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Experiences with participatory research and perspectives on ethical research partnerships on Gender Based Violence in Kenya

Report of interviews with civil society organisations, researchers and activists in Nairobi undertaken in June 2019

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Contents

1. Introduction

Gender based violence, including sexual violence, is one of the most severe consequences of gender inequality. Research is crucial to better understand the causes and consequences of gender-based violence, as well as the experiences of those who have suffered it. Such understanding is vital for designing actions and policies to end all forms gender-based violence. This has led to the field of gender-based violence becoming an important research area, addressed by academic and civil society researchers from disciplines and perspectives as diverse as law, health, human rights and psychology, to name just a few.

Nevertheless, researching gender-based violence is not without risks. Participating in research can cause the re-traumatisation of survivors, by stirring up painful memories(Sharp 2014). It can also put survivors at risk, if the perpetrators of the violence they suffered are still close to them. This is especially true in the case of survivors of sexual violence, a crime which often produces a stigmatising effect for its victims, who tend to be regarded as impure and are often blamed for having caused or provoked the crime. Survivors therefore might not have talked about the crime in order to protect themselves from stigmatisation or even rejection from families and communities (Eastmond and Mannergren Selimovic 2012; Drumond 2016). In order to increase our understanding about the way in which gender-based violence is experienced, the effects it has on survivors and societies, and how it can be eliminated, research must be carried out with caution, which not only prevents the risk of re-traumatisation of those participating in research – the 'do no harm approach' – but which also intends to create a positive impact on the lives of those involved and the societies they live in. Careful design of research methodologies is therefore essential.

One way of conducting research while avoiding the risks of re-traumatisation is using participatory approaches. These present a way of doing research in a collaborative process (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995), using a bottom-up approach that centres participants' priorities and perspectives, leading to results that makes a change to the lives of the participants (Kesby, Kindon, and Pain 2005). In this way it seeks to democratise the research process. Moreover, the process of research itself is as important as the results. The process aims to raise consciousness and increase participants' critical awareness of their situation and of the problems and inequality they face (Fals-Borda 1987; Freire 1996). Participatory research approaches shift traditional research relationships, in which the knowledge resulting from the research is generated and owned by 'experts' (Gaventa and Cornwall 2008; Tuck and Guishard 2013). Instead, it values different sorts of knowledge, experiential and academic, as equally important, and therefore it disrupts epistemic hierarchies. This relates to the need for ethical research partnerships, one of the key themes in this report. Instead, participatory research enables research participants to produce and maintain ownership over their own knowledge, which becomes a source of power to affect change (Blakey, Milne, and Kilburn 2012).

Creative research methods – research methods that are based on creative practices such as art, creative writing, theatre, photography, film-making, etc. – can enhance the participatory nature of research, by giving participants the tools to portray and analyse the issues that are of importance to them, in a way that can be more engaging and not dependent on literacy. Moreover, such methods can result in a creative product that is the research result, which can serve as a way of showing their situation and needs to policymakers and thus contribute to the social impact of the research (Wang, Cash, and Powers 2000). Giving participants more control over what they want to discuss, rather than being subjected to the questionnaires of researchers research, is especially important when working with participants who might have been traumatised by violence. Participatory and creative research allows participants to decide what they feel comfortable telling the researcher, and this thus helps avoid the risk of re-traumatisation (Weber 2018).

Although such participatory and creative methods are already widely used in certain research areas, specifically development studies, their use in research on violence against women is somewhat less common. The interest in knowing more about the experiences with this sort of research led us (the authors of this report, Caroline Bradbury-Jones and Sanne Weber) to undertake a short research visit to Kenya, which we hope to be one of the key focus countries for future projects. With the visit, we hoped to better understand the experience in undertaking research on GBV among Kenyan civil society organisations, and explore whether the use of participatory approaches is common here. We were also interested to know whether Kenyan organisations have participated in international research partnerships, what their experiences were in this regard, and which particular ethical and practical challenges such partnerships bring. We hoped this could help us to identify lessons learnt in terms of ethical research practice and democratic partnership building, which can be important for researchers across the world to do research on gender based violence in a way that respects the agency and well-being of survivors and avoids their re-traumatisation. Eventually, we aim to co-develop guidelines for ethical research partnerships between western researchers and participants and organisations in Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs). Such co-development is crucial because otherwise power imbalances will be perpetuated. Furthermore, we argue that participatory research methods are crucial for ethical research practice, for their potential to transform power relations between researchers and participants, while also avoiding the risk of re-traumatisation through research. Finally, we hoped to start building a research agenda on gender-based violence that is based on the priorities and need for social political impact identified by Kenyan partners, to revert common patterns in which western researchers define the research priorities.

In order to do this, we undertook a series of interviews with different persons and organisations in Nairobi, with whom we undertook interviews to ask them about their work, their experience with doing (participatory) research on gender based violence, their experience with and desire to collaborate with international partners, their ideas about which types of research outputs would best serve their work to generate changes for survivors of gender based violence, and their priorities for future research topics and projects. We spoke with a diverse range of actors, including an academic researcher, an independent researcher, a research organisation, a consulting firm working on social, health and gender issues, an activist, a grassroots shelter for women and girls survivors of sexual violence, and with representatives from NGOs working on women's rights and gender based violence from different angles, including health, and justice. We contacted most of these contacts through Wangu Kanja, with whom we had a prior relationship, while others were contacted through recommendations of other interviewees. We therefore held three interviews via Skype after our visit, while the other nine interviews took place during our visit to Kenya in the week of 2 June 2019.

