated violence. The intersectional feminist lens, therefore, offers essential insights into how these dynamics function, enabling us to grasp the complexities of lived experiences in a world where technology both empowers and oppresses individuals in nuanced ways. The overarching research questions are:

1. How does TFGBV profoundly shape the experience of women and LGBTQIA+ people and how does it limit their access to human rights, expression, pleasure and play on the internet? How pervasive is this phenomenon that affects access to human rights for more than half the population in the world?
2. How does TFGBV take place in varied contexts across the world, and what forms does it take depending on regional and contextual differences, race, caste, ethnicity, class and diverse identities of women and LGBTQIA+ people?
3. What policy reform can and should be made by state actors in relation to TFGBV and what are the potential/actual impacts of proposed technological solutions towards ending TFGBV?
 - a. What are the problems and issues (legal, cultural, social, technological, etc.) that arise at the level of implementation of legal and policy reforms that attempt to address TFGBV (while making a complaint, investigation by police, judiciary etc.)? and last but not least,
 - b. What are the emerging areas of concern such as the growing power of multinational tech giants and companies vis-à-vis international entities, national governments and institutions; design and exclusions embedded in technological infrastructure; the changing nature of social media platforms; extended reality (augmented, virtual), and so on.

These research questions were reinterpreted, improved, changed and shaped to fit into the regional and national context that our partners hoped to explore. In this edition, we reflect on our experience conducting feminist research through an intersectional lens and what it was like to do fieldwork. We address questions about intersectional power relations, participants' autonomy over their own narratives, and their role as co-knowledge producers, along with the security of research data, ethical considerations, and our accountability to the community.

HOLDING THE LINE OPEN: BUILDING AND SUSTAINING A NETWORK OF FEMINIST TECH RESEARCHERS

The FIRN team has grown to a team of three today – each bringing their uniqueness, dreams and quirks to the mix. Along with us are the APC Women's Rights Programme (WRP) managers, the APC communications team, a team of peer advisors, our research partners from different parts of the world, and our funders¹ who have grown and shaped FIRN to what it is today. In all our diversity, we believe that one way to build a movement is through evidence-based narrative building and archiving knowledge that can contribute to activism and policy advocacy. In this process, employing feminist research methodologies helps us understand that our knowledge about a specific topic is deeply connected to how much we care about the subjects we are exploring and the communities we work with rather than for. To this end, we have been advocating for feminist practices on knowledge building to address the power dynamics and social inequalities shaping individual and collective experiences. Starting from the process of selecting research applications, the FIRN team has used a care-based lens with the conviction that our ways of knowing are directly linked to the ethical care we implement in our inquiry process.

This continuous evolution of care and ethics is fundamentally rooted in establishing a critical voice that resonates within various domains of the Global South. However, this effort faces significant challenges, particularly questioning the core principles of feminist ethics of care in research and knowledge production. We have been advocating that by embracing the inherently social nature of knowing,² researchers should be encouraged to integrate their experiences and positionality into the research context and methodology. This approach acknowledges that personal and political experience and the socio-political context significantly influence data collection, interpretation and knowledge construction. This shift towards a more subjective understanding is critical in how care and ethics are articulated, shaped and enacted in practical scenarios, enriching our comprehension of the complexities surrounding knowledge production and epistemic inquiries.³ Ultimately, "How researchers care about research is evident in the stories they tell about their work, the emotional connection that comes through when researchers explain how the area became of interest to them, and what transformations were achieved (or not) through research projects."⁴

The FIRN team sought to determine how to implement the network's sustainability and feminist research engagement effectively. All our current and previous partners are well-invested in the technology research sector. They are feminist activists and advocates in their regional geopolitical and translational contexts. As such, network partners are a collective of experts, not only in the professional sense of the word "expert" but also in the closeness and embodied experience of the topic, in the specific research subjects they care to explore. Yet, we are aware that there is a difference in how the world progresses concerning technological advancement, law and policy regulation, access to human rights, etc. This inequality is highly pronounced within the Global South, as a category. As we are located in the Global South, often racialised bodies, we understand the risks associated with rooted historical differences that render individuals and collectives unrecognisable.⁵

1 This cycle of FIRN is supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and APC

2 Dalmiya, V. (2016). *Caring to know: Comparative care ethics, feminist epistemology, and the Mahābhārata*. Oxford University Press.

3 Ibid.

4 Brannelly, T., & Barnes, M. (2022). *Researching with care: Applying feminist care ethics to research practice*. Policy Press.

5 Raghuram, P. (2021). Race and feminist care ethics: Intersectionality as method. In H. Mahmoudi, A. Brysk, & K. Seaman (Eds.), *The Changing Ethos of Human Rights*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Therefore, our ethics of care are demonstrated in our deliberate attempt to weave the different experiences and feminist perspectives of our partners while at the same time criticising unchecked and invisible power dynamics that emanate from universalising attempts, globalising all experiences in a measure of what is recognised.

Given how power is often practised and conceived, especially in the tech world, highlighting the divide between the haves and the have-nots, to assert and uphold hierarchical control over those who have less negotiating power, feminist researchers are determined not to mimic power hierarchies or to ignore the proximity they have to power dismissively. It is somewhat paradoxical that the work we do is about dismantling power hierarchy, while simultaneously recognising that we are not at all powerless and that we do possess power through the various social categories and interactions in which we participate. These agencies we hold have an implication as to how we relate with our research participants, collect data, interpret and produce knowledge. In this edition, partners have reflected on the messiness of research while navigating multiple forms of power relations with participants, institutions, cultural practices, patriarchal values, countries, and so on. These dynamics must be negotiated during the research process, sometimes on the spot. In all this, what remains to be held closer is the sense of responsibility to facilitate space for participants to share their stories and do justice for the analysis and writing-up of the stories shared by participants.

Here, we found Nyx's argument useful to think about: they argue that power imbalances are inherent and what matters is "how we think about the power we possess and that we come from a space of care when enacting this power."⁶ When care is embedded in the way power is practised and conceptualised, it has the "capacity to empower or transform oneself and others."⁷ In other words, functional power that aims to facilitate access to opportunities and resources, and to support the agenda of the collective, or is applied in service of others, has the ability to contribute to the outcome desired. Here, it is important to recognise how our convictions, assumptions and what we think we know are rooted in particular experiences, belongings, oppression and privileges that are often embodied. Therefore, paying attention to how power shows up, manifests and shifts are integral to our own reflexive work as feminists, researchers and space holders for FIRN. Caring for the network also means caring about the multiple perspectives and interpretations of human experience in the tech world – which is always connected to such contextual experiences, identities and hierarchical structure.

The FIRN team has been attentive and reflecting on the power hierarchy within the research network and the role of APC as the organisation raising the funds to sustain FIRN from funding organisations, holding the network together and in contact with the research partners but not directly conducting research. We are here both an entity that is reported to and reporting on activities and processes, and hence somewhere on a high-tension wire between the power that we do hold and the power that we lack.⁸ However, our priorities have been a partner-centred structure, promoting the voices, work and needs of our partners. Being positioned in the middle means the network is expected to interface

6 McLean, N. (2022). Feminist by Design: Feminist Internet Research Is Messy. *APRIA Journal*, 4(4), 23-34. <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/feminist-design-feminist-internet-research-messy>

7 Allen, A. (2022). Feminist Perspectives on Power. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 Edition). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/feminist-power>

8 Malhotra, N. A., Hussen, T. S., & Fossatti, M. (2022). How to Build a Feminist Internet and Why It Matters. *APRIA Journal*, 4(4), 3-22. <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/feminist-design-how-build-feminist-internet-and-why-it-matters#:~:text=For%20instance%2C%20an%20important%20topic,groups%20in%20the%20Global%20South>

between researchers in the Global South and donor organisations, a responsibility and accountability that demand careful attention to geopolitical contexts. Furthermore, APC, as an international network of civil society organisations, plays the role of a mediation structure between donors and founders from the North and the organisations, collectives and activists situated in different local realities of the Global South.⁹ As such, compared to other similar organisations, FIRN is in a better position to access funding, resources and opportunities, but in the wider feminist network, resource allocations are still uneven. The limitation of funding means we are only able to support 10 research projects, thereby excluding many other equally important perspectives and experiences. The set-up of a peer advisory committee, consisting of a mix of resource persons from different disciplines, was an intentional step to decentralise decision making, ensure cohesiveness, seek balance in research topics, and promote collective responsibility and oversight.

As we recognise the power that we hold through being associated with APC, it is equally important to locate the FIRN team outside of APC, in our own personal gendered and racialised bodies, and the various hierarchical markers that come with it. Our power is relational in this complex web of interconnectedness, social identities and resources. The roles in APC have given us some form of power in shaping and directing the research network; and yet in our interactions with our partners, we appear as the feminists and students in us, earnestly learning from the experiences and knowledge of our partners and finding resonance and a piece of ourselves through their research and reflections.

APPROACHING RESEARCH WITH CARE: DILIGENCE, ACCOUNTABILITY AND ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY

In our introduction, we highlight that care should not be limited to addressing ethical dilemmas in research that reinforces a power imbalance between researchers and participants. Instead, it should inform the epistemological interest, from shaping the research agenda to reporting findings that, even imperfectly, capture the narratives, discourses and insights acquired during the process.¹⁰ Within this context, care should foster a holistic approach that sustains curiosity throughout the research journey.

Through the collaboration with all 10 research partners, we have learned to appreciate how invested each partner is in their research topics and how much they care for the communities they work with. This is seen in the reflection pieces all our partners have contributed to this edition. Each partner appears to prioritise a particular aspect of their journey, and that uniqueness is appreciated as it reminds us of the value of our differences.

Sharin, Eesha and Joshua from iHear, Sangath Bhopal (India) reflected on the sense of accountability and the power of being insiders to a community or a collective. Identified as peers or people with similar lived experiences to their participants, they disclosed their own experiences of participating in activism, experiencing first-hand TFGBV themselves, and recognising the difficulties of accessing policies and rights for survivors of such attacks. In their writing, they explain that they were intimately aware of the power they hold right from their recruitment strategy, the language and

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Dalmiya, V. (2016). Op. cit.

terminology used and the way their positionality shaped the ownership and accessibility of research, to how their subjectivity influenced the questions they pursued during interviews and the subsequent data interpretation process. In their collective attempt to navigate and negotiate power and care, they have included approaches like seeking guidance from community advisors, compensating participants for interviews and learning to be present and authentic in their interactions with participants. While the process was initially disorienting for them, ultimately, it was transformative as they deepened the participatory nature of their research. By dismantling rigid expectations of objectivity and dualism, they tried to practice vulnerability and openness, where participants were also invited to guide the direction of the interviews.

As we read through the reflection piece by Carl and Dany from MariaLab (Brazil), we gain a deeper appreciation for alternative methods as critical tools to redistribute power to participants, thereby disrupting the power embedded in traditional knowledge-making processes. As part of their research methodology, Carl and Danny from MariaLab brought an actual bag to a meeting and invited each participant to place an item inside that they considered a significant contribution or take-away from the research process. They reflect how much this activity was useful and laid the foundation for an open and collaborative process of knowledge creation. The team firmly believes that knowledge is generated through practical action and everyday work and that academia is not the only place for constructing knowledge. The work of creating and holding a community, as reflected by them, is inherently collective, “built through numerous safe spaces and shaped in many ways,” they write. Such recognition has guided their mindfulness about power hierarchies that can exist even in spaces that are considered to be safe. Additionally, in their practice of a free and open production process, they have seen how ideas circulate, inspire, and are reimagined and reused and continue to flow, feeding back into and enriching the ongoing cycle of creation. This has prompted them to reflect on the concept of authorship given the participatory nature of feminist research.

The reflection from our Uruguay partners, Karina and Analía, explored the shift from being an object of study to telling stories of their own community and leading the process of knowledge production. The project challenged the conception of “who” are legitimate knowledge makers, producing key knowledge grounded in socially constructed negotiation of power in real life. In reading their reflection, we are reminded of this statement by Fricker: “To be wronged in one’s capacity as a knower is to be wronged in a capacity essential to human value.”¹¹ As a group of researchers who identified as sex workers, cis, trans, local and migrant, living in Uruguayan territory, they are now telling the stories of sex workers from a first-person perspective by leading a process of knowledge production, and refusing to accept knowledge and publications that do not consider their standpoints and are led by sex work abolitionist researchers. In addition, we are seeing that the research process has also led to a translation of knowledge, not just in the literal sense, but an exchange of knowledge and meaning across different settings and power structures, including legal instruments available to the communities to protect their image rights, especially within the context of image-based violence, and the gaps in implementation.

In designing and conducting their research, Bárbara and Ester from Instituto Minas Programam (Brazil) were aware that they are inherently connected to the research and their backgrounds

11 Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198237907.001.0001>

and lived experiences are inevitable influences in the process. Instead of shying away from the connection, they recognise their standpoint, which informs both their research questions and their interpretation of the findings, making reflexivity a crucial part of their process. Even as they research Black Brazilian women, they insist on not making homogenising claims about Black Brazilian women's experiences with online misogynoir and TFGBV. The consciousness of this inherent subjectivity has led them to be cognisant of the fact that their experiences with TFGBV can and do share similarities without being identical. Reading the snippet of conversations between participants and researchers during a workshop has led us to reflect on the ethics of care as not just a set of codes to adhere to, but very much part of the "why" we do research. In Bárbara and Ester's reflection, they were committed to not only honour the experiences and voices of Black Brazilian women; rather, the research also encapsulates their ambition to expand the possibilities for Black women in Brazil to engage with digital technologies on their own terms. As outsiders reading the experience of Black Brazilian women from the perspective of Black Brazilian women researchers, it helped us to see and understand that writing opens a different perspective on Brazilian politics, and this again points to the power of research in producing new knowledge when it is conducted with care by those who have lived through different forms of marginalisation.

Another similar project that focuses on Black experience is the Hub for Decolonial Feminist Psychologies in Africa, Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town (South Africa). Recognising how Black women and gender non-conforming people are left out of knowledge production and forced to accept knowledge that does not do justice to their realities and causes further harm to them, the research uses a decolonial feminism approach to reassign power to the community. Working as a collective group of researchers, their reflection talks about how decolonial feminism works to counter the production of knowledge about marginalised groups through the colonial gaze, by re-centring the power to research participants to tell their stories from their standpoint. Their intention to retain nuance, and to preserve diversity rather than collapsing individual stories into homogenising themes, has influenced the entire process of their research, from design to data collection to writing. Interestingly, the Hub also invests time and resources to provide care for the researchers themselves alongside the protection of participants. We hope that their practices of care will inspire all of us to think and work around care for researchers, especially those who are continuously investigating violence, particularly gender-based violence.

Gulbakhor from Women's Center "Gulrukhsor" reflected on the challenges in navigating research on TFGBV in Tajikistan, where domestic violence and marital rape are not criminalised,¹² reinforced by a culture of silence, where spaces for women to be heard are almost non-existent. In Gulbakhor's words, "To be heard, we have to find our voice, but someone needs to be there to listen. When research involves discussion of violence and hardship, the research team needs to be ready to listen." In this sense, the research process also offers a temporary safe space for women to reclaim their voice and to seek validation. Reading the reflection, we also sense a pressing urgency to include the experience and perspective of Tajikistan to the global discourse around TFGBV. This research is a constant reminder of how research and documentation, especially in a context where there is very little known about, is a form of feminist activism and movement building. To provide researchers, activists and policy advocates with data and evidence that they can start working

¹² Eurasianet. (2024, 5 February). Tajikistan: Social norms complicate battle against domestic violence. <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-social-norms-complicate-battle-against-domestic-violence>

from is what is needed in Tajikistan. We also recognise the intersectional feminist analysis that Gulbakhor attempted by painting a multilayered picture of the social, cultural and patriarchal factors that contribute to women's marginalisation. The nuances in which women in Tajikistan experienced technology and violence are important entry points towards building context-responsive policy and to demand accountability from tech companies, governments and the international community.

Other than paying attention to power dynamics, Aya from Egypt has shared how attuning to participants and researchers' feelings and needs throughout the process is not a form of radical care, but also a method of rigour. Aya reflected on how thoughtful reflection and documentation of both emotional nuances and intellectual insights meaningfully informed the research process and outcome. Our emotions are a form of expression that tells us what matters to us, and what a particular experience means to us. Through Aya's words, we felt her gentleness and kindness towards the participants, and an intimate connection that she shared with her research, all of which offered a deeper meaning to the research, beyond mere knowledge production. In Aya's words, "If qualitative research brings together individuals who share a common purpose – a desire and willingness to take action – could it become a fertile ground, whether digital or on-the-ground, for building networks of care, a base, a foundation of an organising project?"

In the face of consistent violence and genocide, Ghiwa and Sabiha from Kohl¹³ open the conversation on doing research while grieving for the destruction of lives being wiped out generation after generation by settler colonialists. While the design of the research project was intended as a collective thinking and writing process, despite multiple attempts, the researchers, writers and collaborators in the project found it impossible to transpose the collective thinking and sharing of stories and experiences into research writing that requires a particular structure and modality. The inability and refusal to write in a particular way and coming to a standstill phase in the research, as reflected by Kohl, show a pushback against the idea of "producing knowledge" as if bearing witness and living under continuous genocide is a separated thing. Kohl's moment of silence in writing was the only thing that can facilitate the continuation of having a collective circle to share and talk about different forms of violence and what it means for the humanity of the world. As Ghiwa and Sabiha write, it was through this process that they realised that in order to break free they had to disobey and resist the "usual" feminist reflective writing and write what is urgent and most important for the collective movement. In reclaiming their grief and "failure" to write, they resist writing within the structure and centre death – of beloveds, of a nation, of a country, of history, of humanity, of solidarity, and of ideologies as they once were – from a queer theoretical perspective unapologetically. We find ourselves resonating and inspired by their radical intervention, and at the same time, it makes us reflect on the purpose of research in times of crisis: if it is not to write about what matters to us, then what?

After years of archiving the experiences of LGBTQIA+ communities in Ethiopia, Martha and S. A. set out to explore the multiple ways in which violence is perpetrated against LGBTQIA+ people in the country. Their research shows the extent to which hetero-patriarchal nationalism uses homophobia as a unifying thread and propaganda. Martha and S. A. reflected that while conducting the research,

¹³ Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research is a queer, radical, open-source publication from the South, with an emphasis on West Asia and North Africa. <https://kohljournal.press/>

they quickly realised the differences in terms of perspective, approaches and emotional response between the researchers themselves, even though they both identified as feminists with similar backgrounds. This reflection process helped the researchers to create a system of support to each other and teaches us that ethics of care is not one directional – from researchers to participants – but is multifaceted. Particularly, as Kharnita Mohamed argues, researching violence can be debilitating and traumatic, and unfortunately this continues to be overlooked.¹⁴ In processing the data, one emphasises producing rich and contextual data, while the other is always mindful of the narratives. Such collaborative and shared values and ethics to prioritise participants' wellbeing over the pursuit of data richness is necessary for feminist researchers today. As we read through Martha and S. A.'s reflection, we have seen how being open and honest about differences enriches the research process. For instance, they reflect on how "gender pronouns" were not an urgent matter for research participants, as much as the everyday crisis and constant proximity to violence, and the risk of being outed. Such experience of power dynamics and quick adjustment to what is necessary and important demands an intentional investment to the collective movement building. Building on their expertise and collaboratively addressing the gaps that came along, and care for themselves and their research participants, they have produced a feminist knowledge that is extremely necessary for the LGBTQIA+ movement in the context of Ethiopia.

Last but not least, Aretha from the Independent Institution of Education (South Africa) has offered honest reflection on the multiple challenges that her research team faced throughout the data collection process, in which they received low engagement for their survey questionnaire from their intended participants and a high number of participants dropped out before completing the survey. Despite that, they were able to address this by including students as campus fieldworkers to assist with the data collection process and to include other social media platforms more commonly used by students in their survey. Had Aretha and her team not made these changes to their research design, they would have excluded these key nuances on where and how young people experience online dating in South Africa. Researchers are required to make decisions at every stage of the research process, and these decisions are always situated and influenced by our own subjectivity. In acknowledging that our decisions are limited and rooted in the particular assumptions of our participants and research topics, we open the doors for other ways of doing and knowing. The destabilisation of our assumptions and convictions can be discomforting and painful at times, but ultimately transformative as it grounds our bodies to the lived realities of research participants.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As we navigate the complex dynamics between the pressure to adhere to project timelines and the need to remain attuned to the realities and experiences of our partners on the ground, it has become increasingly evident that unravelling the colonial logics entrenched in knowledge production necessitates creating a supportive environment where we can truly listen to one another. This means allowing space for all of us to feel the pain and emotional weight of our collective experiences, to process the often-overwhelming thoughts and feelings that accompany what we witness in the field.

¹⁴ Mohamed, K. (2024). Debilitating Research: Scholarship of the Obvious and Epistemic Trauma. *African Studies*, 83(2-3), 134-151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00020184.2024.2431801>

Furthermore, we must embrace alternative, non-linear methods of expression and writing that reflect the multifaceted nature of our work.¹⁵ This journey toward building a network of feminist researchers is not just about creating a repository of knowledge; it is about producing knowledge that is deeply rooted in specific contexts and experiences. This kind of context-specific knowledge is essential, as it allows us to understand the nuances of each situation we encounter and to respond with empathy and insight. It invites diverse perspectives and acknowledges that every story matters, enriching our collective understanding and fostering a more inclusive framework for engaging with our partners.

We genuinely hope this edition offers a new viewpoint for our readers and engages the feminist tech community in impactful ways. Our goal is to motivate individuals to continue establishing a strong feminist research foundation in the tech sector. We believe that by encouraging collaboration and sharing diverse perspectives, data and insights, we can cultivate a more equitable and inclusive technological landscape. Together, we can redefine and reshape narratives and enhance the influence of feminist research within the tech industry.

Happy feminist reading from the FIRN team and research partners.

We are grateful to Srinidhi Raghavan for her review of this editorial piece.

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¹⁵ Ibid.

LIMINALITIES OF RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY: BLURRING ROLES AS RESEARCHERS, COUNSELLORS AND PEERS

Sharin D'souza, Eesha Lavalekar and Joshua Mark George



Illustration by Ellena May SJ

Participatory research in tech is an exciting ever-evolving space, however, the process of identity negotiation as a researcher is often riddled with messy, human realities of connection, care and responsibility.¹⁶ Researchers inevitably bring different parts of themselves to the research process, listening as counsellors, relating as peers or people with similar lived experiences, while at the same time being the “researcher”.

