

Research, Practice and Evaluation: Violence against Women Surveys Some Thoughts on Implementation and Decision Making

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Summary

Gender analysis and research hold great potential for improving women's safety strategies, policies, and practice. Unfortunately, much research is *about* women rather than *for* them and often has a minimal impact due to poor planning, budgeting, and dissemination. For example, research methodologies and tools must be thoughtfully adjusted to location, cultural context, and societal norms.

Research should be used to inform policy and improve practice; if policy and practice are to be successful, they must reflect the needs of those for whom they are designed. Much expertise lies in people who live in the reality being researched, a world that may be alien to many researchers and policy-makers. Combining researchers' technical and methodological expertise with participants' real-life experiences can make research more dynamic and exact. Researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners must work closely with those who are to benefit from research findings. Such a user-oriented approach is democratic, empowering, and goes by many names: community-based, participatory, collaborative...

Sadly, many policy-makers do not strategize nor budget for dissemination of survey results and, as a result, practitioners are often not aware of such valuable information. Involving practitioners as an integral part of the research process improves the dissemination of findings as well as encourages ongoing evaluation of whether research is relevant and meets their needs.

Finally, such research-policy-practice alliances and collaboration can encourage more men to participate in gender-based research which is necessary if gender is to be mainstreamed and reach into all sectors of society.

Introduction

The traditional tendency to consider women as subordinate to men has led to a perception of justification of traditional violent practices and gender-based violence, such as domestic and family violence, as a form of control or "protection" of women. It has also helped to hide various types of violence such as sexual harassment, rape, incest, and the sexual exploitation of women

for profit. Such victimization, even in its most violent and serious forms, has in many countries still not received adequate consideration by either legislation or research. Many violent acts, and in particular those occurring within the domestic sphere, are not recognized as crimes and do not appear in official statistics. Despite the fact that domestic violence appears to be frequent practically everywhere, it is also one of the most underreported offences. Furthermore, studies in both industrialized and developing countries show that acts that are reported are often not treated as crimes and simply regarded as domestic and private affairs. As a consequence, women victimization, survival and safety involve the unequal application of, and access to, the law. In addition, it is known that there is a scarcity of data, research, studies, prevention policies, victim support and effective legal measures to deal with the issue.

Violence against women in society and within the family is related to the problem of women's oppression both in the developed and developing countries. Although the available information is partial it does evidence that women in any particular country, developing or developed, are at a greater risk of various forms of victimization related both to traditional gender inequality as well as to changes in gender roles brought about by changes in society. Measures to solve these problems cannot solely rely on criminal law, the application of which can sometimes result in a secondary victimization. It is also ill equipped for dealing with the special emotional, economic, psychological and other relationships that often exist between the offender and the victim. Keeping in mind that different types of violence require different remedies, awareness and understanding needs to be sought elsewhere, and research surveys are one of these vehicles that can both contribute to lobbying pressures, policy debates and improvements in practice. Strategies and policies must be informed and herein lies the great potential of gender analysis, research and information sharing in women's safety.

I guess I was asked to make a presentation to this conference because of research I have been undertaken on violence studies in general and violence against women specifically in a number of southern and eastern African countries. This paper is therefore a collection of thoughts based on my experiences of working in this sector, which will form the basis of my presentation.

During the late 1980s, I was involved in monitoring violence between the liberation movements in South Africa and as part of this research we collected and collated information on the effects of the apartheid state's violence on the lives of black women and girls. However, this was never properly analyzed and any emphasis on the subject matter was more by default than design as issues of women's safety were simply submerged under overall safety issues. It was only during 1997 when I was asked by UN-Habitat to undertake a dedicated study on violence against women in metropolitan South Africa, that I first became directly involved in research for policy on women's safety. As is always the bane of all research studies, limited resources meant that the study was restricted to just fewer than 300 women in South Africa's three major metropolises, who combined represented a total population of around 15 million people of which half are women. However, the research team felt that such a study, if it was to have relevance, needed to be extended and also to include women in all parts of the country. For this purpose we were granted an award by the Danish government to enlarge the study to 1,000 women located across all parts of the country.

