

Profile: Action research on gender-based violence at the University of Namibia: Results and methodological reflections

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Introduction

The lack of gender activism on the University of Namibia's campuses points to a lack of feminist consciousness and a pervasive culture of fear at the university. The Department of Sociology at the University of Namibia (UNAM), in collaboration with the University of Cape Town-based African Gender Institute (AGI), initiated a gender research and activism project to enhance young women's research capacity and to (en)gender some activism. Within the broad theme of young women controlling their own bodies, we chose gender-based violence (GBV) as our focus. The research team comprised two Department of Sociology lecturers and a core group of ten student co-researchers. The project focused on gender-based violence and sexual harassment as key impediments to young women's bodily integrity. The research provided opportunities to reflect and act on young women's lack of control over their own bodies and the institutional cultures and practices that impede such control. Some of the major issues that affect young female students are harassment and violence from taxi drivers, male students and lecturers, sex-for-marks transactions between male lecturers and female students and the exploitation of young women's labour when they become 'hostel wives' and fulfill unpaid social reproductive work for the male students with whom they co-habit.

While the research was largely exploratory, it does provide some pointers to how action research can integrate education, skills building, data collection and action into an empowering process and lead subjects to recognize and assert their own agency.

Participation and action towards social transformation are the key markers of Feminist Action Research. The latter implies the value judgement that

current conditions are unacceptable and require change. Social research, is therefore, not only seen as knowledge construction for its own sake, but as part of a process that empowers oppressed and disenfranchised groups to challenge inequalities and their own social exclusion. Feminist Action Research can enhance young women's research capacity while building feminist consciousness and feminist organization, towards transformation.

The lack of gender activism on university campuses points to a silencing of gendered voices and a denial of particular experiences. Often it is assumed that because university curricula contain courses on gender, there is no longer a need to reflect on gendered and patriarchal institutional practices. Engagements with gender are often appropriated by official discourse, and detached from feminist activist roots. This action research project on gender-based violence gave us an opportunity to return to those roots.

In our research the combination of knowledge and action involved the cyclical integration of a number of activities namely; data collection; education; awareness raising; action and reflection. The epistemological orientation towards democratization and empowerment has methodological implications. This profile reports on some research findings, actions and methodological reflections.

The Namibian political and institutional context

Despite very progressive policy and legal frameworks on gender equality, Namibia is struggling with endemic violence against women and children (Ipinge and Le Beau, 2005; Hubbard, 2007). A World Health Organisation (2005) study on women's health and domestic violence in Namibia indicates that 31 percent of women experience some form of physical or sexual violence at the hands of intimate partners and that 21 percent experienced sexual abuse before the age of 15 years. McFadden and !Khaxas (2007) show how various sexual practices legitimised by the authoritative force of culture, undermine women's bodily integrity and subject them to sexual and gender-based violence. While groups of women, government and non-governmental organisations periodically embark on various anti gender-based violence campaigns, the culture of violence stubbornly persists for various historical, social, economic, political and cultural reasons (Lamb, 2006; Burton, Leoschut and Popovac, 2011; Women's Leadership Centre, 2010).

Intimate-partner violence or wife-beating is often used as a proxy measure

for perceptions on women's social status. Despite progressive legislation like the Married Persons Equality Act (1996), Combating of Domestic Violence Act (2003) and the Combating of Rape Act (2000), many women in Namibia are still not able to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights due to these high levels of violence. The 2006/7 Demographic and Health Survey (Republic of Namibia, 2008) shows that 41 percent of men and 35 percent of women agree to at least one reason where wife-beating is justified. This indicates a high degree of societal acceptance of GBV as a legitimate means of control. A Ministry of Health study of GBV confirms that it is still tolerated in most communities in Namibia (United Nations, 2009). The Legal Assistance Centre (LAC) estimates that nationally, Namibia has about 1600 rape and attempted rape cases per year. This is high for a country with a total population of just under two million people (Coomer, 2010).

Prior to our research, anecdotal evidence suggested that young women at university are exposed to various forms of violence that undermine their sexual and reproductive autonomy and health. Our rationale for using Action Research to investigate the GBV on our university campus, was not only to gather data, but also to educate, raise consciousness and take action that would change the institutional culture and arrangements that impede young women's ability to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights as gender-based violence is a key impediment to young women's sexual and reproductive autonomy (World Health Organisation, 2005).

