

# Studying Political Violence with Ugandan Women: A Feminist Methodological Exploration

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## Abstract

We explore the benefits and challenges of undertaking feminist methodologies to investigate the polarised topic of gendered political violence in contemporary Uganda. Drawing from mixed methods research that triangulated key informant interviews with autoethnography, media content analysis and literature review, we analyse components of the research process. We reflexively examine the power of transgenerational feminist collaboration enabled by our shared exclusion in exile, combined with an enabling African feminist intellectual community. Feminist research methodologies are pertinent to a nuanced understanding of the growing paradox of Uganda's escalating political violence against women and gender minorities amidst widely praised affirmative action. African feminist ethos complicates and challenges normative adherence to principles of research ethics. Feminist methodologies give voice and power to individuals and communities that are ordinarily silenced and erased from traditional academic research.

**Keywords:** feminist methodologies, Uganda, political violence, violence against women

## Introduction: The Intricacies of Feminist Research Methodologies

On the chilly morning of 8 March 2023, a phone call from Nana Mw'Afrika<sup>1</sup> interrupted my reverie on the ICE train to Darmstadt.

"Nalongo<sup>2</sup> Stella, I'm so very broken," she said shakily.

“What is the problem, Nalongo Nana?” I asked.

“I’m shivering all over. I’m breaking with pain,” she replied.

“How can I help? What is wrong?” I asked again.

“Can you believe what I found on the TV just now? Can you imagine that the senior police officer who ordered those rough policewomen to beat me up and shove a baton up my womb when I was heavily pregnant is being decorated and celebrated here in Kiruhura District as our country commemorates International Women’s Day? I cannot... I cannot...” she said, between controlled sobs transmitted across thousands of miles.

“Oh no, Nalongo Nana,” I said, unsure how to respond.

“My eyes are frozen on the television screen. I’m standing with the remote control in my hands. I cannot bring myself to switch off the vulgar scenes unfolding before me, right here in my sitting room. My whole body started shaking uncontrollably as soon as I realised what I was watching. I’m in shock, Stella. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know... I don’t know...” she repeated.

“Listen, Nalongo Nana,” I told my friend after a frozen moment. “Perhaps you should first switch off your television, or at least switch to another channel,” I suggested.

“Alright. Let me switch this thing off. But can you imagine the injustice?” she asked.

“First switch off the television,” I repeated. “And then find a place to sit down.”

After a brief pause, I heard her shuffling her feet.

“I have sat down here with my back to the television. But I’m shaking badly. It is unbelievable that many years after my physical and psychological trauma at the hands of Uganda’s serving police officers, my body can still respond so powerfully from the memories resurrected by seeing this woman’s promotion. Eh, Nalongo Stella, I’m afraid,” she said.

“I am so sorry that you are experiencing this on our day – International Women’s Day,” I remarked, ironically.

“You see? These International Women’s Days mean different things to different women. This brutal senior policewoman is being celebrated by the state using millions of our public funds. But she is being recognised and rewarded for brutalising women protesters who merely exercise our constitutional rights to hold peaceful demonstrations. Millions upon millions of Ugandan taxpayers’ monies are being poured into this useless function, yet many young girls still miss school because of lack of sanitary pads, and many poor women still die during childbirth because of poor reproductive health services,” she ranted, as we commonly did in our routine phone calls.

“I had not even realised it is International Women’s Day because I am travelling to our main office for an official meeting with the administrators of my scholarship, as well as staff members of PEN Zentrum Deutschland. So, I will celebrate our day by working,” I said.

“Actually, I called you about that research interview you have been trying to do with me. I’m now more than ready to make time to speak out about the political violence that I and other women in Uganda have suffered under the public servants and soldiers paid using our taxes. I want to do the interview as soon as possible. I’m no longer hesitating. This pain that arises in the most unexpected moments is no longer acceptable. I must speak up and speak out,” Nalongo Nana said with resolute determination.

“This is very good news, Nana,” I replied.

“Yes, I feel so much better by deciding to break the ice and address the issue of my biggest shame, failure and punishment by the Ugandan state,” she said.

“Alright, Nana, when can we have our interview?” I asked cautiously.

We scheduled an online interview which became the first of several repeat-interviews conducted during our research study. We discussed Nana’s participation as a key informant in our ongoing research.

Drawn from the vast empirical material produced from our feminist research processes, this unplanned interaction between a researcher and a potential research participant highlights several interconnected and integral components of feminist research methodologies. These include (1) collaborative and continuous conceptualisation of the multifarious phenomenon of political violence, (2) the indisputable categorisation of

