Messages of Gender-Based Violence: Reflections on the Politics of the Methodology of Conversations

Enzo Lenine and Naentrem Sanca

Abstract

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a pervasive phenomenon in virtually all societies. It has garnered international attention in global fora and academia as a result of longstanding feminist struggles. From our grounding in feminist International Relations (IR), we reflect upon our experiences of researching GBV in Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau. Our focus is on the messages conveyed by acts of violence that target women and feminised subjects, which constitute a system of communication of power and subordination with structural ramifications in society. The overall aim of the research is to unravel the meanings of gendered acts of violence in terms of existing power relations in these countries and as understood by a range of interlocutors, including survivors, activists, researchers, and government officials. Our investigation of the dynamics of acts of GBV has involved deeper feminist reflections on the politics of research and power relations. In this article, we focus on our methodological approach of using conversations as a means for enabling discussion and interpretation of power relations, with particular attention paid to our positionalities. In so doing, we seek to contribute to current reflections in feminist IR about positionalities, especially in research on GBV that is conducted in the Global South, and in Portuguese-speaking African countries, in particular.

Keywords: feminist International Relations, research positionality, Portuguese-speaking Africa, Global South epistemologies, postcolonial methodologies, survivor narratives

Introduction

Feminist scholarship in International Relations (IR) has drawn attention to gender-based violence (GBV) since the 1970s, when the first international treaties were negotiated and eventually adopted. The United Nations Decade for Women, the major world Conferences on Women that it encompassed (Ghodsee 2010; Lenine and Oncampo 2021), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women were fundamental outcomes of feminist struggles that brought violence against women and GBV onto the global agenda. This international attention unleashed an interest in understanding the factors leading to acts of violence and abuse, as well as the processes of gendering violence itself (True 2012).

In the face of this global endeavour to understand and fight GBV, feminists working in the field of IR have not only researched the treaties and initiatives adopted by states and international organisations (Haastrup 2014; Shepherd 2008), but also explored the experiences of survivors, the motivations behind perpetrators' acts of violence, and the action (and inaction) of states and civil society (Baaz and Stern 2013; DeLargy 2013; Dolan et al. 2020; True 2012). A central goal in these investigations is to shed light on individuals' experiences (especially women's) and bring them into the international arena; echoing the core tenet of feminist IR: "the personal is international" (Enloe 2014).

Nevertheless, feminist international politics is still dominated by scholarship from the Global North, which has dictated the theoretical and empirical engagements with issues of interest. The well-known critiques by feminists in the Global South, notably those of Mama (2011), Mohanty (2003), and Spivak (1998), have sparked intense debates that have generated important changes in the way local stories of feminists in Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific are told to international audiences. At the same time, research on the Global South still lacks serious engagement with local feminisms (Narayanaswamy 2016). African feminisms, in particular, have been largely ignored in international research on GBV on the continent, which raises questions about how one interprets local realities, and how one can go beyond simplistic interpretations of feminism in Africa (Ayiera 2010; Bennett 2010; Dosekun 2021; Lazreg 2005; Mekgwe 2006; Okech 2020;

Ossome 2020). Such interpretations are associated with "sensationalism, voyeurism, and exoticism" (Bunting and Quirk 2020, 7; see also Tamale 2011). They reproduce images and discourses that reaffirm the neocolonial dichotomies that still permeate global politics and that define Africa as a place for extraction of natural and human resources or for the entertainment of foreign audiences avid for sensational stories and simplistic framings of African realities (Autesserre 2012).

Our research project revolves around the gendered messages conveyed by acts of GBV (Sjoberg 2016a), which constitute a system of communication with structural ramifications in society (Lenine and Gonçalves 2021; Segato 2016). By identifying these messages, the conditions of their (re)production and the power relations they entail in individuals' and communities' discourses and practices, our aim is to unravel the meanings of acts of violence with a view to interrogating the discourse of international politics on GBV, which tends to focus on spectacularised forms of violence instead of their specific structural elements. Therefore, we pose the following research question: What gendered messages do acts of GBV convey? Our starting point is that GBV operates under a system of communication which, through the (re)enactment of acts of violence, dehumanises individuals, inscribing on their bodies the mandates of subordination that render women vulnerable (Segato 2016, 2019; Sjoberg 2016a). Gendered messages operate within and help constitute the social structures that sustain GBV but tend to be ignored in IR interventions on the issue, and, more broadly, in the international politics of gender. By addressing gendered messages of acts of violence, the research seeks to offer alternative understandings that extend this subject beyond the usual academic and political discourses on sexual violence.

