

Why feminism: some notes from ‘the field’ on doing feminist research

by Rishita Nandagiri

On Wednesday 27 September 2017, LSE Gender PhD students organised an event titled **Why feminism? An open discussion about doing gender research**. During this event, PhD and MSc students from a range of disciplines engaged in a conversation framed around a series of questions: What does it mean to say we are working with gender studies? What does a gender perspective allow in research? How do we know research to be feminist, queer and/or postcolonial? What questions does that raise for our work? This series of posts presents the transcripts of the speakers’ discussion papers, continuing with Rishita Nandagiri’s account of feminist research and ‘field’ work.



Photo credit: [Anuradha Sengupta](#)

Why feminism?

When I was invited to participate in the panel discussion, ‘Why feminism? An open discussion about doing gender research’, at the Department of Gender Studies, I began questioning myself and my research. Why feminism? I wondered: What makes my research particularly ‘feminist’ or why might it find a home in ‘gender studies’? Is it because of what I research (abortion) or is it because my research focuses primarily on women’s experiences? Is it by virtue of its inter/cross-disciplinary nature, drawing from (and hopefully someday contributing to) a well of feminist thought, critique, and frameworks? Or is it because I identify as feminist, and that influences my research? Or is it actually about the way research is formulated – the very bones of it – how the questions develop, the lenses utilised, the analyses, the tools, and how it’s all written up?

In **Decolonising Methodologies**, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1998) writes that ‘research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions.’ I also see conducting research as a politicised act situated in a particular historical, social, and political context. For my research, that ‘politicised act’ builds on the feminist work of making power – structures, relationships, and its manifestations – visible, and of centring the experiences and voices of women. It means engaging in an intersectional, reflexive exercise in the production of feminist knowledge and evidence to engage

in the work of challenging and transforming, as **Chandra Talpade Mohanty put it**, the “use and abuse of power”.

On conducting feminist research

Researching abortion *is* about power. The politics of **abortion collapses the private into the public, and vice versa**, consequently demanding the careful navigation of the private and the public spheres; and an intersectional and reflexive approach. The sensitive nature of conducting abortion research requires an intimate understanding of how silence, stigma, fear and shame surrounds it; and who this affects and how. All of it determining the shape of abortion research design. This understanding needs to be built into the *bones* of the research (and with full apologies to **Thoreau** (1908), the *marrow* of it). Which brought me to a rather terrifying conundrum: *how do you actually do feminist research[i]*?

I wasn't just confronted by this massive undertaking, but the self-imposed pressure of 'doing it right'. I didn't know what that looked like or what that meant, so I did what we're meant to do: I Googled it. I went to the library. I bothered my supervisors with ridiculous questions and sometimes overwrought e-mails[ii]. I devoured all the reading as I could, devoured article after article on abortion research, attended classes and lectures no matter how vaguely related. I had multiple conversations with people much smarter than I am, and whose intellectual generosity was a true gift.

In all this, I tried to soak up as much as I could: what to watch out for on fieldwork, issues to consider around my research topic, the questions I needed to answer about sampling, the methods I was using, how I was going to justify everything, and, of course, that to-read list I would never conquer. Through most of this, 'doing it right' meant an ever-expanding mental list (sometimes scribbled on post-it notes with far too many exclamation marks) of 'things not-to-do'. Such as:

- Don't essentialise groups of people!
- Don't fall into the trap of forgetting historical context and accidentally depoliticising everything!
- Don't forget to define your terms!
- Don't accidentally gender professions because you didn't confront your biases!
- And the important one: **DON'T MESS IT UP!**

In hindsight, that wasn't a very good strategy. I realised that it's less about *not* doing certain things, and a whole lot more about conducting research in a very specific and deliberate manner. The clue was obviously in the phrase '**doing** feminist research'.

Notes from 'the field'[iii]

'Doing' feminist research, I think, is about making sure I'm asking myself questions about my research that pushes me to consider how power operates, what is invisible and visible about it, and to make that power known, explicit, and spoken. With 'fieldwork' behind me, there are four particular points or questions I grapple with:

- **If I want to do the work of making power visible, then whose voices do I centre? Whose experiences and realities sit 'at the heart' of my research, and why?**

The existing **literature** around abortion shows that women's reasons for obtaining an abortion affect her care-seeking pathways, and they are influenced by family and social dynamics, and the social and economic circumstances that her decision is made in.

My study sites are two rural districts in South India. The majority of women who participated in my study did not finish formal schooling — many of them leaving school before year eight. They did not work in the formal sector, were not financially independent, and often lived in 'joint families'. I focus on their experiences of attempting to, and accessing safe abortion while contending with an

under-resourced health system, financial dependency, lack of accurate information, and managing expectations of extended family and friends and community, on top of caring for their existing families, because I wanted to understand the ways in which women navigate claiming autonomy and wielding agency over their own bodies and lives.

It is a question, a thread, that runs through my research: How do these elements or manifestations of power (existing policies, the implementation of these policies, the knowledge of laws and access to accurate information, the family and social dynamics, economic circumstances, her 'responsibilities') affect how – and if – she makes (and carries out) decisions? It is the work of making the nature of this visible, and situating her experiences here, in this reality, that forms the heart of my research.

- **How is my work intersectional? How do I ensure that it is intersectional not just in my analysis, but is built into my research design?**

As the social-political-economic context impacts women's lives and affects their access to services or information or knowledge or how they experience certain events, employing an intersectional lens is imperative. Applying an intersectional lens is not just necessary for the analysis of data, but must be integrated into the research design itself.

