



**SVRI** sexual violence research initiative

# Executive Summary

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

Cassie Denbow and Joy Watson

COFEM





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### 1. BACKGROUND

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

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

### 2. METHODS

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

#### 2.1 Literature Review

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

#### 2.2 Key informant interviews

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

#### 2.3 Limitations

In a context of having to conduct the study in a relatively short period, we primarily relied on reaching out to key informants in our networks. Our key informants are the ones who responded to a call- those whom we were able to access and who were able to make time to talk to us.

We do not presume that a literature review and eight key informant interviews are able to paint an adequate picture of how feminist research on VAW is conducted in humanitarian and development settings. However, it does provide a snapshot into the ways in which some researchers are working, the challenges they face, and the ways in which they try to circumvent these.

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



### 3. FINDINGS

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

#### 3.1 Challenges in conducting feminist research on VAW

##### *The risk of framing research as 'feminist'*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

##### *Resourcing feminist research on VAW in development & humanitarian settings*

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



## 3.2 BEST PRACTICES

### *Feminist research & reflexivity*

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

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

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

### *Honour the value of emotions in research*

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

### *Self-care & researcher wellness*

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

## 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

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

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

- Conducting feminist research in humanitarian and development settings must be cognisant of the social, political, economic and cultural context.
- Take into account the strategic and practical gender needs<sup>2</sup> of those participating in the research. These include the effects of food insecurity, poverty, poor health (including mental health challenges), intimate partner and other forms of gender-based violence, as well as the lack of or destruction of infrastructure on people's lives. While producing knowledge is a strategic need, it



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

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

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

- Ensure that local researchers lead in research projects in their countries and provide funding to address the structural barriers they face in disseminating their research and in accessing platforms to talk about their work.
- Fund psychosocial self and collective care support for those participating in the research as well as for the researchers involved in the project.
- Fund the convening of feminist researchers from LMICs to come together and share strategies, approaches, and experiences in knowledge production based on their specific challenges. This includes creating spaces for feminist researchers from LMICs to gather; such as the SVRI Forum, to exchange experiences, strategies and techniques; to digest and metabolise their work, and to build solidarities and relationships that lead to greater power and influence in academic and policy spaces.

### **Participative research enhances knowledge production.**

- Consider the ethical implications of participation in the research project in all its constituent phases from the development of the research question to the writing up of the final report. Good practice includes the involvement of those being researched in deciding on research questions and methods as well as in giving feedback on findings.
- Research should contribute towards social change, even if it is small scale and a stepping-stone to larger-scale change.
- Shift the ways in which people think about “expertise” by valuing the contributions of local advisory councils comprised of community members with situated knowledge.

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