

Reflections on Gender-Based Field Research

Kristin Williams with Caroline Andresen, Aparna Polavarapu, and Leigh Stefanik

In an interview in last year's issue of *PRAXIS*, Cynthia Enloe spoke about the importance of a "feminist curiosity" when it comes to global issues.¹ As Enloe has written extensively,² researchers in international relations need to ask more questions about the meanings of masculinity and femininity, and the complex relationships between them in any given context. By asking questions about women, men, and power we can gain a more nuanced understanding of issues as diverse as sexual violence during conflict, the emergence of ethnic nationalism, global and local economic disparities, and traditional norms related to property, marriage, and inheritance, among many others.

A feminist and gender lens can and should be applied to all areas of study, but it is especially important for researchers working within local communities facing multiple vulnerabilities: those emerging from conflict or displacement, or marginalized socially or economically. It is in these situations that gender roles often become most entrenched and that violence and inequality become more prevalent. For this article, *PRAXIS* interviewed three graduate students who have carried out community-based gender research, and encouraged them to reflect on their experiences. Our interviewees had some things in common: all recently graduated from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and all conducted their research last summer in various parts of the African continent. They worked both independently and with the support of local or international organizations. Each came to their respective project with a different background and unique perspective. What links them all is their determined application of a feminist curiosity to human security issues.

Caroline Andresen worked for Mercy Corps in the Central African Republic (CAR).

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She was hired to design and carry out a baseline study on community perceptions of women's rights and the incidence of gender-based violence (GBV) in four different towns. Her report on the study was intended to shape future Mercy Corps programming in the country. Aparna Polavarapu, an attorney, conducted independent qualitative and legal research in Rwanda. She sought to understand how Rwandan women's rights to own and inherit land have been impacted by the implementation of recent land reform policies. In particular, she was interested in the principles of gender equality contained in the new laws and policies, and what is preventing such equality in practice. Leigh Stefanik conducted independent research on internally displaced persons' (IDPs) experiences of GBV and gender roles as they returned to their home villages in northern Uganda. She ran focus group discussions and individual interviews to explore whether wartime changes in gender roles were affecting levels of violence against women.

Why Gender?

Researchers are drawn to gender questions for different reasons. For some, gender research is of primary importance in and of itself, while for others it is a lens through which to understand related issues. Caroline Andresen learned about the importance of a gender lens while working for a local NGO in northern Uganda during her undergraduate years. While conducting research on the causes of domestic violence in four different refugee settlements in the town of Adjumani, she found that she needed to explore more than just the violence itself in order to gain a fuller picture. She "also needed to learn about livelihood strategies in the settlements, the psychological pressures of being a refugee, the educational system, food security issues, and the role of continuing armed conflict in northern Uganda." The links between these interconnected issues demonstrated to Andresen how a gender lens provides insight into civilian protection needs.

Similarly, Aparna Polavarapu came to gender work through an interest in human rights, but believes that "everyone should be thinking about gender in some capacity." As an example, Polavarapu stated, "if you are developing an initiative to raise awareness about a new credit program for low-income entrepreneurs, you will be considering the best fora and methods for reaching your target group. You may think that weekend markets are crowded places and decide that they would be a good forum for informational sessions. However, what you may not have realized, because you didn't ask the question, is that women don't usually attend the weekend market because they are the ones expected to care for the children when they're not in school. Your research will be skewed, because it will show that men are more interested in credit programs than women, when the reality is that you are advertising to a nearly all-male audience."

While reflecting on the importance of applying a gender lens to all areas of community research, the interviewees also acknowledged that women's rights is an important field of study on its own. Polavarapu lamented that gender equality is,

unfortunately, “so rare in our world.” Leigh Stefanik became drawn to gender work after visiting Bujuburum refugee camp in Ghana, where she was appalled by the lack of protection mechanisms for women and girls, who spoke plainly about their experiences of sexual violence. Our interviewees all agreed that gender research is not all about women and must involve examination of both masculinity and femininity; however, as Polavarapu pointed out, “questions relating to gender equality tend to focus on women for the simple fact that women’s lack of relative rights is a worldwide phenomenon.”