As literacy, class, and location can affect abortion access, the same is also true of marital status, age, and caste. Marital status and age can affect women's pathways to care, as young, unmarried women may avoid certified facilities out of fear, increasing their risk of turning to unsafe providers for their terminations. Caste identities, which play out in such immensely powerful ways in India (and I don't believe one can conduct research in India without thinking about and engaging with caste politics), **have been known to affect the quality of care** and may be a deterrent to care seeking in clinics staffed by *savarna*[iv] providers.

Understanding how these different intersectional identities manifest in abortion access was key, not just for how it frames and underpins my study; but for the impact it has on elements of my research design. Recruiting study participants, for example, would need to account for these intersections. I also had to navigate caste and class not just in terms of the study participants' caste and class location experiences, but for how it influences my own access to sites. This was evident in the way caste, class, and gender manifested in my conversations with gatekeepers, or whether providers were willing to speak with me or not, and whether women would pick up on my caste/class location — that my own privilege often allows me to be blind to — and how that affects my interviews and my data.

- **On Reflexivity vs 'Limitations'**

Recently, in a discussion on reflexivity, a scholar casually remarked that reflexivity is often used as a way to disavow the limitations of one's research (perhaps it's my own sensitivity that makes it feel like a dig at qualitative researchers). If that's how it comes across, then I don't believe that's reflexivity at all. That's a caveat. For me, reflexivity is less about 'disavowing' aspects of my research and more about 'owning up to' my own values and influences. I am Indian and I dance across this line of 'insider' and 'outsider'. I am 'insider' in that I am an Indian woman, I speak a few of the languages, and I am familiar with some of the cultural codes and norms. And yet, I am quite often marked as 'outsider'.

After my in-country ethics review board meeting, I joked on a Facebook post, *"Idea for a paper that's probably already been written: the complexities of performing normative national identity... and still getting asked, very politely, 'where are you from?'"*

My 'outsider-ness' is obvious in a lot of my experiences: I've spent most of my life outside the country, I speak with an 'accent'. I transgress certain norms: being the age I am and not a marriage prospect in sight, the way I dress — there's a list in here too of all the ways I'm 'not quite right'. This outsider/insider dance manifests in interesting ways: whenever my research assistant

and I conducted our first visit to a site, the Medical Officer would have a lovely chat with us in the local language, and then, invariably, would ask, “But where is the lady from London who’s coming to do her research?”

I suspect there was slight bewilderment and confusion when they realised they meant *me*, but nurses and community health workers always seemed relieved. We had several of them tell us, “Oh, good. It’s just you. We thought it would be someone fancy”— or variations of that — and the ‘nice’ biscuits would be put away for someone more important.

I am also born upper-caste, and even with all my unlearning — and learning — about caste politics and engaging in anti-caste work, I am *savarna*. A lot of my respondents were Dalit or Muslim women, whose bodies are often easy targets for the State and by many factions of society. Good research practice demands that I understand and reflect on how that power plays out in whether women feel they can refuse an interview, in how it shapes responses (and why), and in how I understand and analyse and write up their experiences.

It’s important to ask that **if/when the subaltern does speak**, am I speaking over her?

To me, reflexivity isn’t a box-ticking exercise, it’s not a list of ‘limitations’. What it is, is tugging at the threads of how we construct knowledge and what underlies it.

- **On the construction of knowledge, its contributors, and its consumers**

A gatekeeper at one of my sites — thinking I didn’t understand the language — turned to his colleague and said, “All these foreign researchers come here and say ‘help us’ and then they say we are backward and that we do everything wrong”. Another gatekeeper shared, “I’m happy to help, but please make sure your conclusions don’t reflect badly on the country”.

I’m not worried about offending my gatekeepers with findings that might upset them. However, their comments trouble me because it’s not untrue: so much of research has been about studying ‘the Other’. Given India’s history of colonisation — and here I am at the seat of Empire — I worry about how I ‘write up’. It isn’t just my location as studying in a ‘foreign’ place, it’s about who the audience for my research is and how/where my research sits in the context of knowledge production.

How do I present women’s experiences without falling into the framework of a universally ‘colonised’ woman, universally subjected to ‘patriarchal oppression’, where I privilege her gender oppression over other forms, and possibly erase the complex and contradictory positions she may take? How do I write about women navigating gender oppression without falling into a trap of “**saving brown women from brown men**”? As Mohanty conceptualises, how do I write about “women in the Third World” when so much of what’s written is “**Under Western Eyes**”?

I don’t have a lot of answers to these questions — maybe it’s about returning to my mental-list of ‘doing’ feminist research, of locating a woman’s experiences in the lived multiplicity of her realities, and consistently ‘owning up to’ the ways in which I consume and produce knowledge. Or, to go back to my original set of questions on what makes my research particularly feminist or why it finds a home in gender studies: I suppose it’s a mix of all these things, a series of questions to grapple with, to pose these questions and shine a light on the ‘not quite right’, and to learn to work with the tensions of research and knowledge production and with my own discomfort with challenging it/being challenged. And perhaps **this** is what ‘*doing feminist research*’ looks like.

[i] Some would contend that this is not so much *feminist* research as it is just *good* research practice.

[ii] That they were very kind and gracious about responding to, with nary a sarcastic comment in sight!

[iii] While I use the terms 'field', and 'fieldwork', I use them with a significant amount of discomfort about what they connote. For more, please see Roger Berger's 1993 [article](#). I would be grateful for suggestions on alternate terms.

[iv] *Savarna* is a term used by Dalit scholars and activists to describe upper caste persons.



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