

Transformative research for forced displacement: an ethical feminist decolonial approach for COVID-19 and beyond

Neha S. Singh PhD^{1*}, Michelle Lokot PhD¹, Chi-Chi Undie PhD², Monica A. Onyango PhD³, Rosemary Morgan PhD⁴, Anne Harmer MPH⁵, Jane Freedman PdD⁶, Shirin Heidari PhD^{7,8}

¹ Health in Humanitarian Crises Centre, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, UK

² Population Council, Avenue 5, 3rd Floor, Rose Avenue, Nairobi, Kenya

³ Department of Global Health, Boston University School of Public Health, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

⁴ Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Department of International Health, Baltimore, MD, USA

⁵ Elrha, London, UK

⁶ Paris 8 University, Paris, France

⁷ GENDRO, Geneva, Switzerland

⁸ Global Health Centre, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, Switzerland

*Corresponding author

Neha S. Singh, PhD

Address: Health in Humanitarian Crises Centre, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 15-17 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9SH, United Kingdom

Email: neha.singh@lshtm.ac.uk

Word count: 878

Comment

The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened inequities and undermined health, human rights and gender equality for forcibly displaced populations.^{1,2} Evidence about their needs is critical to tailor effective and equitable responses; however, data collection efforts face new challenges. Many researchers are attempting to overcome such challenges by collecting data remotely, yet this creates ethical and practical concerns that risk perpetuating gender, racial, and other inequities. For example, the gender divide in mobile phone ownership,³ internet access and digital literacy complicates data collection, further silencing the voices of women and other groups without access to these technologies. Overcrowded living spaces and mobility restrictions (due to COVID-19 and/or gender norms) reinforce ethical concerns regarding confidentiality, privacy, and safety during remote data collection. The gendered, structural and socioeconomic vulnerabilities faced by forcibly displaced populations are being exposed, particularly for women and gender non-conforming individuals.

COVID-19 exposes persisting power hierarchies between researchers and forcibly displaced populations. The latter experience power asymmetries in their position as ‘beneficiaries’ of humanitarian research and action; they are often excluded from decisions in research intended to benefit their communities. Forcibly displaced women and girls are consistently categorised as ‘vulnerable,’ needing protection or rescuing—labels which take away their agency and power of action—while risking exploitation or abuse by the same humanitarian actors aiming to ‘protect’ them. Recent efforts to address these hierarchies through the process of localisation have been criticised for neglecting the insidious effects of sexism and racism, both intrinsically linked to colonial legacies.⁴

The perceived urgency to collect data *remotely* also exposes neo-colonial power hierarchies between researchers in affected settings and those in resource-rich settings. Funding is commonly concentrated in richer countries, with researchers from these settings often defining research questions with limited or tokenistic consultation with in-country researchers or communities. With current movement restrictions, research can typically only be conducted by collecting data remotely or by delegating data collection to in-country researchers. In the haste to produce evidence, interactions can become increasingly top-down, as powerful actors issue directives to frontline actors. This also risks ‘ethics dumping,’⁵ e.g. off-loading risk to in-country researchers by asking them to facilitate data collection under unique challenges during COVID-19. These hurdles require researchers to confront power hierarchies in knowledge production processes.

We propose the application of feminist values to address these concerns. While there are many feminist strands, feminists are united in seeking to address unequal power hierarchies and striving for social and environmental justice.^{6,7} Feminist researchers advocate for intersectional analysis that centres the voices and knowledge of communities, embedding decolonial lenses and ‘ethics of care’ approaches that value people more than the data.^{8,9} Feminist research considers gendered and colonial power hierarchies, and is grounded in reciprocal engagement with communities to equalise power dynamics. By advocating a feminist approach, we propose moving beyond performative dimensions of being gender-

sensitive and ‘decolonial,’ towards understanding what it means to equitably share power within research collaborations in a meaningful way that challenges traditional methods of knowledge production.¹⁰

COVID-19 presents a critical opportunity for researchers to rethink their approaches. Applying feminist values to data collection during COVID-19 and beyond requires putting at the centre the knowledge of those from whom data is being collected. In Panel 1, we provide key recommendations for applying a feminist approach that takes into account ethical, gender and decolonisation considerations when collecting data in forced displacement settings, and a more detailed checklist in Appendix 1. This checklist, while not exhaustive, contains practical recommendations for how to apply feminist principles at all stages of knowledge production in these settings during COVID-19 and beyond.