In this piece, the three of us reflect on the moments when we felt that our roles blurred during the TransNET study – when “objectivity” met empathy, when boundaries felt porous and when our identities were a part of the stories that were told.¹⁷ This piece is split into three sections, each written by a different researcher, named Researcher 1, 2 and 3 for anonymity. Over the last year we have worked as lead researchers on the qualitative and participatory components of the TransNET project, designing guides, co-conducting and analysing in-depth interviews and thinking about power, consent, reciprocity and the co-production of knowledge.

RESEARCHER 1

Reflecting on power in my roles as researcher and community member

As a trans non-binary person myself, I assumed that my lived experiences and work with my communities would make it easier to conduct research interviews, connect with participants and ask insightful questions. What I didn't expect was that there would be so many competing roles and relationships to navigate with participants throughout the research process, and the ethical dilemmas that my power, positionalities and other intersecting identities of class, language and region brought up.

The power to decide whose stories get told

To begin with, the power that we had as researchers to include or exclude potential participants from this research project was quite evident right from the registration sheet.

Our recruitment strategy involved sending the recruitment call out to our social media followers, community spaces and extended networks, which inevitably excluded communities and organisations that we and our networks had not heard of or encountered. This meant that the call reached people who were already connected to us or knew of our work. The people who registered tended to be part of urban communities and activist spaces, where they were more likely to encounter discussions, literature and resources on technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), and thus be more primed for participation in this study.

We avoided jargon like “TFGBV” in our recruitment calls and endeavoured to use simplified language and include examples and definitions. However, the language and vocabulary of research and concepts of “intersectionality” and “gender-based violence” even being mentioned in our title or in

¹⁶ Participatory research aims to collaborate with communities as equal partners at every stage of the research process. This approach is often operationalised in research through community advisory boards, consultations, co-design workshops and involving researchers from the communities of focus. It aims to not just address inequities in the research process but also to make the research design, execution and reporting more responsive to the context and lived realities of the participants.

¹⁷ TransNET is a participatory qualitative study on experiences of technology-facilitated gender-based violence among trans, non-binary and gender diverse persons in India.

our informed consent form meant that they were not relatable or accessible to people outside of academia and advocacy spaces, people for whom these terms are not part of daily conversations. The call for “transgender, non-binary, and gender-diverse persons” also inadvertently excluded communities and subcultures from the Indian subcontinent, such as *kothis*, who may not identify with the “transgender” label.¹⁸ Guidelines for inclusive recruitment strategies indicate that simple, plain and direct language is most accessible to potential participants.¹⁹ However, even when recruitment is inclusive, marginalised communities may still view researchers, particularly those from more privileged socioeconomic strata, with suspicion and even fear, and may choose not to participate due to unpleasant and unproductive experiences in the past.²⁰

The intersections of marginalised class and regional backgrounds were thus remarkably underrepresented in the study. For instance, people from rural or suburban India, non-English or non-Hindi-speaking persons, and people who had not completed high school were missing from our sample. In a country as diverse as India, there are intersections that have been difficult to cover through our networks and recruitment strategies.

These challenges highlighted the power I exert in so many ways – right from using English as one of the two primary languages to interact with communities, to the way my lived experiences and identities shape who gets to co-create this research with us, to even the organisations and institutions through which I conduct this research and who has access to them.

The power to filter and interpret stories

The process of conducting and analysing interviews was also an uncomfortable reminder of how different research is from other approaches to documenting narratives, particularly in how much power is given to the researcher.

The last project I worked on involved supporting queer-trans persons in creating narratives on their experiences within healthcare, which could then be used in advocacy efforts. My role as project coordinator was to highlight the participants’ voices and seek their inputs and consent at every single stage of the process. Their mentors offered suggestions and guidance, without directly editing their written narratives. The cohort of participants also supported each other creatively and emotionally, and they suffered through and celebrated the creation, completion and dissemination of their narratives together.

Switching from that to a formal research project was quite a rough shift in terms of how this project involved limited collaboration with its participants. It also showed in how each research participant was not allowed to interact with other queer-trans participants also going through the same process. As a researcher maintaining confidentiality, I mediated their access to their own information and to the wider community of participants, and I reorganised their narratives into outputs that they had very limited agency in co-creating when compared to the previous project I worked on.

¹⁸ Kothi are men who are “feminine” in their expressions, and who may or may not consider themselves trans.

¹⁹ Coleman, E., O’Sullivan, L., Crowley, R., Hanbidge, M., Driver, S., Kroll, T., Kelly, A., Nichol, A., McCarthy, O., Sukumar, P., & Doran, P. (2021). Preparing accessible and understandable clinical research participant information leaflets and consent forms: a set of guidelines from an expert consensus conference. *Research Involvement and Engagement*, 7, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40900-021-00265-2>

²⁰ Potnis, D., & Gala, B. (2020). Best practices for conducting fieldwork with marginalized communities. *Information Processing & Management*, 57(3), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ipm.2019.102144>

When reflecting back on the interview process, I realised that my conscious and subconscious interests and biases shaped how I drew information out of participants. I tended to follow up on information that felt novel to me, asking questions about perspectives I hadn't considered before, and possibly ignoring topics I had already encountered. At some level, I considered my own knowledge and experiences to be a sort of baseline for what I thought was already evident or common sense, and I inquired more about what I thought was "worth exploring" and capturing. This recognition of researcher subjectivity was not something I had navigated this reflexively when doing quantitative research in the past.

Even when coding and organising data for the first draft of our data analysis, I found myself spending less time refining information that I thought was "basic" knowledge and instead focused my time on highlighting quotes and anecdotes that I thought might catch the eye of readers curious to know more about TFGBV within the transgender, non-binary and gender diverse (TNBGD) communities in India.

While my colleagues reassured me that this is a part of writing a qualitative paper, it bothered me just how much power I exerted with every question I asked or every word I typed. It didn't feel very queer-feminist of me to have so much power over directing and filtering down participants' narratives, since one of my aims as a queer feminist is to address and dismantle hierarchies of power that contribute to oppression. As a trans non-binary person myself, I always wondered about the power that researchers have to share our stories with the world, but now that I'm a researcher myself, I still don't see why I should hold this much power over my community members. The ways in which my personhood and subjectivity influenced the research process made me feel uncomfortable, even though I saw my lived experiences as bringing value to it.

All these reflections emphasised how I had internalised notions of what "good" research is. These notions emerged every time I was concerned about choosing not to be a passive or objective observer in the research process, especially as someone from my community trying to understand and document the diverse experiences of TFGBV within said community. I was subconsciously trying to escape the influence my relationships with my identities and my communities had on the research process.

Ironically, this clashed with the whole point of doing participatory research, which was to have the "researched" take ownership of the research process. As my role blurred from researched towards researcher, I realised that navigating the power that came with it was an active and ongoing process. Rather than shy away from it, I had to acknowledge my power within the institution of research, and then consciously wield it in a way that felt accountable to my communities, even while navigating the limitations of the research framework.

We took many measures to foster reciprocity and co-ownership, such as offering continued engagement and support to participants after the interviews, welcoming them to share any poetry or other narratives they would like us to use in the research outputs, extending support with regard to navigating digital security concerns, reaching out to them for resources when our own community members were being cyberbullied and offering to share any drafts of outputs that used their quotes with them for feedback and consent before publication.

RESEARCHER 2

In-betweeners: What does participatory research have to do with liminality?

In my reflections, I look at how the process of doing participatory work as a lived experience researcher would create a liminal space – the experience of being “betwixt and between” two states, “neither this, nor that, maybe both”, often characterised by ambiguity.²¹

Curiosity about facets of my lived experience

While I was at university, like many budding researchers I found that my interest areas were inextricably tied to what I experienced and saw around me – people from minoritised communities continuously negotiating power and agency. So, in my research, while I was inquiring about how women and queer-trans people make sense of the relationships and spaces around them, I was really looking to connect with and learn from the historical and ongoing experiences of other marginalised people. Thus, my own identity exploration was tied to the questions I was asking in my research. Later, within the non-profit space, when I started doing participatory research with queer-trans communities as a person from these communities, I began to experience a lot of uncertainty. The research process was raising a lot of intimate and ethical questions for me. In no particular order, there were elements of self-doubt, disillusionment and identity confusion in the questions I was asking, questions like:

1. Am I a part of this research only because I am from these communities? Do I *really* have any research skills?
2. As a closeted hypervigilant queer-trans person, am I the best person to work on this research when compared to my peers who are out?
3. Representation on research teams and community advisory boards often includes people with relatively greater visibility in community networks, while more intersectionally marginalised people are often left out and gain fewer direct benefits from participation. Am I right to be disillusioned by the transformative potential of participatory research?
4. Am I a researcher or a community member? Why do these feel like they are at odds with one another?

Who am I?

Inherent to these tensions is the notion of “positivism creep” – where positivism unintentionally affects reflexive and interpretivist projects.²² Positivism is a school of thought in research that believes that there is a single tangible reality that can be measured and tested, using experiments and statistical analyses, in settings where researchers can control and manipulate variables to understand cause and effect. Power hierarchies are ever-present in research, but positivism

21 Le Hunte, B. (2022). Liminality. In V. P. Glăveanu (Ed.), *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of the Possible*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-90913-0_246; Winkler, I., & Kristensen, M. L. (2021). Trapped in limbo: Academics' identity negotiation in conditions of perpetual liminality. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 16 (2), 332-349, p.333. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QROM-09-2020-2023>

22 Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Toward good practice in thematic analysis: Avoiding common problems and be(com)ing a knowing researcher. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 24(1), 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597>

particularly aims to be objective by creating a separation between researcher and participant.²³ As queer-feminist researchers we recognise that reality is socially constructed, knowledge is contextual and the perspectives of marginalised communities provide unique ways of seeing and critiquing systems of power.²⁴ However, in working on the TransNET project, towards this goal, I found myself caught in between the artificial dichotomy of the researcher and participant as two distinct categories. Am I representative of a system that has a history of being extractive and violent towards minoritised groups or am I a queer-trans person whose lived experiences overlap with those of our participants? Am I an insider or an outsider? Am I powerful or powerless? Should I listen and observe, or should I lean into the intersubjectivity and converse?

The process of doing participatory research with queer-trans people as a queer-trans person is a liminal space, as I am neither just a researcher, nor only a community member, but both.²⁵ This liminality disrupted the hierarchies of researcher and participant and brought up feelings of self-doubt, frustration, hopelessness, uncertainty and discomfort. My own identity and my relationship with others in my community was under constant challenge and change. During this period, peer-debriefing and memo writing were incredibly useful tools to articulate my feelings and reflexively engage with the research process.

I contain multitudes

As this research project has progressed, I keep thinking about whether these parts of my identity can converse with each other or should I collapse these binaries altogether. I am a queer-trans researcher documenting histories of violence, resistance and agency among queer-trans people. Role confusion comes with the territory, but expectations of objectivity and reducing bias can create a greater pressure to be in control and bring less of myself to interactions with participants. These positivist values were reinforced within my academic and advocacy experience as constituting “real” evidence. And so, these ideas of control can permeate feminist undertakings at the psychological and interpersonal level. Dichotomies like the researcher-participant divide can often be misleading. For example, the powerful-powerless, oppressor-oppressed dichotomies can sometimes make power look like a static unchangeable phenomenon, when power is a contextual negotiation. As a researcher, I have the power to design the questions I ask in an interview, and at the same time, I am often left speechless and emotional after participants share their stories. I am leaning on my co-researchers and study participants, learning to be more present, open and genuine through the research process. The process of doing this work – continuously reflecting on power hierarchies and exploring new forms of organising power and care in research – is confusing and disorienting, but it is also a bridge towards uncovering something new about ourselves and each other.

23 Park, Y. S., Konge, L., & Artino, A. R. Jr. (2020). The positivism paradigm of research. *Academic Medicine*, 95(5), 690-694. <https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000003093>

24 Maruska, J. H. (2017). Feminist Ontologies, Epistemologies, Methodologies, and Methods in International Relations. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.178>

25 Dwyer, S. C., & Buckle, J. L. (2009). The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(1), 54-63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800105>

RESEARCHER 3

Seeing, holding and responding: the researcher, peer and mental health professional

Liminality can extend beyond blurred roles to feeling the weight of every role at once – researcher, survivor, mental health professional, all pressing in at the same time.²⁶ In this section, I express the dilemma I felt in moments of deep emotional resonance, the constant worry of re-traumatising someone and the challenge of balancing care for participants in research spaces.

This comes from my positionality as an ally, a mental health professional and a researcher, and my thoughts on the intersection of practice and inquiry, a result of pondering the ethical complexities that surround research with marginalised communities.

Based on previous experiences, I was quite confident about how our interviews would unfold. I spent time preparing my approach, practicing my verbal and nonverbal cues, deciding what words to use and thinking through how I would respond to sensitive or delicate information shared during the interviews. Yet, as the data collection began, I soon realised that things were far more unpredictable and fluid than I had imagined. Each interaction unfolded in its own way, sometimes requiring patience, sometimes silence, sometimes a shift in direction. There was a moment in almost every interview where I paused internally just to recalibrate how I wanted to move forward. The interviews were a place of being present, listening deeply and allowing the process to unfold in its own way, and they required constant adapting, learning and adjustment. And this is how I started exploring the idea that power in research isn't defined – it evolves with every conversation and moves between researchers and participants as, for instance, our participants had the final say in deciding how many and which researchers would be present during their interviews. The flow of power shaped not only the research, but also me as a researcher.

When participants shared something deeply painful, I could sense in that instant the internal conflict of my roles pressing in from all sides. I kept asking myself, am I here as a researcher, a survivor or a mental health professional? Which part of me should respond? And more importantly, which part of me is allowed to respond?

The tension between listening and responding

As a researcher, I have always been guided to document, to listen actively without inserting myself into the story. I am but a mere medium and my objectivity is central to the implementation of a project. Courses have taught me that my role is to create a space where people feel safe sharing their experiences without feeling guided, interrupted or influenced. But when it came to being with a participant who was clearly in pain, because of my training in counselling and therapy, I felt that I was wired to respond, to validate, to offer comfort. My urge was to acknowledge the depth of their pain, affirm the unjust nature of the violence, and help them make sense of what they had experienced by piecing together contributing socio-cultural inequities at play. At the same time,

26 Gupta, V., Eames, C., Golding, L., Greenhill, B., Qi, R., Allan, S., Bryant, A., & Fisher, P. (2023). Understanding the identity of lived experience researchers and providers: a conceptual framework and systematic narrative review. *Research Involvement and Engagement*, 9, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40900-023-00439-0>

I could feel myself being pulled away as an inner voice kept telling me: this is not a counselling session, this is an interview.

Many times, I felt that I was more than a distant observer. In some ways I was also a peer, someone who understands the layered experiences of TFGBV and someone who has felt the impact of it. This proximity and the resultant sense of solidarity with the participants made the process complex too. Participatory research challenges the idea that researchers can remain neutral and detached, recognising that complete detachment is neither ethical nor possible. Reciprocity means that respect, safety and care in an interview are not just the responsibility of the researcher but are co-created by both researchers and participants. Rather than placing the burden solely on researchers to perform empathy, we should see the interview as a shared space where both sides contribute to building understanding and respect. I am also holding the narratives, witnessing them, and to some extent I am implicated in them. Holding these different identities in my mind, I often wondered what care would look like in this space. Apart from breaks and the validation of emotions, what else could I offer in that moment without crossing the invisible boundary between a therapist and a researcher? Do I need to stick to these boundaries, or should they be challenged? As someone who has experienced some aspects of online abuse, how do I hold this space while ensuring the objectivity in the research process?

The fear of retraumatising

Another thought that I could feel creeping in was the fear of unintentionally causing harm, of asking a question which could bring someone back to a painful place. It is necessary to hold the weight of people's stories, stories orbiting trauma, systemic violence, discrimination, isolation, resistance and survival, but the thought of burdening them further is far worse.²⁷ It is but natural to think that the line between being supportive and overstepping is thin. Thus, one can always proactively build safeguards – content warnings, reminders that they can skip questions, debriefs at the end – but is this enough? There is no perfect formula.

With the pre-interview discussions we attempted to create a place for grounding, a place that underlines participant agency. We introduced ourselves; we discussed the possible risks and benefits. We tried to create an environment where participants could feel comfortable to step away, take a break, stop whenever they wanted. If distress lingered, we would help them connect with mental health support. But was it enough?

I kept pondering: is my presence helping, or am I just another person extracting painful memories for the sake of research?

We often discussed how to make research less extractive, what reciprocity might look like in this project. Nevertheless, we always wondered if we'd done enough. Or if we ever could. It kept reminding me – no matter what steps or safeguards are incorporated in the process, research will still remain, at its core, extractive. I can shift the language – “participants”, “collaborators”, “co-producers of knowledge” – but how do I make the dynamic truly change?

27 Diab, J. L., & Al-Azzeh, D. (2024). Inclusive inquiry: a compassionate journey in trauma-informed qualitative research with GBV survivors from displaced communities. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1399115>

After discussing this multiple times, we thought that the real challenge is that reciprocity in research can't just be an add-on, a footnote, a well-meaning gesture. One must make sure that it is fundamental. It must be weaved into the process of design, analysis and the way we approach research. It means consciously questioning one's views on authorship, ownership, who gets to shape the narrative. And that can be unsettling.

So where does one even begin? Maybe by admitting that there is no simple answer and just repeatedly taking a step back and thinking: what can we do differently here? Beyond the interview itself, we revisited how we co-produced knowledge. Inviting participants to reach out with more reflections outside of the interview itself and seeking continuous feedback from community advisory board members made the process more collective and fluid. We talked about how to share findings – what methods apart from summaries, discussions or collaborative reflections could be included, what community members' needs are when navigating violent online spaces, and how we could ensure that their voices are centred in shaping recommendations and insights.

And with this active sharing of thoughts and ideas, I could feel the research itself shift. For me, the research process went beyond extraction to mutual learning and accountability. And this process kept evolving with the aim of embedding participants as co-owners and co-producers in a more meaningful way, by co-developing tools, ensuring tangible benefits for participants and facilitating everyone involved in the process taking an active role in determining the findings and narratives that emerge from it.

The imperfect balance

As more interviews followed, I kept thinking that there is no easy solution to this conflict. Some days, I felt like I have found the right balance. I thought that I have managed to play my role as researcher without being cold, my role as a mental health practitioner without overstepping, and that I was able to validate a participant as a peer without making it about myself. On some days I will have to walk away wondering if I could have done something differently, if I could have held space better.

Initially I convinced myself that this research was not about me, it was not about my discomfort and confusion when navigating these roles but was about the people who were sharing their lived experiences, that I needed to decentre myself to ensure that participants feel heard and supported. That is the only thing that counts. But my colleagues reminded me: you also matter. Care should not be a limited resource; holding space for others should not lead to the erasure of oneself. They helped me come to terms with the fact that caring for them also meant allowing myself to be held, to share the load, to not disappear in the process.

Sitting with these dilemmas, contemplating them, has led me to believe that equity, ethics, compassion and accountability need to be at the heart of how I engage with research – every aspect of it. It means being intentional with my questions, framing them with care in a way that does not seek answers but invites stories, building a space where interactions can happen naturally. Ultimately, I need to focus on how to listen, moving beyond witnessing to connecting, and moving beyond extraction to engagement.

CONCLUSION

Doing queer-feminist, participatory work not only involves understanding power relations in our social worlds but also in the process of knowledge production. What we have come to realise is that this process is just as important as the final outcomes and outputs. Just having people from queer-trans communities in research teams doesn't automatically make a research project participatory. Intentional approaches like iteratively seeking guidance from community advisors, compensating participants for interviews and learning to be present and authentic in our interactions with participants have allowed us to deepen the participatory nature of our research. Making research participatory is a collective endeavour. The research team, participants and advisory board members are co-producers, co-owners and key advocates of the TransNET study. In line with this, we also plan to co-develop and co-disseminate diverse outputs with community members at the end of the study.

Our experience has also led us to recognise that participatory work is a work in progress, and each project gives us the space to innovate ways to strengthen the co-production and co-ownership of knowledge. For instance, we've had community advisory boards in some projects that have worked incredibly well, and in other projects, personal and professional challenges can impede regular participation. In these cases, we have tried to explore alternatives such as one-on-one meetings or email correspondence with advisors. What works in one situation may not work in another, and recognising constraints with compassion is also vital.

In the end this process has been emotional, messy and at times overwhelming, one of constant negotiations between what we were taught and what it felt like in practice. The push and pull between our roles as researchers, fellow community members, people with shared lived experiences and mental health professionals meant constantly shifting perspectives, balancing solidarity and engagement, structure and spontaneity. The tension of navigating care, power and our own positionality was initially disorienting but ultimately transformative. Dismantling rigid expectations of objectivity and dualism took us to moments of openness, where participants were also invited to guide the direction of the interviews.

What helped was leaning on others – debriefing as a regular practice, especially with team members when we felt stuck, writing memos to untangle difficult emotions, guidance from our team reminding us that we were in this process together and reciprocity with participants where they could reach out to us within and outside of the interviews. Reflexivity became more than a research tool in the “betwixt and between” where learning, unlearning and reimagining could happen.

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BRINGING THE ENERGY HOME

By Carl and Dany Araújo, MariaLab

Illustration by Ellena May SJ

In an essay in 1986, the acclaimed science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin critiqued fictional works that disproportionately emphasise the archetype of the hero, his acts of bravery, violence and weapons of power.²⁸

To elaborate on her critique, Le Guin draws upon the Carrier Bag Theory, proposed by Elizabeth Fisher in her book *Woman's Creation*.²⁹ This theory argues that the narrative of human evolution is incomplete when it focuses solely on hunting and the invention of tools such as spears, axes and arrows. According with this theory, activities like gathering and storing food – traditionally believed to be performed solely by women – were equally vital to humanity's survival and development. These practices were a crucial step in enabling humans to adopt a nomadic lifestyle and explore new territories. Le Guin, drawing on Fisher's ideas, suggests that before "sticks and spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things [...] the first cultural device was probably a recipient".³⁰ This leads to the metaphor of the carrier bag, which illustrates that "with or before the tool that forces energy outward, we made the tool that brings energy home".³¹

The hero's tale, though limited, is filled with action and power, exalting narratives of victory and conquest. And because such stories are perceived as more "exciting" and "attractive", they continue to dominate most science fiction productions to this day, whether in literature or audiovisual media.