Epistemological and Methodological considerations

In keeping with the key feminist action research principles of inclusion and participation (Reid, 2004), the student co-researchers and to a lesser degree other participants, were involved in the selection of the research topic, the formulation the key research questions, data collection and report writing. Prior to student involvement, the lecturers identified the issue of *kamborotos*¹, that is, intergenerational transactional sex between female students and older men, as the research topic. Student researchers in the group disagreed and started interviewing other female students, particularly those in the hostels, to ascertain what their key concerns around sexual and reproductive rights on campus were. From the outset the participatory and cyclical nature of action research was revealed since empirical data was needed to inform the choice of a research topic. Conceptualisation and empirical data collection were,

therefore, not two distinct phases. After this initial data collection, students returned with the firm conviction that GBV was the most urgent matter for further exploration and immediate action.

We adopted Fals-Borda's (2001) notion that knowledge construction should improve practice and, therefore, requires the conscientisation of educators. We thus combined the three sets of activities identified by Hall (cited in Reid, 2004), namely, research, education and action. The egalitarian and empowerment underpinnings of feminist knowledge construction, presupposes the conscious dismantling of the knowledge-power nexus that reflects and reinforces broader inequalities. The research process was, therefore, a constant inter-play between education, conscientisation, skills training, information gathering, action and reflection. Multiple methods were employed to conduct the various activities. These included documentary research, training and information gathering workshops, focus group discussions, mapping, a campaign, a demonstration, a petition, drama, poetry and a panel discussion.

Although acts of violence are mainly perpetrated against women, the research project tried to avoid, what Harding (1987) regards as victimology since this goes against the empowerment philosophy that underpins feminist action research. The co-ordination of research, conscientisation and action required a democratic and empowering organisational form. The university had no history of feminist activism and therefore no organisational structures through which to channel our activities. The many gender research and teaching activities, that form part of our academic programmes, are not geared towards action that can challenge unequal power relations as well as the patriarchal institutional cultures and practices. We therefore had to institute, what Gergen (2003) refers to as first order democracy by establishing the Action Research Team (ART) that served as a vehicle to co-ordinate activities around information gathering, education and action.

Paradoxes of power in feminist action research

The differential access to academic codes within the research team and inequalities embedded in institutional hierarchies invoked a paradox of power which Lennie *et al.* (2003) refer to as the "impossible burden of feminist research." ART comprised lecturers and students who were locked into differential institutional power locations. These inequalities are incongruent

with the egalitarian ethos of feminist action research. It was a challenge to reconcile the contradictions between the democratizing agenda of action research and the highly stratified institutional environment.

Despite the democratic ideals, the academic language of Feminist Action Research can be very exclusionary and can reinforce inequalities and subject-object positionalities in the research process. Fals-Borda (2001) points out that the anti-positivist stance of action research requires crossing the boundaries between subjects and objects or the researched and the researcher. To overcome subject-object dualisms and differential power locations some mediation was needed. Most of the team members were second year undergraduates who had not acquired the degree of academic literacy needed for critical engagement with the academic literature. We distributed articles on action research philosophy, epistemology and methodologies to all ART members but most found it very difficult and even incomprehensible. To mediate the knowledge gaps, lecturers had to assume the double function of mentors and scribes. One lecturer summarized the literature in more accessible language. This reinforces and polices the boundaries between knowers (experts) and the other.

Institutional mapping, spatial mapping and confronting power

Our first step was to build a common understanding of our institutional context with regard to sexual, reproductive and gender-based violence. At a workshop for core-group members we pooled our knowledge about the institution. Further research was identified and allocated to overcome clear knowledge gaps. Research tasks included the collection and review of policy documents relevant to Sexual, Reproductive Rights and Health (SRRH) and GBV. We found that in some areas there were no written policies. We did manage to obtain Sexual Harassment and HIV/ AIDS Policies. To fill other knowledge gaps, key informant interviews were conducted with the head nurse at the university's clinic, the Deputy Dean of Students and the coordinator of Zamunawe². This initial information gathering process was seen as an affront to some in power. A request for the institution's Security Policy resulted in threats towards the student researcher tasked with accessing it. The hierarchy of power was reasserted when a lecturer and ART member intervened to question the high-handedness and humiliation caused by the

individual concerned.

After a skills-training workshop on participatory methodologies, student members of ART conducted information gathering and education workshops with other students. The idea was to have a cascading effect that will eventually build towards the critical mass needed for collective action. Ten core group members divided themselves into five teams consisting of two facilitators. Each team facilitated a workshop of between 14-18 students. The workshops were held simultaneously, with opportunities for interaction between groups during lunch, tea-breaks and body-work (tai-chi) exercises.

