

Building Feminist Knowledges Through Everyday Conversations: Using Reflective Conversations as Research Methodology

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Abstract

Reflective conversations are used by us feminists to question ourselves and the world from multiple perspectives. In this article, I reflect on my experience of using reflective conversations as a research methodology to explore how feminist knowledges are built through everyday informal conversations. I used this approach in a study that addressed violence against women by examining African feminist perspectives on state responsibility. I argue that these spaces of everyday informal conversations are a site of feminist knowledge building, enabled by a congruence of factors including a shared political analysis which makes it possible to link personal experiences to structural and systemic patterns of discrimination. While using this methodology, critical reflections emerge on the politics of the research process including questions of ethics, structure and form; what it means to be both researcher and participant; and the politics of time. In the end, the political value of headspace is clear – time and space to produce knowledge are central to determining who holds epistemic power.

Keywords: feminist knowledges, reflective conversations, informal knowledge building, African women, violence against women

Introduction

Whenever I have informal conversations with fellow feminists, knowledges are built. What begin as random stories of experiences often spiral into power analyses of systems of inequality and deep resonance between us on

structural barriers to gender justice. It is common for us to end phone calls or social gatherings with statements such as “Ah, we should have recorded that” or “That’s a paper right there.” The discourse often results in epistemic shifts and sometimes action to subvert patriarchy and intersecting gendered inequalities.

This is not new. Feminist methodologies such as the use of stories and consciousness-raising have long been “processes by which individuals share personal experiences with others in an effort to derive collective significance or meaning from those experiences. Through consciousness-raising, women begin to view what otherwise might appear as isolated instances of insensitivity or chauvinism as symptoms of broader societal oppression” (Minow, Verchick and Levit 2016, 45). Such conversations enable feminists to not only name their grievances, but also “reinterpret reality in a critical fashion” (Chamallas 2012, 1). These interactions are not just spaces of insight and revelation, but also of knowledge building.

Knowledge is rooted in the relationships that produce it (Dupuis 2022). Feminist knowledges are built and sustained across an array of modes, spaces and epistemic communities across time (Okech 2020). These communities range from those generated by formal and structured academic spaces of teaching, instruction and research; networks; conferences and professional work settings; to others in much less institutionalised settings such as social movement spaces; conversations among ordinary people or work by individual activists or researchers in their own capacity. Sometimes mobility (Bennett 2009) across these modes, spaces and communities is so significant that, in my experience, it becomes difficult to distinguish between formal and informal contexts through which feminist knowledges are built. Yet, even when performing what may seem like a formal act of knowledge production such as I am doing – academic research and writing for publication under contract – it has always been clear that a greater part of the knowledge being produced for such purposes emerges from informal reflective conversations. By informal, I mean relaxed, unstructured, casual and friendly settings where off-the-record conversations happen in an environment of familiarity and trust.

Feminist scholars have for a long time challenged ways of knowing that keep the “intellectual and personal apart in neat separate categories” (Lundgren and Prah 2009, 174). Feminists have resisted the idea that for knowledge to be accepted as scientific, it must be “objective,” meaning that it is value-free, disembodied and produced by researchers who are separated from their beliefs, values and contexts (Adomako Ampofo and Arnfred 2009; Mejiuni 2013; Harding 2013; Okech 2020; Yadav 2018). “We are embodied and embedded natures and these facts about us matter when making claims to know something” (Assiter 2003, 330). Feminist scholars have also disrupted the idea that personal, emotional and embodied knowledge is incapable of being “objective” or “scientific” (Haraway 1988; Harding 1991). Haraway proposes a definition of objectivity that is different from positivist conceptions of objectivity. She says feminist objectivity means “situated knowledges” with elements including positionality, partiality and accountability (Haraway 1988, 581; Bhavnani 1993).

In this article, I reflect on my experience of using “reflective conversations” as a research methodology that specifically explores how feminist knowledges are built through informal conversations in the course of everyday life. These are reflective conversations with feminists with whom I am in longstanding relationships – good friends, mentors and close colleagues. I rely on Marina Cadaval Narezo’s work and concept of “reflective conversations” because it expresses for me a way of producing knowledge that centres informality, care, affection and respect (2022).