In the remainder of this report, we outline the main themes we identified within the interviews, and which constitute crucial inputs for the guidelines on ethical research partnerships we are developing. First, we discuss the experiences and perspectives that the interviewees shared with us about the way in which research on gender based violence is commonly being undertaken in Kenya, describing some of the main risks and harms identified, followed by some examples of best practice undertaken by the organisations interviewed themselves or others identified by them. We then move on to describe their experiences, positive and negative, in participating in research projects with international partners, outlining key elements for ethical research partnerships. Finally, we outline which types of research outputs the interviewees prioritised for the generation of impact on the lives of the women they work with, as well as avenues for future projects on issues on which more research is needed.

2. Perspectives on and experiences of research on gender based violence

Not all persons and organisations interviewed had experience in doing research in relation to gender-based violence themselves. Many described that they recognised the value of research to inform and improve their work, but identified a lack of funding, (human) resources or capacities to undertake research themselves. Even in universities there is a lack of research funding, and therefore their work is more focused on teaching. Nevertheless, many of the interviewed persons and organisations had been involved in research indirectly, for example having been approached by researchers looking for gender based violence survivors to participate in their research. Unfortunately, these experiences were not always positive, as the next section describes. Others had direct experiences in undertaking research themselves, and also identified some examples of positive practices, which will be described in the second section of this report.

Risks of research with survivors of gender based violence

The interviews we undertook painted a rather concerning picture of much of the research that is currently undertaken in relation to gender-based violence – it is important to state that this does not necessarily refer to their own ways of working, but to what they have perceived to be general practice. According to the interviewees, much of this research is based on interviews with conflict survivors. As explained above, this involves risks of re-traumatising the participants, by asking them to recount traumatic experiences. Some interviewees mentioned that often there is no psychological support in place for survivors, in case they feel emotionally distressed after participating in the research. A senior member of a support centre for survivors of gender based violence even shared an anecdote that evidenced an appalling lack of awareness of the risk of re-traumatisation:

> For example this year I was involved with something, they asked ‘can we have some survivors? […] and then they pushed to the extent that they were asked: ‘can you take us to the place you were raped? So they can share their stories from there and we can film’, and we were like ‘no’! (Interview 5 June 2019).

This anecdote reflects how in the opinion of several interviewees, research on gender based violence often seems to be more in the interest of the researcher than for the benefit of the participants. In fact, more often than not, the research results, and therefore the benefits of taking part in the research, remain unclear to the participants as does the risks of participation, both for the short and longer term. Many times, the research results are not shared with the participants, and at times the research is not even published. This makes the research participants, but also often the NGOs that participated in the research, wondering what use their participation had, since their efforts did not lead to any tangible change, or visible efforts to produce such change at the longer term. As an academic researcher pointed out to us: ‘it’s a bit of an exploitative sort of system and getting the information and people not seeing what’s been done with the information and what use it is for them’ (Interview 4 June 2019). This tendency is even more worrying, since many survivors of gender based violence are in dire socio-economic situations, and have urgent economic and sometimes also medical and emotional needs. They expect a more direct and tangible result of the research. Although quick results are often hard to achieve through social science research, management of expectations and a clear and transparent process of informing participants before they make a decision about research participation is crucial to avoid participants becoming disappointed and disillusioned with research, or indeed, questioning why the research is being undertaken in the first place.

Another tendency pointed out by various interviewees is that often the same people are asked to participate in research projects. This is because researchers and NGOs often go to certain key informants or focal persons who can connect them with survivors. An academic who previously worked as an NGO researcher told us the following:

> What we normally used to do if we want to get interviews is we look for a focal point from the community who we used to call a mobiliser and the mobilisers would be the ones getting the interviews so after that then that is when we come in. […] So if I want, say ten victims in Nairobi I can just look for a focal point person and I explain to them what I want to do, the things I need, the types of participants I want, and then she will give me names of people he/she thinks are a match to what I want. […] This person might always give you the same, same ten people all the time. Of course because this person is looking for reliability. Maybe you have a victim, you know that this one is reliable and because she knows she will come, you will find the same, same faces and the same people turning up at meetings (Interview 4 June 2019).

Another interviewee, who has been involved in research projects for various NGOs, mentioned that for a long time the way of selecting research participants 'had really just been: so who do we think is the best, who have we worked with before? Because some people don't have the resources or the time' (Interview 6 June 2019). This results in the same people being involved in the research, often based on lack of time for the researchers, as it is easier to go back to people you already know to be reliable and in the capacity to participate.

