Doing Research On/With Women in Conflict Zones:
Some Ethical Considerations

by Simona Sharoni

In the past decade there has been a growing theoretical interest in the role of women and gender issues in relation to questions of war and peace. Images of women at the forefront of struggles for liberation, justice and peace around the world have inspired not only academic scholarship on women and gender issues in conflict situations but also numerous conferences and the availability of funding for both individual and institutional projects on these issues.

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exploration of the role of in conflict regions has been serious gap in the literature on international politics. At the literature is quite diverse in and geographically, it has in English by academics who conflict area they write about

and write primarily for academic audiences. The importance of making women and gender issues visible in the academic arena notwithstanding, women in conflict areas have been highly critical of the research approach and methods utilized by many researchers and of the final products resulting from such research.

*Like in other areas of inquiry, some of this work came under attack for assuming universal applicability and for having little or no relevance to the daily lives and struggles of women in particular conflict situations. While there are some general trends concerning gender, war and peace that may manifest themselves across conflict areas, in order to understand the complex workings of gender and conflict in a particular community, one must employ a context-specific approach and work closely with people on the ground. This approach requires a serious change in orientation from doing research **on** women to working collaboratively **with** them.*

*This article highlights some ethical considerations that ought to be taken into account when conducting gender sensitive research in conflict areas. My hope is that it will stimulate a lively discussion on these issues among activists and researchers by highlighting major challenges facing researchers who are interested in working with women in conflict zones and some ways to address them and limit the potential damage of such interventions. While the considerations may change from conflict to conflict, there are two basic principles – **collaboration** and **accountability** – that must be present for a project to be legitimate. Following are some key questions and concrete examples dealing with the ethics and politics of gender research in conflict regions.*

1. **The researcher's motivation, objectives, and social location OR power, privilege and gatekeeping**

"Why do **you** want to do research on women in Israel-Palestine?" This is the first question I ask colleagues and students who approach me for contacts in the region. Although most of them have never been to that part of the world, they seem surprised by the question. The answers I have received over the years vary. During the *Intifada*, European and American feminists were fascinated with the visibility of Palestinian and Jewish women in the struggle against the occupation. My sense has been that many of these researchers embarked on their research projects to examine their own Orientalist stereotypes about women in the Middle East. In other words, the research project was designed to examine how different from (or similar to) are **those** women in relation to **us**. A more recent example involves the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC), which has become one of the most popular research topics on women and conflict after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in the North of Ireland. A few months ago, I was approached by

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a graduate student who was planning to travel to Ireland for some field research as a basis for an MA thesis on the NIWC. The well-intentioned student was quite disappointed when I refused to give her the contacts she sought and told her that at least a dozen theses and numerous other research papers have already been written on the subject. In the course of a lengthy email conversation, I realized that the student has done very little research on what has been already written on women and gender in the North of Ireland. Eventually, with the help of the student's thesis advisor, I was able to convince her to delay her trip, immerse herself in the existing literature on the topic and think of a new thesis idea and reevaluate her plan of a 2-3 week field research trip.

Starting a research project without answering such questions as WHY do YOU want to go to a particular place, WHAT do you want to study and HOW does your topic contribute to the already existing body of literature is a clear reflection of **privilege.** By raising these questions, I used my power and privilege to act as a gatekeeper and to prevent people who may be well-intentioned but ill-prepared from conducting field research in conflict zones. For most researchers, the questions I discuss here are new; they were not central to their professional training. Therefore, they force researchers to re-think their core believes and practices as researchers and to reflect on their relationship (both as individuals and as researchers) to the research topic as well as to the region they wish to explore. In other words, these questions have the potential to re-define a particular research project as a political act rather than as a scientific endeavor.

2. **Research as a political act**

Whether researchers acknowledge it or not, research, especially in a conflict area, is a political act. Thus, it is crucial that the researcher be aware of the political context within which the research project unfolds and of his/her own social location vis-à-vis the conflict, the particular topic and the community where the inquiry takes place. This requires adequate time for preparation both before one travels to the region as well as in the region itself. It is inconceivable that someone who has not had prior exposure to a particular conflict, will conduct a month of field research and expect to get the collaboration of the community as well as make an important contribution to the body of knowledge about that particular conflict.