I used this methodology in a research study that sought to address violence against women (VAW) by exploring feminist perspectives on state responsibility. Although there are well-established frameworks on the meaning, scope and content of state responsibility, which detail state obligations in prevention, protection, prosecution, punishment of perpetrators and provision of adequate remedies for survivors of violence – commonly referred to as the “five Ps” (Smythe 2008; Benninger-Budel 2008; Manjoo 2013; Qureshi 2013; Aziz and Moussa 2014; García-Del Moral and Dersnah 2015; Nekura 2023) – this study explored other pathways of feminist thinking through what should constitute effective state responsibility, from and in practice. The focus of this study is on how feminists in their activism, research and experiences navigate both the limits of the law and its potential as a tool

for social justice in pursuit of a world where women can live free from all forms of violence. This article focuses only on reflections from the methodology. Findings of the broader study on feminist perspectives on state accountability for VAW will be published separately.

The participants I spoke with in this study were African feminist activists located in different spaces – academics, independent researchers, individual activists working at various levels of influence, staff working in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and leaders of civil society organisations (CSOs). While some of them worked in expressly feminist spaces, others conducted their “feminisms” within more general institutional and other contexts. The participants were from diverse disciplines and sectors including law, philanthropy, grassroots organising, sociology, humanitarian work, development, health programming and entrepreneurship. They included individuals from Kenya, Zimbabwe, Uganda and South Africa.

The cross-cutting factor was that the participants were not just in my networks; they were people with whom I had worked closely on VAW work for a long time, whether in movement/activist spaces or in the academy. I would describe most of them as very good friends or close colleagues with whom I have relationships of care, respect and affection. With all of them – some more frequently than others – I have had many informal conversations that have generated knowledge and shaped our work, from authoring academic papers to preparing legal arguments in court submissions, developing curricula, writing position papers and developing NGO strategic plans.

In this article, I argue that these informal and sometimes random (being unwittingly generative in unforeseen ways) conversations among feminists are sites of knowledge building. I also reflect on the politics of the research process that emerged, including of structure, form and ethical access; my positionality; my role as a researcher/participant and the co-creation that happens through reflective conversations; insights from re-thinking debriefing processes for VAW research; and the politics of time.

Reflective Conversations as a Feminist Methodology

Narezo defines reflective conversations as “discussions, encounters that depart from common and mutual understandings – (our diverse feminisms) – through which we find and examine ourselves in multiple times and spaces.” Such conversations go “beyond obtaining information, systematizing it and presenting it as a final and individual product” (2022, 140). It is a methodological process that entails the constant exercise of reflection – confrontational and questioning – on the implications of producing knowledge. It requires “paying attention to the forms, to the substance, the background, the contexts, the personal and collective interests, to temporalities – the ephemerality of an encounter and the permanency of a memory; to the vulnerability of shared emotions” (Narezo 2022, 140).

I found that using this approach facilitated holistic reflections on personal and structural violence. Such violence is produced by systems of domination and sustained through societal institutions, cultures and systems designed to perpetuate discrimination on the basis of intersecting factors such as sex, gender, race and economic status, to deny women and other marginalised communities physical and emotional well-being (Anglin 1998; Crenshaw 1994). Reflective conversations allowed room for emotions in discussions of wins and disappointments in the collective commitment to state accountability for VAW. Reflective conversations happen because there is also an investment in the political intention to see a world where gender justice is a reality.

For some researchers, these characteristics may well exist in conventional interviews or focus group discussions, with little difference from reflective conversations, depending on their design. In this research, I find that Narezo’s conceptualisation of reflective conversations provides more depth and clarity for expressing both decolonial and feminist epistemologies that centre embodiment, relationality and emotion in knowledge production.

Narezo’s “reflective conversations” concept is not self-standing but anchored in a long tradition of feminist epistemologies. The intentional centring of care, reflexivity, informality, relationships and rejection of western disembodied conventional methodologies is not new. It is based on the intention to generate situated knowledges (Harcourt et al 2022; Bhavnani

1993; Haraway 1988; Harding 1991) and draws on work that Black American, African, Indigenous and decolonial feminists have proposed (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 2000; Mama 2011; Smith 2012). Informal research methodologies have also been used widely in various qualitative approaches, for example, in participant observations and in feminist reclamations of ethnography (Makana 2018).