women as not only traumatised victims of political violence but also as active participants in hierarchies that brutalise other women, (3) a clear reversal of roles from a helpless victim of political violence to an agentic actor who decides to address her psychosomatic symptoms of trauma through finding a voice for her story of pain and determining the vehicle through which to reclaim her power and healing, (4) the openness and sensitivity of a researcher to what initially presented as an unscheduled interruption but later became a rare jewel in which a previously elusive potential research subject voluntarily consented to participate in the research, (5) negotiation and navigation of power–powerlessness whereby the research participant expected answers and solutions from the researcher perceived as “expert,” but the latter actively listened and thus returned power to the research participant to reach her autonomous solution, (6) the ability of ethnographic fieldwork to generate thick descriptions about socio-political contexts, and (7) the raw emotions of brokenness and pain freely expressed within the confines of research. This long list from a single (and singular) phone conversation highlights the intricate complexity, multi-layeredness, nuance, intertextuality and density contained within the label “feminist research.”<sup>3</sup> These attributes are particularly feminist because of their ability to (re)configure power between individuals within the research encounter, i.e. researchers’ power is neutralised and shared with their participants who are conceived as collaborators and not mere subjects. In addition, in the process of research, normative victims take charge, actively convert their powerlessness into agency and create meaningful solutions from their vantage point. Furthermore, women are homogeneously portrayed not only as recipients but also as potential perpetrators of violence against other women. Feminist research encourages openness towards diverse emotions and emotionality (of both researcher and researched) as productive sources from which to generate research questions and results. This openness allows for the unstructured conduct of interviews and flexibility of the research cycle.

In this article,<sup>4</sup> we describe and examine our experiences of deploying feminist research methodology to explore the multifaceted topic of gendered political violence and thereby theorise about building resistance to it in Uganda. Drawing on the feminist principle of reflexivity about power and powerlessness entailed in academic research processes, relations and

products, we critically interrogate benefits and challenges of research procedures, cross-generational team building, our positionalities, emergent ethical dilemmas, shifting power differentials between the researchers and the researched, sampling and access to research participants, interviewing individuals about their experiences of political violence, analysing embodied trauma and relying on the public and social media archive for materials to enrich our triangulation. The article has five sections. After examining the rationale for focusing on feminist research methodologies, we analyse the dynamics of effectively building a feminist research team comprising two mobile individuals of different generations who live in different countries of exile removed from the study location. Thereafter, we critically examine the challenges of negotiating ethical review in a repressive society. We then analyse sampling criteria that permit research participants to contribute towards the identification of others. Finally, we discuss the power of undertaking feminist research methodologies.

## **The Rationale of Writing Entirely About Feminist Research Methodologies**

Just as there is no consensus about divergent multiple forms of feminism (Dosekun 2021; Ahikire 2014; Mama 2011; Kiguwa 2004; Tong 1989), there is no agreement about a singular universal definition of feminist research methodologies (Kiguwa 2019, 224; Webb 1993). However, from a close reading of the literature, it is possible to hazard an organic<sup>5</sup> conceptual definition such as the one adopted in our research. We present our working definitions of African feminism and feminist research methodologies.

While we are cognisant of the diverse nuances of African feminism that form an ideological force powering our productivity, we embrace a zygotic conceptualisation that fuses Josephine Ahikire's (2014, 7) assertion that "in African contexts, feminism is at once philosophical, experiential and practical," with Gwendolyn Mikell's (1995, 405) emphasis on "a feminism that is political, pragmatic, reflexive and group oriented," along with Sylvia Tamale's (2006) appeal for more political engagement, theorisation, radicalism and innovation. Accordingly, our research logic was informed by Amina Mama's (2011, e9) framing that "feminism refers to a movement

tradition of women's organising that is broadly non-hierarchical, participatory and democratic, promoting egalitarian institutional cultures characterised by an ethos of respect and solidarity between women." For us, feminist research methodologies offer a major departure from traditional research methodology whose limitations lead to failures to comprehensively grasp the vast complicated flexible intersectional and often contradictory lived experiences of women and gender minorities who are relatively underrepresented in processes and products of academic knowledge production.

Feminist methodology is the approach to research that has been developed in response to concerns by feminist scholars about the limits of traditional methodology in capturing the experiences of women and others who have been marginalised in academic research... [It] includes a wide range of methods, approaches and research strategies (Naples 2007, 574).

Our approach further relies on Mama's (2011, e11) call for criticism rather than an uncritical acceptance of women's movements. She states:

... feminist research approaches can be developed through a politics of critical engagement with activism, using scholarly resources (feminist theoretical tools, modes of analysis, historical experience, etc.) that reach beyond the immediacies of a given local gender relations and struggles to enable reflection and deepen understanding.

Why devote an entire publication to **just methodology**? Firstly, while seemingly banal, this is a common question, particularly because academic practice has long routinised relegating discussions of research methods to a relatively small section after the introduction. The bulk of academic writing is devoted to presentation, analysis and interpretation of research findings. Normatively, there is a relative paucity of scholarly research attention and knowledge production about the processes and politics of methodologies deployed when undertaking research, let alone feminist research methodologies. Stanley's (1990, 12)<sup>6</sup> appeal for a feminist praxis in the academy urges us "to focus on the details of the research production process, for it is this that is a comparative rarity in academic feminist published work."

Secondly, devoting greater attention to research processes through which feminist knowledge is produced facilitates the analysis of power (and powerlessness) embedded within diverse research relationships. Choices about thematic focus, research subjects, interview structure, questions,

completeness of responses, data interpretation, what is valued as knowledge, among others, are political decisions negotiated during research interactions. Decisions by research participants about whether or not to participate entirely in all research components, what details to divulge, whether or not to trust a researcher with private or sensitive information and even the extent of sharing corroborating evidence, are made in relation to power. Naples (2007, 548) calls for “a holistic approach that includes greater attention to the knowledge production process and the role of the researcher.” This ultimately enhances researcher reflexivity. It offers a more transparent account of how the researcher’s framing determines what is perceived as knowledge. Thus, the research process becomes part of the research products. Gune and Manuel (2007) further engage with the politics of researcher–researched exchange(s) in the knowledge production processes specific to sexualities in Africa.