Conducting research on GBV poses a variety of challenges, not only because the traumatic experiences faced by individuals make them sensitive about recalling the past, but also because the subject matter requires treating research as more than data collection or extraction. Questions of power and positionality are central in feminist inquiry about GBV, for they involve complex relationships between researcher and researched (Amoureux and Steele 2016). In other words, who we are and how we are positioned vis-à-vis the researched influence not only what we see, hear, and perceive, but more

fundamentally, what we conceive as an act of GBV and what it communicates in the broader picture of social relations. Therefore, one cannot approach the issue without reflecting upon the politics of methodology at play in this kind of feminist inquiry.

In this article, we seek to discuss the politics of methodology for researching GBV in Africa by reflecting upon our own methodological practices as researchers who are differently positioned with respect to African societies and how our methodological choices impact our research in Portuguese-speaking countries on the continent, namely, Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau. The latter are sites where research on GBV is in its infancy compared to other places in Africa (especially English-speaking parts of the continent). Our reflections aim to delve into the "concrete processes of methodologies" of researching in Africa: "*how* to imagine a 'field' (in an African context!) […] *how* to protect, respect, and be accountable to those with whom we work, *how* to select research foci and methodologies which are capable of dialogue with worlds we want to change" (Bennett 2008, 5, emphasis in original). All these questions underpinned our research project, entitled "Deciphering the Gendered Messages of Violence Against Women in Portuguese-Speaking Africa: A Comparative Analysis of GBV in Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau", conducted under the auspices of *Feminist Africa* and the "Violence, Gender and Power: Feminist Struggles around Violence Against Women" research consortium. We locate our discussion in the field of IR, not only because our research aims to bring local insights to the international politics of GBV, but also because in IR, declarations of positionality have come to prominence in certain methodological debates (Amoureux and Steele 2016; Gani and Khan 2024).

Unravelling the messages of GBV requires engaging with different agents in society, such as survivors, activists, government officials, and NGOs, via a conversational approach. Conversations have long been a useful methodological approach in feminist research, but their use raises issues of power and positionality. As Soedirgo and Glas (2020, 528) argue, "[o]ur positionality is not reducible to demographic characteristics (e.g., race, age, gender, and class); it also is informed by our personal and professional experiences, our political and ideological stances, and other aspects of our social biography, or 'lifeworld.'" During our research in Angola, Cape Verde,

and Guinea-Bissau, we encountered a range of challenges related to our identities as researchers, how we are positioned in relation to those we study, how we remain accountable to those we engage with, and how we handle the information they share to ensure reciprocity. These questions have disrupted our methodological assumptions and led us to adopt a reflexive research praxis that critically engages with the complexities of positionality.

At this point, a clarification is necessary. This is the first article to come out of the aforementioned research project. Empirical findings per se shall be discussed in subsequent articles. This first essay focuses primarily on the politics of methodology in researching GBV in Africa, particularly as it relates to our own research practices.

The article is divided into three sections. We begin by conceptualising gendered messages in the context of GBV. In the second section, we delineate the conversational methodology as a feminist strategy to investigate GBV and the messages it conveys, discussing how issues of power emerge in the relationships between researchers and researched. In the last section, we provide a testimony of our own methodological practices with conversations in our research.

Gender-Based Violence as a System of Communication

The bulk of the literature on GBV in feminist IR has critically disturbed the ontological, epistemological, and methodological fundaments of IR in its attempt "to understand existing gender relations – the dominance of masculinities over femininities – in order to transform how they work at all levels of global social, economic, and political life" (True 2017). This literature revolves around specific types of violence and their occurrence in conflicts, civil or transnational. Feminist scholars have privileged the study of physical violence, with sexual violence in particular gaining increased significance in both theoretical and empirical debates (DeLargy 2013; Sjoberg 2016b; True 2012). This has resulted in a proliferation of explanations of how gender inequalities and social cleavages (e.g., ethnicity), as well as social breakdown generate a spiral of acts of GBV.