Drawing on autoethnography, Kohl and McCutcheon (2015) document their own use of informal conversations in their friendship to tell stories and share personal experiences, which they connect to broader social and political processes in academic research. For them, informal “everyday talk” is used as a medium for reflecting on their positionality, situatedness and accountability in their research journeys – what they call “kitchen table reflexivity.” Relying on the works of Black feminist scholars such as Collins (2009) and hooks (1989, 2000, 2009), Kohl and McCutcheon demonstrate that feminist scholarship has always been about bringing everyday experiences into the realm of academic research.

Reflective conversations also have a place within the oral traditions of African knowledge systems. Much has been written about how customs, traditions, beliefs and opinions were passed on orally until the advent of colonisation when literacy was given precedence and millennia of complex oral Indigenous knowledge systems were devalued (Mbunwe-Samba 1994; Zegeye and Vambe 2006; Msuya 2007). These oral, conversational practices were not only about customs and traditions but also technical knowledge building and transfer through telling stories, sharing experience and engaging memory knowledge (Osei-Tutu 2022; Abdi 2007; Abah and Denuga 2015; Sone 2018; Falade 2013). Ikenobe writes about how these knowing systems are justified through “principles of epistemic trust, epistemic dependence, and epistemic communalism” (2018).

African feminist scholars have argued that these oral forms of knowledge can make visible a sense of knowing that is often muted by Euro-western mythologies and dominant male thought (Jagire 2013; Chilisa 2010; Wane 2011, 2014; Manyozo 2018; Nkealah 2016). As a result, it is by exploring women’s lived experiences and relational worlds that ideologies of oppression against them can be exposed.

Reflective Conversations as a Site of Feminist Knowledge Building

It is the emphasis on the reflective in “reflective conversations” methodology that I believe facilitates feminist knowledge building in ways that may not be possible with other kinds of conversations, dialogues or discussions. When considering the difference between conversations that build knowledge and others that may not, what comes to mind is the distinction between “knowledge” and “opinion” or “information,” a distinction that the academy and scientific communities are often quick to use to discount knowledge systems that are unconventional or unfamiliar to Eurocentric ways of knowing (Kilomba 2008).

My purpose is not to stratify what forms of conversations, methods or processes qualify as reflective “knowing.” The emphasis is on an analysis of the conditions in this research that enabled and exhibited feminist knowledge building. The analysis is partial and based on the specific context and points of inquiry. Being limited to context, they are not generalisable. I noted five factors that worked in congruence to facilitate and demonstrate feminist knowledge building through informal reflective conversations.

A shared political analysis that deliberately links individual experiences to structural and systemic inequalities

Reflective conversations are knowledge-building interactions where there is a shared political analysis. I do not claim that knowledge cannot be produced through disagreement and debate. However, what this research uncovered was that mutual understanding and a shared politics enabled feminist knowledge building. Deep insights were generated precisely *because* there were agreed and aligned points of departure. This enables feminists to ideate, conceptualise and develop knowledge without the burden of having to defend or justify their politics before the thinking process moves forward. A shared political analysis also enabled our conversations to unearth challenges that frustrate the pursuit of state accountability for VAW.

For example, in several conversations, it was mutually agreed that “woman” is not synonymous with “feminist” and that women’s rights organisations, which are often perceived by states and CSOs in many

countries as feminist, are not feminist in their approach. They are depoliticised and exclusionary. They operate in ways that are geared towards maintaining respectability within oppressive power structures and close affiliations with state actors. This depoliticisation compromises their ability to challenge intersecting gendered power inequalities or play the role of CSOs that should hold states accountable. They are not interested in unsettling the status quo of power inequalities.

With that point of departure being settled, the reflective conversations on what would be considered effective state responsibility to address VAW moved to deeper insights. Doing so entailed, for example, interrogating the cost of co-option in processes of identifying solutions to VAW. In other words, we explored what happens when women's rights organisations can be co-opted by state institutions to advance their propaganda. We considered how such compromises sacrifice freedom, leading to interventions that do not target the root causes of VAW, and to outcomes with very little transformative potential. We discussed how a depoliticised civil society not only results in limited thresholds in terms of the meaning and scope of state accountability for VAW, but also hampers the ability of activists or organisations to hold states accountable for VAW. Therefore, having mutual points of departure – such as our feminisms – facilitated knowledge building.¹

