

**Reflections on Conducting
Field Research on Women
in Polarised Post-Conflict
Communities in
Plateau State, Nigeria**

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Abstract

Due to the fragile nature of peace in polarised post-conflict communities, conducting qualitative phenomenological research on women in such communities is not easy for researchers. Consequently, conducting fieldwork in such a location requires adequate and thorough planning before proceeding to the field. In this article, the authors shared their common experiences of conducting research on women

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in polarised post-conflict communities. This article emphasised on the need for a researcher to establish multiple initial contacts with persons in the research locations, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), and/or Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that have done some work or are currently working in the locations. The contacts can provide useful insights about the nature of the research locations, the potential participants, and the sensitivities. The article shows that when conducting interviews and Focused Group Discussions (FGDs), the researcher should ensure the safety of both the researcher and the participants by choosing suitable times and safe locations. The article emphasised the need to ensure that ethical considerations should guide the research process. The researcher, in conducting the fieldwork, must ensure that continuous informed consent is obtained from the participants in the research process. This will ensure that the researcher “does no harm” to the participants. Trust building through confidentiality and anonymity should be guaranteed to the participants to build rapport to ensure their full participation.

Keywords: Field Research, post-conflict communities, qualitative research, women, research ethics

Introduction

One of the effects of intergroup conflicts is the polarisation of communities in the post-conflict period. In this instance, people begin to form new group bonds along their identity lines (Bulus et al., 2020). Ever since the cessation of violent confrontations in Plateau State, Nigeria, there has been the polarisation of many communities along religious lines. The polarisation reflects the resettlement of Christians on one side and Muslims on the other side (Bulus et al., 2020; Mustapha et al., 2018). Although there has been a cessation of violence, the polarised settlement pattern has given room for the lack of social cohesion between the neighbouring Christian and Muslim communities in Jos North and Jos South Local Government Areas of the state (Aliyu, et al., 2015). This resettlement pattern has also

heightened the level of mutual mistrust, tension, fear, and negative stereotypes of “us” versus “them”.

Conducting field research generally in both conflict and post-conflict locations is a herculean task for researchers. Worrisome reports of the experiences of researchers while conducting field research in both conflict and post-conflict locations have left many academics and researchers in shock and constant fear of conducting research in such places. For instance, the 2016 case of Giulio Regeni, a doctoral student from Italy conducting field research in Egypt for his thesis, is one at hand. Regeni was kidnapped and made to pass through severe torture before the kidnappers eventually killed him (Chappuis & Krause, 2019). Another example is that of Matthew Hedges, who, despite meeting all the requirements and obtaining permission to conduct his field research in the United Arab Emirates, was arrested in Dubai and eventually accused of undercover activities relating to espionage. He was held for six months before being granted a State pardon (Hedges, 2019). Grimm (2018) argues that academics/researchers have been somewhat targeted by regional authorities in many countries while conducting field research. These two cases reflect the risks and difficulties researchers face in conducting research in conflict and post-conflict locations.

This article focuses on unearthing some of the challenges in conducting field research on women, particularly in polarised post-conflict communities. The paper will be useful to researchers as they consider and reflect on the dynamism and endless dilemmas associated with conducting any research on women in polarised post-conflict locations. It will address issues that bother on finding safe pathways for researchers in accessing the research location and the participants. It will discuss the sensitivities and ethical considerations that can make the field research productive.

The article draws on the authors’ experiences in conducting qualitative field research in difficult post-conflict terrains. All the scholars have conducted qualitative field research on women in polarised post-conflict locations in Nigeria. Most of our previous fieldworks have involved conducting interviews and Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) with women, girls, Non-Governmental Organisations and security forces, etc. (Bulus et al., 2020; Maza et al., 2020). In spite of the fact that our fieldworks relate to a wide range of issues affecting women at different times and locations,

it is important to state clearly that we experienced common aspects and related challenges in the conduct of our fieldwork. A core foundation for this paper stems from our shared discussions and methodological experiences of conducting fieldwork on women in polarised post-conflict locations.