Thirdly, in her reflexive criticism of the challenges and weaknesses of African feminism, Sylvia Tamale (2006, 39–40) highlights gaps between feminist theory and praxis. She states:

Feminists in the African academy and the activist practitioners on the ground tend to operate in separate cocoons. Gender equality and women’s rights rhetoric hardly spreads beyond the legal landscape... When feminist theory does not speak to gender activism and when the latter does not inform the former, the unfortunate result is a half-baked and truncated feminism. Under-theorized praxis is comparable to groping in the dark in search of a coffee bean. It leads to “obscurantism,” hindering clear vision, knowledge, progress and enlightenment.

A commitment to bringing the work of African feminists in the universities into closer dialogue with those in the women’s movement, scholarship and activism and to linking ideas together with practice “would strengthen and reradicalise both feminist theory and feminist practice” (Mama 2011, e9). To address this gap between feminist theorising and feminist activism, as well as draw from our combined mixed positionalities as not only scholars and activists, but also poets and engaged political actors, we purposefully chose to theorise from our lived realities and the everyday experiences of Ugandan women and gender minorities with whom we lived in proximity. Thus, our feminist methodology, which is hinged upon the need to address this gap between theory and praxis, led to our overall research aim of generating a grounded theory<sup>7</sup> (Strauss and Corbin 1994) about resisting political violence

in contemporary Uganda. Grounded theory aims to generate emic theories from data collected from research participants (Glaser and Strauss 1967), rather than to prove existent grand theories.

Fourthly, clearly outlining and analysing the research methods, data analysis and interpretive frameworks of a study is a prerequisite for research transparency, particularly in research based on qualitative and interpretive approaches (Moravcsik 2019). In some respects, transparency is to qualitative research what replicability is to quantitative research. It enables reviewers to assess the rigour with which conclusions and abstractions were derived from the collected data and analysis.

Lastly, there is the benefit of theorising from and about Uganda specifically and Africa more broadly, thereby growing the body of African feminist knowledge founded upon such nuanced analyses.

## **Research Timing, Proposal Development, Design and Methods**

The timing of *Feminist Africa*'s<sup>8</sup> call for proposals serendipitously coincided with the first author's renewed quest for feminist affiliations that foster mentorship, collegiality and academic productivity.<sup>9</sup> She was resuming her career as a knowledge producer straddling multiple genres (Nyanzi 2023) after fleeing from a tumultuous season in Uganda. This period included indefinite suspensions from Makerere University's Institute of Social Research, a 16-month sentence in a maximum-security prison, a failed political campaign in Uganda's 2021 national elections for the position of Kampala Woman Member of Parliament, an application for asylum in Kenya, and ultimately relocation to Germany on a scholarship offered by the Writers-in-Exile programme of PEN Zentrum Deutschland. Freshly exiled, she was attracted to the call for proposals for several reasons: (1) important overlaps between the consortium's<sup>10</sup> theme and her personal investment in interrogating political violence among women and gender minorities in Uganda specifically and Africa generally; (2) the 36-month timeline, which she deemed adequate for rigorous research and meaningful knowledge production; (3) the flexibility of community availed through belonging to a research consortium that bypassed red-tape bureaucracies within academic



institutions;<sup>11</sup> (4) a research grant worth US\$6,000<sup>12</sup>; (5) the possibility of contributing towards the feminist work ethos of *Feminist Africa*; and (6) the opportunity to produce academic publications.

Consequently, she developed a research proposal<sup>13</sup> to examine the paradox of increasing economic and political violence against diversely gendered women at different frontlines in Uganda, on the one hand, and the disproportionately scanty scholarly attention to the subject relative to other forms of violence (including sexual violence, gender-based violence, domestic violence and intimate partner violence) on the other. Although global trends analyses (e.g., Krook 2018, 2017) reveal increasing gendered political violence, comparatively much more research is conducted in the global North than the global South, specifically Mona Lena Krook's comparative analyses and conceptualisation of *Violence Against Women in Politics* (Krook 2020; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2016). Our broad research project addresses these two research problems by examining experiences of gendered political violence in Uganda. Its two objectives are to generate grounded theories about gendered political violence and build emic models of grassroots support for African feminist resistance to political violence against women and gender minorities.<sup>14</sup>

Using mixed research methods (Boonzaier and Shefer 2006), we triangulated qualitative<sup>15</sup> individual in-depth interviews with autoethnography (Ellis 2004; Chang 2016), content analysis of public media and social media<sup>16</sup> and literature review. Using convenience and purposive sampling techniques (Chittaranjan 2021), we identified twenty key informants for repeat-interviews about their experiences of political violence in Uganda and any resistance they or others developed in response. From this preliminary sample, snowball sampling techniques (Noy 2008) facilitated the identification of support sources and resisters<sup>17</sup> against the political violence individuals experienced. Media content analysis (Krippendorff 2018; Markoff et al. 1975) generated comparative materials about the chronology of events, actors, actions, processes, redress mechanisms and support networks for juxtaposition with key informants' reported narratives. Individual reports and media content were supplemented with autoethnographic materials from the researchers and a review of academic publications and grey literature.