Knowledge was built through reflective conversations that linked the individual to the structural. Connecting the personal and the political facilitated knowledge building by revealing how unique personal lived experiences sometimes reveal systemic patterns of violence. For example, one conversation began with a participant's disclosure of her own experience of sexual harassment. We discussed the participant's efforts to seek justice through the courts and the challenges she faced therein. The case eventually ended after a tedious legal process that took years, and that decentred her and centred the state and the perpetrator, who was acquitted. The only possible remedy at the end of the process, had it gone in her favour, was imprisonment or a fine to be paid to the state. As we talked through the gaps and limits of the criminal justice system, the conversation turned to whether there is legal recognition of a victim's voice in the criminal justice process, what to do about the limited conceptions of punishment and remedies, and what would constitute transformative remedies for VAW.²

In addition, reflective conversations facilitate linkages between individual and structural factors as a way of building knowledge. For instance, one participant remarked:

My knowledge and collective knowledge have been built informally, and it's from sitting, understanding how other people think. It is like a flashlight, a torch, to see things in your life that were hidden to you, you know? "Oh, wait, that happens to me too, and to others; why is that? I've never questioned that." And then, now you begin to question it, and I think that's how knowledge is built.³

Knowledge is built through reflections that happen in safe thinking spaces that are intentionally curated

Feminist knowledge building happens through reflective conversations curated intentionally in safe thinking spaces, with trust and affective solidarity. These spaces may be structured or emerge spontaneously based on how feminists interact with everyday life and work as colleagues or friends. The conversations happen offline and online. Some begin professionally and friendships grow from them. Sometimes, knowledge building is part of feminist meetings curated as informal reflective conversations. On other occasions, they happen in the isolated corners of formal meeting spaces, such as conference venues or classrooms. They also happen at parties, in hotel rooms and during social gatherings. This demonstrates how hostile environments impel feminists to carve out spaces for their reflective conversations.⁴ What was consistent was that the conversations were intentionally curated, meaning that people made time for them and wished to speak with and listen to others in a safe space.

In these spaces of community and affective solidarity (Vachhani and Pullen 2019), feminist thinking happens in ways that reassure feminists that they are not crazy. One participant explained:

You want to think in a safe space because we know we are transgressive. We hold views that other people don't hold. So, if I want to build knowledge, if I want to grow or discuss ideas that are affirming, that help us grow, I know where to go, because I know from there something positive is going to happen.⁵

Another participant described how such safe thinking spaces can be a haven from the world's oppressive systems:

...because we are faced with the realities of homophobia, or white supremacy, or cisheteropatriarchy every day. So, I think that these conversations are really important. I don't feel alone. I feel like I'm not crazy. How I see the world is not crazy. These things actually happen, and they deserve to be addressed; they deserve to be spoken about.⁶

Across the board, there were similar expressions of the reality that reflective conversations happened because of the generosity, care and leadership of feminists, and especially feminist elders. For example, one person observed:

Some people who are more senior than us at the time, they made a concerted effort to create a space for feminists to just come and have lunch and hang out. A lot of feminist knowledge was generated in those spaces.⁷

Several participants named and elevated their African feminist elders (across generations), who intentionally curated spaces for informal reflective conversations that led to knowledge building with the people involved in this research. Most of these elders were mentioned repeatedly by different people. They included Awino Okech, Catherine Nyambura, Hope Chigudu, Jacinta Muteshi, Lebohang Liepollo Pheko, Rashida Manjoo, Saida Ali, Sibongile Ndashe and Sylvia Tamale.

Reflective conversations often result in action

Feminist knowledge building was often demonstrated by the action that resulted from the reflective conversations. In one instance, a participant described a reflective conversation that began as a discussion between two feminists walking out of a theatre, about a case of VAW perpetrated by a local celebrity, which had been reported in the news. On their way home, they encountered a poster advertising a concert of another international celebrity who had been accused of multiple instances of VAW. Their conversation spiralled into an analysis of the impunity with which famous people perpetrate gender-based violence. The two feminists then sat in a restaurant and developed a strategy to address this impunity. The strategy involved mobilising fellow feminists and launching a campaign to stop the international celebrity from entering the country. As a result, he was banned and the concert was cancelled. She recalled:

...we started developing like the strategy on the serviette in a restaurant after watching a film, you know. We put the strategy on Facebook, called people: one was in the media, the other one was a celebrated poet, so she could be the spokesperson for the campaign, the other people were IT techies. I was the writer of the statements. We contacted the government, contacted the police and found out [about] all the other cases against him. We had like a regional mobilisation. Within three days, Koffi Olomide's concerts had been cancelled and visa withdrawn. So, it's conversations, it's the stories.⁸