Le Guin's argument emphasises that by focusing exclusively on the hero, countless other stories risk being left untold.

Perhaps the reader who has progressed to this point is wondering why the opening paragraphs of an article exploring ethical issues in feminist research delve into a theory of fiction. To begin with, it must be acknowledged that the authors of this article are passionate admirers of Ursula K. Le Guin and her extensive work. However, this is not the (only) reason for Le Guin's significant presence in this text. The Carrier Bag Theory, whether applied to human evolution, science fiction or extended to feminist science and technology studies, introduces a new type of storytelling, one that challenges the logics of invisibility and silencing. Moreover, it disrupts our socio-technical imaginary of science and technology, or the so-called "common sciences".³²

If science fiction is the mythology of modern technology, then its myth is tragic. 'Technology,' or 'modern science' ... is a heroic undertaking, Herculean, Promethean, conceived as triumph, hence ultimately as tragedy. ...

If, however, one avoids the linear, progressive, Time's-(killing)-arrow mode of the Techno-Heroic, and redefines technology and science as primarily cultural carrier bag rather than weapon of domination, one pleasant side effect is that science fiction can be seen as a far less rigid, narrow field, not necessarily Promethean or apocalyptic at all, and in fact less a mythological genre than a realistic one.³³

28 Le Guin, U. K. (1986). The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/mirror/u/uk/ursula-k-le-guin-the-carrier-bag-theory-of-fiction.pdf>

29 Fisher, H. E. (1980). *Woman's Creation: Sexual Evolution and the Struggle for Female Power*. McGraw-Hill Book Co.

30 Le Guin, U. K. (1986). Op. cit. 2.

31 Ibid.

32 Chibeni, S. S. (2004). O que é ciência? *Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas da Unicamp*, 1-17. <https://unicamp.br/~chibeni/textosdidaticos/ciencia.pdf>

33 Le Guin, U. K. (1986). Op. cit. 4.

Here we arrive at the core of our argument: redefining technology and science not as weapons of domination, but as cultural carrier bags.

Throughout our research, we encountered the challenge of moving beyond traditional dichotomies – such as subject and object – and conventional notions of scientific rigour when working to establish more horizontal and collaborative research relationships.³⁴

The main question guiding our research was: could digital forensics help tackle technology-facilitated gender-based violence? For the development of this study, we collaborated with other groups in Latin America who want to explore the potential of digital forensics in the context of human rights defence. We dialogued with international human rights and technology organisations that respond to digital threats to civil society and are well recognised as references in the field of digital forensics and advanced threat analysis. We also worked with Feminist Helplines from Latin America, with whom MariaLab had undertaken previous joint projects and therefore had an existing relationship of trust.³⁵

It is important to note that in this research, we occupy dual roles as both researchers and participants, being directly invested in the subject under investigation. This duality of “investigating” and “participating” is inherent to our practice as a feminist hacker organisation. However, when applied within a scientific research context, it requires additional care and thoughtful reflection. We recognise that our personal experiences and political engagement with the topic are integral to the research process, and that critical self-reflection on our positions is essential to the production of knowledge. This also involves acknowledging the power and privilege that come with “community trust”, often rooted in shared identities.³⁶

The feminist critique of modern science represents one of the most fertile grounds for the development of a research ethic that challenges and refutes notions of scientific objectivity, asserting instead that all science is socially and historically constructed. Scholars in the field of science and technology studies, such as Evelyn Fox Keller³⁷, Sandra Harding³⁸ and Donna Haraway³⁹, argue that all knowledge is situated – meaning it emerges from a specific context of creation and is shaped by underlying assumptions that must be explicitly integrated into the analysis itself. Situated knowledge, localised knowledge or partial perspectives form the core of this epistemological framework, emphasising the situatedness and partiality of knowledge. According to this approach, every theory originates from particular motivations, experiences, connections and reflections.

Recognising this bias, we sought methods to ensure that the ideas, data and experiences gathered in our research were not merely reflections of the individuals documenting them. Action research – a process of investigation that intentionally seeks to generate practical effects within the reality being

34 The research project “Feminist digital forensics: A study and a proposal for development” is being developed by MariaLab, a Brazilian feminist non-profit organisation working at the intersection of gender, technology and politics. The project is part of the Feminist Internet Research Network, a collaborative and multidisciplinary research project led by the Association for Progressive Communications and funded by the International Development Research Centre.

35 <https://feministhelplines.org/>

36 Hussen, T. S. (2019, 29 August). “All that you walk on to get there”: How to centre feminist ways of knowing. *Feminist Internet Research Network*. <https://firn.genderit.org/blog/all-you-walk-get-there-how-centre-feminist-ways-knowing>

37 Keller, E. F. (2006). Qual foi o impacto do feminismo na ciência?. *Cadernos Pagu*, (27), 13–34. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-83332006000200003>

38 Harding, S. (1987). Introduction: Is there a *Feminist Method*? In *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues*. Indiana University Press

39 Haraway, D. (2009). Saberes localizados: a questão da ciência para o feminismo e o privilégio da perspectiva parcial. *Cadernos Pagu*, (5), 7–41. Recuperado de <https://periodicos.sbu.unicamp.br/ojs/index.php/cadpagu/article/view/1773>

studied – was the path we chose to adopt.⁴⁰ This method dialogues closely with our interpretation of technology as knowledge organised around action.⁴¹

As part of our research methodology, we organised an in-person meeting with at least one member of each of the feminist digital helplines participating in this project.⁴² We brought an actual bag to this meeting and invited each participant to place an item inside that they considered a significant contribution or take away from this research process. This icebreaker activity served as a playful way to begin the presentations, but it also laid the groundwork for an open and collaborative process of knowledge creation. Through this dialogue, we narrowed down our ideas into three main points, which became the pillars of our research process.

COMUNIDAD. FORTALEZA. CRIANZA MUTUA.



40 Tripp, D. (2005). Pesquisa-ação: uma introdução metodológica. Educação E Pesquisa, 31(3), 443–466. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S1517-97022005000300009>

41 <https://www.marialab.org/manifesta/>

42 The feminist digital security helplines participating in this project are Maria D'ajuda, Navegando Libres, Técnicas Rudas, Luchadoras and Centro S.O.S. Digital.

COMUNIDAD.

The sense of community we have cultivated with the individuals and groups involved in this research predates this investigation and will endure long after its conclusion. Among the ideas placed in the bag, we encountered words such as desire, dream, tenderness and friendship, alongside requests to share words in “Portuñol” and playlists of Latin music – elements that would rarely find a place in the narratives of heroes or the theoretical treatises of traditional scientific paradigms.

Since our beginnings as members of the digital security community, guided even then by the feminist perspective we embrace here, we have always operated on the basis of a “safe space”. This concept refers to an environment that fosters the development of ideas and the exchange of experiences, where the well-being of all participants is prioritised. For this reason, building friendships, sharing nourishing meals and respecting moments of rest are fundamental elements of our approach.

FORTALEZA.

Recognising the knowledge generated through practical action and everyday work is a principle we consistently reaffirm. Understanding and asserting that academia is not the only place for constructing knowledge allows us to remain vigilant about the power hierarchies that can permeate research – even within our own “safe spaces”. By integrating diverse forms of learning and practice, we expand the possibilities for empirical analysis while simultaneously strengthening collaborative efforts.

One common characteristic among the participants in this meeting is their view of digital care as integral to a process of empowerment and capacity-building. This stands in contrast to the militarised logic of the “information security” field, which emphasises “attackers” and “exploits”, reducing protection to the narrow practice of “preventive security”. For the group present, protection and empowerment are intertwined, forming part of a broader process of growth and transformation, one that centres people and the principle of “do no harm”.

The group itself comprises an intersection of diverse individuals, each bringing their own experiences, activism, cultures and passions. When these elements intertwine, they create a rich tapestry of knowledge that calls for transformative technologies and for actions to be expansive in their reach, rather than narrowly ultra-specialised.

Bringing these reflections to both the beginning and the end of a meeting focused on sharing ultra-specialised practices is intentional and deeply symbolic. Thus, when we conclude our meeting with a forró (Brazilian dance) workshop, it served not only as an enjoyable activity that connects us to our bodies and to one another, but also as a way of celebrating and experiencing a rhythm recognised as part of Brazil’s intangible cultural heritage.⁴³

43 Tolentino, I. (2019, 24 October). Forró and the relationship between music, dance and identity. *Corpuslab*. <https://corpuslab.info/foro-e-as-relacoes-entre-musica-danca-e-identidade/?lang=en>

CRIANZA MUTUA.

This expression means more than just the process of creating together, and emphasises the importance of continually nurturing and sustaining this collective creation.

We have committed ourselves to developing alternative vocabularies that reflect the specificity of experiences, challenging hegemonic categories and concepts.⁴⁴ Rather than merely reproducing dominant frameworks, we strive to construct forms of expression that enable new narratives to emerge.

The creation of this community is inherently collective – not just in principle, but in practice, built through numerous “safe spaces” and shaped by many hands. In perspective of a free and open production process, ideas circulate, inspire, are reimagined and remixed and continue to flow, feeding back into and enriching the ongoing cycle of creation.

This also prompted us to reflect on the concept of authorship. Who are the authors of this text, and of future works arising from this project? How can we credit the originality of the ideas we have gathered beyond the classic form of quoting authors and interviewees? Are references alone sufficient, or do they perpetuate a divide between researcher and participant?

And how do we deal with the fine line between anonymity-security and recognition-visibility when we are dealing with complex subjects, especially when addressing issues such as combating violence and the intersecting inequalities of gender, race, class and sexuality? To what extent does naming the individuals who contributed to this research expose them to potential risks?

The concepts of risk and security are deeply familiar to us through our work. As feminist helplines, we engage daily in acts of resistance and incident response; anonymity and risk analysis are central tools to our practice.

Yet, despite our experiences, these questions continue to resonate with us, and we still do not have definitive answers.

For now, we have chosen to name all contributors. From a traditional digital security perspective, this decision may seem illogical, perhaps even incoherent, risky or selfish.

Our bag is shared and carried by the hands of Mariel from Luchadoras; Daniela from Técnicas Rudas; Nara and Nina from Centro S.O.S. Digital; Su and Pris from Navegando Libres por la Red; Sophie from Université Laval (Canada); Lino from Rede Transfeminista de Cuidados Digitais; and Tes, Ashi, Chan, Paty, Dany and Carl from MariaLab.

The act of naming everyone is not tied to a heroic act of defence or attack but rather an effort to “bring the energy home”. It is about reaffirming and preserving the how, the who and the why alongside the what. To motivate, to dream, to share – these are our guiding principles. Building something is important, but understanding *who* builds, *how* they build, *why* they build and for whom is what truly drives us.

44 Oliveira, D. P. de ., Araújo, D. C. de ., & Kanashiro, M. M.. (2020). Tecnologias, infraestruturas e redes feministas: potências no processo de ruptura com o legado colonial e androcêntrico*. *Cadernos Pagu*, (59), e205903. <https://doi.org/10.1590/18094449202000590003>

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Dany Araújo has a PhD in Science and Technology Policy from the University of Campinas (São Paulo, Brazil), with a focus on Feminist Studies on Science and Technology. She has been a member of MariaLab since 2017, currently working in the positions of project coordinator and research leader. Addicted to series of dubious quality, compulsive consumer of fiction books and clearly falling in love with all the Culture imagined by Latin America.

FEMINIST REFLECTION ON OUR RESEARCH PROJECT

By Karina Núñez Rodríguez and Analía Lavin



Illustration by Ellena May SJ

Our research project is led and carried out by sex workers, cis, trans, local and migrant, living in Uruguayan territory. We, who have fascinated academics for decades as objects of study and whose knowledge has been extracted without recognition by someone with a university degree, are producing a counternarrative to the hegemonic methodology imposed by academia.

Of the 42 in-depth interviews we conducted with current or former sex workers, 48% were cis women, 43% were trans women, 7% were cis men and 2% were non-binary. In terms of age, 29% were aged between 20 and 29, 36% between 30 and 39, 26% between 40 and 49, 7% between 50 and 59 and 2% between 60 and 69. Fifty per cent of respondents identified as white, 24% as Afro-descendant, 14% as mestizo, 2% as Indigenous and 10% as other categories. Thirty-three per cent live in Montevideo, 24% in the metropolitan area and 43% in the rest of the country. Finally, 29% of participants had completed their primary education, 45% had started but not completed their secondary education, 17% had completed their secondary education and 9% were pursuing tertiary or university studies.

We prioritised a diverse sample that took into account multiple realities, including the fact that many sex workers have to move to do their work as a result of the moral structure of sex work. Therefore, in designing this research, we considered geopolitical and gender axes as two of the main visible and important axes. In a global and regional context of persecution of transgender people, we explicitly sought a high representation of dissident gender identities. We also aimed to include as much geographical diversity as possible. Uruguay is a centralised country and the dominant perspective is that of the capital, Montevideo. Most publications and academic studies on sex work are limited to Montevideo, do not include a consideration of digital rights and are led by sex work abolitionist researchers. Our focus on diversity presented particular challenges, as sex workers living outside the capital often have limited access to the internet, due to generational and class issues, as well as difficulties in accessing technology. In order to include the perspectives of those who work with the internet on a daily basis, especially on websites and platforms, we changed our strategy and decided to include more people from the capital, both respondents and interviewers.

It was a process of exploration, knowledge production and a recognition of our limitations. It involved a transition from a feminism anchored in our bodies to a feminism practised on the keyboard. As a result, we found that we had more oppressions in common than we had imagined. Although we learned at the beginning of the project how disempowered we are as grassroots feminists, where oppressions wear down the body much more than tech spaces, we found common ground. Coming from the streets, we could never have imagined that our names would appear in an international feminist publication.

We encountered barriers that we turned into learning opportunities. We struggled with the wording of the call for proposals, the logistics of getting a passport and a visa, even setting up an email address. We worked within the confines of a foreign language, which in itself is a mechanism of exclusion that keeps many people out of international spaces. Together with class differences and other privileges, these barriers allowed us to make visible new forms of marginalisation. However, we managed to integrate these experiences into our daily work and discovered that we had the capacity to diversify our feminist practices and struggles.

Being part of this research made it clear that we grassroots activists will always need validating interlocutors. We will never reach decision-making spaces alone, no matter how hard we try. Throughout this process we found ourselves in friendly spaces, but friendliness is not empowering

and can be a form of colonialism. However, we accepted the mediation and translation, and continuous support and guidance helped us to create a new space of feminist dissidence.

The different intersectionalities in the team (trans women, cis women, migrant women, women from the capital and other cities, academics) brought challenges as we sought horizontality. We were aware that all kinds of knowledge were important, necessary and transformative. We had two main challenges. Within the team, we noticed and acknowledged an unequal exercise of power linked to the presence of money, as well as different kinds of privilege. Some of us come with a burden of structural violence that does not allow us to act outside of a hegemonic power structure. Externally, we have had to deal with fixed timelines and structures, not unlike those dictated by the market, that are alien to our idiosyncrasies.

Another common challenge was language comprehension, particularly as a result of the standardised form we had to adhere to. When conducting interviews, we discussed that some questions would have to be reformulated. When we asked about the forms of violence participants were exposed to, we had to be explicit about what kind of practices we were considering (such as receiving unsolicited pictures of genitals or being constantly called on one's personal numbers). Many of them had not thought of these things as violence. Due to the constant violation of their rights, sex workers' perception of danger and violence is limited to their physical integrity, which prevents them from positioning themselves as subjects with digital rights. We also noticed an individualism that emerges from the tyranny of the algorithm. Sex workers who use platforms try to climb the social ladder by pursuing the hegemonic body ideal through exercise and healthy diets. They see themselves as having a higher status than those who do not have the tools to adapt to these trends. They show prejudices against sex workers and clients that they do not consider "high-end", which also implies a form of violence.

The narratives and historicities of bodies are influenced by where they live. We value the territorial deployment that allowed our interviewees to welcome us into their own homes, in contrast to previous experiences the team members had had with academic researchers. These visits generated new, empowering imaginaries that showed them to be not only sex workers but also subjects constructing new realities. We found it dignifying for the interviewees to welcome us, strangers, into their intimate and safe spaces. We received clear signs of their attention when they ignored calls from clients and prioritised our exchange. To thank those who welcomed us into their homes, we brought food to share with them and, if there were children, gifts. We did to them what we would have liked them to do to us.

The research budget included financial compensation for interviewees' time and knowledge. However, this recognition sometimes highlighted the transactional nature of their participation, as they often shared their stories only for payment. We found that a lack of payment made it difficult to get responses to the online survey, and the waiting time for each response increased significantly. Towards the end of the survey we added a prize draw as a financial incentive, but the numbers remained very low.

Our care practices include keeping interviewees' names confidential, not using their information, working only with transcriptions and deleting interview recordings once the research is complete. In addition, we will not use any information beyond the scope of this study. We will disseminate the results of our research publicly and through the collectives we work with, but respecting the

agreed upon anonymity, we will not contact our interviewees individually. We did, however, leave them our personal and institutional telephone numbers and emails so that we would be available if they needed us. A few months after an interview, two participants requested legal assistance from Visión Nocturna, one of this project's implementing organisations. An electronic payment platform was withholding their income because they were sex workers. They reached out because the person who interviewed them was a sex worker who was aware of Visión Nocturna's activism, and personally vouched for them. This led to legal action, resulting in a court ruling that they should receive the money within ten days, which in turn set a precedent.

Thanks to the research process, we understood that there are legal instruments that can be used to protect the image rights of sex workers, but that the state is failing us by not making us aware of them. Not only do they not care about us, but they also exercise institutional violence by ignoring us when we seek protection. This is compounded by the fact that civil society is dominated by abolitionists who seek to position sex workers as victims. In this sense, the research process has been personally challenging. Being an object of study is not the same as being a subject who leads a process of knowledge production. If you are only being "studied", you do not have the responsibility to maintain a counternarrative situated in other, non-academic bodies.

AUTHORS:

Karina Núñez Rodríguez, Uruguay, reductionist sex worker, grassroots feminist.

Analía Lavin, Uruguay, professor, Universidad de la República, Uruguay.

By Bárbara Paes and Ester Borges



As part of the third iteration of the Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN), Instituto Minas Programam has been carrying out research about the impacts of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) on the experiences of Black Brazilian women and their stories of resistance, connection and possibility.

In this article, we share a few reflections from our research process, including considerations about our methodology and our positionality as researchers, the ways research participants challenged and invited us to strengthen our research approach, as well as an overview of the (imperfect) measures we implemented to navigate power dynamics embedded within the research process and to recognise research participants as the key contributors to this work.

“A STARTING POINT FOR MORE”: THE “WHY” BEHIND FEMINIST RESEARCH

We are in the final moments of an online gathering with women who have been interviewed for our research project. We – researchers at Instituto Minas Programam – are investigating the impacts of TFGBV on the experiences of Black Brazilian women and documenting stories of resistance, connection and possibility. In the months leading up to this online gathering, we conducted 12 in-depth interviews with women who had all experienced TFGBV. They are writers, politicians, technologists, students, organisers and journalists who responded to our invitation to join this research project.⁴⁵ A portion of them are joining the conversation this morning.

Some of the women in the call have known each other for years. “I haven’t seen you in forever, *amiga*, you look beautiful!” Paths crossed in organising meetings, online groups, university hallways, street protests, social media groups, feminist gatherings, bars and book launches. Others hadn’t met each other before but started to as the morning went on. “So sorry about the interruptions! Kids are on vacation from school, you know how it gets,” says one as a smiling toddler makes an appearance in her video. “Don’t worry,” responds another, “I’ve got my teenage kid right here, I know how summer vacations can be.”

In the temporary (but sticky!) roles of “researchers” or “research participants”, we’re spending the hour together talking about preliminary findings. We, the researchers, organised these group gatherings to have a space for us to be open about *how* we were building this work, to invite participants to join us in our process of sense-making and to welcome them to complexify our findings (more about that below).

As the conversation about research *findings* wraps up, we ask everyone if they have any reflections or questions about the *process* more broadly. “I want to know: What happens after you publish this research?” responds a participant. “I think it should be a springboard for other things. It should be a starting point for more. More gatherings, more serious public debate about [TFGBV against Black Brazilian women]. More things.” Others agree.

⁴⁵ The selection of participants for this research project was carried out through intentional sampling. We shared a general invitation to get engaged with the research via Instituto Minas Programam’s website and social media, combined with an intentional outreach strategy in closed social media groups which we have been members of and which are composed of Black women who are active in social justice organising.

As researchers within an institution (even if it is a feminist organisation!), working under deadlines and a budget, it can be easy to fall in line with the idea that the “finish line” is the publication date. In doing our best to embed feminist research principles during this project, we were constantly reminding ourselves that the aim of feminist research is liberation,⁴⁶ and were often invited by participants to “re-position the finish line” of this project. Throughout the research process, we did not want to lose sight of how our research carries the purpose of knowledge production and an ethical commitment to social justice and transformation, both of which impact our methodology and what we consider to be the “conclusion” of this project.

In a question like “What happens after you publish?” lies an invitation to keep ourselves focused on the fact that our ultimate goal should be making the research meaningful and useful to its participants. Statements like “This should be a starting point for more” reflect both a summoning and an expression of participants’ radical vision of where research should be taking us. These interventions from research participants are inhabited by the hope that the knowledge we’re curating in this project won’t be just another PDF file somewhere, but that it will eventually, somehow, serve as a small tool within a much larger struggle that some of these individuals are engaged with as part of liberation movements led by Black Brazilian women.

Our experience working on this project has been marked by the perception – sometimes expressed directly by research participants, as seen in the story above – that research needs to be “more”: it must serve as a springboard for further action and discussion, it must be seen as a starting point at best, not a finish line. When researching TFGBV’s impact on Black Brazilian women, we were challenged by research participants to commit to transformation and to conduct this research so that the methodology as well as the findings are meaningful for the participants.

