



Engaging in Gender-Based Violence Research: Adopting a Feminist and Participatory Perspective

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Researching gender-based violence (GBV) is a complex task, presenting practical, ethical and emotional challenges for all those involved in the research process. This chapter explores how feminist and participatory approaches can help researchers to overcome these challenges. Researchers do not usually choose to study GBV for purely academic reasons—‘the point is to end it’ [1, p. 183]. Healthcare and social work professionals bring significant practice skills and knowledge to the research process, but may also face additional obstacles when building a research relationship with service users. This chapter will help you think through such obstacles, based on the basic assumptions and ethical principles underlying feminist and participatory research methods. The chapter also highlights the potential for creative research methods to enable participants to share their experiences in a more meaningful way. While the principles discussed are relevant to researching GBV in general, the chapter includes specific reference to cross-cultural research and examples of projects conducted in China, Guatemala and South Africa.

16.1 Researching GBV in Healthcare and Social Work

Research in the fields of healthcare and social work spans a disciplinary range across medical and social sciences and draws on diverse methodological approaches, both quantitative and qualitative. As a practitioner, you may become involved in research in different ways and at different points in your career. Research activities might include dissertations as part of academic programmes, institutional or service-orientated research, policy evaluation and projects undertaken as an independent or academic researcher. The existing research into best practice in GBV research

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highlights a number of common themes, including the importance of protecting confidentiality, ensuring support is in place for participants, building relationships of trust and ensuring participant safety [2]. All forms of GBV research require an understanding of the potential risk to participants and researchers [3]. Survivors of GBV ‘can be doubly disempowered in the research process, first as research subjects and second as part of a stigmatised and marginalised community’ [4, p. 443]. The risk of repercussions and stigmatisation from perpetrators or the wider community if survivors are known to have disclosed their experiences must be recognised and managed within the research process. However, it is also important to involve survivors in this assessment and acknowledge their autonomy and ability to make their own decisions [5]. Even when you are using secondary data which has previously been collected for another purpose, it is important to ensure confidentiality and well-being. For example, police records or data from other agencies could contain identifying details which could put survivors at risk if made public.

The use of quantitative data is increasingly valued as a way of establishing the prevalence of GBV and evaluating the effectiveness of prevention and support interventions [6]. Quantitative methods are often associated with a positivist research philosophy (see Box 16.1) and an aspiration to objectivity. However, the lack of consistent definitions of GBV, non-response bias for survey data and barriers to disclosure mean that it is difficult to build a picture of how prevalent GBV really is, particularly when researchers intend to compare across different contexts [7]. Furthermore, the perception that numbers are objective masks the assumptions and interpretations that have gone into the research process, for example decisions about which acts are included within the definition of GBV [8]. Making these

Box 16.1 Thinking About Research Philosophies and Epistemologies Research philosophies or epistemologies

The term *epistemology* refers to the theory or philosophy of knowledge: i.e. what can we know about reality?

It is different from the related term *ontology*, which refers to the philosophy of reality: i.e. what is reality?

There are different epistemologies, including:

Positivism refers to the traditional way of viewing knowledge. It assumes that there is a reality ‘out there’ that can be uncovered. The researcher can study this reality without influencing it or being influenced by it, by testing a hypothesis which ultimately leads to objective knowledge.

Constructivism assumes that reality is socially constructed, and therefore differs by community or social context. The researcher is part of the creation and uncovering of this reality, which he or she interprets.

Critical theory, including feminist theory, believes that reality is shaped by social and political forces which have come to be seen as natural. The researcher’s role is to expose these structures, including gendered norms and inequality, in order to transform them.

interpretations explicit can give additional insights into the experiences that underlie the numerical data [9]. In the case of GBV research using secondary sources, two key considerations are how violence is defined and which sources are used to gather information. For example, using secondary data such as police or health records will only give information on how many people have reported a crime to the police or sought medical treatment. Such reporting would not include forms of violence that were not recognised as a crime or acts that did not result in physical injury; nor would it account for the well-established levels of underreporting of GBV [10]. Moreover, quantitative research is less able to give detailed insight into the diversity of survivors' experiences or the contexts in which the violence has occurred. Rather than dismiss quantitative data, however, we need to think instead about how it can be better collected and used, in combination with other data, to build a more holistic picture of survivors' experiences [11].

