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Critical reflection as feminist pedagogy: teaching feminist research in the field

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ABSTRACT

A recent trend in gender and development research has been to equip local researchers with the skills to design and implement research projects that meaningfully resonate with them and their communities. In 2017, the International Women’s Development Agency initiated a three-year research project on women’s pathways to leadership as a collaborative exercise with women’s grassroots organizations based in Cambodia, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Timor-Leste, supported by established research practitioners (the authors). Taking Hollingsworth’s argument that teaching is itself a form of research, we present our findings on teaching non-traditional researchers in development contexts. We argue that a hallmark of feminist pedagogy must be critical reflection both on the structural conditions in which research is designed and implemented and on personal teaching practices.

KEYWORDS Feminist research; feminist pedagogy; development studies; reflection; women’s leadership

Introduction

As development practitioners and researchers with over 30 years’ experience between us, we have come to see research as an essential strategy for social change. Well-designed and well-executed research allows us to have a better understanding of critical problems in context and devise appropriate solutions for addressing them (Greenwood and Levin 2007; Roche and Kelly 2014).

However, research in development contexts can be fraught with challenges: logistical challenges in execution and – perhaps more importantly – significant misunderstandings as a consequence of colonialist frames of enquiry and analysis (Leege and McMillan 2016; Schaaf 2015; Thom and Cope 2016; Winterford 2017). Academics and practitioners alike have suggested that the key to redressing these more epistemological challenges
is a more inclusive, feminist approach to research design and practice (Ahmed 2017; Harding 1987; Hoskin 2017; Leavy and Harris 2018; Tuhiwai Smith 2012).

In this article, we present our experience of supporting local, non-traditional researchers – namely, staff of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working directly “in the field” on feminist/gender issues across five countries in Asia and the Pacific. In 2017, we were competitively selected as consultants by the International Women’s Development Agency (IWDA) to support a research project on Women’s Leadership Pathways (WLP) in Cambodia, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Timor-Leste.1 The job description evolved over the course of the project, requiring an element of “teaching” research practice. In this, we had limited experience: although we had previously conducted research, worked with NGOs, and facilitated multiple workshops (nominally a form of adult learning), we had not combined these skills to teach research methods.

In reflecting on our approach to the WLP research project,2 we draw on the insight that teaching is itself a form of research, which, as such, comes with its own findings and conclusions (Hollingsworth 1994, 50). We argue that a hallmark of a collaborative, feminist approach to research is constant reflection and revision, not only in relation to the data collected and methods involved, but also the structural conditions – including power relations, roles, capacities, and resources – that characterize the research context at various levels. As important – if not more so – is some reflection on our own feminist teaching practice. Following a description of the project and the political context in which it was implemented, we present our reflections through the lens of feminist pedagogy. Recognizing from a feminist standpoint the limitations of generalization, we include in these reflections lessons that we believe may be useful for other similar initiatives.

The WLP research project

The WLP research project was one of many components of IWDA’s broader five-year Women’s Action for Voice and Empowerment (WAVE) program. Funded by the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, WAVE followed on from the success of similar but smaller-scale projects managed by IWDA. By supporting the strategic engagement of its diverse partners, the WAVE program sought to build the leadership capabilities of individual women; work toward change in inequitable legal, policy, and economic frameworks; build the women’s movements and civil society organizations working on women’s rights and gender equality; and generate and apply knowledge that draws on women’s own voices and experiences (IWDA 2018).

In line with IWDA’s “feminist, accountable, collaborative and transformative approach” (IWDA 2017, 13), WLP was originally conceptualized as a
longitudinal, multi-stakeholder, participatory research project. It initially aimed
to support outcomes in three general areas: (1) program evidence and learning
(primarily by testing the assumptions and causal pathways in the WAVE
Program Theory of Change against evidence), (2) advocacy (by contributing
evidence to strengthen program-related policy influence), and (3) engage-
ment with leadership and research discourses (by contributing to academic
and social discourses on women’s leadership by drawing on the lived experi-
ences of individual women). One year into the project, following reflection
on several of the issues discussed in this article, another outcome was
added: (4) feminist research capacity (through building and supporting the
capacity of partner organizations to carry out such research from design
through data collection, analysis, and dissemination).