Despite the illuminating findings of this body of research, the excessive focus on sexual violence not only diverts attention from other forms of violence (psychological, symbolic, discursive) (Medie 2019) but also tends to undermine an understanding of the structural and constitutive elements that produce violence in the first place. To be sure, violence is "both gendered and gendering" (Shepherd 2008, 51), which means that it is intertwined with gender and power (Silva 2021). It is also contextual, which means acts of violence are only made possible where violence entails different dimensions of social, economic, and political life. Understanding GBV thus requires examining the interplay of societal rules that position gendered individuals in sites of subordination and vulnerability (Davies and True 2015), while acknowledging that acts of violence do not happen in a vacuum, for they result from the interactions within a broader network of violences exercised by the state, economic and political systems, as well as colonialism (Gago 2020; Yacob-Haliso and Falola 2021). More importantly, GBV constitutes a particular system of communication of subordination that reinforces the mandates of the same institutions and agents that produce it.

As a system of communication, GBV conveys messages about individuals' worthiness and value to society. Speaking of sexual violence in wartime, Sjoberg (2016a, 154–155, emphasis in original) claims that "[t]he gendered dehumanization of the direct victim, the gendered emasculation of the direct and proximate targets, and the gendered masculinization of the direct perpetrator and his/her allies all communicate *gendered messages.*" These messages encapsulate power relationships that are built upon notions of masculinity and femininity that translate into mandates of sexualisation, domination and subordination. Messages are inscribed on individuals' bodies, i.e., they are embodied practices of GBV (Sjoberg, 2016a). Nevertheless, Sjoberg's focus on sexual violence requires further scrutiny to advance a broader theoretical framework of GBV in feminist IR. To fill this theoretical gap, we look at Rita Segato's (2016) investigations on violence against women in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, where acts of violence operate within an intricate web of social meanings, and Charmaine Pereira's (2018) gender analysis of the Boko Haram insurgency and its spectacles of violence, which sheds light on the discontinuities and continuities of violence beyond the spectacles

themselves. These feminist scholars draw attention to the gendered strategies of communication, emphasising different aspects of the lexicon of violence.

According to Segato (2016), acts of GBV inscribe on targets' bodies messages about patriarchal dominance. Her experiences in Ciudad Juárez led her to interrogate the meanings of egregious acts of violence against women beyond the horror displays of disfigured bodies, mutilations, and femicides. Violence, according to Segato, is not subsumed under an act in isolation, but rather constitutes a system of communication of men's mandate over women's bodies and minds, where the latter represent another territorial frontier for the expansion of patriarchal power. The acts of GBV, therefore, are not simply a display of extreme and atrocious crimes: they consist of perpetrators' signatures on targets' bodies, inscribing on them messages that can be recognised by society at large and, more importantly, by other men. They constitute a lexicon that conveys certain interpretations about the world and how it is structured according to specific power relations that position certain individuals (namely men) at the top of social hierarchies while relegating other, gendered individuals to places of subordination and vulnerability (Lenine and Gonçalves 2021). These messages are part of a pedagogy of cruelty, which consists of "all acts and practices that teach, habituate, and programme individuals to transmute living beings and their vitality into things" (Segato 2019, 27). This pedagogy conveys patriarchal politics through physical, discursive, and symbolic acts of violence, which are not isolated but constitute the very system of messages that (re)produces violence against gendered individuals.

Analysing the Boko Haram insurgency in North East Nigeria, Pereira (2018) interrogates the spectacles of violence against women through a gender analysis. She focuses on how these spectacles shape perspectives on gender in this context, to see beyond the discontinuities entailed in the acts of violence to reveal the structures of gender as continuities that are frequently ignored due to the focus on the acts. More importantly, her analysis draws attention to relations of power and control over women's bodies that underlie the dynamics of violence, showing how hypermasculinity operates not only within Boko Haram, but also as a pervasive component of Nigerian society, economy, and politics. Moreover, Pereira argues that the focus on spectacles of violence renders the diverse categories of women less visible, selectively

subsuming them under the category of victim, which in turn "obscures understanding of the ways in which gendered relations and processes are embedded in complex social relations" (Pereira 2018, 259). Ultimately, the spectacles generate attention by overemphasising the acts of extreme violence perpetrated by Boko Haram while ignoring the normalisation of GBV in Nigerian society. The spectacle produces a simplistic narrative that suits audiences eager for sensationalism and voyeurism, while avoiding a thorough analysis of the deeper gendered messages entailed in the acts of violence and ingrained in the social fabric.

