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Research in forced displacement: guidance for a feminist and decolonial approach

The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened inequities and undermined health, human rights, and gender equality for forcibly displaced populations. The United Nations Refugee Agency estimates that, at the end of 2019, there were 79.5 million people forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations, or events seriously disturbing public order. Evidence about the needs of these populations is crucial to tailor effective and equitable responses, but data collection efforts are faced with considerable new challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many researchers are attempting to overcome such challenges by collecting data remotely, but doing so creates ethical and practical concerns that risk perpetuating gender, racial, and other inequities. For example, the gender divide in mobile phone ownership, internet access, and digital literacy creates barriers to data collection from women, further silencing their voices and that of other groups without access to these technologies. Overcrowded living spaces, mobility restrictions, and lack of autonomy over technology use (due to COVID-19, gender norms, or both) exacerbate ethical concerns regarding confidentiality, privacy, and safety during remote data collection.

The ongoing pandemic has also exposed persisting power hierarchies between researchers and forcibly displaced populations. These populations experience power asymmetries in their position as the so-called beneficiaries of humanitarian research and action,
and are often excluded from participation in decision making about the research intended to benefit their communities. Forcibly displaced women and girls are consistently categorised as vulnerable and needing protection or rescuing, which takes away their agency and power of action, while risking exploitation or abuse by the same humanitarian actors that supposedly aim to protect them. Recent efforts to address these hierarchies through the process of localisation—ie, recognising, respecting, and strengthening leadership by local authorities and the capacity of local civil society in humanitarian action to better address the needs of affected populations and better prepare actors for future humanitarian responses—have been criticised for neglecting the insidious effects of sexism and racism, both intrinsically linked to colonial legacies.

The perceived urgency to collect data remotely also exposes neocolonial power hierarchies between researchers in affected settings and those in resource-rich settings, where funding is often concentrated. Researchers from advanced economies predominantly define the research questions with little or tokenistic consultation of in-country researchers or communities.

With COVID-19-related movement restrictions, research can typically only be done by collecting data remotely or by delegating data collection to in-country researchers. In the haste to produce evidence, interactions can become one sided or top down, as those in higher hierarchical positions issue directives to front-line actors. The new nature of these interactions also risks the so-called ethics dumping, that is, off-loading risk to in-country researchers and communities to equalise power dynamics. By advocating a feminist approach, we propose moving beyond the performative dimensions of being gender-sensitive and decolonial, towards understanding what it means to equitable share power within research collaborations in a meaningful way that challenges traditional methods of knowledge production.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a crucial opportunity for researchers working with forcibly displaced populations to rethink their traditional approaches. Applying feminist values to data collection during COVID-19 and beyond requires putting at the centre the knowledge of those from whom data are being collected. We provide key recommendations (panel) and a detailed checklist (appendix) for applying a feminist approach that takes into account ethical, gender, and decolonisation considerations when collecting data in forced displacement settings.

At the time of research conceptualisation, applying a feminist approach equates to meaningfully engaging forcibly displaced populations so that research is relevant to their concerns, instead of solely focusing on what researchers believe is important. This engagement must include considerations of how gender intersects with other axes of power such as race, ethnicity, or displacement status to shape individual experiences.

Panel: Recommendations for a feminist approach during research in forced displacement settings

Stage 1: conceptualisation of research and data collection
- Establish equitable partnerships to conduct research on topics that are relevant and beneficial to all members of communities

Stage 2: funding
- Meaningfully involve all researchers in budget preparation and ensure an equitable allocation of resources

Stage 3: research design
- Consider the political, social, economic, and historical contexts and power hierarchies of the research setting and plan for the meaningful participation of individuals and communities with less power

Stage 4: collecting data
- Consider how gendered and colonial power hierarchies might be reinforced by capacity building of front-line researchers and engagement with communities
- Ensure collection of data on gender to allow for capturing gender and other inequities

Stage 5: data analysis and dissemination
- Engage front-line researchers and study populations in conducting intersectional gender analysis, as well as in interpretation, writing, and dissemination of findings
- Use findings to challenge unjust systems and policies and deliver gender transformative and equitable programmes

Please refer to the appendix for more details.
Taking such steps at the research conceptualisation stage allows ethical approaches to codeveloping recruitment and data collection strategies, treating forcibly displaced populations as more than data providers, and ensuring the participants’ privacy and confidentiality. Consideration of power hierarchies includes reflection on the dynamics between front-line researchers, who hold power despite being so-called local participants, and communities, leading to concrete steps to reduce power imbalances. Power hierarchies and politics also shape how data are analysed, published, and shared. Choices on which data are deemed relevant, how the analysis is presented, and how authorship is decided are all arenas in which power is exercised to prioritise some voices and silence others. Feminist values emphasise meaningful decision making and relational engagement, from research conceptualisation to publication and beyond.

Dismantling well established data collection practices, especially in forced displacement settings, requires a sustained commitment from all parties in the research ecosystem and changes to the architecture that enables these practices. COVID-19 has given us the opportunity to reflect on and challenge long-existing power hierarchies within research—a process that is needed to address lingering colonial and patriarchal power relations and avoid ethical pitfalls. We believe that applying a feminist lens is not merely about demolishing these practices. COVID-19 has given us the opportunity to reflect on and challenge long-existing power hierarchies within research—a process that is needed to address lingering colonial and patriarchal power relations and avoid ethical pitfalls. We believe that applying a feminist lens is not merely about demolishing problematic structures, but also about collaboratively building up new ones for a more just world.

NSS reports salary support from the RECAP project by UK Research and Innovation as part of the Global Challenges Research Fund, grant number ES/P010873/1. All other authors declare no competing interests. The thinking underpinning this Comment began in a virtual workshop on the Ethical and Gender Considerations in Remote Data Collection and Research in Forced Displacement Settings, hosted by the authors on June 29, 2020, with the support of the Global Health Centre, the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, and GENDRO.

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Urgent needs of low-income and middle-income countries for COVID-19 vaccines and therapeutics

WHO and partners have learnt from the mis-steps in the response to the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic\(^1\) and established the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator to promote equitable access to vaccines, therapeutics, and diagnostics.\(^2\) However, many high-income countries already have bilateral agreements with manufacturers of COVID-19 vaccines.\(^3\) The COVAX Facility of the ACT Accelerator has agreements to access 2 billion doses of WHO pre-qualified vaccines during 2021, but this represents only

Published Online
January 28, 2021
https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00242-7

Comment

www.thelancet.com Vol 397 February 13, 2021