Substantively, the project was concerned with women’s varied journeys to
leadership and their motivation to take on leadership roles given the well-
documented obstacles that women face in Asia and the Pacific. Previous
research has highlighted a range of barriers that impede women’s access
to leadership positions on a global scale (Chappell and Waylen 2013; Childs
and Lovenduski 2013; O’Neil and Domingo 2016). These barriers are under-
stood as a combination of institutional and structural constraints faced in
male-dominated institutions, as well as widespread cultural and attitudinal
barriers that suggest that women should not have a role in public life.
These barriers very much apply in the contexts of Asia and the Pacific.
These regions have seen extremely limited change, for example, in the pro-
portion of women in political leadership positions over the past decade.
The regional classifications of “Asia” and “the Pacific” both sit at the
bottom of the Inter-Parliamentary Union’s regional rankings of women in
national parliament (IPU 2020). At the heart of women’s under-representation
in leadership positions across Asia and the Pacific are discriminatory gender
norms that posit formal leadership as the domain of men (Huffer 2006;
McLeod 2015; Spark, Cox, and Corbett 2019; True et al. 2012). Women are
kept outside this sphere through a combination of violence, limited access
to education and employment, and a legal and policy framework that
enshrines women’s second-class status and generally lacks affirmative
action to redress this imbalance.

Restrictive gender norms are commonly sustained through the compara-
tively high incidence of violence against women in the Asia and the Pacific
(Furlong 2014; UNDP 2014). The threat or exertion of violence – psychologi-
cal, physical, or sexual, often perpetrated by intimate partners and family
members – ensures that women remain in vulnerable power relationships
to men. As women’s political visibility rises, for example, so does their vulner-
ability to electoral violence (targeted at political leaders and candidates)
(Bardall 2011). This risk is frequently amplified by anger against women’s
rejection of traditional roles and values (True et al. 2012).
Women also face significant socio-economic barriers to leadership. They often have less access than men to resources that facilitate access to leadership, such as money, education, or social power and influence (Faxon, Furlong, and Phyu 2015). Across Asia and the Pacific, women’s generally lower health status, problems of violence and harassment, and time poverty as a result of their triple productive, reproductive, and community roles present major obstacles to leadership opportunities (Quay 2014; Zubrinich and Haley 2009). Unequal human development and poor access to food, land, assets, finance, technology, education, training, and economic opportunity further reinforce traditional attitudes about the “appropriateness” of women’s active citizenship, particularly as leaders.

Another category of barriers to women’s leadership is institutional and structural: laws and institutionalized practices place women at a disadvantage in taking up or exercising leadership in the political, social, and economic spheres. This category of barriers includes lack of appropriate policies, laws, and regulations on matters such as sexual harassment, equal pay for work of equal value, childcare, parental leave provisions, opportunities for promotion, and other such matters (Beavers and Richard 2014). In this legal vacuum in Asia and the Pacific, surveys suggest that 30–40 percent of women workers report some form of harassment, be it verbal, physical, or sexual (Rajivan 2010). Even where policies or laws exist, these may not be enforced, or socio-economic factors and gender norms may make it very difficult for women to ensure enforcement (UNDP 2014).

The research project was implemented by staff members of local NGOs who were WAVE program partners, as an optional activity, following an interest-gauging exercise conducted by IWDA with NGO representatives in 2017. The research was undertaken with support from a team of consultants (the authors) who were known to the group as the Research Support Team (RST). The research design was the co-product of the RST and IWDA staff, although NGO partners validated the research questions, methods, and approach early in the process. The RST produced guidance products (which we called “research briefs”) to facilitate learning, data collection, and analysis. Where necessary, research tools such as survey questionnaires and briefs were translated into local languages so that data could be collected in situ in a meaningful way. The data were subsequently translated into English to enable joint sense making.