Working in the Field

Whether examining questions of gender or not, researchers based in local communities often face similar challenges and rewards. The interviewees identified parallel themes regarding what it was like as an outsider coming into the community for a temporary and specific purpose. Much of the time, it was important to these researchers to maintain an appropriate distance. Though they each wanted to be on the ground talking face-to-face with the people who are truly affected by these situations, they were also conscious of their role as independent researchers. Sometimes this meant eating or working alone; sometimes it meant shadowing local surveyors and observing the research from the side. The interviewees also identified language as a significant barrier between them and their study communities. Polavarapu, who conducted independent research, felt a particular sense of separation: “I was living in areas where most people didn’t speak French or English, but Kinyarwanda, a language with which I’m not very familiar. There were many days when I had no one to speak to outside of the hours I spent with my interpreter. There was a feeling of isolation, which I think is a real challenge for many researchers, but often overlooked.” On the other hand, it is possible to be welcomed very openly into the community, as Stefanik experienced when one local man offered her a plot of land on his farm where he intended for her to settle down and become his wife.

Another common theme was the need for good preparation but even better adaptability. Andresen admitted that time was her biggest challenge, and that there was barely enough of it to adjust the survey instrument in order to get the most useful and accurate information. Stefanik spent endless time preparing for one study only to arrive in the field and realize that it was not what was most needed by the communities themselves. She too had to change the design of her research to adapt to her evolving understanding of the situation. In some cases, flexibility was needed in order to adapt to unexpected delays or setbacks (such as a much-needed translator showing up only half the time). In all cases, the interviewees stated that conducting community research helped strengthen their problem-solving skills. Their stories highlight the need for diligence, malleability, and a sense of humor when conducting research on the ground.

The Future of Gender Research

During their time in the field, the interviewees witnessed local innovations which prove

that, as Polavarapu asserted, “there’s no single approach to gender-sensitive research or work.” As just one example, in the course of her research, Stefanik came across a system that couples in one community had devised to improve their communication and decrease fights. As she described it, “Each couple keeps two objects (such as bottle caps) together in the house, each representing the man or the women. If one person removes the other person’s cap, it means there is a problem and they need to talk. When the partner notices that his or her piece is missing, he or she takes the other person’s piece and goes to talk to them. In this way, couples can handle domestic problems more thoughtfully and constructively, helping to prevent misunderstandings and sudden, defensive arguments that can easily escalate.” This system represents a local innovation likely to be overlooked by researchers or NGOs who do not apply a feminist curiosity.

Across the board, the interviewees also identified working more closely with men as the most important step in future gender research. Andresen witnessed local men who were frustrated and angry at the human rights agenda promoted by international NGOs. As she puts it, “They were hostile to the work and frustrated that they had not been consulted to their satisfaction in other projects. They were also angry that their rights had been ‘taken away’ by the international organizations that were there to promote women’s rights.” However, “they provided some of the most telling insights into the perceptions of women’s rights in the study...[and] became some of the most active participants in the violence prevention and reduction work done by Mercy Corps in CAR.” This example shows that, when properly and positively engaged, men can be some of the most important advocates for gender equality. As Stefanik found in her study, gender researchers and practitioners need to work with men to support the evolution of “alternative masculinities” that allow for greater gender equality.

Feminist curiosity led the interviewees into the field and prompted them to question the norms, policies, and systems that bolster particular gender roles and relationships. This curiosity led them to interesting and rewarding discoveries about themselves, the communities in which they worked, and the global issues they sought to understand. However, they all agree that a gender/feminist curiosity means that questions are never fully answered; and indeed, that they often lead to more and more questions. As Enloe says, “Being curious takes energy.”³ To truly understand global issues, we need more energetic and curious researchers in the field who are willing to ask questions about gender and its relationship to everything else.

Endnotes

- 1 The interview can be accessed online at http://fletcher.tufts.edu/praxis/archives/xxiv/PRAXISXXIV_8Enloe.pdf
- 2 In *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire* (University of California Press: 2004) and numerous articles and lectures.
- 3 *The Curious Feminist*, 1.