Given the perverse peculiarities of South Africa's history, targeting generic categories of women by age and spatial location across different types of crimes was insufficient and the study had to take cognizance of race and class. Women's safety in terms of specific crimes was and remains very much dependant on race and class. This complicated the process which was made even more difficult by the fact that no existing research tools offered the type of approach that the research team felt was necessary for the South African situation.

Shocking, as it seemed at the time, which was only six years ago, such research was found to be at a very nascent stage, even in the developed societies. Furthermore, methodologies developed in the developed societies were not easily transferable to developing societies. Indeed, even within developing societies, research tools needed to vary in order to take cognizance of demographic variables and spatial localities. An interview administered to an illiterate woman residing in a tin shack in an overcrowded slum settlement requires both a different set of research questions and applied methodology to an interview with a woman who is literate and residing in a formal home located in a suburban locality. Furthermore, a woman living in a remote rural area is confronted with an environment that is totally alien to that of the other two generic categories of

women, as is that for a woman living on the streets or along the many thousands of kilometres of freeways around the country.

The only yardstick available to the study team at the time was a recent Canadian survey. The interview schedule was found to be very useful and provided us with the first template of our questionnaires, however the survey methodology was found to be completely inadequate. The Canadian survey was conducted by telephone, and whereas South Africa has a good universal access to telephony, it has a poor universal service. At the time, less than 30% of women in the country had access to telephone at home. Indeed rural / urban discrepancies meant that in rural areas coverage only extended to less than 3% of all Black households.

Furthermore, given the relative lack of social care available to South African women, it was felt that many survivors had probably not received prior counselling and to subject women to what may be argued as being secondary abuse and then not be able to follow-up with treatment, would have been unimaginable. Indeed, results of the survey showed that over two-thirds of all the women had never discussed their abuse with anybody before, with less than one-sixth having had sort some form of counselling or “comfort”.

Nevertheless, a way forward needed to be found and this was achieved through the creation of “steering committee” comprising a coalition of politicians, policy makers, psychologists, counsellors, academics, police officers, representatives from the judicial sector, medical practitioners, care givers (private, public and civic sector), survivors of violence, women in vulnerable situations (living with court injunctions, sex workers and women residing in high crime or conflict areas) and social researchers.

A number of working committees were created to try, and better understand, not only how the research should be conducted but also what the research should be about. This process took an agonizing half a year before a research methodology and the research questions were agreed upon. None were new in a manner that some breathtaking thesis was created, but rather represented an eclectic mix of existing methodologies remodelled to be deemed acceptable to

firstly women survivors on whom future policy was to target, secondly practitioners who would have to work with the results and finally policy makers who would have to enact and enforce the findings.

The research team followed a Maoist approach to logistical planning and after a random selection of areas where the research was to be implemented (using the WHO, EPI methodology), 110 spatial cells were created. Utilizing links that were formed through the network of agencies and organizations that had joined the steering committee, a councillor or psychologist was located within or nearby each of the 110 cells and based on the demography of the area, were asked to interview up to 10 women each. Most important of all, a trained councillor or agency either located within or nearby each of the survey cells was approached and formally engaged to supply whatever care might be requested from any of the women being interviewed. This was later extended to include family members. The same service was made available to the research team, of which almost 10% availed themselves to it.

We also located safe houses or places of safety in or nearby each of the cells and put into motion an “evacuation” plan should rapid assistance be necessary. This was never required, but it must be said, that tragically her husband killed one of the women who shared her experience with us the day after she completed her interview – interviews were often conducted over more than one session. Our oversight was that we had not envisaged the possibility that a police officer's partner may have been one of our abused respondents and by alerting the police stations of the fact that we were undertaking such a study, we alerted one of the perpetrators.

I was privileged to be part of that team and was then able to take this experience to a number of other countries in both the developing and developed worlds. However, prior to moving on, it is important to note that without the generous grant that we were awarded, we would never have been able to undertake such a study. Ordinarily, field expenses tend to subsume approximately 40% of most research budgets, whereas in this case the actual field costs would have been around 80% of what would have been a competitive budget had it gone through a tender or bidding process. As it is, we still ran out of funds for the analysis and it was only by

being given time out by respective organizations were the five authors able to get together to complete the report.