There were several other examples of actions that resulted from reflective conversations. They ranged from epistemic shifts to "personal advocacy" that led to breaking a cycle of domestic violence as illustrated below:

The reality sometimes of conversations such as this is, I have had such conversations with a sister, and they come to the realisation that, you know what, I actually have to leave. Now he will gouge my eyes out the way we are seeing. So, the conversations resulted in a level of personal advocacy that happens – not because the state did anything to create awareness.⁹

Reflective conversations make visible ways of knowing that cannot be fully expressed in written or literary form

Several participants saw these informal reflective conversations as sites of building the kinds of knowing that cannot be found or fully expressed through any written form. For example, in a reflective conversation about how trauma from gendered (personal and structural) violence can cause the fragmentation of social movements – and how that trauma plays out in ways that cannot often be observed or measured – one participant affirmed:

I will never read this somewhere, Ruth. I will never because when certain things are written on violence, or that are about our movements, they are couched in certain ways. It is through feminist conversations that you get it raw, as it is. I have gotten it raw, as it is, through such conversations with Hope. Not that I didn't know these from reading, but she brought it home to me in a way I will never read in any book. It will not have the emotions in it.¹⁰

We then went on to discuss how knowing through the body, through feelings and emotions, when having a conversation with someone in-person, is sometimes hard to put into words.

Reflective conversations are also knowledge building because they provide a medium for analysing phenomena as they happen. For example, one feminist described a conversation that happened at a local seafood market. As the interlocutors selected their fish and ate, they noticed how small and scanty the market had become since the last time they were there, before the COVID-19 pandemic. The conversation grew into the gendered impact of informal trade and the asymmetrical economic subsidies that privilege big businesses. She explained that this evolution of the conversation instantiated a methodology through which live knowledge is built as phenomena occur. It highlights the idea that although written form is important, it does not circumscribe knowledge. She continued:

All these are live conversations, shaped by the reality of what we've gone to the market to do. We are doing this together. We start having a very deep feminist conversation about how economies are defined, about how people are still struggling – because look at the market. It used to be full. Where are the people? You understand? So, those conversations you're not going to read about, because the knowledge is happening in real time. It's not about waiting to read about it after someone writes about it long after the market is closed, like a year later. No, we're talking now.¹¹

In this example, the weaving of factors such as shared memory from the last time these two feminists were at that market together, their friendly relationship, a shared political perspective, the ability to link individual experiences/micro and structural macroeconomics, as well as the local and global geopolitical analysis, converged in ways that produced this feminist knowledge about gendered structural and economic violence in the context of a fish market in Mozambique on a Friday evening.

Reflections On the Politics of Research Processes

The dissonance of structure, form and ethics

My decision to use informal reflective conversations as research methodology was both exciting and uncomfortable. As I reflected on the discomfort, I realised that much of it comes from my perceptions about what proper academic research should be, which for me is typically formal, distanced and

structured in ways that make the knowledge produced easily acceptable as valid by scientific communities. It is imbued with strict justifications for any anomalies that fall outside conventional research methods. Therefore, embarking on a research process that centred informality, affection, connection and relational knowledge building was at odds with what I thought I knew about research processes and knowledge production. Some aspects of the dissonance were familiar, that is, they emanated from the contradictions I live with, being a feminist and a lawyer. But it went beyond that.

As I reflected, two life paths or trajectories emerged as possible explanations for the dissonance. The first is my legal and academic training, which was based largely on positivist traditions. For instance, during my PhD training, even though I was fortunate to work with feminist academics, it was always clear that we were in the minority within the law faculty. The PhD journey itself (being an exam with a strict passing formula) was still largely a process of developing knowledge within very constricted paradigms for the purposes of demonstrating to a coterie of academics in ivory towers that one has the capacity for original theoretical contribution. The dominant perspective is that these restricted paradigms are the only way to demonstrate such capacity for knowledge production. Accordingly, there was an inclination to align with conventional, positivist and Eurocentric epistemologies to “pass the test.”

The second path is several years of working with NGOs in precarious donor relations and funding cycles where knowledge generated from project activities is often required to fit neatly within boxes of rigidly defined results frameworks. This leads to the loss of rich insights and ideas from activist work that could fuel feminist imaginations of a world where women can live free from violence. The NGO knowledge generation process becomes reduced to one of counting observable, measurable project outcomes, such as numbers of people trained or cases supported through the criminal justice system.