“FROM A PLACE”: RESEARCHING BLACK BRAZILIAN WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES WITH TFGBV AND OUR ATTEMPTS AT REJECTING FALSE NOTIONS OF OBJECTIVITY

Back when this research project was barely an idea, we met with researcher Thiane Neves for a conversation about her work. She told us how some had dismissed her research describing it as “nothing more than writing about [her] friends online.”⁴⁷ This comment – a narrow-minded attempt at disqualifying Neves’ work – is illustrative of how feminist knowledge production can be trivialised, and in particular, how the contributions of Black Brazilian women intellectuals writing about the experiences of Black women can be discredited, belittled and dismissed as not “objective” enough. At the time, Neves shared with us a reflection on her research practice: “Writing, talking about Black women in Amazônia is also talking about me. I could be another researcher stealing knowledge, but no. I’m researching us. I’m also a Black woman from Amazônia, I’m also a cyberactivist. So I’m researching from this place, too.”

46 Fonow, M. M., & Cook, J. A. (Eds.). (1991). *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*. Indiana University Press.

47 Dr. Thiane Neves specialises in digital culture in the context of technopolitics from Amazonian communities and movements. You can listen to some of the conversation we are referencing at the following link, available in Portuguese: https://open.spotify.com/episode/2Cds3l6n9e-CAev2Lje3GbM?si=n9_8nK-I0WbxdURjz0c4g.

Fast forward to almost two years later and we're starting this project, focusing on Black Brazilian women's experiences with TFGBV and their responses to this violence. The reflections Neves shared with us linger in our minds. As we kick off the research, we do so with the understanding that we too are researching "from a place": our positionality as Black Brazilian women means our backgrounds and lived experiences are inevitable influences in this research. On one hand, this means recognising that objectivity is not possible, that all knowledge is situated and constructed from specific social perspectives,⁴⁸ and that when writing about Black Brazilian women, it has been important to us not to research and write as if we – the researchers – are disconnected from "the subject matter". In refusing the positivist paradigm, which seeks supposed neutrality, we have tried to acknowledge that we are inherently connected to this research.

For us, "researching from a place" meant that instead of striving for detachment, we recognised that our experiences as Black Brazilian women were part of the research design and analytical process. This approach resonates with feminist methodological discussions on subjective experience and insider-outsider positionality, which emphasise that research is never neutral. Positionality is fluid and shaped by our cultural identity, professional background and lived experiences. Rather than seeking detachment, we recognise that our standpoint informs both our research questions and our interpretation of the findings, making reflexivity a crucial part of our process.⁴⁹

On the other hand, we have to be real about how "the place" from where the two of us are researching is not every *place*: Black Brazilian women are an enormous, diverse group and working on this project we insist on not making universalising claims about Black Brazilian women's experiences with online misogynoir and TFGBV.⁵⁰ In our interviews and group gatherings with participants, we talked about how complex our/their experiences are and grappled with our differentiated relationships with technology – influenced by factors such as class, age, geographical region, history of online engagement and more. In these conversations, we were invited to look at the various ways in which online misogynoir and TFGBV impact Black Brazilian women's lives and the multitude of choices and strategies made in how to deal with these impacts. Although online misogynoir and TFGBV are part of a broader continuum of violence, in our research process we have tried to honour how individual experiences and responses can't be narrowed into reductive, universalising narratives.

We have tried to relay the stories and insights generously shared with us without proposing a generalistic interpretation for the ways Black Brazilian women experience online misogynoir and TFGBV and the diverse, dynamic ways we/they build possibilities despite online misogynoir and TFGBV. We have tried to be cognisant of the fact that our experiences with TFGBV can and do share similarities (whether we're thinking of root causes, how incidents play out, their impact, etc.) without ever being identical. In sum, we have been trying to research TFGBV against Black Brazilian women in ways that refuse homogenising narratives and affirm the complexity of our existence.

48 Harding, S. (1991). *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives*. Cornell University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1hhfmg>

49 Bukamal, H. (2022). Deconstructing insider-outsider researcher positionality. *British Journal of Special Education*, 49(3), 328-347. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12426>

50 Coined by Bailey and Trudy, the concept of misogynoir supports an understanding of the experiences of Black women' interactions with digital technologies that is rooted in Black feminist thought. The term refers to the ways in which racist and misogynistic representations in our culture and in digital spaces contribute to shaping society's ideas and perceptions of Black women, creating an "inseparable fusion of toxicity". We found "misogynoir" to be an appropriate concept through which we can analyse the experiences of Black Brazilian women with TFGBV. See: Bailey, M. (2021). *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance*. NYU Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv27ft-yQs> and Bailey, M., & Trudy. (2018). On misogynoir: Citation, erasure, and plagiarism. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(4), 762-768. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447395>

TRYING TO ADDRESS POWER DYNAMICS WITHIN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Just as important as recognising our positionality is the acknowledgement of the power dynamics that may be embedded in being researchers in projects like this. Our positions as researchers can, for instance, distance us from those we are writing about. For one thing, the mere fact that we are able to be paid to write this research may confer certain credibility and/or attention to the issues we're focusing on, even though some of the research participants are Black feminists who have been denouncing misogynoir and TFGBV for years (and many times, they went unheard). In working on this project, it has been important for us to not position ourselves as "the voice" behind the findings we gathered. Instead, we have tried to highlight the collective nature of our investigation and honour the women who contributed to this work as our intellectual peers, whose analysis of the structural issues that exist as a backdrop to TFGBV inform our interpretations, our approach and our writing.

One way we've tried to do this was by creating opportunities for participants to comment on and disagree with our findings. As mentioned earlier, after drafting our initial preliminary findings from individual interviews and desk research, we hosted two group gatherings with research participants, taking inspiration from the "sister circle" methodology. Created by Latoya Sherrica Johnson, sister circles are "group discussions or conversations among Black women arranged by a researcher to examine a specific set of topics and/or experiences," to gain an "understanding of a specific issue, topic, or phenomena impacting Black women from the perspective of Black women themselves."⁵¹ We were drawn to this methodology for a number of reasons: the emphasis on group conversations not being focus groups hosted just to extract stories, but rather a method for facilitating supportive dialogue and knowledge exchange;⁵² the recognition of "researcher as participant" of the group dialogue, someone who shares their own life experiences,⁵³ who is "obtaining knowledge" and also "contributing knowledge when appropriate";⁵⁴ the possibility of researchers not being seen as the sole experts in the room, but rather having space for all, including participants, to be seen as "contributors to this research";⁵⁵ and it being a methodology with "built-in space for emotions", to have stories shared and have them "understood without doubt."⁵⁶

We wanted these group gatherings to be spaces where we share our early findings with research participants, hear their thoughts and, crucially, engage in a collective conversation about their/our experiences of TFGBV. **As researchers, we can't stress enough how meaningful this process was. More than just "getting feedback", we found the group gatherings functioned as a space to search for resonance, to recognise the intellectual contribution these women bring to our research, and to honour our commitment to being transparent and accountable.** It was important for us to hear if/how our findings resonated with research participants and these group conversations were essential to *further complexify our analysis*. Though power asymmetries between researcher and research

51 Johnson, L. S. (2015). *Using sista circles to examine the professional experience of contemporary Black women teachers in schools: A collective story about school culture and support*. University of Georgia. <https://esploro.lib.uga.edu/esploro/outputs/doctoral/Using-sista-circles-to-examine-the/9949334542502959>

52 Ibid.

53 Lacy, M. (2018, 21 August). Sista Circle Methodology. *Medium*. <https://medium.com/@Marvette/sista-circle-methodology-fb37b62657bc>

54 Johnson, L. S. (2015). Op. cit.

55 Nathan, B., Love, R., & Carlson, L. (2023). An Autoethnographic Reflection from Two Black Women Ph.D.'s and Their White Woman Advisor on the Use and Impact of Sista Circle Methodology in the Dissertation Process. *The Qualitative Report*, 28(1). <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2023.5577>

56 Ibid.

participants may never be truly absent, in these sister-circles-inspired gatherings, the participants challenged our interpretations and, as we saw earlier in this text, prompted reflections about the aim of feminist research.

Another way critical reflection about power dynamics within research influenced our research design lies in the (admittedly imperfect) measures we took related to care and safety. Our position as researchers who are part of an institution – a small, independent, Black-led feminist organisation – means that, if needed, we can hire lawyers, digital security experts and mental health professionals. In other words, should this research project expose us to harm (whether it's mental health challenges related to vicarious trauma or any form of public backlash by virtue of the content of the research), we can count on a certain layer of protection and institutional support. This is not necessarily true for all of our research participants, who, in telling their stories of TFGBV, shared how in many instances the movements or organisations they belonged to did not necessarily support them in navigating TFGBV. **Precisely because online misogyny and TFGBV are part of a continuum of violence that has historically harmed the health and well-being of Black women in Brazil, minimising potential harm and/or risks to research participants' well-being has been imperative to our research process.**

With this in mind, we have taken a few measures. One of them consisted of collectively deciding with participants against publishing their real names, a precaution to avoid further TFGBV. Participants explained that anonymity conferred on them the ability to speak more freely about the issues they were facing or had faced without risking potentially harmful personal exposure. Other measures we've applied include offering participants compensation for the interviews, providing stipends for mental health services after interviews, and letting participants know they can redact or "take back" anything they shared with us.

To us, this latter point is especially important because we recognise that, during qualitative research, the conversations we established with research participants are ones where factors like our shared identities and lived experiences (where they exist), potential previous connections with research participants, and our overall outwardly friendliness all contribute to "persuading interviewees to provide us with data for our research."⁵⁷ In other words, though feminist research practices helped us shed the pretence of objectivity and neutrality as researchers, we found that they can also create an environment where research participants share more than they would in other, more public spaces. **Making space for them to redact or "take back" anything they share is our imperfect strategy to avoid reproducing extractive practices. In short, we honour the understanding that not everything we shared is for public consumption.**

Relatedly, we also explained – verbally and in writing – how participants' data would be treated and made ourselves available for questions. Inspired by trauma-informed research practices, we tried to design our research in ways that deliberately avoided unnecessary exploration of trauma, which can be a complex balance. In the online survey through which we first contacted research participants, we informed them that they did not need to write about their experiences with TFGBV, they just needed to indicate interest in joining the project. Later, during semi-structured interviews and group

⁵⁷ Duncombe, J., & Jessop, J. (2002). 'Doing Rapport' and the Ethics of 'Faking Friendship'. In M. Mauthner, M. Birch, J. Jessop, & T. Miller (Eds.), *Ethics in Qualitative Research*. SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849209090>

gatherings, we made an effort not to “over-probe just because we could.”⁵⁸ We didn’t want to make those who had experienced misogynoir and TFGBV go through a traumatising process of needlessly delving into painful experiences out of personal curiosity. Because of this, we limited the number of questions focused specifically on the incidents and didn’t go into too much detail about the attacks; we avoided asking participants to repeat themselves unnecessarily; we did not include screenshots of attacks and posts or content details in our research report.

Ultimately, we recognise that while the measures above are important parts of our feminist approach to research, they are still imperfect. For example, while opting for anonymising research participants can mitigate further exposure to attacks, anonymity also puts us, the researchers, in a position where we are uncomfortably close to being seen as the individual proprietors of a knowledge that was collectively built. Similarly, though we believe that paying participants for their time is a step towards acknowledging their intellectual contribution, it doesn’t erase completely the power asymmetries that are inherent to research processes. We also recognise that though providing participants with stipends for mental health services after the interviews can be helpful to mitigate immediate triggers from the interviews, it doesn’t represent long-term support.

“I CAN’T TELL YOU HOW MANY TIMES I’VE PARTICIPATED [IN RESEARCH PROJECTS] AND NEVER HEARD ANOTHER WORD ABOUT IT.”

We’re back in another one of our research gatherings. A different group of research participants reunites for an evening of conversation. Mediated by an online video conferencing platform, we collectively explore the research findings and talk about the impacts of TFGBV in our lives.

Once more, as we approach the end of our meeting, we – the researchers – ask everyone if they have any reflections or questions about the research more broadly. After answering a few questions about the practical next steps (“When is this getting published?”, “Are we having a big launch party?”) and thanking everyone for joining another meeting with us, one of the women in the room shares: “I also have to thank you two [the researchers] for getting back to us [with the preliminary findings]. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve participated [in research projects] and never heard another word about it. We understand what you’re doing. When we take part in research projects and are left in the dark in the later stages, it’s hard. This exchange [among the whole group] is really important.”

A few other participants nod in agreement. One opens the mic to say: “This research process was a listening environment. We, various women of different ages, are living our experiences [with TFGBV] and each of us in our own way. But it all hits on a very similar point, you know? What it’s like to be a Black woman in this hostile online environment and so on. I hope we can take these findings and use them as a point of analysis. [...] Thank you for your attention, and for the care you took.”

We, the researchers, wrap up the call and thank our conversation partners. Once again their words bring a necessary reminder that in our feminist research practice, the commitment to research participants, creating pathways for accountability and transparency, and centring care are all things that should be requirements, not add-ons.

58 Chayn. (2024, 31 July). How Can We Make Quantitative Research More Trauma-Informed? *Medium*. <https://chayn.medium.com/how-can-we-make-quantitative-research-more-trauma-informed-8f43167378f6>.

So, what *does* happen after we publish our research findings?

Through this research we've been gathering stories that relay the horrible impacts of TFGBV and online misogynoir in the lives of Black Brazilian women and the ways we/they are "finding chasms" – building community and connection, creating strategies for collective care and for organising, recognising the power dynamics embedded in digital technologies. We hope this research will indeed act as a springboard to more things: highlighting the pervasiveness of TFGBV and misogynoir against Black women in our country, bringing forth a much-needed discussion about their consequences, and contributing to expanding the possibilities for Black women in Brazil to engage with digital technologies on our terms.

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BLACK WOMEN, GENDER NON-CONFORMING PERSONS AND TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: A DECOLONIAL FEMINIST EXPLORATION

By Aphiwe Mhlangulana, Mikhael Adams, Lilitha Hole, Floretta Boonzaier, and Kajal Carr at the Hub for Decolonial Feminist Psychologies in Africa, TFGBV research team, Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town



Illustration by Ellena May SJ

OUR PROJECT

Research into gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa is extensive, and yet it remains woefully narrow in scope. The current literature predominantly paints GBV as a problem of poor Black communities in South Africa, locating it within township spaces and engaging only with its most violent, physical expressions. There is very limited research which seeks to contextualise GBV within the broader history of Apartheid and colonialism, to explore the role of whiteness and to recognise a broader concept of violence which centres the everyday experiences of women. Thus, we recognise the need to explore the ways in which GBV enters digital spaces in South Africa, given our country's context. We propose a decolonial feminist approach to exploratory research on technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) as a means to address the issues outlined on multiple fronts. As Black, predominantly women and gender non-conforming researchers, we centre the identity of Black women in this research because we recognise the intersectional nature of GBV, and we wish to extend our research resources to our own community.

We have engaged in a multifaceted methodological project exploring the TFGBV experienced by Black women and gender non-conforming persons on dating apps and on social media. Our research involves both archival components and individual narrative interviews. We have sought to do decolonial feminist research that centres care, emancipatory social justice and reflexivity.

The following is a reflective piece on our larger Feminist Internet Research Network-funded project, which is a collaborative project split across PhD research and an honours research project. The PhD research focuses on Black African women and gender non-conforming journalists and bloggers' experiences of TFGBV and the honours project focused on Black women and gender non-conforming persons' experiences of TFGBV on dating apps.

In this reflective piece we discuss our use of decolonial feminism in our contribution to feminist politics of knowledge building and centring of participants' voices in the research and knowledge co-creation with the participants in both projects. In the next section we discuss our positionality within the research, and questions around reciprocity and power dynamics within the different projects. We further consider participants' diverse lived realities through a decolonial feminist lens. Lastly, we discuss care and safety for research participants and how we ensure accountability in the research process.

OUR CONTRIBUTION TO FEMINIST POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE BUILDING

By centring our participants' knowledge of their own experiences, we have documented the knowledge of Black women and brought it into the academic space, a space that frequently only recognises some types of knowledge as legitimate. We aim to present this work to the university community, where many Black women and gender non-conforming persons who are experiencing the same or similar things may benefit from this shared knowledge and its potential outcomes. We also target spaces where many men, who may perpetrate the violence we expose, may be challenged to behave differently.

By using a decolonial feminist framework, we acknowledge ongoing forms of colonisation and apartheid, the subsequent relationship between patriarchy and coloniality and between coloniality and GBV. Thus, coloniality encompasses the colonisation of patterns of knowledge, which include its production, consumption and transmission and colonisation of the mind. To date, colonial legacies have historically and continuously maintained power over the production of knowledge. Those who are left out of knowledge production (such as Black women and gender non-conforming persons) are forced to accept, make meaning of and consume knowledge that may not serve them, doesn't represent their experiences and may further marginalise them. Therefore, decolonial feminism aims to reassign power to the marginalised, prioritising their own knowledge about their lived experiences and working against knowledge created through the colonial gaze and its machinery.

As such, through a decolonial feminist perspective, we aim to challenge how Black women and gender non-confirming persons' experiences are represented in the media and academia by centring their voices through the narratives they share on their experiences of violence. By doing so, we ensure that Black African women and gender non-confirming persons co-produce knowledge of their own experiences through the deployment of a narrative approach. For example, we allow the participants' retelling of their stories to lead interviews, offering autonomy over their self-expression and description of their experiences. We also create space for critique of our interpretation of their stories through the dissemination of our transcripts and analysis. Therefore, amplifying their voices in the work is a realisation of the fact that, as researchers, we are merely acting as vehicles in the process of sharing their stories.



This is the Hub logo and it holds special meaning for them as a community working together, to do decolonial feminist work. In Indigenous philosophies on the continent, the praying mantis has many symbolisms.

POSITIONALITY, RECIPROCITY AND POWER DYNAMICS

As decolonial feminist psychologists, we acknowledge that the research process creates a asymmetrical power dynamic. When seeking participants' engagement with our questions, our efforts could easily come off as invasive and exploitative, especially when working with difficult topics, such as violence, and when working with marginalised people. It was mandatory for us to practice reflexivity and positionality throughout the research process. The decolonial feminist approach requires us to take our racialised, gendered and other identities into account when working on the topic of TFGBV, as we see these as important to how participants themselves might experience the phenomenon. Therefore, practising reflexivity allows us to be aware of, anticipate and attempt to control our own social identities' influence on the data and the research process.

Reflexivity brings out questions about our participants' ability to relate to us and share their stories with us, as well as how best to represent participants' stories. For example, one of the researchers is a straight-passing, cisgender man of colour who did not disclose his sexuality in the interview process. He shared with us that he felt visually representative of the group that was found to be the main perpetrators of TFGBV against Black women. As a result, there was an initial, yet short-lived, tension or discomfort during some of the interviews. As anticipated, this tension created a subtle change in the participants' engagement in discussions based on the gender of the researcher involved. However, the tension waned when the researcher concentrated on relating to the participants in the interview process.

In reflecting on her experiences during the first phase of data collection, Aphiwe recounts the mental and emotional distress of doing research in digital archives that illustrated participants' experiences of TFGBV. Aphiwe's first phase of data collection involved digital archiving, and in this phase she collected screenshots from Black African women and gender non-conforming persons' blogs and journalism. The digital archives showed the violence that Black women and gender non-conforming persons experience in online spaces. Some of these experiences also reflected Aphiwe's own experiences. This reflection is evidence that research is not independent of researchers' personal lives and experiences. In her supporting role in this project, Kajal has been moved by the ways in which the decolonial feminist lens has brought to light everyday experiences of oppression, marginalisation and violence experienced online in ways that mirror her own lived experience. These congruences represent a strength in the work for Kajal, as its value is immediately apparent to her, and her own experiences guide her critical reflection on our collaborative writing. Additionally, the process of reflexivity helped to question our assumption, shifting some the power of interpretation and allowing for more intentional centring of participants and a decolonial feminist agenda.

In reflecting on reciprocity in relation to power dynamics, we acknowledge that there are no direct benefits for the participants who took part in our study, other than a small token of appreciation. The researchers know they gain far more advantages, such as degrees, and funding for their research. The research participants offer their time and knowledge to this research project, and receive a small token of appreciation in return. This is the reality of all research practices, feminist or otherwise. Still, we believe it is imperative to attempt to maintain equivalent status between researchers and participants. The use of a decolonial feminist framework affords us the opportunity to centre the voices of research participants through the use of open-ended methods such as the narrative approach, allowing for an engagement with participants as co-constructors of knowledge. For example, we provided open-ended interview questions, allowing participants' to lead the

discussion in the directions they felt comfortable going. Participants are also afforded agency in their participation, through being offered the opportunity to provide input on data analysis and our interpretations before any work is published. In our ongoing research, we are making efforts to ensure that our work has some policy impact in the field of TFGBV, and that we collaborate with participants to shape policy at a platform level. We consider issues of reciprocity to be important in research and therefore make sure that we offer a meaningful token of appreciation for the time that people take to participate in our research. We understand that this does not offset the power relationships embedded in the research, but we offer this token in the spirit of recognising that researchers often benefit the most from research undertaken in the field. In light of the decolonial feminist framework that this work takes, we understand that a focus on questions of reciprocity, positionality and power dynamics should always be at the forefront of our thinking in relation to our research praxis. In this light, Floretta, as project lead and co-director of the Hub, has frequently reflected on her longstanding concerns about what reciprocity can look like and how much participants actually benefit from the research. For her, sitting with the discomfort of these questions has been integral to her learning and teaching about decolonial feminist research praxis.

CONSIDERATION OF PARTICIPANTS' DIVERSE LIVED REALITIES

Our research attempted to offer a reading of the various, diverse realities addressed in the retelling of our participants' individual lived experiences. For example, participants shared that ill-treatment online was often based on and further aggravated by stereotypical beliefs surrounding their identities, not strictly limited to but intersected with, race and gender. One of our participants shared that their openness about their sexuality on a dating app became a further source of hyper-sexualisation. Another participant shared that their identity as a mother was also fetishised alongside their identity as a Black woman. These examples demonstrate the ways in which Black women's identities shape how they are addressed online. We therefore emphasise the intersectionality of all their social identities when considering the factors influencing our participants' experiences. Further, we chose to work with Black women and gender non-conforming persons because they have been historically silenced. In line with decolonial feminist work, we worked with these populations because they are historically the most marginalised groups in the South African context.

The PhD aspect of this project is more geographically inclusive in that it studies the experiences of participants in different African countries within the Southern African Development Community or SADC region. This research will involve sensitivity to language by ensuring that participants can engage with us in their language of choice, through the provision of interpreters or interviewers who speak their language. We are also cognisant of the cultural differences that may arise, especially when discussing difficult experiences such as violence, and are still thinking through the ways in which we can demonstrate care and consideration of these. We aim to always retain nuance, and to preserve diversity rather than collapsing individual stories into homogenising themes, and this influences our entire process, from design, to data collection, to writing. In doing so, we seek to create a space for the most marginalised, rooting our work in inclusivity and diversity.