The data collection process undertaken in each of the five countries was primarily supported remotely, through scores of phone calls, emails, and Facebook, Messenger, Skype, and WhatsApp messages. A Facebook group was established to facilitate group discussion. In addition, by the end of the process, four face-to-face workshops brought together researchers, members of the RST, and IWDA staff: a full-group launch workshop, small workshops to support research midstream in two of the five project countries,
and a further full-group final workshop (held in early February 2020) for joint data analysis. Over the course of two years, data were collected through 121 surveys, 95 individual interviews, 20 focus group discussions, and a limited set of video diary entries. Each partner identified the topics for focus group discussions from issues raised in their interviews. In Solomon Islands, one of the discussions focused on generating community support for women’s leadership, while in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, the role of mothers in encouraging leadership was discussed. Some partners arranged for women leaders to travel to their workplaces – even accommodating them overnight – to facilitate these discussions. Following the final data analysis workshop, the RST led the write-up of the shared research findings across the five countries using, to the greatest extent possible, the words of the co-researchers.

At its conclusion, the project looked considerably different from its original conceptualization, having been modified on numerous fronts over time. Within months, it was clear that the project could not be longitudinal (that is, collecting data at three annual points over the course of the project cycle). Not all of the initially engaged partners were able to contribute fully to the research, participate in the final workshop, or contribute to the final report. Along the way, additional funding was allocated as needs became evident, for example, to cover the two in-country workshops, budget allocations to partner organizations for research assistance and translation costs, and an increased number of days for the RST to support the project.

“Teaching as research”

In 1994, Hollingsworth outlined what she held to be true about the nature of teaching and research: “reflective teaching is action research” because it represents more than critical thought; it represents “change as a result of that thought” (Hollingsworth 1994, 50). She then deduced that teaching is research: “Thoughtful teachers regularly question their teaching and their students’ learning, collect information to inform themselves about those questions, experiment, document, summarise and try again” (Hollingsworth 1994, 50).

Although the project was not formally structured as a teaching process, we have found it helpful to understand our engagement with the WLP project along the lines set out by Hollingsworth, recognizing its relevance to the professional role for which we were contracted – namely, supporting feminist research by non-traditional researchers who mostly do not have formal research training or experience. Hollingsworth (1994, 52) writes that she wants her students “to see teaching as research and transform their disciplinary work in their own classrooms.” To that end, through a graduate course on
“teaching as research,” she helps her students to develop and reflect on a range of research skills and, simultaneously, undertakes her own feminist research project to learn from the experience. In parallel fashion, our role has been to support WLP partners in gaining and practicing feminist research skills as part of their work as NGO staff/activists and, simultaneously, through a feminist pedagogical lens, we have sought to engage reflectively in this overall process – and to include the WLP partners in this reflection.

Hollingsworth’s analysis of her own teaching of four consecutive courses on research methods to school educators (teachers and administrators) begins with a reflection of her own objectives (Hollingsworth 1994, 52). In articulating these, she uncovers the emancipatory project that she has embarked on, in which she understands research practice not as an end in itself, but rather as a means to see the world in a new light and find ways to question, challenge, and change it. Similarly, we embarked on the WLP project with a range of objectives that overlapped with but were not determined exclusively by our terms of reference as consultants. In talking about the process, we have identified several different kinds of objectives that we brought into it, although we may not have consciously expressed all of them at the outset. These include a desire to:

- be closely involved with a research project that we saw, as feminists and development practitioners with a political commitment to progressive and transformative social change, as having potentially strong credibility and value because it was to be carried out by women located within and close to the communities and research subjects and engaged directly in social action work;
- expand the pool of gender researchers in Asia and the Pacific, by building confidence, enthusiasm, and skills among a new cohort of women, and work to ensure that their research was widely communicated and legitimized in more traditional research settings (such as academic conferences and literature);
- contribute to uncovering new answers – and new kinds of answers – to questions about women’s leadership and testing new kinds of research methods and data analysis processes;
- earn our living as consultants while extending our credentials as researchers and development practitioners with expertise in feminist research questions and methodologies;
- learn from women activists in the region about how research might contribute to their work and how useful and meaningful research could be conducted in their contexts.

Like Hollingsworth, we soon realized that our primary objectives were less concerned with the knowledge that the project would generate about the
research topic than with the process of generating that knowledge. We similarly “minimised [our] goal of product in favour of process” (Hollingsworth 1994, 52) and realized that *strengthened and more reflective process* is perhaps the fundamental goal of all feminist pedagogy.