Triangulation of methods and materials enhanced the rigour, veracity and accuracy of our research.

## **Team Building and Feminist Collaboration Across Generations**

Initially working alone, building a research team became imperative after a situational analysis of political events in the study context, an assessment of requisite intellectual and manual labour, a cost-benefit analysis of collaboration, the practical realities of exile and a financial review of available resources. Consequently, with the approval of the research consortium convener, the first author invited the second author to join the research team.

Who are the two co-researchers? What qualifications did they bring to the research? What are their compatibilities as research team members? What are their similarities and differences? How do their contrasts influence the team's work dynamics? What are their individual roles? What are their politics of collaboration? What challenges and dilemmas arose in team-building processes? How does collaboration shape underlying principles and assumptions of feminist research? These questions explore researchers' roles in determining the quality and quantity of academic research generated using feminist research methodologies.

Our positionalities arise from our education, experiences, expertise and exposure. Annah Ashaba is a Ugandan cisgender woman in her mid-twenties, single and has no children. She is a Roman Catholic, a Mukiga from Rukungiri in Western Uganda, and she is fluent in Runyakitara languages.<sup>18</sup> She is a member of Uganda's opposition political party called the Forum for Democratic Change. When the research began, she had just started her graduate studies on an online distance learning programme at the University of Edinburgh. She had also fled Uganda into exile and now lives in Ghana, having previously lived as an exile in more than two other countries. Stella Nyanzi is a Ugandan cisgender woman aged 50, a single mother to three teenagers and a Protestant formerly married to a Muslim man. She is a Muganda from Masaka in Central Uganda, fluent in Luganda and a member of the Forum for Democratic Change. She is an exile in Germany.

While our demographic profiles present differences of generation, geography, ethnicity, religion and local language, we share commonalities of Ugandan nationality, graduate education, political party affiliation, exile and African feminist ideology, politics and praxis. We are both social constructionists who believe that all knowledge is situated and subjective (Haraway 2016). As knowledge producers, we have varying insider-outsider proximity in our research participants' communities. Far from detached objective observers of the phenomena we research, we are engaged socio-political actors seeking social transformation (Naples 2007, 548) to improve the prospects of gendered involvement in politics in Uganda specifically and Africa generally. For us, knowledge is political. Undoubtedly, this research is political because it offers feminist resistance against widespread silencing about gendered political violence.

Both<sup>19, 20</sup> of us are artistic and academic knowledge producers straddling diverse genres. Our writings led to repeated political persecution and penalisation. However, rather than allow our dehumanisation from political violence to perpetually silence and shame us, this research empowered us to draw productive energy from our combined reservoirs of pain and trauma to mobilise other Ugandan citizens to recraft similar negative experiences into feminist knowledge. Thus, through this research, we refashioned forms of literary justice as alternatives to judicial systems that let us down. Rather than shun our dehumanisation, we jointly revisited it with other victims and survivors to collectively theorise our gendered experiences of contemporary political violence in Uganda. This is political resistance through feminist knowledge generation. Our research is at once academic, personal, communal and political. Each of us established a record<sup>21</sup> of feminist praxis. Given our experiences as recipients and sources of support and resistance against gendered political violence, autoethnography was the most relevant data collection method.

Based on our research positionalities, we assume complementary roles and responsibilities. Each of us leads in accessing key informants from purposefully sampled stratified communities. The second author led sampling among student leaders and the first author among ex-prisoners and LGBTIQ+ individuals. While the first author interviewed all the respondents and took fieldnotes, the second author electronically recorded

and systematically serialised the interviews as either videos or sound files archived in our data bank. Both authors transcribed and translated interviews into English from local languages where necessary, conducted data interpretation and analysis, reviewed literature and co-authored research outputs which we routinely take turns to present orally at conferences, workshops or other fora. Departing from traditional academic norms of authoritarian, hierarchical, vertical relationships that valorise gerontocratic seniority instead of merit (Deridder et al. 2022; Stanley 1990), we practise a feminist ethos of egalitarian, horizontal collaboration emphasising shared responsibilities based on our respective strengths in fieldwork and information technology. While the first author initially received the research funds and was responsible for their timely disbursement to research participants for internet access and telephone calls before interviews, purchasing stationery and equipment and remuneration, these financial responsibilities shifted to the second author when the consortium transferred the second instalment of funds. Collaboration facilitated delegation, practical exchange and the transfer of research skills.

## **Navigating Multiple Dilemmas of Normative Research Ethics**

In the introductory vignette, Nalongo Nana Mw’Afrika finally agreed to participate in our research after extended processing of her informed consent. She initially hesitated to subject her widely publicised experiences of gross political violence to academic analysis. However, after many months, she decided on her own to participate in several interviews, often initiating subsequent sessions. She never signed any informed consent form. However, we always recorded verbal consent before beginning each interview. This repetitive negotiation of standardised research ethics echoed feminist rationale:

...the issue of ethical praxis in research remains a continuous and political project across the different strands of feminist theory. Ethics in feminist research is a political project that aims to address gaps and problems of representation in research (Kiguwa 2019, 232).