The article proceeds in the next section with discussions on the nature of post-conflict environments and the implications of conducting field research in such an environment. The subsequent section's discussions focus on pathways through which a researcher can access the research locations and the participants, and conduct in-depth interviews and FGDs with women in polarised post-conflict communities. The section also explores some ethical considerations that are sacrosanct to conducting fieldwork on women in polarised post-conflict communities. The final section concludes the discussions with a summary of the entire article.

Post-Conflict Environments: The Implications of Conducting Field Research

A post-conflict environment is difficult to distinguish from a conflict environment. To Reyhler and Langer (2006), it is an environment that is often described as a conflict environment undergoing multiple transition processes. This has to do mostly with the transition from a conflict situation to a peaceful situation that is characterised by stability. Post-conflict environments are characterised by a cessation of hostilities and episodes of violence, a decrease in the number of conflict fatalities, and violent attacks since the cessation of major fighting. Even further, a post-conflict environment is often bedevilled by a broader range of contrary social circumstances, as aptly captured in Johan Galtung's positive and negative peace (Galtung, 1969). Galtung conceives negative peace in an environment to mean the absence of conflict/war. On the other hand, a positive peace situation depicts the elimination of all structures that are causal to conflict/war. Consequently, a post-conflict environment considered to be experiencing negative peace is likely to relapse into violent conflict. This has dire consequences/implications for the researcher's prospects for conducting field research. The researcher faces a methodological dilemma, gaining access to location, participants, and the burden of ethically carrying out the research. It is important to note that, fieldwork in a post-conflict environment

characterised by negative peace may be too risky for the researcher. This is related to the tense social and political environment, the peace of which is considered as fragile. Hence, such an environment is likely to relapse to violence. As a basic requirement, therefore, researchers must make adequate preparations as discussed in the following sections.

Accessing the Research Location and Participants

Before proceeding to the field to conduct research, it is very important for the researcher to have background knowledge and awareness of the research location. Creswell (2007) asserts that an awareness of the research location helps the researcher to “effectively make sense of the intricate relationships between situations, actions, and context” (Creswell, 2007:39). In conducting research on women in polarised post-conflict communities, an awareness of the research location will come in handy to the researcher in figuring out the most polarised post-conflict locations. Making initial contact with persons in the polarised communities is also very important in gathering information about the communities and the would-be participants. This stage requires adequate preparation that will give insight into the nature of post-conflict situations, the dynamics of conflict, and the potential risks. As an outsider⁶, it is good to find out from persons in the community if there is a need for any formal permission to be obtained.

Another important way of gathering information about the communities is to approach relevant local NGOs and/or Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). Goodhand (2000) emphasised that the safest and most useful path to accessing conflict or post-conflict locations for a researcher is through constant engagement with aid agencies such as CSOs/NGOs with projects. Given the fact that they are already on the ground in those locations, they possess key information about the locations and may have people who can serve as gatekeepers to create inroads to the locations. While conducting research in one of the polarised communities, one of the authors gained access to the communities through an NGO that provided contacts in the

6 An insider refers to a member of a specified group and collectivities or an occupant of specified social status; while an outsider refers to a non-member (Merton, 1972).

communities. The NGOs can also play an important role in providing the researcher with deeper insights into the research area and the possible risks involved in conducting fieldwork in the locations. The initial contact with the gatekeeper for the researcher was important in knowing the cherished sensitivities of the communities and the safe pathways into the community.

In conducting field research in conflict and post-conflict locations, one of the challenges usually encountered by the researcher is accessing participants/respondents (Dixit, 2012). To avoid the likelihood of remaining in a small group of participants, it is important for the researcher to prioritise having multiple initial contacts. There are options of sampling methods to be employed. However, since a social research on women often takes a phenomenological approach, purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods are most appropriate (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2007). This is because the methods are suitable in instances where the participants/informants for the research are deemed to possess certain vital features that the researcher considers to be essential to the research. The snowball sampling method is significant in instances where it is challenging to locate key informants from a special population such as victims of gender-based violence and trafficking (Dixit, 2012). Here, the researcher collects data from available members of the target population and requests key information on how to find other members who are also important to the study and may possess even more information (Babbie, 2011). It is a method that can effectively serve exploratory purposes in research.