**Feminist pedagogy and reflective practice**

Given that we were hired by a feminist organization (that is, IWDA) on the basis of our feminist credentials (demonstrated in our repertoire of feminist research), it is not surprising that our approach to teaching research methods and methodology was also feminist. Feminist pedagogies – like feminism itself – are hard to generalize, and perhaps should not be assumed to follow any one particular model or definition, including those based in “Western” thinking (Aneja 2017; Shrewsbury 1993; Sun 2014; on various schools of feminist thought, see Ackerly and True 2020, 2–4). However, key tenets have been distilled around leveling the relationship between “teacher” and “student,” supporting empowerment, building community, privileging individual voices, respecting the diversity of personal experience, and challenging traditional views (Webb, Walker, and Bollis 2004, 418–421).

In illustrating their approach to teaching research methods in a university setting, Webb and her colleagues center their pedagogy on the formation of “research groups,” advocating “self-directed research teams who select their own topics, theories, methods, instruments, analyses, and interpretations as a collective via consensus” (Webb, Walker, and Bollis 2004, 416). Although it was clearly not a research methods course run in a university, we suggest that the WLP project represents an interesting test case for feminist pedagogy, having created its own “research group” composed of the researchers and the RST, and being responsible for its own research design, data collection, and analysis.

Using Webb, Walker, and Bollis’ (2004) framework, we now present our reflections on the extent to which our own “research project” – of teaching research to non-traditional researchers – is consistent with our understandings of feminist pedagogy. These reflections are based on frequent and documented conversations that took place over the course of the project – both oral and written: between us, the authors (over emails and calls); with the WLP researchers (in emails, other digital messages, reflection reports, and face-to-face meetings); and with IWDA (in written, unpublished annual reports and summaries of periodic meetings). Following in Hollingsworth’s footsteps, these data reveal a consistent pattern of questioning our “teaching” and “student learning,” collecting and documenting information to support these lines of inquiry, experimenting, summarizing, and trying again. Retrospectively thinking through our approach, we find that while...
we constantly strove to achieve a gold standard in feminist pedagogy, there are areas in which we could have improved our work practice. We also find that our analysis of feminist teaching of research is difficult to separate from an analysis of how a feminist research project is structured and operationalized. There are certainly aspects of feminist pedagogy that as research practitioners we need to improve on, but there are also wider lessons for the design of feminist research in development contexts.

“Teacher”–“student” relationships

Feminists have aimed to redefine research roles and establish power-sharing arrangements in the design, collection, analysis, and write-up of research (Gawelek, Mulqueen, and Tarule 1994; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2014). By sharing knowledge, “students” and “teachers” both participate in the teaching, and by acquiring that shared knowledge, both “students” and “teachers” participate in the learning (Parry 1996). In ensuring that teaching and learning roles are shared equally, Webb, Walker, and Bollis (2004, 418) suggest that all participants “take the lead on a vital part” of the research process.

In the WLP project, we sought to foster a “reciprocal transfer of knowledge” in which “academic researchers … respect non-academic knowledge and expertise and support an egalitarian relationship with [research partners]” (Coughlin, Smith, and Fernandez 2017, 7). Our non-academic partners brought their understanding of the social, cultural, and economic realities of the communities in which they live and work (being the sites of our study) – including their understandings of the potential utility of the research findings – while we shared more theoretical and comparative understandings of the social problem (being the nature of women’s leadership), potential research designs, and methodologies, including the “imposition of limits” related to meeting the methodological conventions that are necessary to ensure the production of valid research (Webb, Walker, and Bollis 2004, 418).

This two-way transfer of knowledge was achieved by marking out distinct tasks among the research group. The researchers were responsible for data collection and analysis. They “learned by doing” (Freire 1982), and their experiences of research became knowledge that they could share with the research group, including with us. Our task was to guide and coordinate data collection and analysis as members (rather than leaders) of the research group, consciously bringing in our own context and experience. We sought to define ourselves not as research experts, but rather as research facilitators and learners. Teaching some traditional research methods was necessary, but we favored hands-on and interactive learning activities, wider group discussions about research experiences, and reflection on the emotions involved. Bringing the research group together to discuss and validate our findings further supported this reciprocal learning.
None of this was easy. There were significant barriers to reciprocal knowledge transfer within our group in the structure of the project (for example, our interactions with the research partners occurred mainly remotely rather than in person) and in the asymmetry of the research experience. Questions asked in emails and messages were usually directed to us as “teachers”; very few messages were shared on our group platform (Facebook) to be discussed and reflected on by the group as a whole, and there was little uptake on invitations from us for the research partners to share experiences in that forum. If the researchers did ask each other questions, this was done in private without our knowledge. The lack of interactivity among the group reflects a number of realities, such as language barriers, the busy schedules of the researchers, and lack of confidence in their capacities among some of the partners. Moreover, there were gaps between partners who had no research experience and those with significant experience or university-level research training. In these circumstances, we had to step up to answer practical questions that allowed the project to move forward, but we attempted to do this in ways that deflected the label of “expertise” and reinforced partners’ confidence in their own knowledge and insights, presenting ourselves in the role of an “intermediary between student and topic, rather than as a facilitator of the truth” (Webb, Walker, and Bollis 2004, 418).