Through the use of decolonial feminism, our research focused on the experiences of marginalised Black women and gender non-conforming persons. Although there may be work on violence and trauma in these groups, not much work attempts to foreground participants' agency and

participation, which we have aimed to do. Through our research methods, we centred the voices of our participants, ensuring that their narratives were amplified. Our work also aims to ensure that this research has been conducted not simply for its own sake and for our careers as researchers, but to make a meaningful difference to marginalised groups' experiences online. This is especially because, as a group of mostly women and queer Black researchers, our lens and positionality put us in a good position to represent and advocate for our own communities.

ENSURING CARE AND SAFETY FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

All the safety measures we implemented during our research were in the best interests of the participants, especially with regard to ensuring confidentiality. For example, we asked participants to provide pseudonyms to be used on all research documentation. Ultimately, we opted to use the pseudonyms in the final report regardless of what participants preferred, to prevent breaches of privacy and consequences that both participants and researchers could not anticipate. In addition to confidentiality, stipulating and asking for consent was of great importance, therefore multiple checks were made, with consent being considered an ongoing process rather than a one-off agreement. We specifically highlighted the right of participants to refuse to share or let us use certain information that they had already provided. In terms of care, participants received resource lists containing the names of psychosocial services they could access should the conversations on their experiences of violence and trauma be overwhelming. We did have a potential participant request to withdraw as they were not in a state that allowed them to readily discuss their experience. Additionally, we have connected with a psychologist to support participants who need emergency psychosocial assistance due to conversations had during the study. We also recently decided to conduct post-research check-ins with our participants, so as not to convey the impression that participants' involvement and engagement was no longer needed. We consider these post-research check-ins as a way of holding us accountable to do research in the interest of care and justice as it aligns with our decolonial feminist framework

Another way we attempted to show care was to provide vouchers as a token of appreciation for participating in the study. We initially offered vouchers for a popular South African online shop. However, due to the cost of item delivery, we also offered vouchers for a local supermarket. Participants preferred the latter, being able to use the voucher for daily needs or wants. This way we ensured that the care we extended to participants could be felt despite any differences in socioeconomic conditions.

For us, security also entailed the cautious storage of data. All of the interview recordings will be saved in a password-secure online folder. This is currently deemed to be the most secure means of storage. All of the interviews, and information related to them, are anonymised. Once the project has been completed, the recordings and all information pertaining to them will be kept for five years and destroyed thereafter.

Reflection on the ethics of the study, the safety of participants and the storage of participants' stories occurred throughout the research process. A change in strategy occurred when we decided against focus groups, as this activity would breach the privacy and confidentiality we had initially vowed to uphold. This change in strategy is an example of placing the participants' safety over the researchers' desire to gain additional data.

As indicated earlier, we work as a collective, with different and varied experiences of our work on violence and trauma. At the Hub for Decolonial Feminist Psychologies in Africa, we have been careful about how we engage the topic of violence – this care when approaching research on violence is important for the communities we work with, but also for ourselves as researchers. We have engaged and deeply reflected on the question of what it means for us to research violence and trauma, given that we ourselves may have experienced it and come from the very communities we are researching. We have also written on this topic. We consider that it is as important to care for ourselves as it is to offer appropriate care for participants. In the Hub, we offer various forms of support to each other, both individual and communal. We do this through writing retreats, group debriefings and regular check-ins with supervisors to redistribute emotional and academic workloads and ensure well-being. We have, over the past few years, understood that alongside the protection of participants, we also require care for ourselves as researchers. In our meetings and retreats, we constantly reflect on how our research has impacted us, and we work with a clinical psychologist who offers us support and debriefing sessions when we require them.

We work as a community of decolonial feminist scholars in psychology, aiming to not only shape our discipline in ways that serve us and our communities best, but also to work towards using research to advance social justice, especially for the most marginalised.

ACCOUNTABILITY IN RESEARCH

In the first instance, accountability for us means fulfilling the promises we make to our research participants. It also involves ensuring that participants' information and stories are protected and are used for the purposes expressed to the participants. We will also be sharing the interview transcripts from the PhD component of this project with the participants themselves, to allow them to have the final say over how much of what they shared they want included in the final analysis and report. Additionally, we intend to share the final reports to see whether participants agree with all aspects of the project prior to publication. All these measures work towards holding the researchers accountable for their interpretation and use of data. We consider ourselves additionally accountable to the research area as a whole – in advancing a feminist decolonial investigation of TFGBV, we offer a reading of the issue that counters some of the harmful stereotyping that might be at play in the field and we explicitly work towards advancing issues of social justice through our research. This means being accountable to how we engage with participants: respecting their perspectives, honouring their stories and trying to do justice to them in the ways we engage with their words, not just treating them as “data”. Accountability will similarly be practised in the dissemination of the work, as we are planning on writing for the popular media to broadly educate the general public about TFGBV, as well as putting together a policy brief for application developers, for social media and dating apps specifically.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As we engage the emerging practice of decolonial feminism, we are challenged to take meaningful responsibility for the impact of our work. We find ourselves iteratively questioning the impact of our actions, from interview to knowledge production, constantly interrogating the ways in which

we live up to our decolonial feminist ideals. While this research is ongoing, we remain enmeshed in questions with limited answers, but we believe it is this ongoing reflexive and responsive engagement which sits at the heart of the decolonial feminist endeavour.

AUTHORS:

Aphiwe Mhlangulana is a PhD candidate at the University of Cape Town. Her research interests include feminist digital activism, Black women's experiences of technology-facilitated gender-based violence and student activism and advocacy against gender-based violence. Aphiwe has experience working as a researcher and as a research facilitator for experiences of technology-facilitated gender-based violence.

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Lilitha Hole is an honours graduate and research assistant in the Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town. She co-conducted honours research on South African Black women's experiences of technology-facilitated gender-based violence on dating applications, under the Hub of Decolonial Feminist Psychologies, UCT. The research is an exploration of how racial, gender and sociocultural identities interact in influencing Black women's engagement in and navigation of online dating apps.

Floretta Boonzaier is a professor at the Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town, and co-director of the Hub for Decolonial Feminist Psychologies in Africa. She researches and works within and across feminist, critical and decolonial psychologies, intersectional subjectivities, gendered and sexual violence. She is also noted for her expertise in qualitative methodologies, specifically in narrative, decolonial and participatory approaches.

Kajal Carr is a PhD candidate at the Department of Psychology, UCT. She is a writer, researcher, project manager and research consultant. Her work centres issues of gender-based violence and decolonial feminism. Kajal is passionate about critical qualitative research methodologies and engages them at every opportunity.

TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN TAJIKISTAN: RESEARCH CHALLENGES AND THE FEMINIST RESEARCH APPROACH

By Gulbakhor Makhkamova



Illustration by Ellena May SJ

ABSTRACT

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) presents a significant threat to women, exacerbating gender inequalities and discrimination in digital environments. This paper examines the impact of TFGBV on women in Tajikistan, analysing its social and psychological consequences and discussing the methodological complexities associated with researching this phenomenon. Special attention is given to the application of the feminist methodology to ensure an ethical and inclusive research approach. The study integrates qualitative fieldwork data, emphasising participant narratives and researcher reflexivity.

INTRODUCTION

As digital technologies evolve, gender-based violence takes new, often less visible yet equally destructive forms. TFGBV encompasses cyberstalking, online discrimination, non-consensual dissemination of personal information, threats, and digital harassment. In societies with entrenched patriarchal traditions, such as Tajikistan, women experience dual pressures – both online and offline.

Women who experience TFGBV often fear exposure and judgment. As one interviewee expressed, “Even if you anonymise everything, someone might still recognise your story. I don't feel safe” (G. A., 47 years old, journalist). This fear of identification results in self-censorship and withdrawal from online platforms, further limiting women's participation in digital spaces.

This paper addresses the following key research questions:

- What are the primary manifestations of TFGBV in Tajikistan?
- What are the social and psychological repercussions of digital violence?
- What challenges exist in studying TFGBV, and how can they be mitigated?
- How does the feminist approach enhance research ethics and inclusivity in this field?

The study is based on qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews and focus groups with women who have experienced TFGBV.

METHODOLOGY AND THE FEMINIST RESEARCH APPROACH

Our feminist internet research approach is rooted in feminist principles, emphasising the autonomy, safety and well-being of women. Our research applied the following strategies:

Ethical principles and trust

- Ensuring informed consent, including the right to withdraw at any stage.
- Adopting flexible data collection methods to provide a comfortable environment for interviewees.
- Guaranteeing maximum anonymity and data protection for participants.

One participant voiced her scepticism about research confidentiality: “I trust you personally, but I don't trust the system. How do I know my story won't be traced back to me?” (I. N., 36 years old, teacher). These concerns highlight the need for rigorous data protection measures to ensure interviewees' security.

Inclusivity and women's participation

- Engaging women from diverse age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds and levels of digital literacy.
- Utilising varied interview formats (one-on-one interviews, focus groups, online surveys).
- Creating a safe space where women not only answer questions but also share their insights on combating TFGBV.

Researcher reflexivity

- Conducting collective discussions on ethical dilemmas and the influence of researchers' personal experiences on data interpretation.
- Continuously refining methodologies to minimise re-traumatisation of interviewees.



Photo taken during focus group discussion conducted by Gulrukhsor Crisis Center and Shelter

KEY FORMS OF TFGBV IN TAJIKISTAN

Based on the collected data, the main forms of TFGBV identified include:

1. **Cyberbullying and public shaming** – Women, especially those active on social media, are subjected to mass online attacks, humiliation and harassment. One interviewee explained, “I lost my job because of online harassment. My employer said the scandal was bad for business.”
2. **Family-controlled digital abuse** – Monitoring, surveillance and restrictions on internet access imposed by family members as a means of control. A married woman described her experience: “My husband controls my social media. If he sees a comment from a man, he punishes me.”
3. **Non-consensual dissemination of personal information** – Cases where personal photos or private messages are used for blackmail and coercion.

4. Digital exploitation – Coercion into online interactions or activities involving sexually explicit content.

It would be wrong to say that TFGBV has affected the life of every woman in Tajikistan. There are women who actively reduce their online presence, who self-censor so as not to attract either public attention or provoke a reaction from their husbands who might not approve of their posts or those commenting on them. But most people have seen TFGBV. They have seen the public pile-on where women with a public profile have been targeted with online shaming. They have seen incidents where a personal argument with a teacher, doctor or business owner turns public, spreading slander and insults.

SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF TFGBV

Psychological trauma

TFGBV results in:

- Chronic stress and anxiety disorders.
- Social withdrawal and fear of offline interactions.
- Loss of self-confidence and feelings of helplessness.

Victims often feel powerless in the face of escalating online violence. One interviewee described her experience: “The harassment kept growing, and I felt like I couldn’t do anything to stop it. I just stopped using the internet altogether” (A. M., 26 years old, housewife).

Our research in Tajikistan showed that in some cases women had lost everything as a result of TFGBV; their families, their homes, their jobs. They were afraid to leave the house, afraid for their lives, and were unable to form relationships as a result. So when undertaking this research, our research team was asking women to unpack this trauma, so that we could also understand.

Social consequences

TFGBV contributes to women’s marginalisation:

- Job loss due to reputational risks.
- Exclusion from families and communities.
- Self-censorship and withdrawal from digital spaces.

METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES IN STUDYING TFGBV

Reluctance to share experiences

- Fear of repercussions and distrust of the research process.
- Hesitation to participate in interviews or requests to remove personal accounts from the study.

One interviewee stated, “I don’t want my story to be written down. I can tell you, but I don’t want my words to exist somewhere permanently” (O.R., 38 years old, businesswoman). As our study

progressed, one in four cyberbullying victims in our sample refused to talk about their experiences. And even among those who agreed to be interviewed, several subsequently withdrew their consent and asked that their stories not be used in the research report (which we, of course, complied with). This meant that the research took longer than anticipated to complete, as we searched for other women who were willing to be involved.

The research team had a strong focus on confidentiality, anonymity and protecting the identity of women. The women contributing their experiences wanted to know: what are you going to do with the information that I tell you, where are you going to write it down, who are you going to tell, will you use my story? It's very difficult to answer these questions clearly and honestly. Will the particular story of one woman highlight an overall trend that needs explaining? Because we are right at the start of understanding this issue in Tajikistan, we have to be honest and say, I don't know. Will someone recognise the story? Even if we anonymise the story there is still a chance that someone might identify with the experience and rightly or wrongly attribute the experience to someone they know.

Influence of patriarchal norms

- Victim-blaming narratives and denial of the problem.
- Lack of recognition of digital risks, shifting responsibility onto women.

A number of women noted, "If a woman behaves properly, she won't face such problems online." This widespread belief further silences victims and hinders efforts to combat TFGBV. This social pressure on cyberbullying victims and the denial of the significance of their experiences leads many women who have had such experiences to avoid mentioning them and even to push them out of their consciousness as something inappropriate or simply unimportant. This leads to some potential interviewees refusing to talk to researchers or denying that they have been victims of TFGBV.

We see in Tajikistan that women, particularly but not exclusively older women, are staunch defenders of the patriarchal system. Sometimes these women hold views on gender norms that are more extreme than men. As with offline violence, these women hold other women accountable for bringing violence upon themselves, as a result of non-conformity with gender norms and social etiquette.

Research fieldwork also highlighted other issues around reflexivity, where our own experiences and exposure shape our views. Tech-savvy young women who courted controversy by promoting non-traditional views were hardened to the hate. They couldn't understand women who allowed themselves to be affected by it. Experts who worked with students on online safety said that TFGBV didn't happen to young girls as they don't have phones, contradicting the first-hand evidence of girls who had experienced both offline and online gender violence. These women were ready to say that because it hadn't happened to them, or didn't affect them, that it wasn't important. Research participants could therefore give misleading information, because they themselves haven't experienced something.

As feminist researchers, we have to be very aware of the position we hold while doing the research as part of the society; we have to reflect on the power dynamics between the women participants who are providing knowledge and information about their lived experience at large and us. But we also have to remember how these same factors have influenced the women who are giving us

information on the situation at large, and it is important to critically analyse this data to separate their personal experiences from their views about what others should or shouldn't feel, as these views may not actually correspond with the real lived experiences of other women.

Emotional toll on researchers

- Compassion fatigue from exposure to traumatic narratives.
- Feelings of helplessness when facing systemic issues.
- Ethical dilemmas regarding the publication of sensitive stories.

The research team was committed to hearing from women in all their diversity, to understanding how the problem of TFGBV alters in different groups and different situations, and to making sure that all women have a voice. The research process showed that feelings of isolation and powerlessness were common in women experiencing TFGBV. The violence is snowballing online and you are sitting staring at your phone feeling powerless to stop it. The research team explored diversity in age, urban versus rural settings, types of profession, level of online presence, disability, and ethnicity. Did the offline vulnerabilities apply to online violence? Or is the internet a leveller that can affect us all? To be heard, we have to find our voice, but someone needs to be there to listen. When research involves discussion of violence and hardship, the research team needs to be ready to listen. We provide an opportunity for someone to speak out, and some people want to share every violent and difficult moment of their life, even if it isn't relevant to TFGBV. Some of these stories were extremely distressing. It was important that the listening from the research team validated the experiences that the women were sharing.

The interviews and focus groups were conducted by a team of women who had many years of experience working with women who have experienced gender-based violence. Before the field research started, the team spent many hours together discussing the types of TFGBV, how it might impact, who it might impact, different personal experiences of online safety, reflexivity, gender norms and stereotypes in Tajikistan, working methods, ethics, and safety. Even so, conducting the field research had a greater impact on the researchers' own mental and physical health than they expected. To conduct this type of research you need a very experienced team, people who really understand the local context, who can sensitively approach the subject matter, who put the needs of the women participating as their priority, who can professionally manage themselves, and who have listened to many cases of trauma. It is important not to overload these field researchers. While it might be difficult to find the correct calibre of researcher, and this might impact the number of researchers who can be involved, it is important to avoid potential burnout among the researchers.

The research team tried to cope with these challenges by providing each other with emotional support, spending free time together, and reading inspiring texts about the experiences of other feminist researchers and activists.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SOLUTIONS

Strengthening legal mechanisms

- Developing legal frameworks to protect women from digital violence.
- Criminalising cyberstalking, harassment and non-consensual data dissemination.

Enhancing digital literacy

- Implementing educational programmes on digital safety.
- Creating accessible information resources for women.

Establishing safe online spaces

- Developing support platforms for survivors of TFGBV.
- Facilitating peer networks and psychological assistance.

Psychological support

- Providing crisis intervention and long-term therapy for affected women.
- Offering emotional support for researchers handling traumatic narratives.

As researchers in TFGBV, we ask women to share some of the most traumatic moments of their lives with us, so that we can understand, so that our research can help protect others in the future. The long-term effects of TFGBV on both the mental and physical health of the women sharing their experiences were visible. Women were offered psychological counselling by trained professionals after sharing their experiences, which many used. But others who relived and retold their experiences didn't want outside help, even though they reported physical and mental health issues. These issues were particularly evident in the one-to-one interviews. The specific social context needs to be fully considered to properly ensure that the safety and well-being of women are being ensured. Just writing that you have trained counsellors available to those who want them is not enough, if women don't know them, don't want to use them, but relive the trauma as a result of retelling their experience.

CONCLUSION

TFGBV is a critical issue that exacerbates gender inequality in Tajikistan. This study highlights the deep psychological and social impacts of digital violence while underscoring the methodological complexities of studying such a sensitive topic. The application of the feminist approach enhances research ethics, inclusivity and interviewee safety. Addressing TFGBV requires a holistic approach incorporating legal reforms, digital literacy programmes and robust psychological support systems.

The research taught us a lot as feminist scholars and activists. Here are the key learnings that we would like to share.

Be prepared. Make sure you really have thought about how and what you are going to do before you start. Think about your own safety and the safety of others. Think about your own position, bias, previous knowledge, and what you don't know.

Be prepared to change. As you go into the field research stage, be ready to change all of these assumptions. Really listen to what women are telling you. Make sure you understand them, where they are coming from, what they are trying to tell you.

Be respectful of trauma. Women who share their personal stories have relived the worst moments of their lives so that you can be informed. They may or may not want support from you after that.

Respect the trust that they put in you, the boundaries that they set for how their personal information can be used. Make sure that you are deserving of that trust.

Be ready to accept that some people don't want to share. We want to make sure that our research is actually correct. First-person accounts are the best way of understanding this, as we are not dealing with bias in terms of what others think does or doesn't happen to others. But we have to accept that in the field of violence, many women don't want to share.

Be specific. If possible, be specific about what you are going to do with the information that women share. When working in groundbreaking areas, this can be quite difficult to do, but think about what concrete information you can provide.

Be inclusive. Do the women who told their stories want to be part of the research going forward? Not everyone wants to be reminded. Look at how you can continue to include those who provided the information for the research, the language needs, and the presentation requirements, to allow ownership from those who contributed.

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BEYOND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION: CAN RESEARCH BE A SITE FOR MORE? REFLEXIVE NOTES

By Aya ElHusseini



Illustration by Ellena May SJ

“إريوك موكح اندن ع ول ليخت إليخت”
دالو اي .. انبر ةايحو، مهيّف دح عذجأ نم عذجأ يقبنة هلاو. [...] مكبيسنه يداع ةعامج اي‘ مهلوقنه. طبضللاب! يوهل اي هلاي
”بلكلا”

“Imagine! Imagine if we had a queer government!” I joked with Fahd.

“Ya lahwi!” he laughed.

“We’d tell them [non-queers], ‘Guys, it’s fine, we’ll leave you alone.’ [...] We would be cooler and better than the best of them. I swear to God.” – Fahd

I intentionally joked with Fahd (pseudonym) to lighten the intensity of our conversation at that moment. It worked – we both laughed. Underneath that laughter, there was anger, pain, and a sense of faith.

My conversation with Fahd was part of qualitative research aimed at unpacking the complex array of political and structural forces that exacerbate gendered violence, including its technology-based manifestations, particularly in Egypt. Ultimately, the research aimed to inform and influence policy and advocacy efforts.

In this article, I critically reflect on my experience conducting qualitative feminist research. Specifically, I examine two questions: 1) How political and intimate involvement with research shapes the process and relationship with participants and influences the outcomes; and 2) how qualitative research can maximise beneficence to participants and the broader community – beyond influencing policy-making efforts. I engage with these questions by drawing on conversations with the research participants and debriefs with the research team. Rather than being exhaustive, this article serves as a starting point for further inquiry into how qualitative research can be a site for community building and perhaps... organising!

THE SYSTEM IS NOT BROKEN: A CONVERSATION WITH FAHD

Fahd, an Egyptian in his twenties, is passionate about arts and culture and enjoys spending time with his friends. He works with grassroots organisations that support diverse communities. A few months ago, he reached out to the team expressing his interest in participating in the research. Last October, Fahd and I had a digital conversation that lasted for about 90 minutes.

Throughout the semi-structured conversation, Fahd shared his experiences with gendered violence, particularly digital entrapment, as a queer individual living in Egypt. His account highlighted how a prevailing culture of impunity, the legal landscape and digital infrastructure perpetuate violence. He reflected on the entrenched impunity that must be challenged, as well as conflicting feelings toward the country. He also spoke about the ways he cares for himself and his community as well as his dreams and efforts to benefit his community:

“I feel hurt and angry [...] sometimes I think, I want to leave Egypt, let it burn, I wouldn’t care. But then I feel like, where should I go? Why? For what?”

The first experience Fahd chose to share with me was about Sarah Hegazi, an Egyptian queer leftist activist and a fierce fighter for liberation. In 2020, she took her own life in exile in Canada – or rather, she was murdered by a brutal regime. In October 2017, Sarah was arrested days after raising the rainbow flag at a concert by the Lebanese band Mashrou Leila, in what was known as the Rainbow Flag Incident. Detained, tortured, and violated by a criminal regime and a society whose fabric is woven with hatred. Months after her release, fearing another arrest, she was forced into exile.⁵⁹

Following the concert, there was a massive crackdown compounded by both state-sponsored media propaganda and incitement on social media. This led to one of the largest mass arrests of 75+ individuals who were LGBTQI+ or merely perceived to be, most of whom had no connection to the concert. They were prosecuted under the guise of “violating vice laws.” Many others who expressed solidarity or even empathy became targets of repression as well.⁶⁰

Fahd was one of the people who were targeted. He shared his experience and the long-lasting psychological and social implications that he is still experiencing. He shared his love for Sarah and recalled the shock at her passing:

“The last time we spoke was when she was travelling. We’d send messages when we had the chance, and the last ones were really kind, just telling each other our feelings, that we loved each other. When I came across those messages later, it really hit me. What happened with Sarah was a huge shock. I just couldn’t make sense of it.”