Both Segato and Pereira emphasise the structural dimension of GBV, whereby the acts of violence are manifestations of a deeply rooted system of discriminatory social norms around gender. These norms constitute the system of communication of the mandates of subordination that turn women and feminised subjects into targets of the various forms of GBV. It is precisely at this systemic level that the messages of GBV operate, and specific methodological strategies are required to decipher their meanings.

Conversations and the Messages of GBV

Feminist methodologies have adopted the conversational approach to investigating women's lives in local and international contexts, as well as in their interconnections and grey zones (Sylvester 1994; Zurn 2021). Conversations are a useful tool for conducting research in sensitive settings, and GBV is a complex phenomenon characterised by latent traumas. Deciphering the messages of this system of communication requires delving into the meanings of violence to different social actors, a task which can only be achieved through the adoption of an interpretative methodology.

Conversations offer interesting methodological avenues to go beyond the limits of questionnaires where the researcher approaches the researched with previously elaborated questions, leaving little room for the interlocutor to set the rhythm of the interaction. Furthermore, researchers using questionnaires or structured interviews rarely interrogate their own positionalities in relation to the researched, rendering the underlying power relations invisible. Instead, central to these methodologies is how a researcher

interacts with her interviewed subject to "extract" reliable information, thus treating the latter as a "native informant" (Bunting and Quirk 2020) who will most likely be discarded once the research is completed (Van den Berg 2020, 41). To clarify what such extraction means, Bunting and Quirk (2020, 6) use the following metaphor: mining companies extract resources by digging deep into the ground and taking away the precious materials to be consumed elsewhere, most likely in the Global North.[1] Similarly, research-as-extraction drains precious knowledge in the form of personal testimonies, which is processed in distant places (Okech 2020, 320), to be consumed, often as entertainment, by foreign audiences disconnected from the daily challenges and suffering of those from whom the knowledge was taken. Consequently, personal testimonies are deprived of their meanings as part of the subject's life and become a "vehicle through which to gather documentary evidence of [women's] oppression" (Okech 2013, 96).

Conversations distinguish themselves from their mainstream counterparts by enabling continual reflection on the implications of one's methodological choices as well as the conceptual and ethical underpinnings of research, thus fostering the reflexive use of feminist methodologies (Ackerly et al. 2006). Conversations presume flexible relationships between researcher and researched, and this facilitates interactions between the parties involved in the process of knowledge production and further reflections upon their positionalities and the specific power relations such situatedness entails.

Regarding the researcher-researched relationship in researching GBV, adopting a conversational approach is useful in interacting with survivors of acts of violence. By starting conversations with a focus on the broader context of violence and letting the researched set the flow of the conversation, the researcher is more likely to bond with the interlocutor and exchange information in "a sense of give and take" which requires the mutual openness of both parties in the conversation (Mohlakoana 2008, 78; Mupotsa 2011, 102). Such relationships may be paramount to achieving research goals in cases where the research depends on individuals' will to share their stories or not, and the ways they perceive the researcher in terms of her positionalities is an essential factor in building trust, connecting, and cooperating (Fubara 2023; Kiconco 2020).[2]

Conversations are not a panacea for eliminating the hierarchies of power in the process of researching. Power relations manifest in differences of positionalities that may not be manageable in participants' relationships. For one thing, as researchers, we are situated in a structure of knowledge that determines who is entitled to define research questions, frame epistemological and methodological approaches, and ultimately decide what gets published and circulated within academia (see Sabea 2008). Moreover, academia fosters the notion that the researcher always knows more than the researched, thus imposing a hierarchical relationship whereby the former determines the proper meanings of social phenomena. As a result, interviewees may be abstracted from their situated knowledge, or, more profoundly, from their agency to define what counts as relevant issues to academia. Conversations may create channels of communication that minimise the effects of such power relations, but they cannot in themselves render researchers' relationships with interlocutors horizontal. Who is entitled to know, and how, still depends on researchers' conceptions about the world. Concepts, explanatory frameworks, and interpretations always involve social values, which are embedded in the researcher's background and practices (Mupotsa 2011). Our research is no different in this sense: although we do attempt to engage with individuals in ways that allow for their knowledge to be respected, we still approach them with certain goals derived from our research questions, theoretical frameworks, and even methodological approaches (see Merriam et al. 2001 and Okech 2020).