Conducting In-Depth Interviews and FGDs in Polarised Post-Conflict Communities

In conducting phenomenological field research, it is common for the researcher to conduct in-depth interviews (semi-structured or unstructured) and FGDs (Allmark et al., 2009). Interviews and FGDs avail the researcher the opportunity to interact with the interviewee in an open face-to-face conversation on the research issues. The expectation of the researcher is to obtain vital information from the interviewee. Here, the researcher possesses an interview guide consisting of questions that are asked to the interviewee. The interviewee, using discretion, is free to respond to the questions. In conducting interviews in polarised post-conflict communities

in Plateau State, using semi-structured interview questions was deemed appropriate because it allowed the interviewer to modify questions in line with what the interviewer considers to be suitable and appropriate for the research.

The semi-structured interview questions were all open-ended in a bid to provide an in-depth understanding of the understudied phenomenon as well as an in-depth exploration of the key issues. It also allows the interviewees in their own words to express themselves freely. The use of probes turned out to be useful to explore new areas. Generally speaking, probes are of great significance to a researcher in gaining further depth and foresight on the research issues in line with the research objectives (Gray, 2009). Also, during the interviews, which were face-to-face, the researcher is able to take note of the social cues of the interviewee. Some of the social cues include the body posture of the interviewee, key gesticulations, and facial expressions that complimented what they were saying.

Very critical to conducting interviews is the place for conducting the interviews. The safety of the researcher and participant is very important. As such, the researcher, through the gatekeepers, must find a safe and conducive place for both the interviewer and participants. For instance, one of the authors who focused on women's agency in peacebuilding in polarised post-conflict communities in Plateau State explained that interviews took place in different places that were very comfortable and safe for the participants. While some women preferred to meet at their homes, some preferred to meet during business hours in the marketplace. Some other women arranged with the researcher to meet outside their homes to avoid any issues with their spouses, who they know will not permit them to participate in any research. Therefore, the researcher and the women agreed to meet at a buffer zone in-between Angwan Rukuba and Dogon Dutse. Interestingly, the conduct of the interview with another woman was hurriedly done as the woman explained that she left home in the guise that she was headed to purchase some things in the community market. This participant had to disguise where she was going to due to the perception of family members about women and children as the susceptible groups to violent attacks.

For the FGDs, the identification and scheduling of meetings with participants was mostly handled by the gatekeepers and the women leaders in some of the polarised post-conflict communities. In arranging an FGD, it is important that the gatekeeper is duly informed of the shared common characteristics that a participant must possess. Kumar (2005) emphasised that the participants that make up a group for an FGD should have common experience of understudied social phenomenon. So, for example, in the research on women's agency in peacebuilding in polarised communities, the researcher informed the gatekeeper and the women leader to select and invite only women who had a shared lived-experience of conflict and peacebuilding in the communities.

In conducting fieldwork in polarised post-conflict communities, it is important for the researcher to know the preferred language spoken by the participants. This is important for building rapport and the process of interviews and FGDs. One of the authors experienced this during fieldwork with women in the polarised post-conflict communities. The researcher was not fluent in speaking the preferred language of the participants— Hausa. Therefore, the researcher had to recruit and train two research assistants to address this challenge. The research assistants were people who had experience in conducting qualitative phenomenological research and handling qualitative data. Both the interviews and the FGDs with the participants took place in safe places that were most preferred by the participants and at a time that the women chose. Interviews and FGDs should be conducted within the time frame that is considered safe for both the interviewer and interviewee (9am-4pm). This time period is considered safe as most of the day's activities must have commenced in the communities such that if there is any breakdown of law and order, the news would have circulated.

Another key consideration for the researcher in conducting both interviews and FGDs is the need for the researcher to balance power relations between the researcher and the participants. As Karnieli-Miller et al. (2009) emphasised, there are disparities in terms of demographic and socio-economic dynamics that may bring about an imbalance in the power relations during interviews and FGDs between the interviewer and interviewee. Managing power relationships during the interviews and FGDs is critical as it can significantly influence the quality and depth of data collected for the research. In one of the studies by one of the authors on

gender-based violence against women in polarised post-conflict communities, gender was one of the factors that created an imbalance in power relations between the researcher and the participants. The researcher was a male; as such, he thought it necessary to engage the services of a female research assistant, who was familiar with the culture of the participants from the polarised post-conflict communities.