Fahd was not the only participant who brought Sarah into our conversations – other participants did too. I didn’t know Sarah, but like many of us (at least from what I observed in my close circles), we identified with her. Years later, anger and grief remain.

Attuning to research participants’ feelings and needs and extending this to researchers is not just a form of care but also a method of rigour.⁶¹ Thoughtful reflection and thorough documentation of both emotional nuances and intellectual insights can meaningfully inform the research process and outcome.⁶²

Throughout my conversation with Fahd, I felt many boundaries got blurred. As if I was no longer a researcher sitting at my desk in a European country, speaking with a research participant through my laptop. For many moments it felt as though I was sitting beside him – two friends sharing grief and anger and searching together for a way forward.

59 نونى قصدي نوي المالساو ولقت عي ماظن: “وبنيرل” عقوم يلع داع. (2018، ريمت دبس 24). رصم يد م. <https://www.madamasr.com/2018/09/24/opinion/u/%d8%b9%d8%a7%d9%85-%d8%b9%d9%84%d9%89-%d9%85%d9%88%d9%82%d8%b9%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b1%d9%8a%d9%86%d8%a8%d9%88-%d9%86%d8%b8%d8%a7%d9%85-%d9%8a%d8%b9%d8%aa%d9%82%d9%84%d8%8c-%d9%88%d8%a5/>

60 Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. (2018, 25 September). Press release: A year after the raising of the rainbow flag incident, and five years after the longest security crackdown against people with different sexual orientations: <https://eipr.org/en/press/2018/09/year-after-raising-rainbow-flag-incident-and-five-years-after-longest-security>

61 Long, T., & Johnson, M. (2000). Rigour, reliability and validity in qualitative research. *Clinical Effectiveness in Nursing*, 4(1), 30-37. <https://doi.org/10.1054/cein.2000.0106>

62 Blakely, K. (2007). Reflections on the Role of Emotion in Feminist Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 6(2), 59-68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690700600206>

When the conversation ended, I closed my laptop and stepped outside for a walk. I walked for hours, trying to digest this conversation and the tangled feelings it stirred toward the country: the anger, the desire for revenge against a system that deliberately and slowly murders anyone who speaks truth to power. This conversation pulled me back even before 2017, into the reality of the present. A present shaped by the ingrained and intricate powers of authoritarian fascist and nationalist ideologies that legitimise violence to systematically silence opposition both online and offline and punish anyone who challenges the social order they strive to maintain. Deeply ingrained powers that facilitate and reinforce the dominance of Western colonial imperialist forces to serve their interests.

During our conversation, Fahd attributed the violence to the state and a broken system. But I believe the system is not broken; it was built this way. Exposing infrastructures of harm (online/offline) that shape lived realities is what the research aims for. However, I acknowledge the research's partiality; it does not capture the magnitude of harm in contexts of genocides and conflicts where violence manifests and impacts lives in unprecedented ways.

POSITIONALITY AND PROCESS

As part of the Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN) and hosted by Cairo52 Legal Research Institute, the research examined the lived realities of women and queer individuals with gendered violence, including its technology-based manifestations Egypt. These realities were the point of departure to (a) have in-depth understanding and analysis of the complex array of political and structural forces that exacerbate gendered violence both online and offline; (b) highlight the rights and health ramifications as well as the everyday resistance strategies individuals adopt to thrive; and (c) ultimately, the research aimed to inform and influence policy and advocacy efforts.

I positioned myself in this research as politically and intimately involved – and geographically fluid, alternating between Egypt and Europe over the past two years.⁶³ In the following sections, I reflect on how my positionality influenced different aspects of the research process such as design, the team involved, and the relationship with participants.

Besides exposing infrastructures of harm, another reason to initiate this research project was to archive and amplify voices of the community. It was a deliberate attempt to counter the systematic erasure of our narratives.⁶⁴ However, undertaking such a project as an independent researcher was challenging. An eroded civic space with restrictions on civil society organisations⁶⁵ left few options to find a value-aligned host organisation to support the project on an administrative level. Unsurprisingly, the process took more time than expected.

Over time, the research gained a solid foundation and was supported by a network of activists, researchers and academics whose contributions were instrumental to its execution. Some chose to voluntarily offer support at various stages and diverse capacities – from advising on research design to providing safety and security support.

63 Yip, S. Y. (2023). Positionality and reflexivity: negotiating insider-outsider positions within and across cultures. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 47(3), 222–232. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2023.2266375>

64 Ibreck, R., Rees, P., & Tazzioli, M. (2024) Counter-Archiving Migration: Tracing the Records of Protests against UNHCR. *International Political Sociology*, 18(4). <https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olae035>

65 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies. (2025). *Freedom of Association in Egypt: Submission to the 48th session of the Universal Periodic Review*. <https://cihrs.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Freedom-of-Association-in-Egypt-upr48-2025.pdf>

The core team included two researchers who played a pivotal role in supporting data collection and processing, and initial analysis:

- Camillia Kamel: An Egyptian feminist legal researcher based in Europe. Her work focuses on freedom of expression and minority rights in the region.
- Heba Anis: An Egyptian feminist journalist and researcher. Her work focuses on violence against women and minority issues.



Illustration by Alaa Satir

ACCESS

The team and I reached out to our professional and personal networks to enlist their support in reaching participants. Additionally, we published a call for participation through the digital platform of the host organisation. The team's positionality facilitated access to participants. Although we opted for a maximum variation sample, the team's positionality somewhat influenced the characteristics of those who participated.

Participants were women and queer individuals residing in Egypt, particularly across Delta, Upper Egypt and Cairo, or who had left the country in the past two years. They ranged between 20 and 39 years old. They experienced a form of tech-based violence and/or were actively engaged in an initiative or human or women's rights organisation concerned with addressing gendered violence in Egypt.

RELATIONSHIP WITH PARTICIPANTS

Camillia and I spoke with a large number of participants. We had hybrid (online/offline) individual in-depth conversations and group conversations. The group conversations were meant to take place over four weeks with one session a week. The main goal of these conversations was to create a

base for community network and have the time to build deeper connection and rapport, which is not possible in a one-time setting. We also wanted to offer the participants the possibility to create written contributions to be included in the research outcome. Nevertheless, it was extremely difficult to implement this design. Instead, we were able to implement a two-day on-ground conversation with a group of women.

Although we didn't personally know any of the participants, the way we reached them established a sense of trust. This initial foundation was crucial, allowing us to build upon it and work to create an environment where participants could feel comfortable and at ease.

For example, we attempted to refuse the hierarchical nature of the participant/researcher relationship. This involved engaging in a two-way conversation, sharing more about who we are, and why this issue concerns us. Additionally, throughout our conversations, participants' well-being took precedence over the research objectives. We checked in with participants a few times throughout the conversation; we intentionally refrained from pressuring participants to disclose anything they were uncomfortable sharing, even if such disclosures could have enriched our study; we also stopped recording a few times when participants requested, allowing them to share confidential information they did not want to be recorded.

Regular debriefings were conducted throughout the research process in order to collectively discuss conversations with participants, reflect on dynamics, emergent tensions and ethical dilemmas, and reassess our approach. These debriefings were essential to address issues of credibility and trustworthiness of findings. They provided a space for ongoing engagement with questions on positionality, privilege and geographical location. We became increasingly aware of how they shaped the dynamic of the conversations.

For example, with some participants, it felt like a conversation. We talked about things that mattered to them, even when unrelated to the research. We also shared resources and provided information they asked about. Moreover, we asked for their advice and input in designing workshops for group conversation. In certain cases, the fact that we were not based in the country made participants feel comfortable opening up or led them to perceive the research as "more credible".

Nevertheless, not all interactions unfolded in this manner. For others, the conversations remained formal, resembling "professional" interviews. Some participants expressed discomfort or even "intimidation", as one explicitly stated. Others, particularly representatives from civil society organisations, were reluctant and cautious in sharing information, inquired extensively about the hosting organisation, or even withdrew from the conversation after the research objectives were explained.

BEYOND CARE

Qualitative research on violence is critical to understanding its root causes and structural enablers, which can inform possible interventions and archive narratives of communities to counter the systematic erasure of their existence. It also poses risk of emotional harm to those involved.

Thereby, it requires responsibility to ensure that research is not extractive and maximises benefits.⁶⁶

A feminist ethics of care then becomes a necessity for ensuring that participant well-being remains a priority. The ethics of care we adopted were rooted in *reciprocity, empathy, support and rapport*. Below I 1) highlight measures we followed to ensure a consistent application of the feminist ethics of care, and 2) underscore some of the limitations and ethical dilemmas we grappled with. I end with some questions on pushing boundaries of what research could do for the community.

Qualitative research on emotionally engaged topics⁶⁷ such as violence entails a potential risk of emotional harm. In this research, potential risks included emotional distress or at worst re-traumatisation; legal ramifications due to participation; and lack of access to the internet, which would hinder participation. In addressing these risks, we did not only intend to minimise potential harm, but also to reciprocate beneficence to participants. Thus, our feminist ethics of care were grounded in prioritising the well-being of participants, including digital and physical security, building connection and rapport, and providing access to resources.

Digital safety and security: Precautions we took to ensure maximum safety and security for participants during our digital conversation.

Legal support: Participants were informed that they have the right to legal support, provided by Cairo52 Legal Research Institute, in case of any legal repercussions as a result of participating in the research.

Internet access: We provided financial support to buy internet bundles for participants who had (limited) access to the internet.

Emotional support: To ensure that we could support participants emotionally, we decided to have a feminist psychologist⁶⁸ as part of the research team. Our care provider has rich experience working with survivors of gender-based violence in Egypt and Syria as a psychologist and researcher. She was a great support to the research participants and the researchers. Participants had access to one support session. This session was meant to be an additional space for participants to speak up, vent out or receive a referral to a sustainable and affordable method of support beyond what we could offer with our limited financial resources. The researchers had access to support sessions as well.

In addition, we had a few psycho-educational sessions with the care provider to ensure that we didn't cause unintended harm to participants or ourselves. We learned about the trauma-informed approach.⁶⁹ Such an approach to qualitative research is rooted in empathy, prioritising individuals' well-being and respecting their agency over their narratives. This includes being mindful of our language during conversations by, for example, using descriptive language and being transparent about what the research can offer, which can foster trust.

66 Iyer, N., & Taye, B. (August 2019). Digging up trauma, survivor porn and other ethical concerns about research. *GenderIT.org*. <https://genderit.org/feminist-talk/digging-trauma-survivor-porn-and-other-ethical-concerns-about-research>

67 Blakely, K. (2007). Op. cit.

68 Feminist psychology adopts a decolonial and intersectional approach to psychology, and to the understanding and analysis of the nuanced lived experiences that are shaped by multiple power structures and systems of oppression. Savaş, Ö., & Dutt, A. (2023). Decolonial and intersectional feminist psychology for the future of (forced) migration and refugee resettlement. *Current Research in Ecological and Social Psychology*, 4, 100124. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cresp.2023.100124>

69 Pemberton, J. V., & Loeb, T. B. (2020). The Impact of Sexual and Interpersonal Violence and Trauma on Women: Trauma-Informed Practice and Feminist Theory. *Journal of feminist family therapy*, 32(1-2), 115-131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08952833.2020.1793564>

We referred to these resources as “The Care Package”, which was outlined in detail in the informed consent form. The form also provided a comprehensive explanation of the research topic, potential risks and benefits, and the measures in place to protect participants’ safety and confidentiality. We detailed the process of collection, analysis and usage, as well as the steps participants could take if they suspected a misuse of their data by the researchers.

LIMITATIONS

Despite these measures, we recognise our limitations as researchers and the inherent partiality in our research design, process and outcomes.

During the debriefs, we discussed our feminist ethics of care: how it was initially envisioned and how we applied it. Support, for example, was conditioned by our limited capacity. Framing what we were capable of providing from the outset with participants was necessary to avoid posing unrealistic expectations on us.

Rapport and connection were also points of discussion. For many participants, the rapport established during the conversations seemed to be transient and confined to the duration of our interaction. In certain cases, I found myself critically reflecting on the nature of the rapport with some of the participants I spoke with, particularly when ideological or political disagreements or differences surfaced, and I chose to remain silent in response to participants’ thoughts.

Some participants who initially expressed interest in engaging with the psychologist or attending a workshop later disengaged or never responded to our check-in emails as a follow-up to our conversation. While this disengagement was unsurprising, we thought that maybe they just needed a space to share their experience with someone they didn’t know. Although it remains challenging to determine whether these conversations caused distress or harm to participants, we know that their participation held meaning to some. Participants expressed appreciation for feeling heard and understood, accessing supportive resources, and having the opportunity to contribute to their communities.

PUSHING BOUNDARIES

However, many other participants, especially those who proactively reached out to the team to express their interest in participating, as well as those who joined the two-day workshop, were eager to do more than share their experiences. They wanted to contribute further, offer support, learn and write.

Throughout these conversations, I was curious about what motivated participants to take part in the research. I asked Fahd, as I did with everyone I spoke with. Nearly all shared a common desire: to take action aspiring to benefit their community.

“I wanted to meet others, exchange experiences, and hear different perspectives. Also, given my work with communities, I’m also curious to learn from others and see what approaches are working, and how we can build on those.” – Fahd

"I am very interested in getting involved in any of these things, because I see that the situation in Egypt is getting worse for us trans people, so I try to get involved in anything that comes my way because I hope that something will change." – Seif

"I just want to believe there's real hope for change. I want to see things improving." – Reda

Seif and Reda, who are both Egyptians in their twenties, also reached out to the team, to take part in the research. Similarly, Samia, a workshop participant, contacted me after the workshop ended, expressing interest in contributing through writing.

If qualitative research brings together individuals who share a common purpose – a desire and willingness to take action – could it become a fertile ground, whether digital or on-the-ground, for building networks of care, a base, a foundation of an organising project? In one of the debriefs we discussed the community-building aspect of research. Later, I could not help but imagine if qualitative research was designed with this in mind, with intentionality at its core to build, to view it as another potential site to organise!

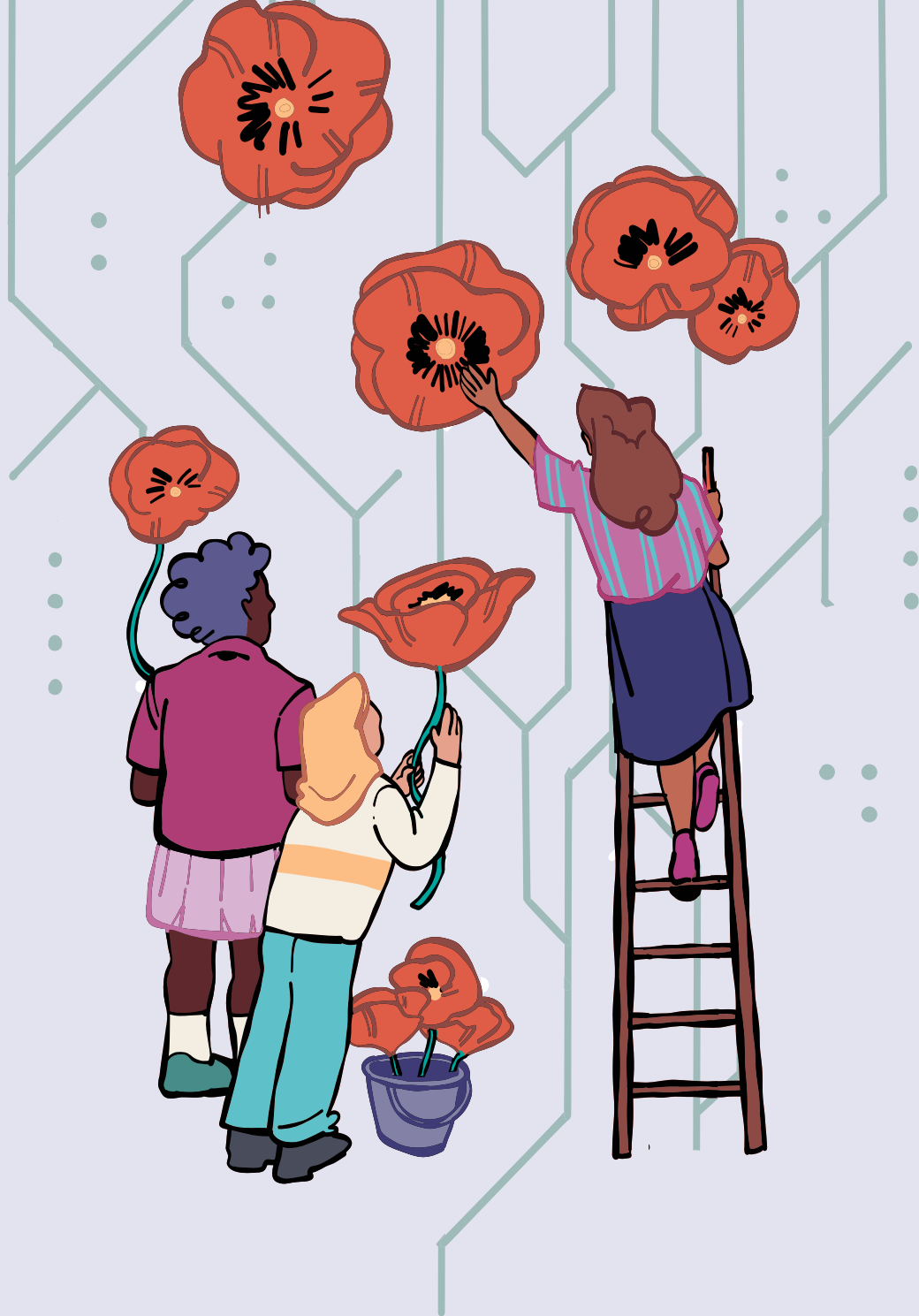
During the processing of the data, I read Fahd's transcript, I stopped at the joke and thought, No! I don't aspire to a queer government. Instead,

Imagine! Imagine liberation. Imagine a world free from systems of oppression; free from colonialism, capitalism, racism and patriarchy!

The author thanks Camillia Kamel for reviewing the article.

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WHAT IS METHOD UNDER ANNIHILATION? NOTES ON QUEERNESS, DEATH AND DATA

Sabiha Allouche and Ghiwa Sayegh

Illustration by Ellena May SJ

We came to this research a few weeks after the genocide in Gaza, perpetrated by the Zionist occupiers, intensified post October 2023. We were driven by the necessity to look into the ways in which Israel's genocide of Palestinians was justified by colonial feminism's use and deployment of online gender-based violence (OGBV). The starting point of this research was to explore the exploitation of Western feminist narratives as tools for spreading misinformation, propaganda and rationalising war crimes and genocide, perpetuated through online platforms, while also highlighting the disparities between Western feminists and intersectional feminists from the Global South. Alongside Makan,⁷⁰ we organised thought circles with about 15 participants, most of whom were queer Palestinians and Lebanese, dispersed across the world. We invited people with specific interests, like digital forensics and anti-colonial design, as well as students and junior and senior scholars. Our idea was to create participatory research: the framework and theory would be developed collectively, while groups of two or three people would each be responsible for a section or chapter according to their respective interests. Kohl⁷¹ and Makan's role was to hold the entire process together, supplying the group with the necessary data and research. It was easy to get people to come together online, as the space was greatly needed. We had deep discussions about whether we even wanted to engage with colonial feminism, which is to say white feminism, in the first place. We have been let down by imperial/colonial/white feminism for decades, and this history has not changed today as imperial feminism instrumentalises gender-based violence to justify and condone genocide. We wanted to write about what matters to us, and not converse with Zionism or imperialism. We grieved together, felt determined together and took comfort in each other's presence in the space.

Yet, every time we tried to transpose the thinking process to paper so we could start to collectively write, the process would fall through. We tried to go back to thought circles by organising one on positionality specifically, as it had come up multiple times in our conversations, but this did not take place because of low attendance. We had to come to the conclusion that positioning oneself, where method is concerned, could only be established in the context of a genocide. Beyond conventional understandings of positionality, the writing process itself forced us to locate ourselves in the world, in a specific time and place. But the impossibility of transitioning to a written format of organising thought was very telling of the moment we lived in and through in 2024: we were/are collectively exhausted, we lost purpose in the work that we do and we no longer had/have words to describe the horrors that we continue to witness. The urgency and crisis mode of last year made us unable to reflect on that emotional stage of grief. Deep inside, we also collectively refused to use the same language as our colonisers (and by language, we mean here a system of organisation that disciplines the thought before it disciplines the speech). It was as if, to quote one of the participants, "Everything we did/knew before October 2023 no longer counted". This brings us to the question: what is method under annihilation? How can we reflect on lived horrors that are ongoing? And in holding together one's methodologies and modes of being, what is needed to communicate and document when everything we know has been blown apart by genocide?

70 Set up and led by members of the Palestinian diaspora, Makan provides transformative education aimed at strengthening the movement for Palestinian liberation, contextualising Palestine within the broader framework of social justice and global liberation movements. <https://www.makan.org.uk/>

71 Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research is a queer, radical, open source publication from the South, with an emphasis on West Asia and North Africa. <https://kohljournal.press/>

QUEERING DEATH

Several authors have addressed the reach and scope of necropolitics, and of death's relation to knowledge production. Necropolitics has been previously theorised along a spectrum of let live/ life optimisation on the one hand, and of let die/death optimisation on the other, oftentimes within an analytical framework that centres the state.⁷² Achille Mbembe, thinking through necropolitics, emphasises their always already racialised/gendered/classed dimension.⁷³ Lauren Berlant and Jasbir Puar note the slow death that debilitating neoliberal economies engender, and Kharnita Mohamed ponders the long-term implications of researching violence whilst being embedded in it.⁷⁴ Together, these frameworks helped us identify the specific structures and bodies that are needed for the sustenance of Israel's exceptionalism, which is itself dependent upon the existence of a minimum number of perpetually disposable Palestinians. Nevertheless, they do not allow us to engender life from death, something that queer death studies (QDS) enables.