Rather than engaging directly with the communities and building up trust that allows for the invitation of new research participants, key informants are being used as a 'shortcut' to selecting participants. The use of key informants however entails risks. Often key informants or so-called gatekeepers tend to have a particular position in a community, which is not always representative, and can influence the information provided or the persons whom they provide access to. If researchers speak to the same victims, the same experiences are included in research outputs, while others, that could provide a more diverse understanding, are left out. Depending on certain key figures in a community moreover reinforces dynamics in a community as to who decides on who participates, and therefore risks disregarding or exacerbating already existing divisions and power imbalances (McKenna and Main 2013). This might even have socio-economic effects, since one interviewee mentioned that research participants often receive reimbursements for travel costs and food, which thus only benefits the same people.

More worryingly, if the same people are interviewed over and over again, while not seeing any benefits of their research participation, people stop seeing the use of research altogether. The same academic told us a similar experience: 'so someone will tell you, 'you are the 50th person interviewing me, what are you going to do differently?' […] So it's like they're being used and they are not getting anything out of it' (Interview 4 June 2019). This eventually leads to a sensation of research fatigue among participants, which tends to appear after long-term or repeated participation in research projects, especially where there are no perceived changes as a result or when changed cannot easily be linked back to the participation in the research (Clark 2008; Mwambari 2019). Eventually research participants might even end up feeling disempowered and instrumentalised by researchers, therefore producing the opposite effect of the social change that is aimed for. An independent researcher we interviewed expressed the effect of this research fatigue, which impacts the participants, but eventually also the capacity for researchers to undertake research:

> Right now in the slums when you just say the word research no-one listens to you, she told me… People are tired because they get asked questions but they don't get any feedback. […] One of the people asked me why didn't you sit with us and even develop this research with us and even ask us is sexual violence the issue? (Interview 13 June 2019).

Some interviewees pointed out that survivors are often only included towards the end of a research project, when the research topics, questions and methodology are already set. Sometimes they are even only used to illustrate the larger findings, with researchers targeting those survivors with the most 'attractive' stories (Mwambari 2019). This late engagement with survivors makes it hard for the participants to influence what the research is about, and therefore it is not always meaningful for them or can even end up making them feel used and exploited (Mwambari 2019). An independent researcher we interviewed said:

> In our engagement with victims the one thing that over the years they have complained about is that they feel like an afterthought when it comes to engagement at any level. […] Just because you have money and funding it is not right to do it this way or expect the victims to just be there waiting for you to turn up and say I need this information (Interview 13 June 2019).

Victims' involvement as research participants seems to reflect a desire to include 'local voices' in the research, while at the same time there is little interest in or awareness of the need to involve such voices from an earlier stage of the research, in order to make sure the participation is meaningful and beneficial for the participants. According to the same researcher, this has to do with certain terms, such as community participation or local involvement, becoming popular and fashionable, thereby increasing the legitimacy or attractiveness of the research, without really adhering to what these terms stand for: 'who is this community? Because the word is always community, participatory; but you find it is always the same gatekeepers' (Interview 13 June). These reflections echo debates that have been ongoing in development studies for over a decade, as participatory and community-based approaches became something of a buzz word. Several authors have critiques how such approaches, or at least the use of the corresponding discourse, are often implemented as a way to legitimise the implementing agency as 'grassroots oriented' (Kapoor 2004; Tuck and Guishard 2013). Yet when the discourse is not complemented with actual actions to engage the community and participants in a meaningful way, with a spirit of bottom-up engagement and genuine participation, it can produce feelings of powerlessness in the participants, who treated as objects rather than subjects in a tokenistic form of participation (Kapoor 2004; Kelly 2004). Such feelings will eventually cause distrust (Mwambari 2019), which can lead to survivors withdrawing their participation from research project, as they can end up doing more harm than good.

It is therefore not only in the interest of participants, but also of researchers – both national and international – to undertake research in a more ethical way that benefits the research participants, in order to keep creating the knowledge that is needed to improve policy on gender based violence. This requires a culture change from researchers, who must reflect better on their methodologies. One way to overcome the problem of re-traumatisation and research fatigue is to start using participatory approaches to research, which start from a genuine collaboration with the participants, enabling them to tell the stories they desire to share on the topics they prioritise. Another way is for researchers and NGOs to critically analyse whether they really need to speak to survivors firsthand, or whether others might already have done that, in which case research can draw on those sources. The academic we interviewed suggested that 'perhaps for NGOs it's better if they co-ordinate their work and ensure that once one organisation has interviewed they don't go back to the same survivor and ask them the same set of questions' (Interview 4 June 2019). Fortunately, other interviewees were able to share some positive experiences and practices in that regard.

Best practices in researching gender based violence

Although not many of the persons interviewed for this project have strong experience in using participatory or creative research as such, there is strong experience with some of the key elements of participatory approaches. One research organisation that is specialised in health and development research with a strong focus on gender based violence expressed their research this way:

> I wouldn't necessarily describe it as participatory because I know that that's a whole different science or practice of its own. But we are very big on ensuring that the voices of survivors are extremely important. There's no point in doing this if we're not going to listen to them and they often they have really great ideas of what we should and shouldn't be doing. So in that sense I would say that their voices and needs are definitely incorporated (Interview 4 June).