Confronted with these hierarchies of knowledge, the researched may resist notions that are insensitive to their local contexts, and which treat them as powerless objects instead of agents.[3] African feminists emphasise that "[p]ower (...) is negotiated and negotiable, assessed in relative rather than absolute terms, and rightfully framed within cultural, historical, and generational contexts" (Blay 2008, 69). In research about personal experiences of GBV, women may not be willing to share information when they are unsure of how researchers might use it (see Moputsa 2011).

It is in this terrain of uncertainty and instability that feminist methodologies (and, in our specific case, conversations) operate (Bennett 2008, 7). It is a place where we, as researchers, face our own fragilities as humans and scholars, as professionals trained within formal methodological

frameworks (often shaped by the qualitative–quantitative schism), and as individuals emotionally connected to those who are meant to be the researched. Like the methodological challenges Okech faced when talking to individuals about complex and sensitive issues, our own conversations reveal that listening involves "steer[ing] between multiple and contradictory assumptions" about who we are in the various social spaces we navigate. This has required reflecting on our own positioning vis-à-vis our interlocutors, and how these positionings are cemented upon multiple power relations that end up defining us as outsiders or insider–outsiders (Furaba 2023).

In our two-person team, Lenine is a complete foreigner to Africa, and a white man, which poses specific challenges in the context of feminist research, for he is perceived as an outsider. Being a Brazilian white man and the team member with the highest academic qualifications and a stable position in academia elicits ambivalent responses in Portuguese-speaking Africa. On the one hand, some individuals are still influenced by colonial legacies which grant a position of prestige to white people (especially men) and are therefore more willing to treat foreign researchers than local scholars. For our research, this means that certain doors that would otherwise be closed to local researchers, especially women researchers, who are still perceived as not belonging to this specific social site, are more likely to be open. On the other hand, his being an outsider can raise suspicions in the minds of interlocutors about Lenine's motivations for studying African realities. Is he simply engaging in data extraction to advance his own career elsewhere, without providing any feedback to the researched? Is he complicit in a process of sensationalism and voyeurism, given that GBV is often portrayed through acts of extreme violence without due consideration for the contextual features that make it possible? Will the research reproduce Western colonial academic perspectives and interests, even if both researcher and researched share a colonial past related to Portugal? Alternatively, does this point of connection open new avenues for our research team to reflect upon our own relations as individuals whose societies (Brazilian, Angolan, Cape Verdean, and Bissau-Guinean) are now attempting to strengthen bonds that are not (or at least should not be) mediated by colonialism? In interrogating his own positionality in a given context, Lenine continually tries to anticipate situations, identify the power relations at play and determine how he is

situated within these hierarchies. Such power relations are significant, not only because they are an integral part of the research endeavour at epistemological and methodological levels, but also because they reflect the gender hierarchies that structure society together with other social cleavages and colonialism. For Sanca, being a female researcher from Guinea-Bissau poses another set of challenges regarding positionalities, which have to do with insider–outsider status. Possessing local knowledge, and having connections with a wide network of activists, researchers, and civil society organisations (CSOs) in Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau, are fundamental to achieving the research goals of this project. As a national engaged in feminist activism and research in Guinea-Bissau, Sanca is directly connected to individuals with diverse interpretations of the meanings of GBV. All these aspects contribute to her insider status, granting her a sense of "membership" within the collectivities we interact with. But this insider status does not always manifest in benign ways: for instance, her credentials as a researcher and an activist are often questioned by survivors, government and international organisation officials, and CSOs, who tend to see the research as not "serious" because it is conducted by a local, female researcher. Gender hierarchies are at play in the field, sometimes making it difficult to reach certain individuals, especially those in government and international organisations. Will they grant access to a female researcher? Do they view her as a person in a legitimate position to conduct the research? Furthermore, being a citizen of Guinea-Bissau poses challenges for her as an outsider when dealing with Cape Verdean citizens, especially survivors. Historical derogatory stereotypes about Bissau-Guinean nationals may surface in conversations and anticipating this causes personal distress. Will survivors speak openly to a Bissau-Guinean woman? Will they discriminate against Sanca based on nationalistic divisions? The outsider status also emerges in interactions with other ethnicities in Guinea-Bissau, as well as with individuals of different social classes and educational backgrounds. These are unsettling questions that are not easily negotiated in the course of research. They show how different social markers, such as seniority, ethnicity, nationalism, and social status (Yacob-Haliso 2019), interact in particular and not clearly demarcated ways for a female researcher in Africa (Fubara 2023).