Qualitative approaches can provide some solutions to the gaps in quantitative data, but present their own challenges. Interviews and focus groups can provide opportunities for survivors to share their stories in their own words and provide a richer insight into the impact of their experiences. While focus groups can be useful for gaining insights into normative expectations around GBV within the group, more personal and sensitive questions are often better suited to individual interviews [12]. However, it is important to bear in mind that the definition of a sensitive topic will vary between participants and should be understood relationally, based on what feels safe to discuss in the space of the interview [13]. In order for participants to make an informed decision about what they want to share, ethical practice requires us to be clear with participants about how they will benefit from the study and also about potential risks, such as the limits of confidentiality, the potential for them to be identifiable from their data, the potential negative impacts of taking part in the research and how their data will be managed [14].

Physical and emotional safety are key requirements for participants to take part in GBV research. Disclosing traumatic experiences, which may still be ongoing, can potentially be both painful and cathartic [15]. It is important that survivors feel in control of how they share their story and what details they choose to include. For the researcher, this means thinking carefully about how much information is

Box 16.2 Thinking About Terminology 'Victims' or 'survivors'?

We have used the term 'survivors' to talk about people who have experienced GBV, but there is ongoing debate about the best term to use, and individual survivors may also have differing views. The term 'victim' is often used in relation to the criminal justice system, or by those who want to emphasise the impact of violence, while 'survivor' tends to be used by those who wish instead to emphasise the resilience and agency of those who have experienced GBV. The term 'victim-survivors' is also used by some to emphasise this duality of experience.

actually needed in order to avoid re-traumatisation [16]. For example, if a study is focusing on the impact of rape, it is likely to be sufficient to talk about the impact on day-to-day life without needing to ask for detailed disclosures about the assault. Balancing the risks and benefits of the research ethically between the researcher and participants is also important [12].

In addition to the emotional impact on survivors, researchers can also face the risk of emotional distress or secondary traumatisation from exposure to repeated accounts of traumatic experiences, whether this is through interviewing survivors directly or from reading or transcribing their testimony [17, 18]. Given the prevalence of GBV, it is also likely that many researchers will themselves have experienced some form of violence, which can exacerbate the emotional impact of hearing survivors' stories [17]. It is important that researchers have access to training and ongoing support to work through these emotional responses [19].

Initial contact with research participants is often made through gatekeepers, individuals or support organisations with whom survivors have already built up a trusting relationship [20]. This also provides reassurance to the survivor that it is safe to participate and to the researcher that there is support in place if a participant finds the emotional impact of the research difficult to manage. However, there can also be disadvantages, in particular with gatekeepers preselecting a particular group of participants to take part rather than enabling each service user to decide for themselves [20]. Where gatekeepers are community leaders, who may be men and potentially perpetrators themselves, it may be necessary to provide only general information about the study in advance, without mentioning the focus on GBV, and only share fuller details with individual participants in a confidential setting where they can make an informed choice about participation [21].

Many healthcare and social work researchers fulfil a 'dual role' as both practitioners and researchers, whether this is with their own clients or with others who are accessing similar services. Regulated practitioners will need to keep their professional code of ethics and safeguarding processes in mind alongside their consideration of research ethics. This dual role can bring benefits, particularly in terms of accessing participants and having knowledge of the presenting issues, relevant skills to manage risk and disclosure and an awareness of appropriate support services for onward referrals where needed [22, p. 15]. However, it can also be challenging to negotiate the boundary between the two roles and to ensure that expectations are managed and participants can make informed decisions about consent [23]. Practitioners who are working with participants from outside their institution can feel powerless when focusing solely on the research role and being unable to intervene in a professional capacity. If you are working with other practitioners as your participants, there may be a need to report practice concerns that you encounter during your research which could make participants reluctant to share their challenges or concerns about practitioners. Many of these concerns about ethics, safety and well-being of those involved in GBV research can be addressed through feminist and participatory research approaches.