Having the female research assistant during the interviews and FGDs made the women feel comfortable, given that the women considered the research assistant their daughter. Her dressing style was also very important as she deliberately avoided wearing trousers to appear decent to suit the cultural identity of the participants. For instance, she wore the native Hausa-Fulani wrapper that fully covered her upper body and also made a good covering of her hair using a veil on days they had either interviews or FGDs with the Hausa-Fulani women. The male researcher also dressed in the traditional *Kaftan*, making him appear like a Hausa man. The physical appearance and the speaking of the local language of the participants made the participants feel comfortable to relate freely. In fact, to further balance power relations, the research assistants used respectful words that suggested respect for the socio-cultural norms of the women. The research assistant kept using words like *mama-* meaning mother while discussing and asking questions to particularly older women during the interviews and FGDs. It is important to note that managing power relations between researchers and participants is very difficult. Despite all efforts to manage power relations between the researchers and participants, either through reflecting socio-cultural norms such as dressing and adapting to the preferred spoken language of the participants as well as creating a gender balance through the use of research assistants, the researcher believes that all imbalances and differences were only minimised but not totally eliminated.

Sensitivities in research should be established before embarking on the fieldwork by the researcher. In the process of conducting an interview, once those sensitive issues come up, the interview session can end up being so emotionally intense. This could have a grave impact on not just the participant but also the researcher and the research outcome. Thus, the “Do No Harm principle” by Mary Anderson is a guide to researchers on the unintended negative impacts that can emanate from a well-intentioned

research activity. The phenomenological qualitative research approach allows the participants of a research to, in their own words, narrate their lived-experiences on a social phenomenon. Some of the lived-experiences of the research participants include horrific and traumatising experiences such as rape, bereavement, and domestic violence. These are very sensitive issues that must be systematically and carefully probed into to avoid traumatising flashbacks. From the authors' previous study on women in polarised post-conflict communities in Plateau State, some of the sensitivities that emerged before embarking on the field include religious and cultural beliefs, rape, and death. Given the ethno-religious conflict experiences of the women, religious beliefs emerged as a major sensitive issue that is cherished by people in the entire state. It has been the cause of virtually all conflicts in Plateau State. Thus, any researcher willing to conduct any research in the state should also consider the religious-gendered barriers to the full participation of members of such communities.

Researchers must also be careful of the socio-psychological effect of the narratives of the lived experiences of participants. Lalor, Begley, and Devane (2006) assert that significant attention is often placed on the participant in relation to the emotional impact of a research process. They lament that very little or no attention is given to the psychological effect of a research process on a researcher. Accordingly, researchers should prepare before going to the field to guard themselves from the psychological impact of the research process. While the researcher prepares for ways to protect themselves from the emotional impact of the narratives of the lived experiences of the participants, frantic efforts should also be made to protect the integrity of the study. Some of the psychological demands that are often experienced by a researcher include change and difficulty in sleeping routine, self-blame for things beyond the control of the researcher, the constant worry over the safety of both the researcher and participants. Wood (2006:384) asserts that researchers undergo a period of "fieldwork blues". This period is often characterised by psychological and emotional stress, solitude, and emotional fatigue in managing and keeping data secure. Wood notes that all these psychological and emotional challenges can, in a way, impact on researchers and lead to blunders in judgment. As such, researchers should be aware of the effects of this and take measures to manage them.

Moss (2015) narrated the psychological and emotional challenges she encountered during fieldwork, and some of the measures to address them include openly discussing the research process with assistants and taking a day or two off to recover from challenging interviews.