While there were clearly several structural barriers inhibiting an equalization of the “teacher”–“student” relationship, we could have done more to encourage critical reflection on the research process, including supporting the researchers to challenge us – and others in the group – as “teachers” and co-learners. Greater trust and confidence could have been built among members of the research group. More focused efforts to facilitate and sustain relationships between research partners, rather than mainly with us, might have helped. The resources required for successful network building and maintenance are frequently underestimated, but it is perhaps self-evident that increasing the opportunities for a research group to work together, face-to-face, improves shared learning. We do not know how often the researchers from the five countries were able to meet, but we suspect that more personal connections – not just in relation to their research, but on their (advocacy) work more generally – could have bolstered their confidence in relaying questions to each other, rather than to us as research facilitators.

**Empowerment**

Feminists understand power not only as a noun, but also as a verb (Parpart, Rai, and Staudt 2002). Empowerment is not simply a process of giving women power but of activating the power that they have, in part by seeking to
redistribute and restore access to capacities and resources – of varied kinds, including skills and tools, but also personal resources such as confidence – that reinforce women’s efforts to pursue their own goals and agendas. Feminist pedagogy is undertaken in this spirit. Power need not be redistributed from one group to another; it can simply be restored in the “activation of multiple perspectives” (Scering 1997, 66). By demystifying research and enabling members’ participation in making decisions about the research, the power of the research group and its individual members can be activated (Webb, Walker, and Bollis 2004, 419).

In the WLP project, empowerment occurred in several ways. First and foremost, all of our interactions with the research partners were couched in positive reinforcement, a key strategy endorsed by Webb, Walker, and Bollis (2004, 419). Because a critical task was to sustain motivation for the process and output of the research among non-traditional researchers, we began all of our discussions and interactions with praise and thanks. In turn, the researchers were very generous with their praise and thanks for the research project and our support. Our Facebook group page reflects their positive reinforcement of our role: “thank you for helping and supporting me to have a chance to do all of this”; “thanks … for being helpful in reviewing my [focus group discussion] questions”; “so grateful for both of you in mentoring me in this research journey.”

Second, we began all of our face-to-face interactions with a session to set ground rules for discussion (Davis and Hattery 2018, 52). These sessions were important to set out roles and responsibilities among the group, including ours as “learners” as opposed to “experts.”

Third, we supported empowerment in decision making by the research partners, presenting various options, rather than imposing fait accompli outcomes, and letting the research partners know that their views on the best and most feasible ways of conducting data collection were valued. For example, in disseminating the survey instrument, we suggested a couple of options for reaching out to the research participants and each research partner chose the one that was most suitable for their own local context.

Finally, we encouraged reflection and refocus of the research process over the course of the project. We specifically reviewed the researchers’ capacity to engage in the project, the methods by which to collect data, and the sample of research participants. This resulted in several strategic changes that made the research more realistic and achievable. By the end of the project, the partners could see the value of this reflection:

I found that to construct the right questions required me to look at the sphere of leadership and the characteristics of women leaders – not merely looking at the general results but to go specific. A key learning point was that different questions need to be constructed for different methods, and the responses are then slightly different. (Researcher A, 2020)
I found out that doing this kind of research can collect a lot of good data, especially as I needed to meet with the same person many times. It turned out that the open questions in the survey [elicited] hidden stories that they had not told me in the interview or focus group discussion the first time around. The experience empowered me to keep communicating better with research subjects. (Researcher B, 2020)