Each group did a transect walk of the university campus to identify unsafe spaces where women feel threatened and where violent attacks are most likely to occur. These were documented photographically. Facilitators used other participatory action research tools to gain information about the types of violence that occur on campus; the type and up-take of services provided on campus; ranking of the most important issues around GBV and the types of actions that can bring about change. In addition to the valuable information gathered, facilitators and participants found the process empowering and even therapeutic. Facilitators later submitted workshop reports on the facilitation process and findings.

Key Findings

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment, violence and threats perpetrated by taxi drivers at the taxi rank³ just outside the University's gate was seen as the most immediate concern for workshop participants. Female students are touched inappropriately, physically pulled and dragged by taxi drivers who accost them at the gate and jostle them to fill up their taxis. There are cases of female students who were threatened and beaten up by aggressive taxi drivers and this type of intimidation perpetuates a culture of fear and silence.

Participants reported knowledge of what they referred to as "sexually transmitted marks". They reported that there are lecturers who exchange marks for sexual favours, although this is against the University's Sexual Harassment Policy. Other unwanted and unsolicited sexual advances, like making sexually suggestive comments or touching students were also reported. Participants reported that male security guards touch female students inappropriately while some male students whistle, grope, touch and pass humiliating remarks

on various parts of the anatomy of female students.

Discussion revealed that women often show a great level of tolerance to harassment and violence since they have been socialized into submissive gender roles; others lack the assertiveness to resist or are ignorant about their sexual and reproductive rights. Sexual harassment, therefore, often goes unreported.

Rape and Assault

Assertive female students are often stigmatised. Some suffer “corrective punishment” in the form of rape or beatings to humiliate them. Many Namibian indigenous cultures discourage female assertiveness and at times males use violence to “correct” such “aberrations”. Gossip and isolation form part of the negative sanctions imposed on assertive women. Women who suffer sexual assault are often too embarrassed to report it to the police. They get blamed for the assault and accused of being too provocative. In fact, during the research process, a student reported a violent assault by a taxi driver. When we contacted the city police the first question the policewoman asked was what the student did to provoke the assault. Women living in the university hostels reported the following acts of violence:

- date rape
- secret staging, filming and distribution of sexual encounters via cellular phones and social networking sites without the knowledge or permission of the women involved. This is often done as corrective punishment to humiliate young women deemed arrogant or unattainable.
- Often, males cohabit with their female partners in the female hostels. As a result, other females feel unsafe when using communal facilities like toilets, bathrooms and kitchens when confronted by strange men in these areas at night.
- Participants reported that they do not feel safe when walking to lecture halls, the taxi rank and hostels at night. This is a problem as lectures continue till late at night.

c) Access to sexual and reproductive health services

HIV/AIDS peer-counselling and psychological counselling services are available through the office of the Dean of Students. Many participants had problems

with the accessibility and the quality of counselling services. They complained that counselors and social workers are often out of their offices with no notification about when or where they could be reached.

Questions were raised about the lack or perceived lack of confidentiality of counseling services. This discourages students from accessing these services. Participants expressed the need for a clear protocol to report cases of sexual harassment, rape and assault, particularly when it involves lecturers. Some felt that counselors were reluctant to take up cases of sexual violence for fear of victimization. Students also fear victimisation and, stigmatisation and, therefore, often do not report sexual harassment on the part of lecturers.

The UNAM clinic provides primary healthcare services, HIV testing and counselling services and contraceptives. Participants raised concerns about the judgemental way nurses dispense these services. The most worrisome issues reported were the lack of confidentiality and embarrassing and judgemental remarks made by nurses about the sexuality of students. At times, students are publicly humiliated and the reasons for their visit announced to all waiting in the queue. Gender inequalities in condom distribution were seen as discriminatory. The university has male condom dispensers in male toilets and no condom dispensers in female toilets and female condoms are often not available.

Namibia has a very restrictive abortion law and abortion on demand is illegal. Young women have illegal and unsafe abortions at great risk to their health. Participants reported the illegal sale of abortion pills by untrained persons. It is not clear how widespread this is and could be a topic for future investigation.