This view evidences a very different perspective on the reason for involving survivors in their research, in terms of really making sure the research heeds the opinions of survivors and takes them into account in more than just a discursive way. In the same vein, many interviewees mentioned that they always make sure that before publishing research they go back to the participants to validate the findings with them, as a representative from a women's organisation explained to us: 'one of the things that we have been trying to do: once we have done a research document, we have been going back to the people who have contributed and ask them: is this a true reflection of what you said?' (Interview 4 June 2019). Even if the methods for undertaking the research might not have been participatory, at least this step in securing a feedback and validation process as part of the research guarantees that the research results represent a true reflection of the experiences of the participants. This increases ownership over the research results, and helps prevents the previously described phenomenon of research fatigue, as at a minimum, participants know what their participation led to. A similar view speaks from the approach taken from a women's organisation we interviewed, who undertake research to inform their programming on issues related to gender based violence and women's rights:

> We always like to engage the community because at the end of the day they are the ones who will consume the information so we don't want a situation where we have just talked about some things and we go into a community to do it. The resistance towards the results that you might get would be much higher if you have not involved them from the word go (Interview 3 June 2019).

This explains that actively including survivors in the research not only benefits the survivors themselves, but also those commissioning the research. By making sure the research they undertake reflects the survivors' voices, they make sure that the projects they design reflect the needs experienced by the survivors, which makes sure they will not run into unexpected resistance when implementing the project. Therefore, genuine participation of survivors increases the effectiveness of the work undertaken to benefit them. It is thus clear that although participatory research methods as such might not be widely used by Kenyan organisations, there is certainly a strong interest in doing research that incorporates the voices and reflects the needs of survivors. It was however also recognised in the discussions and interviews, that (international) donors still often prioritise numbers, statistical evidence and large-scale research, which they consider more reliable evidence than data produced through qualitative or participatory research. Raising awareness among funders about the benefit of qualitative data which can illustrate survivors' lived experience is therefore a pending challenge.

Some organisations also describe how they take important steps to involve and engage the survivors after the research has been finalised. A women's organisation describes their approach:

> We are helping the survivors to understand the violations and some of the findings and then we help them have that conversation with the county government and national government, media houses, society organisations. So it's about building their capacity so that they are able to negotiate and have conversations with people who do not understand the issue (Interview 4 June 2019).

It is advisable that this sort of strategy to build survivor's lobbying capacity should only occur after transparent conversations with survivors about the benefits but also risks of such activities, since lobbying can be draining, revictimizing – especially if it means publicly identifying oneself as survivor – and if unsuccessful can reinforce feelings of powerlessness. Civil society or international support to accompany survivors in such efforts are crucial. Although some interviewees explained to us by that for a long time there was not much collaboration or communication between civil society and academia in Kenya, which were each working on their own, more recently coordination has been increasing. This coordination could prove important in making sure that research – including academic research – gets 'translated' to the survivors in a way that makes it useful for them.

A way of taking the research forward and create impact on the basis of its results, is to identify from an early stage which changes can be expected based on the research, and which stakeholders can be expected to make those changes. Starting early on with raising the interest and awareness of these stakeholders and informing them about the changes expected from them can help increase the impact of the research. Communicating these results, and informing the participants about these actions throughout the course of the research, can increase their understanding of the importance of the research, and therefore can prevent the occurrence of research fatigue. A research organisation has embedded this in their practice:

> In addition to being a research organisation we have a strong ethos around research uptake; our findings have to be something that's really useful to the context concerned. I guess our research is only really successful if it's taken up by a community, health centre, government, so we're always building that element into our research, which makes us a bit different from the typical research organisation which might emphasis publications alone. […] You're often times not doing this alone, but you've already been in a relationship with these people, it could be government folks, non-government partners and you are already thinking through what do we need, or what does the government really want to do, or what does this particular NGO need. So that process helps to ensure that someone is at the end waiting to receive and ready to adopt what it is that you have.

> So we work in this way with national governments, regional governmental bodies and where possible internationally (Interview 4 June 2019).

Another important step in empowering survivors in relation to research participation, but also in taking up research results for lobby purposes, was mentioned by a member of a feminist legal organisation. She explained the existence of a victims' network that comprises victims of different sorts of crimes (including gender based violence), who meet periodically to discuss research participation and agree on their lobby agenda and on who will attend meetings with the government on behalf of the victims. This avoids the reliance on gatekeepers and the over-researching of certain individuals, as she explained to us:

> At the end of the day they nominated people who would represent them at the meeting, so then as opposed to us guys selecting people saying come you will be part of the meeting, we had them do it for themselves. […] That was a good example, just to have a person who you engage with on behalf of the others, someone the community can trust, and someone who they know will be able to be the voice of their needs (Interview 6 June 2019).

The creation of survivor networks can thus be an important step to make ownership and participation of survivors more feasible and practical. The creation of regional survivors' networks is also one of the central actions of another women's organisation we spoke with, representing an additional potential step to overcome research projects being geographically focused on particular regions.