Our wish to think through death productively, i.e. to queer death, is the direct result of the genocidal and ecological extinction paradigms that inform our research. If anything, our research sits alongside knowledges that have been historically confined to the margins and that have sought to create spaces of counter discourse and resistance beyond institutional understandings. The participants in our research not only recognise their loci of intervention, they are already confronting death and genocide on a day-to-day basis. Their thinking and writing, thus, are in and of themselves theory in the flesh.⁷⁵

To queer death means to "undo normative entanglements and fashion alternative imaginaries".⁷⁶ Queer thinking is an approach that refuses to submit to rigid definitions and linear analysis. It is an invitation to take the in-between seriously and to pay attention to what happens when we refuse to limit our analysis to either/or polarised paradigms.⁷⁷ To pay attention to what lies in-between is to appreciate the potential of indeterminacy in destabilising linear understandings of life and death, discipline and protest, agency and subjectification and so on.

As far as the writing circle of our collective process goes, rather than view our inability to meet our initially-stated objectives for the research as failure, we embrace it as a decolonial moment of collective refusal that brought us together.⁷⁸ The indeterminacy in the unfinished work means that the im/possibilities for such work remain open, as opposed to viewing death as a finality.

As such, queer approaches to death do NOT take death as a fixed moment that marks the end of life, nor do they bound it exclusively to a human subject.⁷⁹ Instead, death becomes meaningful in terms of assemblage and relationality, echoing a multitude of Indigenous ways of doing and being through

72 Braidotti, R. (2010). The Politics of "Life Itself" and New Ways of Dying. In D. Cool, & S. Frost (Eds.), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Duke University Press; Haritaworn, J., Kuntsman, A., & Posocco, S. (2014). *Queer Necropolitics*. Routledge.

73 Mbembe, A., & Meintjes, L. (2003). Necropolitics. *Public Culture*, 15(1), 11-40. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>

74 Berlant, L. (2007). Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency). *Critical Inquiry*, 33(4), 754-780. <https://doi.org/10.1086/521568>; Puar, J. (2017). *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*. Duke University Press; Mohamed, K. (2024). Debilitating Research: Scholarship of the Obvious and Epistemic Trauma. *African Studies*, 83(2-3), 134-151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00020184.2024.2431801>

75 Moraga, C., & Anzaldúa, G. (2021). *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. SUNY Press.

76 Radomska, M., Mehrabi, T., & Lykke, N. (2020). Queer Death Studies: Death, Dying and Mourning from a Queerfeminist Perspective. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 35(104), 89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2020.1811952>

77 Krishnan, S. (2024). Afterword: queering beyond queer theory. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 31(9), 1311-1318. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09663669X.2024.2366230>

78 Mohamed, K. (2024). Op. cit.

79 Radomska, M., Mehrabi, T., & Lykke, N. (2020). Op. cit. 83.

deaths, beyond western linear temporality and binary thinking. Challenging the presumed inertness of the living/non-living and offline/online binaries results in productive haunted presents that could work toward opening new possibilities.

Extending queer thinking to the realm of death re-evaluates its place and role in relation to knowledge production. What is at stake when our research questions remain confined to a framework in which death is understood conventionally, unilaterally and individualistically? Our attempt at a collective methodology forced us to contemplate the limitations of these research enquiries, when questions of social justice and transformative politics do not extend their understanding of the death of one human to that of all humans.

Where Palestine is concerned, Israeli settlers and their allies too often justify the genocide by the dichotomy of “we love life” vs. “they (Palestinians) love death”. To qualify Palestinian resistance as a “culture of death” is to be complicit with the mass destruction and wide-scale violence perpetrated by the genocidal colonial occupation. Such qualification echoes centuries-old colonial narratives that sought and continue to construct the native’s refusal as inherently violent, vengeful and unwilling to acquiesce to colonial “civilisational” rhetoric. But colonial (and state-sanctioned) violence and annihilation are what is collectively killing us and making life unbearable; resistance to them, even when enacted through carnal death, once again refuses death as a finality. Therefore, we recognise in the act of resistance and its afterlife, a site for potentiality and lifemaking, where the narratives, histories and life stories of those who have to contend with annihilation are preserved/live on. As murdered Palestinian poet Refaat Alareer wrote, “If I must die, you must live to tell my story”.⁸⁰

METHOD AS DEATH/DEATH AS METHOD

The genocide in Gaza has been broadcasted by Palestinians themselves, who took to social media to show the world the obliteration of their bodies in real time. One wonders: what does it mean “to live in ecological and social proximity to death”?⁸¹ The answer to this question depends on who the dead are, where they are located and whether they are deemed grievable, be it in terms of citizenship, migratory status, geopolitical positioning, racialisation, class, gender, sexuality, ability and other markers of hierarchical difference. For instance, settlers and white sovereign citizens in other geographies are allowed to say their goodbyes, be buried with family and friends, rest in peace and be remembered. In contrast, genocidal settlers continue to violate Palestinians’ bodies in death, preventing them from finding their dead under the rubble, disrupting funeral rituals and uprooting Palestinian cemeteries throughout the occupied territory to replace them with settlements and hypermodern infrastructure. In Gaza today, the “luxury of death” is not measured by dignified burials anymore, but by whether one dies “with a full body”.⁸²

When confronted with the unimaginable scale of these atrocities, “method”, no matter how queer, decolonial or non-linear, becomes obsolete. The death of method as we know it only reflects the collapse of our known paradigms for death itself. Imagining life as something other than fragmented and torn apart under genocide is an impossible task, a conclusion our collective methodologies naturally extended into. In other words, the extractivist “eco-apartheid”, or the combination of ecocide

80 Alareer, R. (2023, 1 November). If I must die, let it be a tale. #FreePalestine #Gaza. X. <https://x.com/itranslate123/status/1719701312990830934>

81 Ibid, 84.

82 Al Khateeb, M. M. (2024, 10 June). The luxury of death. *We Are Not Numbers*. <https://wearenotnumbers.org/the-luxury-of-death/>

and genocide that has been stripping Gaza to the bone, takes root in capitalist and colonial systems under which annihilation feels inescapable.⁸³ With the real-time proliferation of the “colonial frontier” of the occupied land (Gaza) and the plundering of its resources, our methods have to stand in opposition to the binary logic of endless colonial expansion vs. endless death for Palestinians.⁸⁴ Thinking about methods in thinking circles, no matter how numerous and political, will not save us; it is the resistance from Gaza that teaches us about the world, and how to escape its eco-apartheid future.

For every capitalist system out there, a Gaza, somewhere and at some point, has been/will be erased. It is the prototype of the many (non-)ecologies to come when we affix ecological disasters accelerated by warfare to national borders and convince ourselves that there and here are unrelated. To think through death as method is to dismantle the distance between the here and the there, and to recognise that the death of one is the death of all humanity.⁸⁵ But Palestinians’ insistence on attaching themselves to the living reminds us of ghosts’ ability to drag time and space. By answering Palestinians’ call to narrate their lives according to their own terms, we temporally “drag” our existence, not through gender-transitive displays, but through our refusal to adhere to geopolitical and linear history conventions. We refuse to affix Palestine and ourselves to a “straight” fixed time and geography that reproduces the very divisive present-time of the nation-state; instead, we reorient ourselves to a yet to be real-ised plural futurity, where resistance seriously questions conventional geographies.⁸⁶

With Palestinians’ persistence in telling their story/ies, we embrace death as a reminder of our human duty to document not only our lives, but their very inter-connectedness – not in universal depoliticised “one human race” rhetoric, but through a wilful politics of pluriversality or difference. It is a leap of faith that those whose life has always been accompanied by death are only too familiar with. Death no longer equates the sociological doom and gloom of the death drive; rather, death and the beyond become the anti-imperial outpost from which we speak, think and live otherworldly – the last outpost from which we “write ourselves into existence”, so to speak.

FROM DIGITAL DEATH TO DIGITAL OTHERWISE?

Which (dis)orientations do we have to heed in order to do research on OGBV in times of genocide? Israel’s barbaric use of technologies of mass killing has propelled it, in the colonial mind, to the status of a pioneer that’s opened up unimaginable possibilities for a terrifying future. In contrast, Palestinians and their means of resistance are portrayed as belonging to the past – another form of digital annihilation (as per Sarona Abuaker’s reflections).⁸⁷ We therefore opt for a “queer calculus” as “reading practice” in order to denaturalise and make strange the way we receive and process the monumental data coming out of Gaza.⁸⁸

What exactly do we mean by queering data? If algorithms, as we know them, are synonymous

83 Kolinjivadi, V., & Ashraf, A. (2024, 17 November). Palestine against an eco-apartheid world. *Mondoweiss*. <https://mondoweiss.net/2024/11/palestine-against-an-eco-apartheid-world/>

84 Ibid.

85 Abuaker, S. (2020). Suture Fragmentations – A Note on Return. *Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research*, 6(3), 243-255. <https://kohljournal.press/suture-fragmentations>

86 Bahng, A. (2017). *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times*. Duke University Press.

87 Abuaker, S. (2020). Op. cit.

88 Kapadia, R. K. (2019). *Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War*. Duke University Press, 16.

with banal, everyday interactions that reorientate⁸⁹ us towards technocapitalist flows of data that sustain depoliticised patterns of consumption, reading beyond these flows should, in theory, lead us to novel circuits of knowledge-making and transformative praxis. For instance, the No Thanks App, which instantly informs buyers whether the products they are interested in purchasing contribute to sustaining the Israeli settler project or not, is one example that disrupts the flow of technocapitalist consumerist patterns because it reorients consumers to new products.

The re-routing of cash flows towards less established businesses constitutes, in many ways, a rupture in the ever-growing year-to-year profit-making of established brands. Slowly, but surely, consumers de-link from the familiarity and confidence that established brands have long offered. At the same time, this re-routing compels them to resist comfort-in-knowing and to embrace the strange and the unfamiliar beyond their shopping habits. This reading of digitised patterns of consumption, albeit speculative, is on par with Black, queer and feminist code studies, which offer us “crucial resources for apprehending the sites and workings of ‘glitch politics’ that refuse/elude hegemonic digital-social-spatial orders and mediate for ways of thriving otherwise”.⁹⁰

As a result, it is important to rethink queer theory’s hostility towards and at times demonisation of the quantitative method. Not withholding the epistemic violence that quantifying and taxonomising has historically had (and continues to have) on racialised and non-normative bodies, in a world where the boundaries between the real and the digital are increasingly blurred, queer theory must reposition itself in relation to the quantitative “in the unfolding methodological battles of social science meets big business”.⁹¹ What’s more, technocapitalism is enabled by closed and impenetrable systems of data to the extent that it becomes near impossible to distinguish between algorithms that “preempt” the social and those that “predict” it.⁹² Either way, a (presumed) “outdated social life” is “artificially frozen”.⁹³ Where Gaza and Palestinians’ narratives are concerned, it is imperative that we engage in wilful data mining that ensures their longevity, not solely for purposes of commemorating and mourning, but to counter-quantify and visualise (as a mean of knowledge dissemination) the scale of our inter-connectedness in relation to Palestinian liberation. Here, we take inspiration from the methodology employed by the Palestine Open Maps project, initiated by Visualizing Palestine in 2019.⁹⁴ Through visualisation, Palestine emerges as a quintessential queer assemblage of contradiction, mess and patch-work, and queerness itself “as an intersectional practice”.⁹⁵ After all, we spent the last 18 months tirelessly chanting “in our thousands and our millions, we are ALL Palestinians”.

In keeping with queer theory’s political orientation towards the indefinite and the fluid, we also recalibrate the workings of our vision to galvanise digital clout on what matters. In our unwillingness to engage with state logics and white/colonial feminist discourses, we discard footage depicting the deviancy of IDF soldiers, whose sexcapades entertain toxic manosphere and reiterate self-gratification. Instead, we shift our gaze to Palestinians’ DIY content chronicling and archiving of their

89 Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke University Press.

90 Elwood, S. (2020). Digital Geographies, Feminist Relationality, Black and Queer Code Studies: Thriving Otherwise. *Progress in Human Geography*, 45(2), 210. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132519899733>

91 Haber, B. (2016). The Queer Ontology of Digital Method. *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 44(3-4), 156. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.2016.0040>

92 Ibid, 155.

93 Ibid.

94 <https://palopenmaps.org/en>

95 Chatterjee, S. (2023). Crisis Epistemologies: A Case for Queer Feminist Digital Ethnography. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 32(5), 490. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2023.2179606>

day-to-day life-making online, such as fashioning screws and bolts from scratch, building dwellings with sand from the seashore or re-imagining their favourite recipes by adapting to the scarce ingredients available to them.

To think queerly today is to think against and in spite of the straight line of algorithms. A queer ethics towards data is one where glitches are not only preempted and practiced; the glitch itself becomes the point of entry, the language of coding and the algorithm that binds us in our love for Palestine. The algorithm, then, is not always to be feared, despite its current gendered, classed and racialised deployments. With feminist and queer methodologies across the globe largely pushing towards the documentation of digital violence as a threat to life, we caution against the digital clean-up work (also known as digital hygiene) that the data currently coming out of Gaza could become. If our collective thought circles failed in producing a concrete piece of conventional writing on time, they allowed us to not only rethink conventional attitudes towards death, but to seriously incorporate the dead alongside our activism and political orientations, even more so in the age of withdrawing funding and institutional cowardice towards life-sustaining, anti-settler colonial research.

* We would like to thank Makan, who have been one of the main pillars of this thought process, particularly Sarona Abuaker and Aimee Shalan (to whom we owe the title of this piece).

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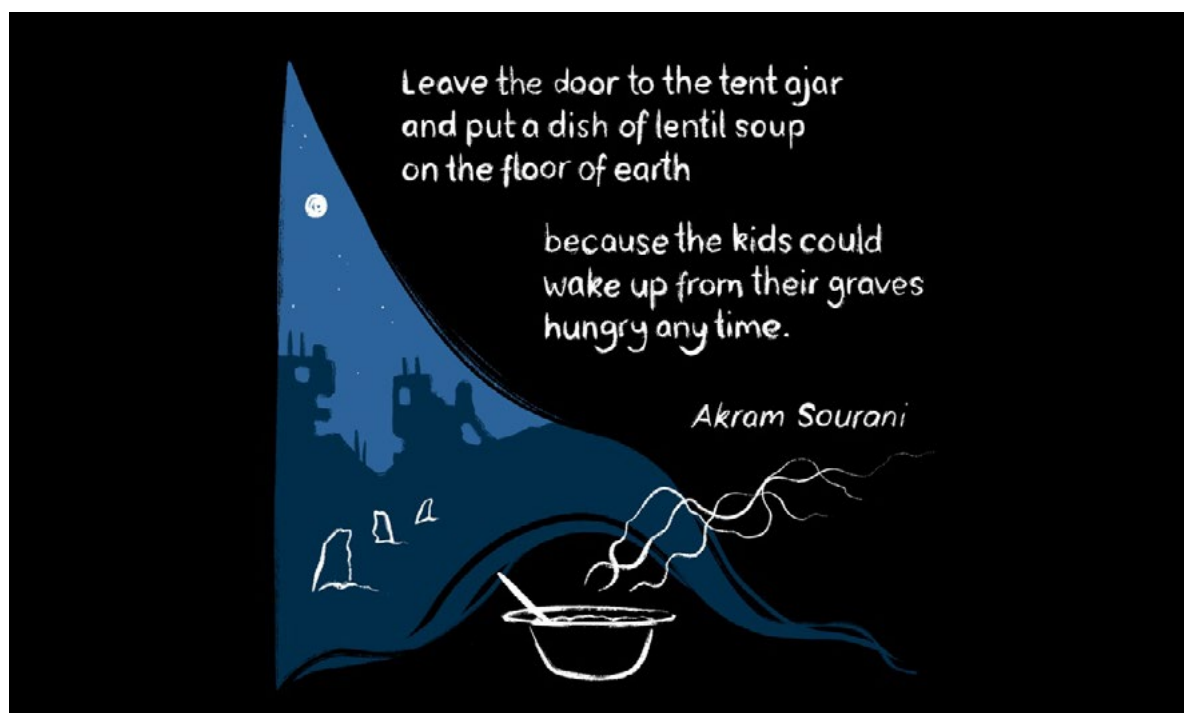


Illustration by Billy Ruffian

REFLECTING ON FEMINIST RESEARCH: FROM A SHARED EXPERIENCE TO COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

By Martha Tadesse and S.A.



Illustration by Ellena May SJ

INTRODUCTION

As two feminists passionate about human rights and from Addis Ababa, a cosmopolitan city, we have been engaging in ongoing conversations about online gender-based violence (OGBV). We have been actively involved in various women's rights campaigns for several years, having participated in online feminist dialogues and contributed to research and archiving efforts. In recent years, we have observed and experienced the various feminist issues we raise being repeatedly misrepresented, while also facing online harassment and threats. This has become a trend in which social media platforms are shifting from spaces of shared experience and advocacy to sites of danger, with limited legal measures to protect users.

Online hate speech and instances of OGBV target not only feminist individuals but also the LGBTQIA+ community. In August 2023, an organised hate campaign against LGBTQIA+ individuals spread on social media, particularly on TikTok. Religious leaders, anti-gender groups, TikTok influencers and individuals were seen posting videos calling for mob justice, issuing death threats and advocating for harsher laws against the community.

Having witnessed the profound impact of OGBV on the LGBTQIA+ community and rights advocates, we recognised the urgent need to document both its harmful effects and the community's resistance to it. To address this, we conducted ongoing research to highlight the OGBV experienced by LGBTQIA+ individuals and their coping mechanisms. Our study revealed the harsh realities of the daily violence they endure, as well as their remarkable resistance in the face of such adversity.

Some of the questions we continuously challenged one another with during the research process include, how does the broader social, cultural and political environment in Ethiopia influence our research? How do we balance the need for transparency and representation with the responsibility to protect participants? How do we ensure that our participants have access to this research?

While the two of us share common experiences as feminists with similar backgrounds, this research reflection highlights our differences, whether in perspective, methodology or emotional response. We also highlight the challenges we faced and the collaborative learning along the way.

BUILDING TRUST WITH THE STUDY PARTICIPANTS AND POSITIONALITY

We share common experiences as vocal feminist advocates actively engaged in feminist gatherings, online advocacy spaces and social groups, including digital campaigns. Our visibility in the digital space and outspoken stance on human rights issues have made us targets of significant backlash and ongoing harassment. This hostility has deeply affected our engagement on social media, particularly on Twitter (now known as X), where we have had to navigate challenges to our activism and online presence.

This experience has given us a certain level of familiarity with the context and key actors involved. Research indicates that such familiarity offers several advantages in qualitative studies, including easier access to participants, quicker rapport-building and more nuanced, responsible data

collection. It also enhances the depth of data interpretation by situating findings within a broader social, political and historical context.⁹⁶

While our positionality made it relatively easier to build trust with study participants, discussing LGBTQIA+ issues with feminist advocates remained a significant challenge. The lack of a unified stance on LGBTQIA+ rights within Ethiopian feminist spaces limited our ability to fully leverage our connections within the feminist community. Understanding that trust is fundamental to ethical and effective research, we engaged in critical socioanalysis to reflect on how our positionality and identities influence our work.⁹⁷ Consequently, we strategically divided interview roles based on our level of engagement and trust. One of us conducted interviews with LGBTQIA+ individuals, while the other spoke with feminist advocates.

In addition, we have both worked in the development sector, which brought us the opportunity to travel across Ethiopia and learn about different cultures and understand the climate better. Our experience in community engagement and travel has also given us insight into the country's complexity. This understanding helped us tailor our data collection tools and communication styles, and we adapted our approach to geographical and linguistic contexts. This allowed us to gain the trust of study participants and engage with them better.

One of the challenges we encountered in this research was the absence of a common queer language. In many cases, participants were unable to express their experiences using specific terms, as the language simply doesn't exist or is underdeveloped. Instead, they shared their experiences through personal stories. These stories, rather than words, became a powerful means of communication. This process made us reflect on our own positionality. Our access to education, activism, transnational queer discourses, travel and our exposure to up-to-date information gave us linguistic and discourse privilege that many participants did not have. Recognising this imbalance, we chose to meet study participants with openness, and to learn about their experiences as expressed in their own words. This experience taught us the value of listening to lived experiences, recognising that sometimes words cannot fully capture the depth of one's reality. We also learned that researchers must engage in ongoing self-reflection to understand how their identities, experiences and perspectives influence their interactions with participants and the research itself.

METHODOLOGICAL DILEMMA: NAVIGATING THE PROTECTION OF LGBTQIA+ INDIVIDUALS AND THE NEED FOR THICK DATA ON VIOLENCE

Thick data is essential for producing meaningful qualitative research that captures the lived experiences of study participants. Some scholars refer to this as experiential data.⁹⁸ When planning our data collection, we critically reflected on key aspects, including data collection tools, sampling strategies and the setting in which this data collection would take place. Through continuous

96 Chavez, C. (2008). Conceptualizing from the inside: Advantages, complications, and demands on insider positionality. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(3), 474-494. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2008.1589>; Hussen, T. S. (2014). Exploring "Familiar" Spaces in Feminist Ethnographic Fieldwork: Critical Reflections of Fieldwork Experience in Gurage, Ethiopia.

97 Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. R. Nice (Trans.). Stanford University Press, 116; Moon, J. (2007). *Critical Thinking: An Exploration of Theory and Practice*. Routledge.

98 Schultze, U., & Avital, M. (2011). Designing interviews to generate rich data for information systems research. *Information and Organization*, 21(1), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infoandorg.2010.11.001>

discussions, we conducted in-depth interviews, key informant interviews and document reviews, engaging members of the LGBTQIA+ community and rights advocates.

Throughout the study, safeguarding the dignity and protection of research participants was our fundamental guiding principle. Given the sensitive nature of our research topic, we prioritised privacy and confidentiality by ensuring that participants' views remained confidential, respecting their right to decline any questions they were uncomfortable answering and allowing them to withdraw from the study at any stage without pressure. Participants were fully informed about the study's objectives and the measures taken to protect their confidentiality before consenting to take part. LGBTQIA+ activists were engaged to provide critical feedback on the tools and process of the study. Even though the process was demanding, we conducted the data collection ourselves to ensure high ethical standards and data quality.