The Link between research, policy and practice

Research, simply for the sake of it unfortunately happens. Where such research informs the academic debate or adds to the greater knowledge of the subject matter, it can be argued that it has a place and is acceptable. However, too frequently, illogical briefs and inappropriate planning often results in research for research's sake and the only impact it has is to have interfered in the lives of the respondents.

Marx said that the method of investigation is different from the method of presentation, which has influenced generations of researchers. However, this is problematic when we deal with research on women's safety, for this schism suggests some level of inauthenticity and a distinction of researcher, researched and consumer or beneficiary of research. This simply does not hold and the aim of research should be to inform policy and to improve on practice, and as such there should be an inextricable link between the three.

Social research has moved from the sterile nature of past methodologies and has become much more pragmatic and participatory, as the people being researched have been categorised from being mere subjects to becoming participants in both the process and the outcome. Interactive social research may be regarded as being both more pragmatic and utilitarian. Such a user-oriented approach to research incorporates a value-base that is committed to promoting change through research. It is democratic and participatory by nature and is in sharp contrast to the positivistic 'top-down' approach that has been accused of 'lifting decisions from the village square' and placing them with 'experts or outside agencies'.

A key feature research, whose aim is to inform policy and thus be put into practice, should be the empowerment of the recipient and there is no better way of achieving this, than through participation. This may, for example, involve the researcher, policy maker and

practitioner identifying the user group, working in close collaboration with the users, and getting them involved in identifying their needs, setting up research questions, and using the research findings. As such the research process is based on the ethos of putting the recipient at the core.

The practice goes by many names: community-based research, participatory research, collaborative research, and others, but rests on two main principles: democratization of the knowledge process, and social change. As such it is specifically geared either to policy or practice or hopefully to both. In practice research can only succeed in doing this by developing from the outset and maintaining throughout a working relationship with all sets of stakeholders. They are linked in a circuitous manner and are inseparable.

The rest of the presentation is set out in response to the questions asked by the conference organisers.

The benefits and value of an alliance between research and practice in implementing action on urban safety

Two relationships exist and lie at the core of each answer given to this question:

- 1) A dichotomous relationship between theory and practice is the essential cornerstone of successful research that will have a meaning in the “real” world and this is based upon theory being informed by practice and vice versa.
- 2) A tripartite relationship between researcher, policy maker and practitioner is an indispensable reality when such research is being entertained. Indeed this is extended to a quadrangular relationship when the respondent is brought into the equation.

The benefits of the alliance are numerous and we can begin by stating the most obvious that through partnership and rigorous community based action research women's voices are

heard. An important element of action research is participation by 'informants' who engage in collective, self-reflective enquiry in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social practices. Ultimately, if policy is to be successful, it should reflect the needs of those for whom it is designed. Furthermore, for years now, researchers are engaged to undertake tasks because they are deemed to be experts and although this may be true, real expertise lies with those people who live through the reality being researched. A combination of research expertise in terms of technical applications and methodological procedures matched with that of people's life experiences makes for a more dynamic and exact process.

Another benefit is that an alliance involves as many stakeholders as possible in determining the types of information needed upon which to base their decisions on, thus ensuring that the research questions are better targeted. As such practitioners and policy makers, together with researchers set the scenario for the research, create the research tools, plan the research logistics, administer the field research, analyse the findings and test the findings amongst the targeted recipients.

The steering committee launched for the inaugural Violence against Women Survey in South Africa was an organic process with no "rules" determining either a constitution or parameters to involvement. It was simply an organic and evolving process that took every body input into account. There were two consequences, one positive and the other negative. The process took over six months just to get to ground zero, but a level of awareness was created that no ordinary research process could have hoped for and a sense of buy-in permeated way beyond those who participated.

Yet another benefit of an alliance is to allow stakeholders the opportunity to analyse research and thus enhancing the output by adding their experience that is based on harsh realities, to whatever theoretical frame of reference is being used. Theories although emanating from researched realities are not always reflective of the "real" world and thus need to be moulded in order to be used as useful tools in understanding the situation within which the research is being undertaken. There are obvious factors that can be replicated across different studies, but in all

likelihood, there will always be a need to “adjust” the theoretical and methodological frameworks to each situation.