3. **Neutrality and objectivity vs. situated knowledge**

Taking into account the political context and ethical consideration, almost always calls into question conventional definitions of neutrality and objectivity; rather than detaching oneself from the objects/subjects of study, the researcher must immerse herself in the lives of the community. This approach to research is based on the premise that knowledge claims that emerge from a close interaction and involvement with the community are likely to be more credible than knowledge that is the result of observations from the outside.

4. **Relationship between the researcher and the community**

Ideally, this relationship would begin with an invitation issued by a community group to a particular researcher to work with them on an important issue they would like to examine. Another option is for the researcher to approach a community with an interest in their work or with a particular research topic and inquire whether the community is interested in the project. These contacts should be made far in advance of the planned field research to allow ample time for negotiations between the researcher and the community.

5. **Reciprocity and collaboration OR what's in a research project for the community?**

Another question, which puzzles people who approach me with requests for advice and contacts to conduct research in conflict zones involves the contribution of a particular research project to the community. If the researcher doesn't address this question explicitly, it should be raised by the community. Examples of contributions may include using a research project done by an outsider for fundraising and/or to gain credibility and legitimacy both within the community and worldwide. The community should outline its priorities and determine whether it would be useful for them to embark on a collaborative project with outside researchers. The community should also determine the focus of the research and the process of data collection and interpretation. Reciprocity and collaboration are easier when the community treats research as a venue for reflection, advocacy and action rather then simply as an academic endeavor. Conducting research on a particular topic provides an opportunity for reflection; it may be instrumental for a particular group to gain visibility and credibility both locally and globally and to secure funding. Research can also inspire action and provide useful information for advocacy.

6. Trust

To launch a collaborative research project, the researcher must earn the trust of the community. Making her agenda explicit and being willing to spend extended periods of time in the community as well as make previous work available to the community as well as volunteering her skills and connections for the SERVICE of the community. The researcher must be well-informed about the conflict and the complex political and social issues involved before interacting with the community. The researcher should not ask questions that may trigger suspicion if asked prematurely. The researcher must adhere to strict principles of **confidentiality**, which should be DEFINED BY THE COMMUNITY. This MUST include a commitment on the part of the researcher to allow participants in the research to review the results of the research or at least the parts attributed to them.

7. Responsibility and accountability

At the minimum the researcher should adhere to the principle of "do no harm." That is, make sure the research project doesn't endanger the population. Nevertheless, scholars ought to challenge themselves to go beyond this minimum and find ways to give something back to the community. This implies staying in touch with the participants after the project is completed, being willing to use one's one power and privilege when needed to assist those who participated in the research, their families, friends and other community memebrs.

8. Participation

Who is included and who is excluded in the project and how does it affect both the process and the product? How is the community defined? One needs to be specific in describing the community (size, composition etc.) before drawing conclusion. At the same time, one must be careful not to reveal facts and figures that may be used against the community.

9. Collaboration

The level of collaboration depends on the community, the researcher and the nature of the research. Nevertheless, the terms and nature of collaboration ought to be negotiated BEFORE the project begins. During this process, the researcher and the community must take into account disparities in power and privilege as well as other factors that may either assist or interfere with a collaborative process. Ideally, research will be co-authored with at least one member of the community where the research takes place. While co-authorship can be complicated, it has the potential to produce better research, which reflects more accurately the needs of the community and increase its relevance, usefulness and accessibility to multiple audiences

10. Research (ab)use

Scholars must discuss with the community such questions as who has the control of the final product, how accessible is the language describing the final product and how useful is it for community use, compensation of the community, assurances etc. Scholars should have a critical understanding of how their research can be co-opted to uphold a status quo grounded in injustices and inequalities.

Concluding remarks

At an international women's gathering I had the privilege to participate in last year, someone suggested we ask participants from conflict areas to give examples of both good and bad experiences they have had with researchers. In the course of our discussions, no one recounted a positive experience. It was also clear that conventional researchers and women activists had very different perceptions of what constitutes *good* research. The emphasis on participatory action research appealed to activists but seemed alien to most academics. In retrospect, it may have been premature to discuss a particular method of conducting collaborative research. Instead, we should continue and collect stories of research conducted in conflict zones in order to understand the damage caused in the name of research as well as explore non-exploitative ways of working with people. The ethical considerations outlined here represent an attempt to account for past wrongdoing and offer some preliminary principles as the foundation for a new relationship between researchers and women activists in conflict zones.❖

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