Various scholars emphasise the need for a systematic review of research instruments and methods when studying violence.⁹⁹ In line with this, we made several amendments across different stages of our research process. Initially, we believed that conducting focus group discussions (FGDs) would generate thick data by creating a safe environment for peer discussions. However, after engaging with LGBTQIA+ activists and considering Ethiopia's current political climate, we realised that FGDs could pose potential risks to participants.

While in-person data collection often yields rich insights, safeguarding participants' welfare remained our top priority.¹⁰⁰ As a result, we opted for in-depth interviews conducted online. This methodological shift underscored the importance of adaptability in research design, particularly when working with vulnerable populations. Conducting online in-depth interviews not only minimised risk, but also provided participants with the freedom to share their experiences in a setting of their choosing.

Our findings reinforce the idea that some methods, though useful, are not always appropriate – especially in contexts where privacy and safety concerns are paramount. From this experience, we learned the critical role of ethical reflexivity in qualitative research and the need to continuously reassess methodologies to ensure they align with both ethical considerations and the needs of participants.

Additionally, we deliberated over certain data, considering whether to include it based on our experiences. One of us emphasised producing rich, contextual data, while the other consistently reminded us to be mindful of the narratives. Ultimately, we made a conscious decision to exclude some data to prevent potential harm. This choice highlights the ethical responsibility of researchers to prioritise participant welfare over the pursuit of data richness. It also underscores the importance of ongoing, collaborative reflection, allowing us to recognise both our expertise and the gaps in our understanding.

99 Fraga, S. (2016). Methodological and ethical challenges in violence research. *Porto Biomedical Journal*, 1(2), 77-80. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pbj.2016.04.005>; Jaquier, V., Johnson, H., & Fisher, B. S. (2011). Research methods, measures, and ethics. In C. M. Renzetti, J. L. Edleson, & R. K. Bergen (Eds.), *Sourcebook on Violence Against Women*. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452224916.n2>

100 Basha, S. A. J., Cai, Q., Lee, S., Tran, T., Majerle, A., Tiede, S., & Gewirtz, A. H. (2024). Does Being In-Person Matter? Demonstrating the Feasibility and Reliability of Fully Remote Observational Data Collection. *Prevention Science*, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-024-01706-6>

BEYOND DATA: THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF DOCUMENTING VIOLENCE

While we express this research took an emotional toll on us as researchers, we first want to acknowledge the far greater psychological and emotional burden placed on the study participants. As survivors of ongoing OGBV, LGBTQIA+ individuals face relentless attacks through organised campaigns, disinformation and other forms of digital violence.

As researchers, it was emotionally overwhelming to consistently listen to, read and watch violent content. The emotional strain was heightened by the graphic nature of the materials we encountered, particularly videos and posts of hatred and dehumanisation. For one of us, this brought up deep feelings of anger and frustration, while the other struggled with feelings of sadness and helplessness. As both of us grew up in religious spaces, it was even more difficult to witness videos where religious leaders incited violence against LGBTQIA+ communities. This experience added a layer of emotional complexity to the research, as we were constantly navigating our own emotions while engaging with painful, often traumatic data.

Through the process, we learned the emotional impact of conducting such research and the importance of providing researcher care in qualitative studies. Studies also show that the emotional challenges researchers face when studying violence are usually neglected, with no support mechanisms to help them navigate these experiences.¹⁰¹ To cope, we adopted different strategies. One of us found it helpful to compartmentalise emotions during data collection, focusing primarily on the research itself to maintain distance. The other, however, needed to debrief and process the content regularly, seeking emotional support from trusted friends. Despite these differences, we both recognised the need for self-care and emotional resilience throughout the research process.

On this note, research ethics committees (RECs) could play a greater role during the ethics review process. Just as RECs assess the prevention of harm to participants and provide guidance on appropriate support, it is equally important to extend similar care to researchers working on sensitive topics. This support could be integrated into the REC framework or addressed through an alternative institutional risk management system. However, this study was disadvantaged in this regard, as we didn't apply for REC due to the restrictive environment.

FEMINIST POLITICS IN KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND DISSEMINATION

Discussions around OGBV in Ethiopia are often centred around gay men and emphasise urban contexts. Hence, we tried to ensure that the perspectives of women and non-binary individuals, who are typically marginalised in these conversations, were included. We also tried to represent both urban and rural communities, acknowledging the unique challenges faced by rural populations. This process helped us to reflect on the conceptualisation of gender and who matters in the discourse.

¹⁰¹ Pio, E., & Singh, S. (2015). Vulnerability and resilience: Critical reflexivity in gendered violence research. *Third World Quarterly*, 37(2), 227-244. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1089166>

Participants are often left without access to research findings, as dissemination can be costly or limited to English, excluding those who speak other languages. One key aspect of our research is that we are translating our findings into Amharic, Ethiopia's official language, and plan to expand this translation work to other languages. This allows participants and the wider LGBTQIA+ community to have access to our research and engage with their own stories. In line with Connell's "Southern theory", our approach challenges the dominance of Western-centric knowledge and recognises the importance of including diverse perspectives in the production and dissemination of knowledge.¹⁰² By translating our findings into Amharic, we are not only providing access but also **contributing to a broader dialogue that considers the unique histories and experiences of the Global South.**



Photo by Martha Tadesse

Our research challenges traditional, often dominant, forms of knowledge building by incorporating storytelling and visual art methods that are frequently overlooked in more conventional research. And this process has been collaborative, with participants engaging in the creative aspects of archiving queer resistance. This collaborative approach allows participants to actively shape our research and makes certain that their voices and experiences remain central to the knowledge production process.

This approach reflects an ongoing challenge to the global inequalities in knowledge production and aims to create space for Southern voices and encourage new ways of learning and knowledge-

¹⁰² Connell, R. (2007). *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science*. Allen & Unwin.

sharing. In addition to the translations, we have included some direct quotes in the participants' own languages, acknowledging that translation often fails to capture the depth and nuance of lived experiences. Who are we trying to reach with this process? Who is the intended audience, and what language will resonate with them? These are some of the questions we continuously ask one another. Whenever possible, we believe it is important to prioritise the people who participate in research as its first audience, as their voices and experiences are at the heart of the work.

This research marks just the beginning of a much broader conversation on the intersection of gender, sexuality and OGBV. As we write this article, OGBV continues to be rampant, with horrific instances unfolding in real time. Just recently, we came across a gruesome TikTok video of a man, alleged to be gay, being brutally attacked. These acts of violence highlight the urgency of our work and the need to further explore how social media platforms can be held accountable for the violence they perpetuate. As this conversation continues to evolve, we remain committed to amplifying the voices of those affected and contributing to a collective movement for justice and accountability.

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We extend our heartfelt gratitude to community members for their trust, vulnerability and invaluable time. Your openness has been a source of strength for this research. We also thank the activists on the ground for their unwavering support and dedication. To those whose names we cannot mention, your behind-the-scenes efforts in gathering secondary data and assisting in various capacities have been instrumental in shaping this work. Thank you.

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EXPLORING TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN ONLINE DATING EXPERIENCES AMONG SOUTH AFRICAN YOUTHS: REFLEXIVITY ON THE RESEARCH METHODS ADOPTED FOR THE STUDY

By Aretha Asakitikpi

Illustration by Ellena May SJ

INTRODUCTION

Conducting this research on technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) in online dating experiences among South African youths has been a deeply introspective process, forcing me to engage critically with questions of power relations, representation and methodological choices. As I navigated the complexities of studying the intersection of technology, intimacy and gender-based violence, I became increasingly aware of my positionality, as well as that of my research team members, as academic researchers and students, the ethical dilemmas inherent in the study and the broader implications of my methodological choices. This reflexive piece is a culmination of my reflexivity thus far as the principal investigator of this project, undertaken in association with research team members consisting of academics in the fields of psychology, sociology, criminology, public health and IT. The team also consists of fieldworkers and research assistants drawn from the project's selected universities and their campuses.

THE MOTIVATION BEHIND THIS STUDY

My interest in this topic was fuelled by three major concerns:

1. The high prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa – a national crisis that has led to repeated government interventions, including the annual 16 Days of Activism for No Violence Against Women and Children campaign.¹⁰³
2. The rapid rise of online dating – a sector projected to generate at least \$12.28 million within South Africa's economy in 2024.¹⁰⁴
3. The significant presence of youth on online dating platforms – particularly youth within university spaces, where both experimentation in relationships and power imbalances often create an environment ripe for potential abuse.¹⁰⁵

Despite these realities, research exploring TFGBV within the South African context has been limited, particularly in relation to how online dating platforms, and by extension social media platforms, contribute to vulnerabilities and risks within intimacies. This gap in the literature raised several critical questions for me.

- Could frameworks from the Global North be applied to understand the dynamics of TFGBV in South Africa?
- How can the unique history of South Africa with respect to racial, gender and sexual diversities shape the way youths experience TFGBV in online dating spaces?¹⁰⁶
- What does the transition between online and offline violence look like, and how does it manifest in university settings?

¹⁰³ <https://www.parliament.gov.za/project-event-details/3>

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.statista.com/outlook/dmo/eservices/dating-services/online-dating/south-africa>

¹⁰⁵ Rietchard, C. (2007). *Online dating in a South African context: A psychological study of the persona profile*. University of Pretoria. <https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/28308/dissertation.pdf.pdf?sequence=1>; Davids, N. (2019). *Gender-based violence in South African universities: An institutional challenge*. Council on Higher Education. <https://www.chc.ac.za/file/6459/download?token=XT7N1ToQ>

¹⁰⁶ South Africa's society still reflects Apartheid-era racial categories: Black African, White, Indian/Asian and Coloured. Black African includes groups like Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho. White refers to those of European descent. Indian/Asian denotes people from the Indian subcontinent and Coloured signifies mixed heritage individuals. However, these terms don't fully capture South Africa's diverse populations. Tewolde, A. I. (2024). Self-identification in post-Apartheid South Africa: The case of Coloured people in Johannesburg, South Africa. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 9, 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.100866>

- Most importantly, how can policies be shaped to protect vulnerable users and bring perpetrators to justice?

These reflections became the foundation of my research questions and informed my methodological choices.

NAVIGATING RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: A REFLEXIVE STANCE

Given the complexity of this study, my research team and I adopted a mixed-methods approach, utilising both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews across four purposively selected universities in South Africa and eight purposively selected campuses within them. These are: The Independent Institute of Education¹⁰⁷ (IIE MSA Campus), Wits University (main campus), University of KwaZulu-Natal (Howard College Campus, Westville Campus and Edgewood Campus) as well as North-West University (Mafikeng, Vanderbijlpark and Potchefstroom Campuses). The quantitative method was adopted to understand the level of prevalence and resulting experiences while the qualitative method was adopted to gain a deeper understanding of how South African youths perceive TFGBV as could be perpetrated through online dating apps and other social media platforms. Within the selected universities, our campus selection was guided by factors that reflected the study's core variables, including racial, gender and sexual diversity, as well as GBV prevalence, urban versus semi-urban locations and institutional ownership (private vs. public).

As I engaged with the research process, I became increasingly aware of my positionality and that of my research team as academic researchers on the one hand and student representatives on the other. For the academic team members, all of whom have a background in university teaching and administration, our primary interaction with students had always been in formal academic settings. However, this study required academic team members to step outside our core roles as faculty and engage with students as research participants sharing their personal experiences of online intimacy, vulnerabilities and even trauma. To approach this, a lot of the intimate questions were included in the quantitative survey (questions that interrogated feelings, traumas, experiences) while the qualitative discussions included questions which probed awareness, communal responses, suggestions for support, addressing justice for survivors, holding perpetrators accountable as well as addressing government and social media platform responsibilities. For the qualitative aspect of this research, the recruitment of participants for focus group discussions (FGDs) was pushed by student fieldworkers who explained our research aims to prospective participants. These combined strategies proved to be very effective during the FGD sessions as the student participants were very much at ease, open and frank about their perspectives, opinions and experiences.

In the initial stages of this research, I had to reflect on my emic (insider) and etic (outsider) positionality within the research:

- As an academic, I held a position of power in relation to our participants, which could potentially influence how they responded to our inquiries.
- As a Black African researcher who identifies as a heterosexual female, I needed to ensure that our study adequately captured the experiences of South Africa's diverse racial and LGBTQ+

¹⁰⁷ The Independent Institute of Education is the host institution for this research.

communities in ways that were sensitive, inclusive and representative of their identities.¹⁰⁸

I believe it was this awareness that forced me to reconsider my approach, making a conscious effort to bridge the gap between researcher and participant by co-creating knowledge with them through our student representatives. This reflexivity led to the adoption of campus fieldworkers and research assistants, a strategy which will be explained in further detail in the next section.

CHALLENGES AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN DATA COLLECTION

In designing the quantitative survey, we hoped to gain initial insights into how young South Africans navigate intimacy in online spaces. However, a critical moment of reflexivity emerged when I analysed participant engagement with the survey. While there was a high number of initial clicks, many respondents dropped out before completing the questionnaire. This raised several important questions.

- Were participants uncomfortable with the questions?
- Did the survey format feel impersonal or intrusive?
- Was the topic too sensitive to engage with in such a structured format?

To better understand these challenges, my academic team and I initiated an incentive whereby call credits were given to participants who completed the survey. However, this initiative was quickly abandoned as the participation pattern indicated an almost 80% Black heterosexual female participant engagement, most of whom indicated little involvement with online dating. While this could have been a representation of the South African university population index, there was a need to encourage other voices and dimensions of online intimacy engagements. This led to more reflections on how more diverse participation could ethically be encouraged and the possibility of expanding the scope of the research. The answer came in two forms.

The first was from one of our student survey participants who volunteered to go through the campus with her phone using a generated QR code linked to the survey. She offered to explain to her colleagues the importance of the project and thus bridge the gap between the research and the researched. While I appreciated her conviction on the importance of the research and her gesture to volunteer her time for its progress, I did not think it was ethically right for her to do so without some sort of compensation and co-ownership. This led to incorporating her into the project and extending an invitation to other students in the selected university campuses to be a part of the research as fieldworkers.

Our campus fieldworkers are highly commended for their efforts in not only creating an awareness of the research amongst their colleagues but also in being respondents in the quantitative as well as qualitative aspects of the data collection process. They will be encouraged in the coming weeks to make blog contributions on their experiences as campus representatives for this research, write-ups which will be hosted on the project's official website. Depending on the quality, the content produced will be used in forthcoming academic presentations of the research and the students' contributions

¹⁰⁸ English, K. K. (2021, 5 October). Perspective on the Sex & Gender Data Working Group Guidance. [https://kenglish95.github.io/posts/2021/02/Sex & Gender Data Working Group](https://kenglish95.github.io/posts/2021/02/Sex_%20Gender_Data_Working_Group)

will be acknowledged. We hope this strategy will not only encourage a research mentoring process for the selected students but will also result in a co-creation of knowledge.

The second solution came from an in-depth discussion with the Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN) team. As a result of this discussion, we decided to expand our research to include other social media platforms more commonly used by students. Focussing solely on online dating apps limited our research, for it meant that we could not capture other possible forms of TFGBV perpetrated through more accessible social media platforms. With this expansion included, the survey began to show a new pattern of online intimacy engagement, which would otherwise have been omitted.

When this new aspect was introduced into the questionnaire, we engaged the selected students who served as fieldworkers for the different campuses to test the survey and provide direct feedback on its structure, content and accessibility. Their insights revealed key areas where the questionnaire format could be further improved (in relation to word selection to better represent their social media engagements and intimacy realities) to enhance participant engagement and comfort. In addition, we sought to purposively select student fieldworkers who represented the diversities we needed in our data collection. This, however, proved more challenging as we realised that although the racial walls of apartheid fell more than 30 years ago in South Africa (in 1994), urban spaces for education such as those within the university setting still witness issues related to race, gender, social class and even language.¹⁰⁹ Despite our efforts, we could not get on board white or Indian fieldworkers. I felt this was a limitation as I realise that it is easier for students who looked like our prospective participants to approach their peers and encourage them to participate. With such synergies, the likelihood of participant acceptance would be higher.

The insights gained from the reflexivity of our quantitative research experience are factors I took into consideration when preparing for the qualitative phase of this project. We engaged with our research assistants, who are also students from our selected campuses, to discuss our research design. Discussions about the aims of the study were also held with our student fieldworkers, who assisted in the recruitment of participants for the campus FGD.

Within our FGD sessions, we anticipated possible barriers like lack of trust and emotional distress amongst our FGD participants. As a team, we realised that discussing TFGBV may evoke stressful memories for participants, and this may require our team to adopt a trauma-informed research approach. To mitigate this anticipated challenge, we felt the need to create safe spaces that balanced empathy with objectivity, ensuring that participants felt supported and empowered, rather than merely subjects of study and data extraction. The FGD sessions thus focused on letting the participants know that their voices were valuable in developing effective strategies for creating awareness, protecting possible victims, providing safe space communities for survivors and developing activism to bring perpetrators to justice. During the FGD sessions it became apparent that many of the participants had never heard of the term “technology-facilitated gender-based violence”. Many were aware of GBV but believed this was a form of violence that could only occur physically. During the FGD sessions, many participants realised that they or people they knew were victims of TFGBV, though they had not previously thought the experience was a violation.

109 le Roux, A., & Groenewald, E. (2021). The elusiveness of a sense of place-belonging: One student's struggle on a diverse South African campus. *Issues in Educational Research*, 31(3), 854-870. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier31/le-roux.pdf>; Soudien, C. (2008). The intersection of race and class in the South African university: Student experiences. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 22(3): 662-678. <https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/EJC37453>

As researchers, these sessions were very insightful as we learned from our participants, while the participants not only learned from one another but were also excited to be a voice working towards a solution for TFGBV amongst South African youths.

Adopting these power-sharing approaches to our research made me reflect deeper on the limitations and dynamics of digital communication in research methodology. Conducting surveys online offered convenience and anonymity, but it also created a sense of detachment that sometimes hindered deep emotional disclosure. Detachment in the sense that little human contact was had all the way from receiving the link to filling out the survey and submitting it. It is an interaction between the respondent and technology. This made me ask: does digital communication desensitise one to the reality of TFGBV, just as online dating sometimes detaches intimacy from real-world consequences? What could be the implication of this within research like this which aims for a more decolonised knowledge co-production outlook?

REFLECTIONS ON THE DECOLONISATION OF RESEARCH

One of the most significant epistemological tensions I grappled with was the reliance on Global North literature to frame this study. Research such as those conducted by María José Díaz-Aguado et al. (2022), Norcie et al. (2013), Smith (2023), Fereidooni (2022), and Huang et al. (2022) provided insights into characteristics that result into victims and perpetrators of TFGBV through online dating platforms and other social media interactions¹¹⁰ However, their theories and case studies were based on Western contexts and, at best, Latin American realities, raising the following question: can these frameworks truly capture the nuances of TFGBV in a post-apartheid South African society, where race, sexuality, gender and social class still shape access to power and justice? Seeking answers to this question may entail consulting other outlets of knowledge such as university research outputs like theses or blogs from websites that focus on TFGBV within the Global South.

Drawing from the work of Mpoe Johannah Keikelame and Leslie Swartz, I considered the idea of “research with” rather than “research on” participants, ensuring that South African youths are active contributors to our research rather than just its subjects.¹¹¹ This led to my decision to:

1. Engage students as research assistants and fieldworkers, allowing them to contribute their perspectives on the study's design.
2. Develop platforms (a research website and YouTube channel) for participant interaction, encouraging ongoing discussions beyond the data collection phase.¹¹²
3. Prioritise a qualitative approach that allows participants to share their own narratives, rather than simply fitting them into pre-existing Western categories of TFGBV.

110 Díaz-Aguado, M. J., Martínez-Arias, R., & Falcón, L. (2022). Typology of Victimization against Women on Adolescent Girls in Three Contexts: Dating Offline, Dating Online, and Sexual Harassment Online. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(18), 1-17. [10.3390/ijerph191811774](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191811774); Norcie, G., De Cristofaro, E., & Bellotti, V. (2013). Bootstrapping Trust in Online Dating: Social Verification of Online Dating Profiles. In A. A. Adams, M. Brenner, & M. Smith (Eds.), *Financial Cryptography and Data Security*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-41320-9_10; Smith, D. N. (2023). How Deception Plays a Role in Online Dating and Dating Apps. *Canadian Journal of Family and Youth*, 15(2), 23-32. <https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/cjfy/index.php/cjfy/article/view/29869/21782>; Fereidooni, F., Daniels, J., & Lommen, M. (2022). Predictors of Revictimization in Online Dating. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(23-24), NP23057-NP23074. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605211073715>; Huang, S. A., Hancock, J., & Tong, S. T. (2022). Folk Theories of Online Dating: Exploring People's Beliefs About the Online Dating Process and Online Dating Algorithms. *Social Media + Society*, 8(2), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221089561>

111 Keikelame, M. J., & Swartz, L. (2019). Decolonising research methodologies: Lessons from a qualitative research project, Cape Town, South Africa. *Global Health Action*, 12(1), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16549716.2018.1561175>

112 Website: <https://safedigitalvoices.co.za/>
YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@OnlineGenderBasedViolence>

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: THE RESEARCHER, THE RESEARCHED AND THE FUTURE

Through this research process, I have come to appreciate that methodology is not just about choosing research tools – it is also about critical self-awareness, ethical responsibility and the active involvement of those we study.

The study of technology-facilitated gender-based violence in online dating, and by extension the social media space, is more than just an academic exercise. It reflects broader societal issues: power, vulnerability and the evolving nature of digital intimacy. As a researcher, I recognise that my role is not just to document these experiences but to contribute to meaningful interventions that can create safer online spaces for South African youth.

Moving forward, I hope that this research inspires further studies into TFGBV, online safety and digital justice, particularly from African perspectives. By centring local voices and lived experiences, we can begin to shape more inclusive, decolonised methodologies that truly capture the realities of those we seek to understand.

AUTHOR

Dr. Aretha Oluwakemi Asakitikpi is the director of KASA Training and Development Pty, her private enterprise that specialises in research and training in Sub-Saharan Africa. She also serves as a part-time supervisor for research projects at STADIO Higher Education in Johannesburg, South Africa. Dr. Asakitikpi has undertaken extensive research on media and curricular representations of gender, asserting that these depictions can lay the groundwork for legitimizing gender-based violence, inequalities, and oppressive patriarchal cultures, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. She is currently the principal investigator for the FIRN-funded research project titled “Exploring technology-facilitated gender-based violence in online dating experiences among South African youths.”