Although our interviews were always within the remit of our approved research instruments, participants often prioritised which experiences they shared. Similar to Nana, many participants who later remembered further details not shared in initial interviews asked for subsequent sessions. While some completed their first interview in one sitting, others prematurely aborted it because they could not bear the emotional toll of narrating painful memories, or due to unforeseen interruptions such as electricity cuts, internet disconnections, unplanned visitors or the need to attend to parents or children midway through the interview. We flexibly departed from rigid adherence to research protocols, including scheduled workloads, timed non-stop interviews, strictly following the step-by-step structure of listed questions and blindly determining each participant's point of saturation. This feminist practice echoes Mama's (2011, e12) reference to improvisation and adaptation for the local use of conceptual tools, feminist theory and new methods, "often in ways that are not fully conscious, and which often go unreported."

Considering that we were interviewing political, gender and sexual minorities, we adhered to foundational principles of research ethics, namely autonomy, non-maleficence, justice, beneficence, research merit and integrity. Our research participants constantly challenged the inflexible application of normative research ethics principles, e.g. refusing anonymity, rejecting pseudonyms, not yielding their autonomy to either male partners or older children to decide whether or not to participate in our research, insisting on monetary compensation for the internet, preferring verbal to written consent and demanding pragmatic utilitarian value from research participation. While contestable in application, these principles have universal claims in the literature. Alele and Malau-Aduli (2023) assert that "these principles are universal, which means they apply everywhere in the world, without national, cultural, legal or economic boundaries. Therefore, everyone involved in human research studies should understand and follow these principles." It is normative practice within traditional research to undergo rigorous preparation, endure bureaucratic submission processes, submit to assessment that sometimes entails interfacing with reviewers, revise and resubmit where necessary and eventually receive approval of protocols that stipulate strict observance of the principles of research ethics (Ibingira and Ochieng 2013).

The mandatory requirement of ethical review is taught in compulsory courses at all stages of university education, irrespective of discipline or geography. The academic classes are enforced through practical training before any research is conducted. These rituals engineer generational perpetuation of unquestioning subservience to normative research ethics review processes. Countries have centralised systems and hierarchical structures for effecting this technology of surveillance and approval of academic research. Disciplinary specialists, community leaders and representatives of minorities populate institutional ethics review boards whose annual proceedings and decisions are reported centrally to a national body that collates them in accessible databases. Adherence or non-compliance to standards is assessed from these data (Ochieng et al. 2013).

The Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) collaborates with the National Drug Authority<sup>22</sup> and the National HIV/AIDS Research and Ethics Committee<sup>23</sup> to manage the review of research ethics (UNCST 2014). Charles Rwabukwali (2007, 113) decried the dominance of biomedicine in UNCST's protocols and processes:

...UNCST has issued guidelines for good practices aimed at improving quality of research that is ethically grounded. Unfortunately, these guidelines are biased in favour of biomedical research, hence a need for guidelines dedicated to the social sciences and a framework for ethics to guide social science research in Uganda.

He identified four challenges, namely undue pressure/coercion, deception, privacy and confidentiality. Fontes (2004) and Mootz et al. (2019) highlight the scarcity of scholarship on ethics specific to conducting and disseminating research about violence.

Our research experience further uncovers other dimensions to the challenges of seeking ethical approval from UNCST. These include over-monetisation of the review process, which is a money-making venture for under-financed institutional review boards; unduly long back-and-forth submission processes; the politicisation of feminist research topics, such as sexual orientation and gender-based violence; and a lack of specialists to empathetically analyse feminist methodologies. Given our identities as dissident political exiles, accredited research ethics review boards would have hesitated to review our proposal. Perhaps submission would only have

succeeded through payment of hefty fees charged in foreign currency. Instead, *Feminist Africa's* consortium reviewed and approved the science and ethics of our research. Regular consultations with a feminist professor helped us to troubleshoot and resolve ethical challenges encountered during data collection. We discussed the progress and challenges of fieldwork in monthly online workshops with consortium researchers.

An urgency to further develop African feminist ethical review processes persists. Given that traditional research still excludes people who fail selection criteria, it is important to expand the reach of feminist ethics that facilitate inclusion instead of exclusion. Women such as Nalongo Nana Mw'Afrika, who experience political violence, are still excluded from traditional research. Thus, they navigate, dismantle and recreate their own ethical requirements sensitive to their tears, tremors, trauma and truncated narratives. African feminism invites us to address the disjuncture between an inclusive ethical practice and exclusionary normative ethical review.