16.2 Feminist Research: Principles and Benefits

There are many different strands of feminist research, which share certain key interests. In the first place, feminist research is interested in uncovering knowledge that is often taken for granted. ‘Traditional’, positivist research (see Box 16.1) has long taken the male worldview as its standard, assuming that reality and knowledge about it are the same for everyone [24]. Women’s experiences, or even ‘their very existence’, are often insufficiently recognised in positivist research [25, p. 15]. Feminist research instead aims to produce knowledge that promotes the transformation of different forms of oppression that women and other oppressed groups experience. The production of knowledge is therefore a political process and practice [24, 26, 27].

Feminist research aims to uncover gendered and other forms of inequality through analysing and questioning the oppression inherent in everyday experiences. Therefore, the personal is political [26, 28]. Emotions are treated with suspicion or even discredited in positivist research, since emotions risk distorting ‘true knowledge’. This shows the gendered ways in which research itself is constructed. In Western culture, men are conventionally associated with reason and women with emotions. Men are therefore seen as dispassionate, objective and value-free investigators, whereas knowledge claims of women—and people of colour—have historically often been discredited [29]. Nevertheless, emotions can be a site for the construction of knowledge, especially when studying a topic like violence, since people *feel* violated, abandoned, angry or hurt. Moreover, people experience and interpret violence in different ways. Feminist research considers these different and multiple truths and aims to disrupt essentialising categories and binaries that fail to do justice to the complexity of human experiences [30]. This also means being attentive to silence; survivors can be silenced by others, or refuse to speak to protect themselves or others [30].

Feminist research questions the assumption of a single objective truth about the social world, which is embedded in social structures in which researchers and their research are located. The term ‘situated knowledges’ is often used to indicate that knowledge is always partial, subjective, relational and multiple [24, 31]. Instead of assuming that the researcher is neutral and independent from the objects researched and therefore able to produce value-free research, feminist research explicitly recognises the role of the researcher within the research process. Since researchers are always situated in social, historic and economic structures, feminist researchers scrutinise how their own background and identity, as well as their emotions, biases and values affect the research, and vice versa. This reflexivity enables the production of more transparent and accountable knowledge [24, 27]. For practitioners, the reflexivity required within the research process fits well with the skills of critical reflection developed through qualifying programmes and applied in direct practice.

Another issue of concern to feminist research is power, in relation to the power inequalities between men and women and other oppressed groups in society, and also within the research process. In contrast to positivist research, which has often been critiqued for objectifying and exploiting its research participants for a higher scientific goal, feminist research is concerned with diminishing the power imbalance between researcher and participants which results from differences in ethnic,

economic, class and educational backgrounds [24, 26, 27]. These power imbalances are of particular concern in cross-cultural GBV research.

Reflective Exercise

Using your own experience: Think about your own training and experience as a practitioner. What skills have you developed that will be useful to you as a researcher? What areas do you need to learn more about?

Reflecting on positionality: Think about your identity. How might that influence your choice of research topic and your understanding of the information you collect?

Understanding power relations: Consider what the challenges might be of conducting research in a cross-cultural context. What kind of power inequalities might you encounter (think about gender, race, socioeconomic groups, professional status etc.)? What could you do to redress these power imbalances?

16.3 Researching Gender-Based Violence Across Cultures

There are additional challenges involved in conducting GBV research across cultures, whether this is working with cultural difference within a country or carrying out a research project internationally. In fact, black and postcolonial feminists have been crucial in pointing out how feminism itself has long ignored ‘other’ female voices, and how white feminists have often taken on neocolonial roles in ‘speaking for’ marginalised or ‘Third World’ participants [32–34]. To prevent such inequalities, researchers require a critical consciousness about their own privilege, which can be based on their ethnic or geographical origin [33, 35]. This is particularly vital where a researcher from a dominant or more privileged group is researching the experiences of people within a more marginalised or disadvantaged community [36]. Researchers must seek to actively challenge inequality within the research process and ‘not unintentionally replicate oppressive dynamics and patterns of power and control’ that survivors have experienced from perpetrators [37, p. 508]. In addition, it is important to avoid ‘exoticising’ forms of violence that are located in non-Western cultures while failing to recognise that all GBV takes place within a particular cultural context [38, p. 102].