When the Violence against Women Survey was launched in Kenya, templates developed in South Africa, and later Tanzania, were used, but immediately it became obvious that terminology and understanding of certain actions and reactions were different in Kenya. These were not picked up by the policy makers, but rather by the practitioners, who guided the set-up process towards a model that later proved successfully workable. Once again the set-up took much longer than envisaged and a significant amount of the finances were utilised on this portion of the work, however, once the project began, anxiety dissipated as the process moved through the subsequent stages in a trouble free manner.

Indeed, adjustments to learnt experiences may also be necessary even when research is being undertaken at the same place but across time.

In South Africa, various gender studies that were conducted over time amongst the same target groups, required constant changes, for not only was there “research response expertise” displayed by the respondents and this had to be probed for, but the changing environment, namely exogenous factors started to impact on their perceptions and attitudes towards particular issues. During the mid-90's legislation was passed legalizing the concept of marital rape, and within months, respondents who had previously either ignored or had not internalised the concept of forced sex by their spouses, started to articulate such violations. Likewise, ongoing reform within the law enforcement and judicial sectors has meant that each subsequent phase of the research has been forced to adjust.

This is also a lesson that needs to be taken into account when research, policy makers and practitioners look to precedence for templates to work with. The law enforcement and judicial, as well as social welfare and care settings, impact considerably on how women view safety within their environment. Familial structures and certainly in the developing societies, religious networks also have a profound impact on women's actions and reactions to their safety.

Yet another benefit of an alliance relates to dissemination. The successful completion of research does not end with a document full of recommendations, but with the assimilation of these into the world of practitioners and this can only be achieved if the dissemination logistics have themselves been successfully implemented. Unfortunately this hard reality rarely crosses the divide between what policy makers and researchers know should be done and what they actually do. It is rare indeed to see a researcher “taking” their findings back into the arena from which they initially drew their data and information. In fact, few research manuals suggest that this 40th step should be added to the existing 39 steps to successful research undertaking. Sadly, many policy makers also fail to see the need to strategize around how dissemination should occur and are always reluctant to budget for this task. Whether it is ignorance on behalf of the researcher and the need to be a gatekeeper on behalf of the policy maker, it means that the practitioner often loses out on valuable input.

A tripartite arrangement with practitioners as an integral part off the research process means that the findings are being disseminated as they are being analyzed. More important however, is the fact that there has been a buy-in and acknowledgement that the research and research output is relevant and meets the needs of those implementing the findings. In South Africa, there was a side effect that had not initially been intended.

Soon after the interview schedules for the Violence against Women's study were developed, the research team was asked by a number of care organisations working with women, for electronic copies of the questionnaire, for it was seen as a tool that they could use either when screening women survivors or as part of ongoing counselling. In total, over 20 organizations adapted the interview schedule to their needs. In retrospect, this made perfect sense, for it was input from the self-same organizations that created the schedule in the first place. In addition, organizations that previously had none or little contact with each other, created links that showed promise for the future.

A strategy based on a research, policy maker and practitioner alliance should be a non-negotiable when this type of research is being undertaken, but it carries risks and these should be acknowledged and planned for up-front. Research recipients as participants engage themselves on

the basis of their learnt experience, which will be reflected through common threads across the groups involved, but will also display a degree of uniqueness to many individuals. The need to air this uniqueness can result in frustration and can impact upon the process itself, and subsequent outcomes. The focus can easily become redirected resulting in outcomes that may not be readily predicted and, for this reason alone, researchers may not be fully at ease with what they are not in control of: the 'knowledge' it produces, the thinking it stimulates, or the action it promotes.

During the early work on women's safety projects, the notion of emotional abuse was introduced as an area that women wanted to explore. This soon became an area that entrenched itself, not only in gender specific research, but has subsequently been incorporated into victimisation and youth rehabilitation research.