In addition, most relationships between donors and NGOs are characterised by distrust and suspicion about how funding is used. Therefore, I come from a tradition where the documentation of work by activists is used mainly to prove that funds were used properly. Field reports are reduced to scanty folios that focus less on reflections and more on tick-box gathering of

evidence to disprove misappropriation – receipts, signing sheets, consent forms and field photographs. There is, of course, nothing wrong with diligence and accountability, which should in fact be encouraged. However, these methods leave little room for generative knowledge building from activists' reflections on our everyday resistance to gender inequalities.

What emerges from historicising my situatedness in these two life paths (academia and NGO culture) is how they have shaped my ideas about legitimate knowledge production processes, including structure, form, content, communication with participants, what I wear, my tone of voice, acceptable meeting settings, and how interviews are structured. They have shaped my approach to knowing.

As I grappled with this dissonance, I became aware of the times when I was performing “Dr Ruth”, the legal researcher, and the times when I was being myself within the relationships in which knowledge was being produced. I was grateful for the work of feminist scholars who documented their own reflections on their relational research processes in their own contexts (Okech 2013; Mupotsa 2011).

The process of obtaining consent for this research, including providing information to facilitate participants' decisions, went beyond the typical preparation of information sheets and consent forms with a signature section (which would have fulfilled the requirements of the ethics review committee). I used an invitation form that was less about ensuring that information concerning the study was included, and more about how I came to this research, why I want to do it, the central points of inquiry, the approach, what I thought was the participant's role and why I was inviting them. For several participants, this approach forestalled anxieties about whether they had to prepare anything technical before we spoke. I noticed that this structure also made it easy for many of them to engage with the information and begin reflections even before we met.

Instead of the typical consent form, I developed a document called Ethics of Care. It included the issues in consent form checklists such as confidentiality, informed voluntary consent, anonymity and payment clauses, but it went further to address the ethical concerns I had thought about, such as the power dynamics in informal relational research and the need for a

better debriefing approach for violence research. The consent form did not have signatures; instead, the focus was on explaining the risks of research and ethical considerations and developing a shared understanding of how continued informed consent would happen. I found signatures inappropriate and unethical in this context, with the potential to introduce a dynamic that is inimical to the safe spaces where the reflective conversations would take place.

In taking the decision to exclude signatures, I reflected on questions such as: what are the reasons for requesting signatures before participation in research? What do signatures invoke in such contexts? What do participants think they are “giving up” or “giving over” to the researcher by signing? Who is being protected by such signatures? Protected from what, how and why? I found that there are problems with viewing signed written forms as the ultimate evidence of consent. Wynn and Israel challenge the insistence on signed consent forms and argue that “written consent may not protect participants, may mask unethical research, and may often be inappropriate for legal, cultural, political or historical reasons.” They show that although ethics review bodies construct the practice of written signed consent forms as universal, it is in fact specific to dominant western cultures and ideologies about authenticity, power and form. These bureaucracies persist despite “the ample evidence that signed consent neither documents nor materializes ethical research relationships” (2018, 1).

I thought about the ethics of what it means for me to conduct research in these informal reflection spaces where often sensitive, off-the-record, personal and confidential information is shared on the basis of trust. Despite the relationships of trust and care between the other participants and me, I still hold the power to interpret the knowledge produced and determine how it is analysed and displayed, what is included and excluded in articles such as this, and how the stories are told. I navigated this power through honest conversations with participants about my responsibilities as the researcher. I highlighted the non-innocence of research in an open discussion with participants, including how it can be used as a tool for domination (Smith 2012). I explained my intentions to move away from extractive research which is “on and about” people rather than “with and for” them (Harcourt 2022). This prompted more discussions concerning my responsibility and accountability.

It included questions about how I would ensure confidentiality, present information accurately and truthfully, remain transparent by sharing various drafts with the participants for their review, and seek clarification as needed along the entire research process.