## **Emergent Sample Using Purposive, Convenience and Snowball Sampling Techniques**

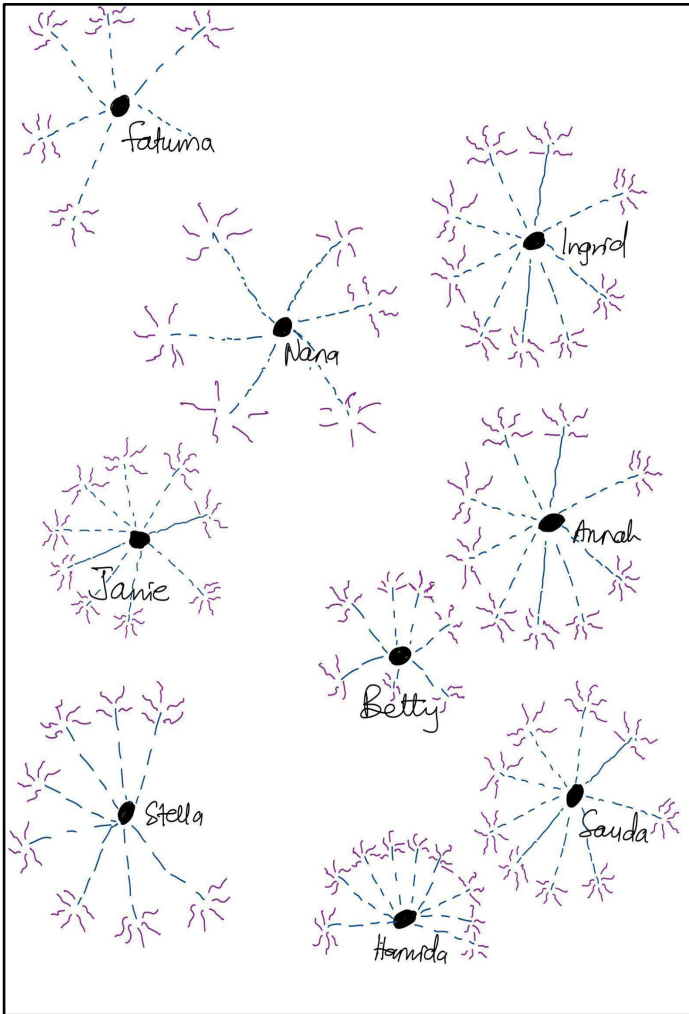
Generally, the prized primary focus of feminist research is (biological) women's lived experiences (Kiguwa 2019, 223; Mama 2011). This rule has three exceptions. Firstly, not all research about women is necessarily feminist. Secondly, sustained criticisms have underscored an inherent essentialism that forbids interrogations and problematisation of the social construction of WOMAN as an ambivalent, fluid and changing gender category imbued with contextual meanings (Moi 1999), WOMEN in their pluralities and diversities and WOMYN – an index for radical queer and non-binary feminists' refusal of reductionist reliance on essentialist marginalising handed down from patriarchy, misogyny, heterosexism and queerphobia (Kunz 2019; Khan 2017; Simamkele et al. 2017). Thirdly, historical developments within feminist movements comprising frictions, fractures, factions and unexpected fusions underscore competing, contradicting and intersecting forms of feminism. Indeed, there is no singular monolithic feminism, but rather a plethora of feminisms. Peace Kiguwa (2019, 223) critically asks and then provides an instructive response.

...Is feminist research only ever concerned with women as subjects, and with exploring women's everyday experiences and social relations? Again, depending on what paradigmatic approach you adopt, the answers to this question would be very different.

Our overlapping self-identifications and affiliations with radical queer feminism and African feminism influenced our sampling frame. Our key informants were purposively sampled from women in Uganda who experienced political violence. Building upon intersectionality (Crenshaw 1993), we included varying generations, geographical locations, income brackets, professions, education levels, political party affiliation – including non-partisanship – and marital status. Furthermore, we opened the boundaries of our sampling frame to include queer people, transgender women and transgender men, non-binary and non-conforming gender identities and other forms of gender minorities. Developments in Uganda's socio-political scene, specifically escalating (but unresearched) state-instituted violence targeting LGBTIQ+ individuals and communities after the advent of the Anti-Homosexuality Act (2023), informed a revision of the sampling frame.

From this broad sampling frame and autoethnography corroborated with public media content analysis, we developed a list of 20 potential key informants. Five individuals were reserved in case of refusals due to conflict of interest, unwillingness, unavailability, research fatigue and mistrust. These 20 informants were key nodal contacts to three categories of samples emergent in our study including (1) people who experienced political violence; (2) individuals, collectives, institutions, civil society organisations, state organs, regional or international bodies that offered support during or after political violence; and (3) individuals and associations that resisted political violence (*see figure 1 below*).





**Figure 1:** Key informants as nodes linking to support and resistance

There was an overlap between names we developed and names our key informants mentioned. This complementarity increased our confidence to implement the snowball sampling technique and confirmed the findings of our preliminary situational analysis of the research context. It also verified the credibility of our eventual sample, despite reported shortcomings of convenience, purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Noy 2008).

Pursuant to our aim of generating grounded theory about gendered political violence, the emergent networks of support developed organically from our research processes, materials, interpretations and empirical findings. Most supporters acted privately, confidentially and away from public media. They were neither recognised nor named in public records.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, resistance work is largely under-researched, heavily tabooed, censored and frequently criminalised in the context of growing despotic militant authoritarianism (Tripp 2004). Thus, the key informants served as nodal links, granting us access to an underground nexus of highly invisibilised contextual resistance working to counteract gendered political violence in Uganda. Grounded theory uncovered this important sample of key informants from/with/about which we studied feminist resistance work.

## **Feminist Praxis of Returning Power and Voice to Marginalised Women**

The foregoing exploration of African feminist methodologies we appropriated to study gendered political violence with women and gender minorities uncovers the ambivalent combination of multiple advantages juxtaposed with challenges. Departing from male-dominated, positivistic research approaches, feminist methodologies facilitated our focus on often-neglected, hard-to-reach, silenced and largely invisibilised research participants, including subjugated opposition party members, dissidents, student protesters, ex-prisoners, ex-convicts, government critics, anti-establishment actors, gender minorities and LGBTIQ+ individuals (Naples 2007; Kiguwa 2019). While feminists have argued for the inclusion of otherwise excluded diversely gendered individuals – a position we strongly endorse – it is noteworthy that some potential research participants do not necessarily want to be found. Some prefer to and even insist on remaining undetected and concealing what they perceive to be shameful, painful, traumatising secrets in the service of self-preservation. African feminist ethics call for tactfully balancing a researcher's relentless search for knowledge with respect for the autonomy of research participants.