Box 16.3 Some Reflections on Theory

Postcolonial studies examine the impacts and ongoing legacies of colonialism on previously colonised societies. They critique ongoing Western influence and cultural imposition in different fields (including academia), arguing for more diverse forms of knowledge instead.

Postcolonial feminists have exposed inequalities and Euro-centrism within feminism, calling for more diversity and against oppression within feminism.

Box 16.4 Example of Feminist Participatory and Creative Research in a Cross-Cultural Context

Western researchers Brinton Lykes and Allison Crosby have worked with indigenous survivors of conflict-era sexual violence in **Guatemala**, using a variety of methods, including drama, creative storytelling and drawings, combined with indigenous practices such as rituals and ceremonies. The research helped to understand participants' understandings of and needs for reparation for the crimes they suffered, resulting in a demand for integral reparations presented to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [43].

The involvement of interpreters in the research process brings an additional layer of complexity. On the one hand, there is potential for interpreters to act as cultural as well as linguistic mediators, and for the shared language barrier to help redress power imbalances between researcher and participant [39]. On the other, bringing another person into the research process can impact the dynamics of the relationship, particularly if the participant does not want to share their experiences in front of someone from a similar community [40]. In addition to cultural factors, researchers need to keep in mind the impact and intersections of other identity characteristics on survivors' experiences of violence and ability to engage safely with the research process [41, 42]. Many definitions and interventions focused on GBV assume a female victim and male perpetrator within a heterosexual relationship, rather than recognising the myriad forms which violence can take. Experiences of violence will also be mediated through intersecting characteristics such as class, race, sexuality, (dis)ability, educational levels, family status and religion, in addition to gender [8, 42]. It is important for researchers to recognise this diversity of experience through all stages of the research process in order to promote inclusivity and meaningful representation. Giving participants more control over the research process, through participatory research approaches, can be a way of responding to this challenge.

16.4 Participatory Research: Principles and Benefits

Like feminist research, participatory research approaches have a strong focus on the potential of research as a political tool for social change. Rather than a set of particular methods, it refers to a way of doing research as a collaborative process [44]. It is based on a bottom-up approach, making participants' priorities and perspectives central to the research, to produce knowledge as the result of a collaboration between researcher and participants [45]. It aims to democratise research processes and diminish power inequalities between researchers and participants. By using specific methods, it promotes co-constructive knowledge production processes with the ultimate goal of social action (Table 16.1) [44].

Table 16.1 The differences between participatory and non-participatory research

	Non-participatory	Participatory
Aims	Focus on understanding a situation and finding or testing solutions	Focus on understanding a situation from the perspective of those most affected and finding or testing solutions based on their interests
Process	Research methods are chosen by researchers	Research process aims to bring about change
Ownership	Researchers set research agenda; participants are research subjects	Research agenda is set in partnership between researchers and participants
Beneficiaries	Researchers are main beneficiaries of the research process	Participants and wider communities are main beneficiaries

Participatory research is of a political nature, both in terms of its process and outcome. The participatory research process intends to raise consciousness and increase participants' critical awareness of their situation and of the problems and inequality they face [46, 47]. It enables research participants to produce and maintain ownership over their own knowledge, using it as an instrument to produce change [46]. This is based on the assumption that knowledge is socially constructed and embedded. Not limited to academic knowledge, it also includes experiential knowledge of non-academics. The legitimisation of popular knowledge disrupts the traditional, positivist process of knowledge production which is controlled by 'experts', often white and male, who generate 'expert knowledge' about participants that they themselves have no control over [48]. Like feminist research, participatory research thus aims to emancipate marginalised groups, helping them to transform their lives.

Participatory research methods have long been used by geographers and development researchers and practitioners. They include mapping exercises, the drawing of timelines, problem trees and other tools to identify and collectively analyse the specific problems at stake [45]. Another strand of participatory research involves creative research methods. An often-used method is Photovoice, which allows participants to document their reality through photographs, to then collectively construct a narrative about their problems and the steps needed to overcome these [49]. Other visual methods include film, drawing or collage making. Mapping can also be used as a creative method. Body mapping, for example, enables participants to artistically represent their physical and mental health [43]. Corporal forms of expression such as dramatization, or verbal techniques such as storytelling, poetry, narrative writing or oral histories are other examples of creative methods [43]. The creative product which results from the research process, for example a film, play, exhibition or book, can help the participants to show their situation and needs to policymakers [49]. These products offer more diverse forms of presenting knowledge and experiences than traditional written academic texts [28, 34].