On being a researcher/participant and the value of knowledge co-creation

I assumed the position of “researcher/participant” to bridge the gap between “researcher” and “researched” and dismantle the hierarchy of “subject” and “object” in which the former is the supposed “knower.” Being both researcher and participant also facilitated the co-creation of knowledge through reflective conversations. Through mutual dialogue, I was actively involved in the conversations, sharing my own experiences as the participants recounted theirs, and questions flowed both ways, which made participants comfortable and forthcoming. Danai Mupotsa used a similar approach in research on gender and sexuality in Zimbabwe that analysed the experiences of young women (2011, 101).

The safe spaces allowed for unique and shared experiences to be woven into the process of knowledge production. The characteristics of reflective conversations, the space of trust, respect and care in which they took place, and where nobody was judged, allowed for disclosures and imagining to happen. The combination of experience and discourse (Mupotsa 2011) allowed for a process through which “explicit and implicit meanings were shared” (Mama 1995, 98). The knowledge co-creation was expressed variously, sometimes as drawings or illustrations used to explain concepts or relationships between ideas.

Even though I had some commonalities with the participants, not least because we were all African women feminist activists, our experiences and realities were diverse. There were power dynamics at play that I was conscious of and had to navigate through the research processes. Some of the participants were my former bosses, while I was a former boss to others. There were socio-economic differences. I thought about what it meant to invite friends or close colleagues to be part of my research: did they believe they had the right to say no?

Were there concerns about the implications for our relationship, regarding their being “supportive” for my project? While invitations for research participation from strangers can easily be ignored without much consequence, the case is different with requests from a close friend or colleague. I navigated most of this terrain through flexibility (in expectations, time and process), and by listening, creating many opportunities for honest questioning or feedback and being responsive. The research process was driven by a recognition that power moves in informality.

Rethinking the debriefing process to meaningfully address the risks of trauma in VAW research

The risks associated with conducting research on gender-based VAW are well documented, including the possibility of respondents and researchers being traumatised by accounts of violent experiences (World Health Organization 2005; Mulla and Hlavka 2011). Even in studies that do not ask direct questions about people’s experiences of violence, traumatic events may be recounted.

Research in general and especially on violence can be extractive. It often engages people on the margins of society about experiences that are difficult, and this can trigger or activate certain traumatic experiences and emotions. People with such experiences are often from communities that do not have access to resources and spaces of healing (Chirape 2021). In this research, even though I did not ask about participants’ experiences of violence, their stories often led us to discussions of personal and structural violence.

Traditional debriefing processes commonly consist of providing participants with resources such as contact lists of therapists, hotlines, rape crisis centres, domestic violence shelters and reading material on processing trauma. This was the approach recommended by the ethics review body that evaluated my research, along with a mandatory debriefing email/letter template. I found this approach inadequate for a few reasons. First, the participants in this study, being activists and professionals working on VAW, may know or have personal or professional connections with providers of psychosocial support services likely to be on contact lists provided as part of

the traditional debriefing process. This familiarity may cause participants discomfort about consulting such service providers.

Second, most of the psychosocial services listed that are free are in high demand and under-resourced, which makes it difficult to confirm their availability, quality, consistency and ability to support in debriefing cases of trauma that differ from the typical rape or domestic violence crises that they handle. I was also not sure whether these spaces are queer-friendly. For these reasons, research participants do not often respond to or engage with such resources provided on contact lists.

In re-thinking debriefing, I decided to partner with a feminist psychologist, Skye Chirape, whose work involves healing and responding to the violence that can result from research processes. Together, we established a debriefing plan, and she held space for participants to deal with trauma arising from the research, as well as any other emotions that were activated in the process. The debriefing consisted of two sessions paid for from the research funds provided by *Feminist Africa*. Participants could have the two debriefing sessions with their preferred therapist or healer and be reimbursed for the expense.

The debriefing was structured in a way that recognised the need to provide feminist activists with a healing space for their work and life generally. This means that the debriefing process was about how the research could add value to the participants, recognising the general difficulties and impact of existing in contexts where they are constantly challenging systems of oppression. The debriefing invitation did not assume that participants were traumatised. They were encouraged to take up the offer even if the research did not activate any negative feelings, or if it evoked positive feelings such as joy, pleasure, solidarity and love. This debriefing approach was about recognising that reflective conversations as knowledge-building processes are part of all other activist work.

Of the 12 participants, 10 took up the debriefing offer: eight went with the plan established with Chirape while two chose to have sessions with their own therapists; the remaining two opted out. Most of the participants wrote back about their positive experiences with the debriefing process. They described the value of this space as being the rare opportunity for someone to

hold space for them to just reflect and debrief about their work, especially the emotional and psychological labour that comes with doing social justice work. They were grateful to be part of a research process that not only took but also gave.