While a few research participants remained sedentary, the majority were highly mobile – shifting within and without Uganda as internally displaced persons, detainees, prisoners, fugitives, residents in protection houses, asylum seekers, refugees, illegal migrants and foreign students, among others. For example, Nalongo Nana Mw’Afrika was in Uganda when we first invited her to participate in the research; she then travelled to Kenya, Germany and back to Uganda during the period we interviewed her. She continues to travel widely. She was also twice in police detention and remanded in prison during the research. We were able to follow up, keep track, maintain or regain contact and resume research processes interrupted by the precarity of this mobility. Similar to the research participants, we ourselves were highly mobile in our residence, flexible in our research schedules and intermittent in our availability. Both researchers lived in exile during the research. While exile brought the disadvantage of physically removing us from our country of focus, it also availed the necessary illusion of relative safety from state surveillance and penalisation, thereby emboldening our research participants to trust our ability to freely write honestly for, about and with them. In a similar vein, the emboldening was ours to use as explained below by Nyanzi (2022, 5):

Exile made the writing of this book possible... Writing and publishing this book when I was resident in Uganda would have most certainly invited more political persecution from dictator Museveni’s punitive and repressive militant regime. Exile brought me relatively more freedom to write taboo topics.

Although there are long histories of exiled African women as slaves, colonised subjects, pro-independence freedom fighters, wanted political actors, dissident writers and critical musicians, there are relatively few creative and academic works produced for and by them. Contemporary African feminist studies have come of age, particularly with the rapid advancements of information technology, which enhance the urgency to appropriate innovative methodologies that trace, track, train and undertake research with highly mobile and excluded exiles. As two exiled Ugandan knowledge producers, our research necessarily recentres dispossession, disruptions and disadvantageous distancing as a vantage point for both researcher and researched. Rather than being daunted by the challenges of high mobility, constant shifts in residence, necessary concealment as fugitives, occasional disappearances and

inaccessibility of our research participants, we embraced these as methodological components of our research design. African feminist ethos informed our resilience, temerity, innovation and flexibility in our attempt to include these difficult research subjects because their stories matter to feminist justice away from courts of law.

Rather than merely conduct research *on* or *about* women and gender minorities, we deliberately chose to work *with* Ugandan women – as emphasised in this article’s title. We were aware of potential power asymmetry between our research team and the participants. Drawing upon the feminist ethos of egalitarian collaboration, we continuously checked and countered expectations and projections of superiority cast upon us by our research participants who perceived and interpreted our residence abroad, educational attainment and track records of activism back home as indicators of relatively more power. However, feminist ethos demanded that we continually conscientised ourselves about the participatory politics of neutralising our power, thereby returning authority to the research participants. Thus, reflexivity was integral to our research processes. We debriefed immediately after each interview. This echoes Kiguwa’s (2019, 232) assertion that:

Feminist theory’s project of recovering marginalised voices and exploring possibilities for social justice for women has broader implications for the place of reflexivity as a core ethical principle in research. The research encounter is invariably marked by unequal power between participants and the researcher.

When some research participants attempted to turn interviews into consultations for our advice about their challenges, we encouraged them to generate their own solutions. Many who experienced political violence reported finding our interviews therapeutic. For some, it was the first time they had publicly revisited and narrativised trauma that had been suppressed for years. Sometimes, these interviews were emotionally draining for our research team, necessitating detoxifying or consultations about how to effectively collect narratives of women’s trauma without suffering mental illness including unmanageable grief, anxiety, depression or lethargy. What kept us going against all odds was the constant reminder of our desire to mete out feminist poetic justice through writing that named and shamed perpetrators while simultaneously celebrating survivors, their support networks and allies of resistance against political violence.

All our research processes, from designing research instruments to negotiating ethics, collecting data, processing, analysing, interpreting, theorising and writing, gave credence to women's often silenced, muted and erased voices (Boonzaier and Shefer 2006). Triangulating various mixed methods enhanced our rigour in collating and verifying research materials from alternative sources (Nyanzi et al. 2007). These data do not only provide thick descriptions that promote direct quotations from the very words of research participants, such as the introductory vignette, but also give voice to otherwise unjustly silenced individuals. The power of our feminist methodologies lies in their ability to centre women's voices despite experiencing gendered political violence in Uganda. The power of our feminist methodologies is the glue that facilitated our transgenerational collaboration which bridged several demographic differences, engendered our attention to a highly maligned topic and enabled us to expose the punitive military regime in the country from which we are presently exiled.

It is impossible to conclude this feminist methodological exploration, particularly because the research processes are still unfolding through our ongoing generation of emergent grounded theory about women's experiences of and resistance to political violence in Uganda. Akin to the subaltern speaking back or the hunted narrating their version of the hunt, our forthcoming grounded theory – conceived, birthed and nurtured through the intricate triangulation of feminist research methodologies outlined above – will confirm, complement, complicate, contradict or counter existent grand theories about violence against women in politics and political violence against women.