Some other ideas about in what ways academic and international research could be used to generate impact in Kenya, mentioned by the interviewees in this research project, are the following:

- Presenting evidence and numbers. It is deemed easier to impress policymakers with larger scale quantitative data. On the other hand, it might be important to sensitise policymakers about the importance of small-scale qualitative studies which express lived experiences, rather than only focusing on the numbers.
- It is considered that comparative studies which can provide examples from other countries where policies were successful can be an important way of convincing policymakers of the importance of certain policies.
- To make research more accessible for non-academic audiences, it is important to break research outputs down into shorter, easier consumable outputs. This goes for policymakers, who often do not read lengthy reports but prefer short and succinct policy briefs, as well as for community participants, so that they can use the research for their own lobbying processes. Other avenues for this could be using social media platforms, mass media and local media to reach a wider audience, and the creation of infographics or posters targeted to grassroots audiences.
- The organisations involved in the research can benefit from not only the process of the research, but also its results, if recommendations are produced that are directed towards improving their work and programming.

As a general rule, it is important to let local researchers and organisations have an important say in which outputs would be most relevant for creating impact on the ground. Different types of outputs can be needed for different impacts and audiences. This requires time and budget, which needs to be calculated from the beginning.

3. Perspectives on research with international partners

Some of the experiences described in the previous sections were related to the interviewees' participation in research projects together with, or designed by, international researchers. The relationships between international researchers, often from Europe or the US, and local researchers are not often talked or written about. It is generally international researchers who come to LMICs to study; rarely do African researchers get the opportunity to research in the West, thus making international research collaborations a one-way street and defining the Global South as a place of knowledge extraction rather than as a place of important research experience and knowledge (Munene 2019). When the work of 'local' researchers – who can be involved in research as research associates or assistants, fixers or translators – is discussed, this is often in terms of the potential impacts of these local assistants on the research. a few studies (Turner 2010; Mwambari 2019) have explicitly discussed the experiences and challenges of such participation for local researchers. Our interviews show that those experiences have been mixed in Kenya, ranging from rich learning experiences to uncomfortable positions defined by a lack of influence on the research while facing the research participants, also after the research is over. This section deals with this mixed bag of experiences. It should however be pointed out that this research was carried out by researchers from the North. As researchers based in the UK, we are not local to the Kenyan context, and this might have influenced the responses in the interviews. As Mwambari (2019) points out, our participants might have felt more at ease to discuss these issues more freely with other Kenyan researchers rather than with outsiders. It could therefore be that the issues discussed below only represent one part of their actual experiences.

Benefits and positive experiences of international research partnerships

Interviewees described a range of benefits of participating in international research partnerships, both for the international researcher and the local partner. It was mentioned repeatedly that participating in such partnerships, and co-producing reports and other research outputs, can give credibility both to an organisation and to the study. This was identified as especially important since over the last years, the Kenyan government has tried to delegitimise civil society. International support and collaboration could help counter such strategies. One participant remarked that international researchers tend to be, or are perceived to be more neutral and less biased than some national researchers, among whom especially men can be influenced by culture, religion, tradition. These are crucial factors when working on sensitive issues such as gender based and sexual violence.

In addition to the reputational aspects, a clear obstacle for research in Kenya is access to funding. International research partnerships could therefore fill a clear gap, by providing resources to undertake research, with both academic and civil society partners. Participants also identified that research skills in terms of methods, ethics and analysis are not always very strong among Kenyan researchers, while there is also a lack of research mentoring for young scholars. Research ethics training, especially in terms of the ethical treatment of participants who are victims of gender based violence, were flagged as important ways in which international partnerships can strengthen Kenyan research practice. This makes research collaboration an important opportunity to learn. Especially international research projects that involve a range of different countries and experiences can make for a very rich learning experience, as a representative from a research organisation describes:

> It was a wonderful experience. We got to engage with academics all over the world so we got to share lessons and develop proposals on similar themes, so it was a very rich learning experience for me as a young scholar. […] People could volunteer to write about

> whatever they wanted to and there were a mix of junior and senior researchers and somehow we were able to put everything together in a coherent whole. We had at least two special issues if not more, in journals with people in different countries (Interview 4 June 219).

In this way, partnerships can expose Kenyan scholars to research training, international contacts, and it might facilitate publishing in international peer-reviewed academic journals, as well as creating more accessible publication pathways. International research partnerships however do not only benefit local researchers. International researchers too have much to gain from working together with Kenyan researchers. A women's organisation pointed out that, especially in research on sensitive issues such as gender based violence:

> You need to understand the different dynamics in different communities. There are some communities where you cannot have a conversation with men and women together, or there are some communities where you have to take certain religious customs into consideration and ethnic dynamics that you have to be aware of. So understanding those helps to break down the barriers of resistance that you might meet (Interview 3 June 2019).

This can help avoid bad research practice, such as asking culturally inappropriate questions that can be experienced as offensive by the participants (Mwambari 2019). When research is carried out in a partnership that respects and values those different skills and assets, the experience can in fact be 'fantastic', in the words of a representative of a women's organisation. She described a partnership in which they found that 'there has been a lot of dialogue and we can push back respectfully and say, "that is not relevant" and "that won't work in this context" and they listen' (Interview 21 June 2019).