The politics and privilege of time

The reflective conversations methodology revealed the centrality of time in knowledge production. In *Gender and the Politics of Time*, Valerie Bryson argues that “Time is both a primary good and a political resource ... and the distribution of time is both unjust and a source of political inequality” (2007, 1). In this research, the inequalities that were made visible were that the distribution of time determines who can produce knowledge and in what way.

Those who have the privilege of time become “knowers” because research and writing take time. Several participants expressed the desire for more time for such reflective conversations, and to analyse and write the knowledges issuing forth from these interactions and their own work. It was difficult for the African women I spoke with, who have the capacity to develop feminist knowledges, to do so due to several challenges. Few people, including academics, have paid research time. Many participants also mentioned the burden of care work, which they often bear alone at home. This meant that the “before or after work” time they often set aside for research and reflection is hard to realise because of the responsibilities of care work. In addition, many feminist activists have busy work schedules that leave very limited time and capacity for reflecting. Sentiments such as “the reality is that activists do, academics write” or “Black people implement, White people theorise” or “African women do the work, northern scholars publish it” recurred in the research.¹²

Time also affects how research is conducted. Applying feminist methodologies may require the kind of flexibility that takes a long time to attain. It may also result in “inconveniences” that take time to resolve. In addition, researching in politically volatile contexts marked by insecurity and political instability requires taking breaks during the process. In my case, just before I embarked on this study, I was dealing with exhaustion and burnout from doing feminist lawyering work within such unstable contexts. I decided

to resign from my job to rest and recover. I also resigned because I wanted to have more time for research and writing, and it had become clear that I could not do so while holding down a full-time job as legal director.

I was able to take these decisions because I am privileged to have a dual-income family, had saved up enough money to live on for a while, and have a supportive husband. The typical demands of life do not allow for dedicated time and space to write. I wrote most of this article during a time when my professor friend allowed me to use her beach house in Portugal for a solo resting and writing retreat at no cost. I was quite literally “gifted” time and space. I know that without this combination of privileges, this article would not have been possible.

Conclusion

In this article, I have reflected on the process of using reflective conversations as a feminist methodology in a study of feminist perspectives on state responsibility for dealing with VAW. I have argued that spaces for everyday informal conversations are a site of feminist knowledge building and discussed the factors that enable this process. In using this methodology, I grappled with the dissonance between this process and the nature of “proper” academic research, partly due to the positivist legal and academic training I received as well as my NGO background. During this research, I often had to confront what it means to be situated in different disciplines and sectors, interrogate what I think I know, and challenge many of my assumptions about research processes.

The greatest lesson from this study is my recognition of the political value of headspace. Time and space for producing knowledge are central to determining who holds (epistemic) power. Through reflective conversations, feminists build knowledges that are vital and actionable by weaving in experience and discourse. This knowledge building goes beyond responding to or “talking back” to hegemonic or conventional western or male-centered theories and trying to locate African women’s realities within them. It is about beginning ideation from the diverse realities of African women by African women. As one of the participants noted:

As African feminists, we can theorise for ourselves. We can determine and speak to how we see things – how we see things changing or being impacted, why things exist, and why they exist in a certain way. We can give an explanation that makes sense, not just to ourselves, but to the world.¹³

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Notes

1. Reflective conversations with P1 (26 August 2023), P7 (13 September 2023), P10 (12 October 2023).
2. Reflective conversation with P3 (25 August 2023).
3. Reflective conversation with P3 (25 August 2023).
4. Reflective conversations with P4 (30 August 2023), P5 (23 September 2023), P8 (23 August 2023), P1 (26 August 2023).
5. Reflective conversation with P12 (22 September 2023).
6. Reflective conversation with P3 (25 August 2023).
7. Reflective conversation with P3 (25 August 2023).
8. Reflective conversation with P12 (22 September 2023).
9. Reflective conversation with P1 (26 August 2023).
10. Reflective conversation with P11 (5 October 2023).
11. Reflective conversation with P1 (26 August 2023).
12. Reflective conversations with P1 (26 August 2023), P12 (22 September 2023), P5 (23 September 2023), P6 (15 August 2023), P8 (23 August 2023).
13. Reflective conversation with P2 (28 August 2023).

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