At a practical level, we identify how a feminist approach can be helpful in addressing ethical, gender and decolonisation concerns. At the time of research conceptualisation, applying a feminist approach means meaningfully engaging forcibly displaced populations so that research is relevant to their concerns, instead of solely focusing on what researchers believe is important.¹¹ This must include consideration of how gender intersects with other axes of power such as race, ethnicity or displacement status to shape individual experiences. Such steps at the research conceptualisation stage pave the way for ethical approaches to co-developing recruitment and data collection strategies, treating forcibly displaced populations as more than data providers, and ensuring participants’ privacy and confidentiality.¹² Consideration of power hierarchies includes reflection on dynamics between frontline researchers who hold power despite being ‘local’ actors, and communities, leading to concrete steps to reduce power imbalances. Power hierarchies and politics also shape how data are analysed, published and shared. Choices on which data are deemed relevant, how analysis is presented, and how authorship is decided are all arenas where power is exercised to prioritise some voices and silence others. Feminist values emphasise meaningful decision-making and relational engagement from conceptualisation to publication and beyond.

Dismantling well-established data collection practices, especially in forced displacement settings, requires sustained commitment from all actors in the research ecosystem and changing the architecture that enables these practices. COVID-19 has given us the opportunity to reflect on and challenge long-existing power hierarchies within research – a process which is needed to address lingering colonial and patriarchal power relations and avoid ethical pitfalls. We believe that applying a feminist lens is not merely about demolishing problematic structures, but also about collaboratively building up new ones for a more just world.

Panel 1. Recommendations for a feminist approach during research in forced displacement settings

Stage 1: Conceptualisation of research and data collection

- Establish equitable partnerships to conduct research on topics that are relevant and beneficial to all members of communities

Stage 2: Funding

- Meaningfully involve all researchers in budget preparation and ensure equitable allocation of resources

Stage 3: Research design

- Consider the political, social, economic and historical context and power hierarchies of the research setting and plan for the meaningful participation of actors with less power

Stage 4: Collecting data

- Consider how gendered and colonial power hierarchies may be reinforced by capacity-building of frontline researchers and engagement with communities.
- Ensure collection of data on gender to allow for capturing gender and other inequities

Stage 5: Data analysis and dissemination

- Engage frontline researchers and study populations in conducting intersectional gender analysis, as well as in interpretation, writing, and dissemination of findings.
- Use findings to challenge unjust systems and policies and deliver gender transformative and equitable programmes.

Please refer to Appendix 1 for a checklist with practical recommendations for how to apply feminist principles to all stages of the knowledge production cycle in forced displacement settings during COVID-19 and beyond.

END PANEL 1

Declarations

We declare no competing interests

Acknowledgements

The thinking underpinning this article began in a [virtual workshop](#) the co-authors hosted on 29 June 2020 on the Ethical and Gender Considerations in Remote Data Collection and Research in Forced Displacement Settings hosted by Global Health Centre, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies and GENDRO.

Salary support for NSS is provided under the RECAP project by the UK Research and Innovation as part of the Global Challenges Research Fund, grant number ES/P010873/1.

References

1. MSF. Stigma and disruption: How COVID-19 is hitting healthcare in Bangladesh's vast refugee camps. 2020. <https://stories.msf.org.uk/bangladesh-covid-19/index.html>.
2. Mballa C, Ngebeh J, De Vriese M, Drew K, Parr A, Undie C. UNHCR and Partner Practices of Community-Based Protection across Sectors in the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region. Nairobi, Kenya: UNHCR and Population Council, 2020.
3. UNHCR. The digital lives of refugees: what's next? 2019. <https://www.unhcr.org/jo/12182-the-digital-lives-of-refugees-whats-next.html>.
4. Slim H. Is racism part of our reluctance to localise humanitarian action? ODI HPN blog Available at: <https://odihpnorg/blog/is-racism-part-of-our-reluctance-to-localise-humanitarian-action/>. 2020.
5. Schroeder D, Cook J, Hirsch F, Fenet S, Muthuswamy V. Ethics dumping: case studies from North-South research collaborations: Springer Nature; 2018.
6. Brooks A, Hesse-Biber SN. An invitation to feminist research. *Feminist research practice: A primer* 2007: 1-24.
7. Davies SE, Harman S, Manjoo R, Tanyag M, Wenham C. Why it must be a feminist global health agenda. *The Lancet* 2019; **393**(10171): 601-3.
8. Kapilashrami A, Hankivsky O. Intersectionality and why it matters to global health. *The Lancet* 2018; **391**(10140): 2589-91.
9. Leon-Himmelstine C, Pinet M. How can Covid-19 be the catalyst to decolonise development research? <https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/how-can-covid-19-be-the-catalyst-to-decolonise-development-research/>: Oxfam; 2020.
10. Brun C, Lund R. Real-time research: decolonising research practices—or just another spectacle of researcher–practitioner collaboration? *Development in Practice* 2010; **20**(7): 812-26.
11. Lokot M. The space between us: feminist values and humanitarian power dynamics in research with refugees. *Gender & Development* 2019; **27**(3): 467-84.
12. Calia C, Reid C, Guerra C, et al. Ethical challenges in the COVID-19 research context: a toolkit for supporting analysis and resolution. *Ethics & Behavior* 2020: 1-16.