As a research team, positionalities also feature in our relations with one another as researchers. Lenine and Sanca met in Brazil, where Lenine was Sanca's supervisor. We both conduct research for this project online and in loco, interviewing participants, sharing impressions, analysing testimonies, and discussing research findings. Our new status as partners in research has led to another set of reflections about positionalities: how to manage expectations concerning academic hierarchies and negotiate different knowledges about and experiences in Africa, to name a few. Managing these positionalities has already produced some results: regarding academic hierarchies, Sanca has taken the lead in interviews to firmly establish her status as a senior researcher, and we have decided to switch positions as first authors in publications derived from this project. In negotiating knowledge, we routinely share our impressions and understandings of all stages of the research process, eventually agreeing on what is to be reported in academic papers. As a team, we continually remind ourselves that our current status is not based on our previous interaction as supervisor-and-student, but as research partners who possess different types of knowledge, each essential for interpreting what we see, listen to, and feel in the research context.

Power relations are always multilayered and constantly shifting, which invites us to meditate on the possibilities of active reflexivity. This consists of "ongoing interrogations of (1) our positionality; (2) how our positionality is read by others, given their own social location and the contexts in which we interact; and (3) the assumptions about our conclusions in the first two stages" (Soedirgo and Glas 2020, 527). Embracing and acknowledging our positionalities instead of rendering them invisible is paramount to managing the power relations in the research process. We continually remind ourselves that positionalities are dynamic, context-dependent, and contingent; hence, they cannot be treated as static, but as changing features in our understanding of our selves.

Conversations in Practice

In this final section, we describe in more detail the preliminary conversations carried out with feminist activists, CSOs, scholars engaged with research on GBV in Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau, and a survivor. Activists,

scholars, CSOs, and survivors have different perspectives on the meanings of GBV, and engaging in conversations with them was our methodological strategy. We proceeded with due respect and extreme caution, for example, by avoiding direct questions about cases of violence and we did not press them to describe experiences of violence in their respective countries, considering the multiple dangers involved in this sensitive issue as well as the intricacies of how individuals recognise (or fail to recognise) abuse (see Bennett 2001).

The first stage of our research consisted in preparing for the field by reading about the local histories of GBV (Silva 2021, 2022); analysing reports issued by United Nations agencies, NGOs and national ministries; and reviewing local research on GBV and feminisms in Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau (Figueiredo and Gomes 2016; Liberato 2016; Monteiro 2016; Mouzinho and Cutaia 2017; Silva 2021).[4] Preliminary conversations[5] with scholars, activists, and a survivor provided a more experience-based impression of the field. The conversations touched on multiple aspects of gender issues and GBV in Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau. These include gender-mainstreaming in law and its effects in defining violence against women and/or GBV; the operations of UN agencies and CSOs in providing support and relief for survivors, and in generating and collecting data on GBV; feminist activisms and how feminists in each country understand GBV and make its eradication a goal in their social activism; and the lived experiences of survivors, how to reach them, and the complex web of relationships in which they are immersed.

At the start of our conversations, we would provide a brief introduction of ourselves, such as our nationalities, our academic credentials, and the research project. We would then ask our interlocutor about the context of GBV in the interviewee's country; how women become targets of acts of violence; or the various understandings and meanings of GBV in her society. Our goal with these questions was to understand the field beyond raw data displayed in official reports and research. Our approach was to let interviewees express themselves freely, and to shift positions from us, the researchers, to them (Schulz 2020), enabling them to set the rhythm of the conversations. In so doing, we attempted to make our interlocutors feel comfortable in sharing their ideas, impressions, and experiences, without being judgmental about their content, nor strictly procedural. This meant that

we were listening and responding to their speech, knowledge and lived experiences. It was our way of avoiding the possibility of treating testimonies as mere data that one extracts from a subject in a reifying fashion.