Box 16.5 Example of the Diverse Outputs of a Feminist Participatory and Creative Research Project

The MoVE project in **South Africa** has deployed various participatory creative and arts-based methods to enable migrant sex workers to represent their own experiences. Drawings, photovoice, zines (small self-published works), narrative writing, poetry, body mapping and posters have been used to enable sex workers to speak for themselves and disrupt harmful and negative stereotypes about them [28].

Reflexive Exercise**Exercise:**

- What do you think the risks could be of researching the situation of migrant sex workers using traditional, non-participatory methods?
- Do you think the use of participatory and creative methods will lead to different research results? Do you think the research will have a different impact, and if so, how and why?
- Do you think there can be risks or challenges from using participatory and creative methods in this research?

16.5 Feminist Participatory Research Practice to Research Gender-Based Violence

As described, feminist and participatory research approaches have a shared goal of transforming inequality and oppression. Yet there are more reasons that make feminist approaches to participatory research particularly appropriate for researching GBV. First of all, the involvement of survivors as co-researchers is ethically important. Without including those whose lives are being debated in national and international academic and policy debates, knowledge will always be incomplete or superficial [28]. Furthermore, participatory strategies can have important individual and collective impacts on research participants. GBV survivors are often portrayed as vulnerable and fragile. Participatory and creative methods can help change such negative stereotypes by allowing participants to give their own account of their situation. The recognition and validation of their experiences, through their own self-representation rather than being spoken for or about, can give an important impulse to participants' well-being [28]. The collective knowledge production process contributes to developing skills and building solidarity among the participants, helping them to take action to actively change their situation, which is an important element of the social justice goals of feminist and participatory research [43].

It is also important to recognise that survivors of GBV can experience research fatigue. They may have been interviewed many times, asked indecent or intrusive

Box 16.6 Example of the Potential for Impact of Feminist Participatory and Creative Research

Caroline Wang developed the Photovoice method, initially working with a women's reproductive health programme in **China**. Photography was used to identify the reproductive health needs of community women and their everyday lives. The photographs taken formed the basis for discussions and participatory data analysis in groups, eventually helping the participants to frame and participate in policy discussions [49].

questions and seen few direct, tangible results from their participation [50]. Feminist research is mindful of these risks by centring the research participants and diminishing power relations. Participatory creative methods give participants the tools to express their own experiences, rather than relying on pre-established questionnaires, thus helping to avoid stirring up painful memories which can be re-traumatising [51]. Feminist participatory and creative research can help to make research a positive experience for participants by enabling them to engage in creative practices that are enjoyable and enable them to work together in a group towards a shared goal [28, 43, 51].

16.6 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has described the benefits of combining a feminist and participatory approach when researching GBV. These methods enable research to be more beneficial for participants by giving them more power over the research process, avoiding risks of re-traumatisation and developing tools for social justice. Creative methods can reinforce these benefits, making research an enjoyable experience for participants and exploring more diverse ways of expressing and representing sensitive, complex and diverse experiences, which are often hard to express in written texts. Participatory and creative methods can draw on practitioner-researchers' existing values of engagement and reflexivity to break down power inequalities and place survivors' voices and experiences at the centre of the research process.

In spite of these benefits, there are some things to consider when exploring these methods. They tend to be more time and resource-consuming than more traditional methods and require careful planning. It is also important to realise that not all research participants are interested in longer term and more intensive research participation [44, 45]. When using visual methods, it is important to be mindful of the risk of co-creating images which hyper-visualise or objectify women as victims of violence and reduce them to this role, rather than showing their agency [43]. Finally, in spite of the explicit intention to reduce power inequalities between researcher and participants, it is often hard to eliminate these inequalities completely [28, 43]. Therefore, critically analysing your own positionality and influence on the research

is crucial to guarantee that the research process is carried out effectively *with* rather than *on* survivors of GBV, enabling it to contribute to the transformation of their reality.

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