Appendix 1. Checklist for applying a feminist approach (taking into account ethical, gender and decolonisation considerations) when collecting data in forced displacement settings

Stage 1: Conceptualising activities requiring data collection

- Has an equitable partnership been established between all researchers before establishing the research aims and objectives?
- Is capacity building viewed as a reciprocal process between partners?
- Whose interests are reflected in the conceptualisation of the research – and whose are not?
- How are women from affected communities involved when developing the research question?
- How have policymakers and other key stakeholders (e.g., humanitarian actors) been consulted when developing the research question?
- Will this data collection duplicate existing efforts?
- Will benefits of data collection outweigh the risk to the participants, including from an intersectional gender lens?
- If remote data collection is preferred, is it the best alternative to in person data collection? Will it reinforce or reproduce gender and other inequalities? Is its use suitable and feasible for the particular research question, and will it be equally safe and acceptable for women, men and gender non-conforming people?
- Has a risk analysis been conducted to identify socio-economic, gender and racial considerations which may bias or negatively impact data collection, as well as how the research itself may exacerbate inequalities?

Stage 2: Funding

- Have displaced populations, especially women, and researchers from the study setting been engaged in the conceptualisation of research questions, methodologies and approaches feeding into the funding proposal?
- Have all researchers been directly involved in preparing the budget and are their costs accurately reflected? Does the distribution and allocation of funding avoid reproducing patriarchal and colonial power dynamics?
- Does the budget reflect equitable allocation of resources, including sufficient costed time to analyse data, write up and disseminate study findings?
- Who is responsible for receiving/disbursing/reporting on the funding used for this research, and how might their role shape power hierarchies within the research partnership?
- Is there an accountability mechanism in place that allows all partners to report, anonymously if relevant, to an external oversight committee on different aspects of equity in research partnerships?

Stage 3: Research/assessment/M&E design

- Does the study design take into account previous relevant research as well as the

political, social, economic, and historical context of the study population and setting?

- Do the research methods allow participation of groups who hold less power, for example adolescent girls, older women, or women with disabilities?
- Does the study design take into account factors identified during the risk analysis, e.g., socio-economic, racial and gender considerations?

Stage 4: Collecting data

- Have efforts been made to mitigate transferring risk to frontline researchers, as well as study populations?
- Are the bi-directional opportunities for capacity strengthening during data collection acknowledged and upheld?
- What strategies are used to mitigate against colonial and gendered power hierarchies during data collection?
- How does participation in the research affect communities' time, including gendered division of labour, paid work and caregiving responsibilities? What efforts have been made to ensure data collection occurs at times convenient for communities – rather than researchers?
- Are disaggregated data collected in a way that facilitates intersectional gender analysis?

Stage 5: Data analysis, synthesis and dissemination

- How are study populations, especially women, and frontline researchers involved in analysing, interpreting, writing up and disseminating study findings?
- How are writing and authorship decisions made and what role do 'ethics of care' principles play in this decision-making process?
- Where are the final reports/papers made available and who can/cannot access them?
- What efforts have been made to 'close the loop' and share findings/conclusions with communities who participated in data collection?
- What efforts are made to use findings/conclusions to effectively challenge unjust policies which reinforce inequalities and impede the rights of displaced persons?