Reporting, dissemination of findings, education and action

Fals-Borda and Mora-Osajos' (2003) argue that Action Research are complex, irregular, multi-linear and convergent systems of thought. Our research exposed the need to transcend boundaries and binaries that are traditionally regarded as discreet and distinct. Firstly, data collection was an ongoing process that often overlapped with awareness raising, education, reporting and action. Findings were reported in multiple forms and overlapped with a number of other activities.

ART, in partnership with the office of the Deputy Dean of Students and the coordinator of the University's Gender Research Unit, made presentations to

new students on our research findings and ART activities during Orientation Week. The opportunity was used to launch an awareness raising pledge that male and female students signed. The pledge read “thumbs down to GBV on all UNAM campuses”. Students had to sign a pledge by dipping their thumbs into paint and then making the thumbs down imprint on a banner. This caused a lot of curiosity, was messy and great fun. Information pamphlets about GBV and sexual harassment reporting procedures were distributed to encourage reporting and the assertion individual agency.

International Women’s Day (8th March) was used to draw attention to GBV on campus. ART organized a demonstration and handed over a petition to the University management. About eighty male and female students participated in the small, colourful and lively demonstration. The lack of participation in the demonstration underlines the paucity of activism and pervasive fear of challenging authority on campus. The demonstration and other activities were widely reported in the print and electronic media.

ART hosted a panel discussion the day after our demonstration in order to exact accountability from the university as an institution. Findings from our research were presented to the student population, University policy makers and managers responsible for activities that have a bearing on SRRH and GBV on campus. These policy makers and managers were asked to respond to questions ART members prepared for them. Some managers were indignant about the fact that they had to answer to students and others acknowledged some of the problems but avoided firm commitments about actions towards change. Some saw ART’s “audacity” in breaking the silence around sexual matters as bringing the university into disrepute.

On the 10th March ART hosted a drama afternoon. The tools of Forum Theatre, open microphone and poetry were used to disseminate research findings, to raise awareness and to collect more data. Augusto Boal’s Forum Theatre, derived from the Paolo Freire’s educational philosophy of pedagogy for the oppressed, can be used in a number of areas of social justice activism and civic education (Sullivan, undated; Zinn, 2006; Komain, 2005). ART members developed a participatory drama “Malaika” that depicted some of the key findings of the research and exemplified some of the issues related to SRR and GBV (Sakaria, 2011). The audience became actively involved in constructing alternative and transformative narratives. Scenes were frozen and the audience asked to conceptualise, verbalise and act out alternatives to the

findings presented in that scene. The audience became “spect-actors” moving them away from the traditional passive spectator role (Ibid). After all the scenes were staged, the show was transformed into an open discussion forum. Discussion revealed gender differences with regard to views on GBV. Although most male students disagreed with GBV, they called for some understanding and tolerance for the many reasons men feel compelled to commit acts of GBV. This caused heated debate and was deemed unacceptable to most female students present.

The forum was again transformed into an open creative space where the audience could make any contribution towards the topic. Contributions ranged from short statements, to poetry to songs. The use of drama, poetry and song was an attempt to overcome the many dualisms of traditional research that separate the creative, affective, experiential and rational aspects of cognition and indeed human endeavour. It affirms Fals-Borda and Mora-Oseja’s (2003) assertions that to face injustices and social defects, research and teaching practices should overcome discriminatory distinctions between the academic and the popular, and between the scientific and the political.

Conclusion

Our action research on GBV is ongoing – we have already set out the next phase that includes drawing male students, taxi drivers and security guards into the process. Information gathering, education and action will continue. We will expand our core group to twenty researchers/educators who will carry out further research, education and action. Our activities generated so much interest that a group of male students and staff members have instituted their own separate but ART-linked feminist action research project to explore GBV and constructions of masculinity. We recognise that personal and institutional transformation requires ongoing work over a long period of time. So far we have achieved some of our objectives but many remain unfulfilled and, therefore, the struggle for gender justice continues.

Endnotes

1. The term *kamboroto* literally means “small bread” and is a descriptor for young women who are engaged in sexual relationships with older often married men or men involved in more stable relationships with other partners. The term denotes the transactional nature of the relationship since the men do not have to support these women in the same way as their marital spouses, they only have to provide “small bread”, hence *kamborotos*.
2. Zamunawe is a students’ organization that provides HIV and AIDS training and peer counseling to other students.
3. Windhoek has a very limited public transport system and most of those who cannot afford their own cars use taxis shared by up to five people. Like a bus system, taxis follow a fixed route. Passengers who wish to get off at a certain point beyond the designated route are made to pay extra.

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