Bad practice in international partnerships

Unfortunately, not all experiences have been this positive. There are many power structures at play between international researchers and local stakeholders, including the local organisations who might not participate as researchers but provide an important gatekeeper function that makes research possible. Their role is often taken for granted, thereby risking to maintain colonial practices and privileges (Mwambari 2019). The director of a women's organisation raised this concern:

> We have all these international organisations coming into the country to work in partnership. How do they compensate time for people who are providing or creating venues for them to access that whole chain? You're opening a way for them to reach out, […] how do you compensate their time? (Interview 4 June 2019).

The benefit of participating in or facilitating research for the local organisation or gatekeeper is not often reflected on by international researchers, is also the impression of an independent researcher we spoke to. She said that: 'as soon as they have their results then they go. We need to make sure we are benefitting the organisation or the community' (Interview 13 June 2019). Even though research impact is high on the UK research agenda, this impact work does not always involve the communities who participated in the research. They should become part of the impact agenda, in order to make research meaningful for them.

As has also been described elsewhere (Mwambari 2019), often international researchers come with a budget, research design and timeline that were defined in advance, which allows local researchers little leeway to influence or adapt the research. A representative of a women's organisation described that she has experienced international organisations suggesting research on a topic that the local organisation did not found relevant at the time. They 'did have discussions to ask if this was the time to do this particular study or not, but we went ahead and did the study' (Interview 21 June 2019). This particular study involved a relatively high number of stakeholder, which makes it harder for a local partner, who is just one of the stakeholder, to influence decisions about the scope of the research, especially because local partners are usually only approached when the research question is already set. Sometimes, they are approached at such a late stage that they do not believe research can be carried out in an ethical way. A representative from a women's legal organisation describes such an experience:

> We had a group, I won't say who they are from outside the country who reached out to say: "we are working on this document and we would like to get the input of sexual violence victims in Kenya, but we only have 3 weeks". And it seemed like it was a big project which seemed to have been going on for a year. And then it appeared, according to the emails: "we are not able to all come, we don't have enough time and we are looking for local partners we can work with". The way it was being presented was like: there is no time, you have to do this (Interview 6 June 2019).

This not only proves the point made earlier of survivors' voices often being an afterthought in research, but also shows how local organisations are often placed in an uncomfortable position. Given the lack of funds, they might need to participate in order to guarantee their staff salaries, while they are not unable to influence the research in any way as it was nearly finished. Instead, they are expected to work with tight and unrealistic deadlines on a sensitive issue. In this case, the researcher decided not to participate, but this might not always be an option. An independent researcher shared similar experiences. She distinguished being hired as a researcher, which she understands to give a higher degree of agency and a more equal position within a project, from being hired as a consultant, who is just expected to carry out what the donor or international researcher has decided: 'Entry as a consultant can be very constrained to what the organisation wants because they have already made up their minds, so you have less space to really even shape the methodologies' (Interview 13 June 2019). In her experience, often there is not even time to present the research results and outputs to the participants, which reinforces their sense of being used and exploited. She comments: 'it's very top-down: We suggested the research, it is our report, the language of our report and we cannot share. And that also reinforcing duplication: if you don't share your report then it's not available so people repeat another research'. This shows how the attitude of international NGOs and researchers helps maintain the above described tendencies of over-researching and research fatigue. Relying more on the insights and judgments of local researchers could help prevent this.

Beyond the risks of research fatigue which creates distrust and feelings of being exploited in the research participants, this practice also impacts on the local researchers, who find themselves in an uncomfortable position. They are stuck in the middle between international researchers who bring the funding and therefore decide on the research, while they are also the ones most directly facing the participants. Sometimes local researchers even encounter the same participants in subsequent research projects, when these participants confront them with the lack of results from earlier studies (Chiza Kashurha 2019). An independent researcher expresses the stress and burden this places on local researchers, who would like to do research in an ethical way but are not always allowed to do so:

> When I was doing research in the slums the people would say ‘you have already asked us!’ The slums are very over researched. […] They were like ‘come on how much more do you want me to answer?’ It was a reflection point you know, and it was such an uncomfortable place as well, because we could not even speak back. I asked the organisation ‘can we go back and really sit with them and show them what we found?’ but they were like ‘no this is our report, let’s roll the programme’. So who are we doing all these things for? (Interview 13 June).

These experiences suggest that ethical research practice requires thinking through research relationships or partnerships at two different levels: with the local researchers in universities or NGOs on the ground, and with the research participants. This creates a responsibility on the international researcher. Yet there are hardly any accountability mechanisms to make sure that researchers deal with this responsibility in a serious way. Too often, international researchers think only about one side of this equation, by hiring local researchers – not always on equal and participatory terms – while not giving them the space to create ethical relationships with the research participants. By not thinking through those different levels of research relationships, international researchers can end up doing harm not only to the participants, but also to the researchers themselves, who might feel exploited and used. This resembles unequal and even colonial relationships that are at odds with the goals of social justice that much research on gender based violence ostensibly pursues. We therefore argue for a set of guidelines for researchers from the West and LMICs to adhere to in order to establish ethical research partnerships that can advance research agendas which do not only create knowledge for social justice, but is also carried out in a democratic, fair and equally beneficial process. In the next section, we lay out some of the key elements that the interviews in Kenya provided us for the development of such guidelines.