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## Notes

1. We adopt the names research participants chose. While some chose pseudonyms (preferring anonymity), others maintained their known identities.
2. Cultural title assigned to mothers of twins in Luganda. Both this researcher and the research participant are mothers of twins.
3. Feminist research is about the politics of gender. However, not all gender analyses are feminist research. Kiguwa (2019, 220) explains that "...some gendered research and analysis is not feminist in approach and orientation. This distinction is important as meanings of 'feminist' and 'gender' tend to be misleading in that they are often understood to refer to the same thing. Doing work and research on gender is not always feminist in orientation." Mama (2011, e8) distinguishes between "women's mobilizations" and "pursuing feminist agendas."
4. This methodological article is the first of four publications from our research. Subsequent publications focus on (1) ambivalences of feminist resistance against militarisation, (2) ethos of visibilising political violence against women dissidents and (3) building a grounded theory of support networks for resisting gendered political violence in Uganda.
5. "Organic" denotes a living, changing and developing concept whose nuances we are studying, debating and interrogating. We are open to emergent context-specific configurations of feminist research methodologies.
6. Despite its age, this reference remains relevant because there is a paucity of feminist research focused on describing and theorising research processes.
7. In this paper we distinguish between "grounded theory," "a grounded theory" and "grounded theories." Both the analytical framework and the research output(s) are called grounded theory. Furthermore, while the overall aim of our research was to theorise about gendered political violence from the data collected about

diverse experiences of our research participants, we realised that there were several sub-theories emanating from and contributing towards the main grounded theory. For example, state-instituted homophobic violence in Uganda is a sub-theory of political violence against gender and sexual minorities, just as dehumanisation through forced anal penetration of political activists during interrogation by police officers is a sub-theory of gendered political violence. These two sub-theories contribute towards the grounded theory we sought to generate using a grounded theory analytical approach.

8. *Feminist Africa* (2020) is “a continental gender studies journal produced by the community of feminist scholars in Africa. It provides a platform for intellectual and activist research, dialogue and strategy ... is guided by a profound commitment to transforming gender hierarchies in Africa, and seeks to redress injustice and inequality in its editorial policy, content and design.” The journal is “committed to the strategic and political need to prioritise African women’s intellectual work.”
9. Mama (2011) conceptually discusses the feminist African intellectual community.
10. This research project was undertaken under the three-year-long *Feminist Africa* – Violence, Gender and Power: Feminist Struggles around Violence against Women Research Consortium, which started with a call for proposals issued in the journal.
11. The consortium comprised research teams whose proposals were successful. In addition to receiving a grant from *Feminist Africa*, all researchers met online regularly for methodological workshops and physically biannually for presentation of results and writing.
12. *Feminist Africa* granted US\$6,000 to each selected research team, thereby enhancing recipients’ capability to engage in research.
13. The research titled “From Assault to Rape at the Frontline: Resistance Experiences of Uganda’s Women” commenced on 16 January 2023.

14. Detailed descriptive analyses of research findings on gendered political violence are contained in subsequent papers (Ashaba and Nyanzi, *forthcoming*; Nyanzi and Ashaba, *forthcoming*).
15. Some feminist schools of thought exclusively use qualitative research methods. They criticise quantitative methods drawn from positivistic and deductive research paradigms for being intrinsically male-centred and dominated by men as experts (Harding 1991, 1986, Boonzaier and Shefer 2006). Other feminists prefer case-specific decisions about combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. Emphasis is placed on transcending the statistical measurement of fixed variables and advancing towards appropriating qualitative methods to unpack the complicated overlapping messiness of women's lives.
16. Research materials include (1) texts from newspapers, tabloids, magazines, letters, diaries, medical reports, police charge sheets, prison discharge notes and passports, (2) photographs published in print and electronically, and (3) video footage from television, documentaries and social media platforms.
17. While some resistance was mounted by individuals who experienced political violence, this was supplemented by other resisters, including individuals, collectives, organisations, professionals and politicians.
18. Runyakitara refers to four closely related Bantu languages spoken in Western Uganda, namely Runyankore, Rukiga, Rutoro and Runyoro.
19. The second author is a poet, essayist, short story writer, seasonal columnist in local and international newspapers. She is a government critic and activist, holds a Bachelor of Arts with Education from Makerere University and is currently pursuing a Master of Science in Social Justice and Community Action at the University of Edinburgh.
20. The first author is an academic researcher, dissident poet, social justice activist, social media commentator and government critic. She has a doctoral degree in Medical Anthropology with specialisation in sexual and reproductive health and rights, a Master of Science



degree in Medical Anthropology and a Bachelor of Arts in Mass Communication and Literature.

21. The second author jointly led the #FeesMustFall students' movement protesting unjust tuition fee increments at Makerere University in October 2019. She is a teacher, community organiser, social entrepreneur invested in eradicating menstrual poverty, and a human and women's rights activist. As a responder for political prisoners, she paid the first author multiple visits at Luzira Women's Prison. The first author held a nude protest for labour rights at Makerere University, won cases in the academic tribunal and civil court, organised socio-political protests for women, girls and pro-poor communities, advocated for LGBTIQ+ rights and campaigned for free speech.
22. For pharmacology.
23. For HIV/AIDS.
24. Future research will examine motivation to support victims of political violence.

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