As interviews and FGDs go on, researchers should show empathy as the participants narrate their stories. Showing empathy is critical in rapport-building with the participants. It has a way of making participants feel that the researcher understands or deeply empathises with them. The words empathy and sympathy are sometimes used interchangeably, but they actually differ. While empathy focuses on sharing in the seeming emotions or lived experiences of someone else, sympathy presents a kind of pity or sorrowful feeling for another. When you sympathise with someone, it does not necessarily mean that you share in the person's feelings. During interviews and FGDs, empathic expressions by the researcher send a message of social solidarity to the participants and build rapport (Prior, 2018). Researchers should engage in rapport management by using words that demonstrate genuine empathy and reinforce social solidarity rather than words that can trigger a sense of pity on the part of the participants. From the experiences of the authors, it is important for researchers to be sensitive to avoid any potential harm to the participants. For instance, in a case when an interview session becomes emotionally intense and a participant becomes terribly distraught, it is expected of the researcher to use sensitivity and intuition to ascertain if the interview session should continue, come to a pause, or an end.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical consideration in every research is very important. The research participants must be duly informed about the purpose of the research and the possible benefits and risks of their full participation by the researcher (Wood, 2006). The researcher must ensure the participants grant their full consent to participate. Scholars have maintained that the concept of consent in research is relative, which makes it debatable (Sin, 2005). It all depends on how consent is defined and operationalised. Although informed consent is difficult to attain, the quality of the relationship that is established between the researcher and participants plays a role in addressing part of the

challenge. According to Sieber (1993), the quality of the researcher-participant relationship that ensures truly informed consent is seen in the researcher and participant maintaining respectful communication, high-level openness, respect for individual and community autonomy, and socio-cultural norms. It also involves adequate communication of the nature, findings, and importance of the research and its potential impact.

Informed consent also ensures that the participant is given some level of decision-making power to exercise. Wood (2006) asserts that participants in her previous study were orally assured of their right to decline to respond to any question that made them feel uncomfortable. The participant is also duly informed of their right to withdraw their participation at any moment, and they do not owe the researcher an explanation for withdrawing from the process. The field experiences of the authors suggest that it is important for the researcher to duly inform the participants of their right to retract any information at any point. Also, from the experiences of the authors in conducting research in polarised post-conflict communities, researchers should avoid giving the participants any consent form to sign. Signing any form could raise doubts and concerns about the safety of the participants. This will also affect the quality of information that may be given by the participants. Thus, the researcher should practice what is often known as continuous or process consent. Here, during the course of the research process, the researcher constantly confirms the consent of the participants. The researcher should get verbal informed consent from the participant before the interview proceeds and permission to record the interview.

Central to ethical considerations in conducting field research in general is the issue of confidentiality, anonymity, and trust building. Oliver (2003) stresses that anonymity and confidentiality are very important to the process of conducting any social research. Confidentiality and anonymity raise concerns for the safety of both the researcher and the participants. Consequently, Ensign (2003) notes that, it is important that the researcher ensure that the trust of the participant is earned by emphasising on confidentiality and anonymity. To earn the participants' trust, researchers put measures that seek to ensure that the anonymity and confidentiality of the participant is guaranteed. The measures include stating in clear terms the purpose of the research and using pseudonyms rather than the participants' real names.

Conclusion

This article has established that conducting research on women in polarised post-conflict communities is not an easy task. This is because of the fragile nature of peace that exists in a post-conflict community. Consequently, conducting fieldwork in such a location requires adequate and thorough planning before proceeding to the field. In the chapter, the authors shared their common experiences of conducting research on women in polarised post-conflict communities. To have a successful and hitch-free field experience, it is important that the researcher establishes multiple initial contacts with people in the research locations and CSOs or NGOs that have done work or are currently working in the locations. Through these engagements, the researcher gains more insights into the nature of research locations and potential participants for the fieldwork. The multiple initial contacts also provide the researcher with vital understandings on safe pathways to access the research locations and participants as well as establish the sensitivities that can cause harm to both the researcher and the participants.

Also, when conducting interviews and FGDs on women in polarised post-conflict communities, the researcher must take into consideration the safety of both the researcher and the participants. The researcher should consider the best time and safest location to conduct the interviews and the FGDs. To build rapport, it is important to conduct the interviews and FGDs in the most preferred language of the participants. In instances where the researcher is not fluent in the participant's preferred language, it is important for the researcher to train and engage the services of research assistants. The researcher should also consider managing the imbalances that may exist in the power relations between the researcher, research assistants, and the participants.

The article emphasised the need for ethical considerations to guide the research process. In conducting the fieldwork, the researcher should ensure that continuous informed consent is obtained from the participants in the research process. This will ensure that the researcher "does no harm" to the participants. Trust-building through confidentiality and anonymity should be guaranteed to the participants to build rapport to ensure their full participation.

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