4. Key aspects of ethical research partnerships

The foregoing shows that there have been mixed experiences in terms of research and international research partnerships on gender based violence in Kenya. Both these positive and negative experiences identify lessons that are essential to inform best practices that we believe should inform guidelines on research partnerships. As Mwambari (2019) has also suggested, adopting these guidelines should first and foremost be researchers' responsibility. Nevertheless, others have responsibilities too. We believe there is also a need to raise awareness about the importance for ethical practices in wider institutions, for example for those who teach students about research and fieldwork, and for ethics boards that approve research, which should take more meaningful steps to hold their researchers accountable. We also believe that research funders, both in academia and the development and health fields, could play an important role in making sure research is carried out in an ethical and responsible way. We believe that the following issues represent the minimally expected ground rules for an ethical research partnerships. Furthermore, there is a need for those partnerships to conduct research in a way that is ethical and responsible towards the participants. It is here that participatory and creative approaches to research, which we initially set out to research, can play a key role. In a separate piece of work we address the key elements that should be kept in mind when undertaking such research. The elements described above however mainly refer to the ground rules for ethical relationships between the different partners in a research project.

Reciprocity and value for all of those involved

Participating in truly democratic and ethical partnerships mean that there should be value in such participation for all partners. Too often, it seems like research mostly benefits international researchers who control the research process and its outputs. Before the start of a research project, it is therefore important to identify between all partners involved what each partner will contribute and how they will benefit. As a representative of a women's organisation explained: 'it feels like a true partnership if it is something we can agree on which is of value to both of us rather than having someone just come and just be around, do a bit of data collection (Interview 3 June 2019).From the previous section it is apparent that research funding is scarce, and therefore funding can be of important benefit to local organisations or researchers. It is however not all about the money. Training processes can be important ways to contribute to local knowledge and capacities too, or the participation in workshops, etc. Also publications and other research outputs are important, as is described in the next sections. All these issues should be discussed in honest and transparent ways, and ideally be outlined in a memorandum of understanding of statement of intent, before starting the research. This way, expectations are clear and local partners can decide whether or not they see the value of participating.

Appropriately valuing local researchers

The previous sections have made clear that local researchers are of the utmost important to international projects. They can provide crucial contacts, have cultural knowledge and sensitivity which is crucial for collecting data in an appropriate and sensitive ways, they are aware of local norms and customs, etc. Nevertheless, local researchers are often treated as mere consultants, who simply carry out what has been decided internationally, and whose main task lies in data collection. This reflects unequal power relations in which 'local' is often seen as inferior than Western, which is also often reflected in the remuneration of local versus international researchers (Mwambari 2019). This is not only utterly unfair, but it is also a lost opportunity. Local researchers have crucial contextual, theoretical and substantive knowledge that is essential at the moment of data analysis and writing up the research results. Local researchers should therefore be seen as equal team members, rather than as research assistants or consultants, and they should be valued and remunerated as such. A member of a research organisation explained: ‘We don’t like to think of ourselves as data collectors and I think we have the capacity to do so much more. It’s nice to have that kind of relationship’ (Interview 4 June 2019). Furthermore, in addition to their academic experience and theoretical knowledge, local researchers might have the practical work experience on the ground that is crucial to turn academic research, which can sometimes be too theoretical, into recommendations or actions that can create impact. Academic theories, including critical theories, often privilege scientific knowledge, considering experiential knowledge of non-academics from non-Western parts of the world less valuable. This however leads to a gap between theory and practice, based on a ‘sub-theorisation’ of practice (Santos 2011). A member of a women’s health and human rights organisation believed that ‘it’s about offering practical recommendations because that’s often a challenge where the research is so academic. You need someone else to be able to assist, to show you how this can be useful for the survivors and the people working with the survivors’ (Interview 21 June 2019).Local partners can also play an important role in translating academic texts and jargon into language that is understandable for participants at a community level. Approaching local researchers as full and important team members creates a different sort of relationship, defined by collegiality and equality rather than hierarchical relationships. It is a relationship that also values different ways of knowing.

The importance of time

As described, too often the involvement of local partners as a step towards including ‘local voices’ in the research is almost an afterthought. Contacting local partners at such is not only disrespectful towards local partners, as it shows their say in the research project is minimal, but also towards the participants they are expected to work with. Researchers should build in partnerships from the start of the project, and allow local partners sufficient time to build relationships with communities or survivors who are potential research participants. There must be sufficient time to consult with communities before a project, give them time to discuss and give feedback before starting a project, and ask them what sort of research outputs would be useful for them. Here it is important to emphasise that consultation of communities or sharing the research results with them does not always take the form of genuine engagement, in which communities actually have the possibility to influence the research. Consultation is not enough; it is about being open to participants’ opinions and adapting the project or results accordingly. International partners should respect and rely on the opinions of local partners as to what timeframes are culturally appropriate and also feasible for the partners’ own work schedule.