We eschewed asking direct questions about acts of violence for various reasons. First, we did not know whether the interviewee was herself a survivor of some form of GBV (which was the case in one of our conversations). Second, direct questions might strike the interviewee in unanticipated, counterproductive ways, which could undermine mutual trust, a process that is still under construction and continual negotiation. Third, a direct question could evoke prejudices about Africa associated with exoticism and sensationalism, which are frequently infected by racism and colonialism (see Tamale 2011). Finally, violence is deeply contextual, and acts of violence are manifestations of the more complex structure of violence in society.

The interviewees also provided invaluable information about research procedures in their home countries and the challenges we might face in the field. One obstacle, in particular, has been emphasised by all of them: governments. In Angola, and Guinea-Bissau, data are rarely publicised on easily accessible platforms and accessing them through governmental institutions requires navigating bureaucracies with the help of insiders or people who have connections with bureaucrats. In Cape Verde, governmental agencies are more transparent and make data available. However, it remains necessary to navigate bureaucracies to find data, as not all information is minimally or readily available. It is also important to note that CSOs and activists frequently cooperate with local governments to implement feminist agendas. However, government authorities are also suspicious of them and, in the case of Angola, authorities attempt to control dissent and critical voices (Mouzinho and Cutaia 2017).

Another challenge mentioned by some interviewees concerned previous research conducted by foreigners, namely the problem of data extraction. In our conversations with an Angolan activist (a founding member of *Ondjango Feminista*), the extractivist model of research was mentioned as an obstacle. She stated: "Many foreign researchers interview CSO members, but do not provide feedback about the research, so many CSOs now refuse to share information." Some organisations, bureaucrats, and other agents are

suspicious of the neocolonial dynamics implicated in this sort of inquiry (see Gellman 2022; Tuhiwai Smith 2021). To overcome this suspicion, which reflects the wider perception of extractivism in Angola, the activist suggested building a more meaningful connection with agents in the field and making room for them in the research by discussing methodological issues described by Gellman (2022) as "collaborative methodology," which seeks to decolonise research.

At the end of our conversations, we would ask whether the interviewee could kindly identify and encourage other women (activists, scholars, survivors, authorities) to participate in our research. Aware of the ethical implications of outsourcing recruitment (Kiconco 2020), we opted instead to rely on their cooperation to reach such women and ask whether they would agree to share their knowledge. We emphasised our commitment to ethical research standards and, more importantly, to paying attention to the complexities of layered realities, honouring women's experiences and respecting their multiple trajectories within the ambit of GBV.[6]

These complexities permeate all aspects of our research and conversational approach. Not only was each national context complex, but also different layers of context coexist in these societies, and each layer displays specific intricacies that are not easily subsumed under oversimplifying, generalist labels such as patriarchy or subordination. To be sure, these labels capture general patterns and trends, but they are not sufficient for comprehending the realities of survivors, nor the experiences of those struggling to advance feminist agendas on violence, gender, and power at all levels and spheres of politics. Complexity emanates from the intersections of gender-religion-ethnicity-class; the contradictory relationships between survivors and those who provide them with support in shelters and CSOs; and the negotiations with individuals for whom GBV is a daily war in their lives and communities. It was precisely in the testimony of an activist who survived GBV that we were confronted with the most difficult challenge in the entire research process, namely, how to understand complexity, embrace it, and at the same time, honour those who share their personal struggles with us.

In the testimony in question, our interlocutor shared a deeply intimate story that connects to the broader context of structural violence in Guinea-Bissau. As she declared: "Sometimes I say that I am the child of an act of violence: a forced marriage." She had survived continued acts of physical, psychological, and economic violence, which were manifestations of the intricate web of relationships between gender, ethnicity, and religion, which together operate to turn women into mere objects belonging to their male partners, husbands, and families. Her body was turned by her family into a site for the extraction of her labour, and, more fundamentally, her existential force, undermining in this process, her autonomy. Religion intersected with gender and ethnicity to legitimise the various forms of exploitation exercised by her family during her life. Breaking this cycle of violence was a process of regaining agency and asserting herself as an individual among those who had treated her as an object.