Finally, such alliances encourage more women and most importantly men as researchers into a research and policy sector that they in the past ignored. Unlike scientific research and to a lesser extent marketing research, social research has tended to be fairly gender equitable in terms of participation, however, gender based research has until very recently been dominated by women with a strong sense of activism and if it is to mainstream and reach into all sectors of society it must attract more women and men. By extending the research process into the realms of policy-making and amongst practitioners, greater exposure is given to the discipline.

BENEFITS OF SUCH COLLABORATION

Until quite recently urban safety issues were not all based on real life experiences, and therefore not founded on safety within the home, on a street level and within neighbourhoods be they residential, commercial or educational. Yet safety related policies, if they are to be successful must be based at that micro level. People's experiences are a reflection of the world within which they reside, a world that may be alien to many researchers and most policy makers. Two examples are used to illustrate this.

When undertaking the violence against women survey in Dar es Salaam, and on completion of the proposed research framework to policy makers, a number of men responded to

the issue of women subjugating their income to their spouses as an act of normality and that such questions were irrelevant to this type of study. Their women colleagues were quick to point out their shortcomings in terms of their skewed sense of normality and insisted that this remains an issue. The research subsequently showed that this was an issue and one over which many women felt humiliated over and certainly not normal. Indeed, one police officer engaged me on the issue on a daily basis for the weeks that I spent in Tanzania and at the end agreed that he had erred.

Secondly, research must be reality based and if statistics are to be reflective of reality, researchers must be confident of their reliability.

I was involved in a study of drug usage in South Africa and Jamaica, and in the first wave of research, a very odd set of statistics was collected. We found a very high percentage of middle-aged people describing themselves as being substance abuse addicts and a much smaller incidence of adolescents replying positive to such a question. We had expected an inverse relationship and the findings made no sense at all. However, after further research, it was established that most of the respondents in both countries felt that caffeine and tannin were drugs and drinking coffee and tea meant that one was an addict. At the same time, very few of the indigenous populations of both countries felt that marijuana should be described as a drug.

FACTORS THAT HAVE FACILITATED OR INHIBITED THE PROCESS

Many factors have facilitated this process, not least of all the enthusiasm and desire for survivors of abuse to be heard and to share their experiences so that others may benefit. However, the one single set of entities that have been at the core in terms of linking research, policy and practice into a continuum have been the NGO's and CBO's operating in this sector. They have been and continue to be at the forefront in terms of creating the space within which researchers and policy-makers have been able to engage in research on women's safety issues.

On the inhibition side, undoubtedly, intellectual and political elitism has been the main obstacle limiting the complete involvement of all stakeholders in research on women's safety issues.

A second inhibiting factor has been the inability of many funding agencies to understand the necessity of making funds available to enable both for the consultation process to be put into action and to compensate women participants for their efforts. For too long now, funding agencies and policy makers, and it must be said researchers too, have arrogantly believed in the notion that because a research process is being undertaken for the benefit of a particular segment of society, an engagement by members of that segment of society should contribute their services gratis. Yet when research and policy making is undertaken into a national process that would benefit all citizens of that national entity, including researchers and policy makers, similar sentiments are not expressed. The researcher and policy maker also conveniently ignore the notion of creating budget “space” for participants, for in all likelihood, it would compete with the overall funding available for their own benefit. This is an issue that another forum needs to deal with, but one that must be dealt with pretty soon.

The impact of research partnerships on women's capacity for action and participation in developing diagnoses and solutions

A lot of research is about women rather than for women. Partnerships can make the transition from "about" to "for". Also, as previously discussed, it means that solutions may be different and about building up networks of caring. Much about action, decision support, etc., is cast in masculine terms, as an activist friend put it to me when she heard that I was coming to this conference, that male practitioners in safety studies tend to “be very phallic in their approach, talking about penetrating the problem”.

On a more serious note however, diagnostics too, assume that the problem is an illness and the approach taken could in some instances be compared to medical modelling, whereas, as the process becomes more action orientated and led by women it tends to move towards articulation-based diagnosis. This, itself is a step towards solution.

Finally, partnerships are also important because many women are alienated from formal power infrastructure and resources. Forming partnerships with formal structures can start acting as an essential first step in including them into the power structure system and also exposing those within that system to women as recipients of the policies they enact.