Being involved in the entire process of research

From the preceding paragraphs it becomes clear that involving local partners should not be an afterthought or an instrument for obtaining local knowledge. Local researchers and organisations would generally like to be involved in the whole research process, and their ideas are essential for making sure that the research is culturally and contextually relevant, carried out in ways that are appealing to participants and sensitive to local norms, that the research outputs are made accessible in a meaningful way to the participants and that the results are taken forward in ways that can produce impact on the ground. Therefore, it is important to start engaging local researchers from the outset, involving in the setting of the research topic and question, designing the research methods, collecting and analysing the data and producing the different outputs, be they academic or more policy-oriented. Academic researchers might believe that peer-reviewed academic publications are of little use to their civil society partners, but our interviews showed that co-authored academic publications are of interest to many local researchers, as a way of showing the credibility and legitimacy of their work, and to learn from academic researchers and vice versa. Moreover, in the words of a research organisation: ‘the people on the project are able to give valuable contributions to peer review publications or the final report’ (Interview 4 June 2019).

Setting and managing expectations

In some cases, due to budgetary constraints or when working in a very large international project, it might be hard to give local partners an equal say in the design and content of a research project. In these cases, it is crucial to be open and honest about this from the beginning, and to be clear about what is expected from the local partner and what they will receive in return and to examine the role and motives of the international partner. Will their role just be data collection or is there scope for involvement in the design, analysis, and publications. When all of these things are clear, NGOs or local researchers can then decide whether they want to accept or refuse the partnership. In this regard, agreements on publications, the use of logos and acknowledgements, as well as funding and remuneration should be discussed very clearly, to avoid any disappointments and feelings of exploitation. In the same way, it is important to be very clear to the participants in the research about what the research will be like, what will happen with their contributions and about what the research can and cannot do and change. A lack of transparency towards local partners and participants will cause distrust.

Planning impact

The second section described how the lack of actual changes as a result of research reinforces feelings of research fatigue among participants. Therefore, to make sure that the research is meaningful for participants and NGOs, it is important to identify from the beginning of a research project what the desired impact is, and what are the ways to achieve this. In this way, rather than the research finishing with a project report or academic publication, which in themselves do not make changes to policies or survivors’ lives, the research can be more clearly connected to strategies to generate changes. These can consist of working with NGOs to improve their programming, key persons such as gender focal points or departments and ministries in local or national governments to adopt or adapt policies, or communities, religious leaders and elders to raise awareness or change practices and attitudes. Making these actors into stakeholders in the research early on helps to create ownership over the research, which helps to increase their commitment to take the results forward. This makes an important connection with the impact agenda that is ever more important for UK academics, and requires them to work together with their local partners to identify impact at different levels.

5. Concluding remarks

This report has described the experiences of a number of Kenyan organisations who work in areas related to gender based violence in undertaking research, individually or in international partnerships. These have showed that Kenyan organisations and researchers are very well aware of the ethical risks of doing research with gender based violence victims. Unfortunately, exploitative research practice is still relatively common, also among international research projects. Furthermore, it is clear that international research partnerships are not always democratic and transparent. Research often seems to benefit international researchers more than local researchers or participants. Ethical and democratic research partnerships would benefit both local and international researchers. This would enrich the research results, increase its local relevance and cultural sensitivity, and can increase the likelihood that it will lead to impacts that can improve the lives of survivors. Ethical research partnerships, key elements of which have been outlined in this report, would imply equality, transparency and participation during all stages of the research. To further prevent research fatigue, over-researching and re-traumatisation of survivors, identified as a common problem by interviewees, participatory approaches can be used. The use of such approaches is not common in Kenya yet, although their use corresponds to many of the values expressed by the Kenyan organisations and researchers interviewed.

To finish this report, we will outline some ideas and priorities for a research agenda, identified by the participants in this research. These priorities can form the basis of further discussions about potential research partnerships, when funding opportunities arise.

- It is important to analyse efforts to prevent gender based violence, as currently the majority of research and programming is focused on efforts to respond to this violence.
- In terms of response to violence, it is important to study the effectiveness of policies and programmes, to understand which are most effective.
- Currently, there is considerable attention to sexual violence against women, while it is sometimes forgotten that sexual violence can also be perpetrated against men and children. Research must uncover the violence committed against those other groups too.
- Femicide is on the rise in Kenya and more must be learnt about it: what cause it and why is it on the rise?
- There is a strong stigma attached to counselling and psychosocial support interventions in Kenya. More must be known about this, is that research can help combat this stigma. There should also be analyses about locally and culturally appropriate forms of psychosocial assistance, including arts-based interventions. Furthermore, the mental health of those working to support survivors of gender based violence as well as activists in the field should be better understood and addressed.
- There is still a need to better understand the obstacles in access to justice for survivors of gender based violence, along the entire justice chain, for example from the medical examinations to the police investigations to the justice sector.
- Sexual violence during conflict and in times of elections tends to be underreported because of the obstacles for women to denounce in those times of upheaval. The full extent of this violence should be studied, as well as women’s experiences in seeking support and justice.
- Rather than solely studying and addressing survivors of violence, more attention should be focused on bystanders of gender based violence, in order to develop bystander interventions that can help prevent this violence. In the same vein, it is important to address men and their role in committing, responding to and preventing this violence.

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