Through her testimony, we identified the patterns of signification of gendered messages. It was precisely in this story of resistance against different acts of violence that we could understand not only how some forms of violence are neglected in international debates about GBV (e.g., the economic extraction entailed in economic violence, which denies women rights to inheritance, property, and financial management in the family), but also, and more importantly for our research, the powerful message of annihilation of the self. The denial of autonomy and agency confines women to a role of serfdom in relation to husbands, brothers, and families, and this message is conveyed by and constantly re-enacted in the stories of other survivors who had faced similar experiences of GBV. The message has become entrenched in the social fabric, normalising the pedagogy of cruelty as part of the broader structure of violence.

By holding these conversations and listening to personal stories, on many occasions we felt that storytelling was a way of avoiding the erasure of one's history, a form of resistance against GBV that cuts across different psychological and social levels, and a process of sharing knowledge about how to strategise in struggles against GBV. By viewing the structural persistence of GBV beyond the spectacles of specific acts of violence, we, researchers and researched, could find paths of resistance, empowerment, and change that are necessary in this long struggle.

Conclusion

Declarations of positionality may evoke narcissistic performances that reinforce colonial tropes, especially those associated with racial divides (Gani and Khan 2024). As challenging as such declarations are, reflecting on the power relations operating within our team and vis-à-vis interlocutors in Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau offered us an opportunity to anticipate power inequities and negotiate them with all the subjects involved in the research. More importantly, considering concerns raised in IR about the essentialism of positionality statements, our primary focus on relations instead of personal identities enabled us to raise legitimate questions that may or may not be answered in our field research, but which are essential to disturbing the discipline and the mainstream discourse on scientific objectivity (see Tickner 2005). Questions, rather than definitive answers, function as reminders that the aims of research and disciplines must be constantly interrogated to confront old prejudices (Gune and Manuel 2011, 40–1).

Furthermore, this reflexive stance helps re-signify the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of GBV research in IR, especially in contexts where imaginaries of sexual violence still dominate discussions. Although Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa have also endured traumatic civil wars, Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau contemporarily face challenges associated with less spectacular forms of violence than those observed in conflict settings. Understanding how the structures of GBV operate in these countries is fundamental to advancing change at the local and international levels. After all, what happens to women in these contexts cannot be separated from the international politics of GBV, which prioritises certain spectacular acts of violence. To change this outlook, more research grounded in the realities of individuals in the field is ever more necessary.

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Notes

1. The Global North also influences how research is conducted in Africa by African researchers. Since most funding originates from international organisations headquartered in North America and Europe, African researchers, governments and NGOs are constrained by the methodological requirements set by these organisations (Bunting and Quirk 2020). African researchers face the challenge of accommodating, on the one hand, foreign interests and "scientific" standards, and on the other, their own interests and goals with respect to producing knowledge that dialogues with local realities and communities. In our conversations with Cape Verdean scholars and Bissau–Guinean activists, this concern was also expressed and perceived as detrimental to the valuation of autochthonous knowledges of African societies.
2. Reddy and Sandfort (2008) emphasise the importance of building relationships with research participants to make them feel like active contributors to the research process. This minimises suspicions, facilitates cooperation, and helps to understand how individuals negotiate their multiple identities while navigating a complex social context pervaded with gendered hierarchies. Kiconco (2020) makes similar remarks about the importance of trust between participants and the researcher, and she also emphasises how her positionalities as a black African woman facilitated access to survivors of GBV. Likewise, bonding allowed Kiconco to rely on the collaboration of survivors to identify and recruit other women to her study.

3. One of our interlocutors in Angola underscored how individuals who had previously participated in international research avoid collaborating with foreign scholars, because of such disempowering treatment that renders them research objects rather than agents of their own lives and within their local realities.
4. A great deal of this literature focuses on feminist activisms and historical struggles in the processes of independence from Portugal. It sheds light on how women were present in a variety of social processes leading to independence, and how their current social positions reflect gender and (neo)colonial hierarchies.
5. Online conversations via Google Meet. Sessions lasted between 40 and 50 minutes on average. Conversations were conducted in Portuguese, and the excerpts presented in this paper were translated by the authors.
6. Gune and Manuel (2011) advocate for an ethics of care whenever an "ethically sanitised" methodology fails to address the nuances of doing field research. Finding ways to protect subject-participants and the researchers themselves is essential to researching sensitive issues, such as sexuality, violence, and GBV. In our experiences, we were constantly reminding ourselves of the need for an ethics of care that could minimise the power inequities between us and subject-participants, as well as within our team.

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