Of course, we encountered barriers to full empowerment in the project. While we were conscious of and worked to mitigate power hierarchies, all of us work within multiple organizational contexts. The researchers were usually junior staff of NGOs and often required approval for their actions from their executives. On some occasions, the researchers noted to us that making decisions made them feel guilty and vulnerable. Additionally, not all of the researchers were involved in making the initial decision to participate in the WLP project. For them, aspects of this project were just another part of their job, assigned to them rather than taken on by choice. In this sense, not all of the team members were empowered to contribute – or perhaps interested in contributing – “equally” and “continually” such that ideas could be adopted from other members (Webb, Walker, and Bollis 2014, 419). Moreover, the project expected the researchers to persuade senior women leaders – including busy executives and politicians – to engage with them and answer all of their questions. As one of our researchers noted at the end of the project,

[t]he most challenging part of the WLP process was following up on the participants to collect the data. The majority of the women that had taken part in the research were working women, so it was a bit of a challenge to follow up on the data and even getting them to participate in the research. (Researcher C, 2020)

A final challenge in terms of empowerment of the group was that we all wore multiple “hats,” working across different tasks and projects. Even the most committed and enthusiastic of the research partners often had limited time allocated to the project and found it difficult to fit data collection and related activities around their primary staff roles.

We consider that our pedagogical practice could have been more supportive of the real power struggles in which our partners were engaged – with their organizations, IWDA, and the women leaders whom they were trying to study. We needed to brainstorm more effectively the strategies that could have supported (and protected) the research partners, including the executives of the partner organizations, to market the project to a greater and more diverse set of women leaders.

**Building community**

As feminists, we value community, constructed in relationships and dialogues, and within which we feel empowered to share and learn (Gawelek,
Mulqueen, and Tarule 1994, 182; Schniedewind 1993, 18). The “collective product” achieved in our communities, through collaboration on tasks and projects, resonates and has value for us as feminists (Parry 1996, 46). From the standpoint of feminist pedagogy, the “feminist teacher” is crucial to building such communities in the learning process. As Shrewsbury writes,

[t]he feminist teacher is above all a role model of a leader. S/he has helped members of the class develop a community, a sense of shared purpose, a set of skills for accomplishing that purpose, and the leadership skills so that teacher and student may jointly proceed on those tasks. (Shrewsbury 1993, 14)

We tried to build community by consistently demonstrating high levels of enthusiasm for this project and excitement about what the research partners had achieved. We negotiated more face-to-face time with the researchers than the project originally envisaged, although this was only possible in two of the five countries. We aimed to encourage reflection on the importance of the research and the skills that our researchers were developing – not just for this project, but to take forward in their professional lives. In some of this, our partners’ reflections indicate a level of success:

Participating in this research has had a great positive impact on my career. Experiences in the event of implementing different methods and receiving responses or feedback has inspired me in my leadership role in the community and stepping in where needed. Doing the research work has helped in analyzing unjust actions and as well as providing words of encouragement to young people. (Researcher A, 2020)

However, building a community of practice, even around the same research project, was a constant challenge. The individuals working on the project often changed – not only our research partners, but also the managers of the project working at IWDA. Our own RST also changed, with a third member’s involvement (voluntarily) reduced over the course of the project. As another of our partners noted,

[t]he biggest challenge for [our organization] in this project was the turnover of staff. From beginning to end, there was not a consistent team leading and facilitating the research. As such, there was a lack of confidence at times in the handover in ensuring the project was managed successfully and that the objectives stated were carried out effectively in a consistent manner. It also made our participants feel overwhelmed and confused. (Researcher D, 2020)

In addition, we reflected that the duration of the project – planned for three years to accommodate a longitudinal approach – was too long to sustain dedicated interest and effort by women who were busy with myriad other responsibilities. Building trust among a group of researchers who can only meet twice in a three-year period is exceptionally difficult.
We suspect that building a research community would require a project that brings the research group together more often and is more realistic in its timeframes. In their analysis of partnerships in community-based participatory research, Kendall et al. (2017, 29–30) outline three factors that enable success:

1. a clear understanding of the strengths and limitations each organisation brings to the partnership;
2. a strong belief in a commitment to compromise and equality as essential components of the partnership; and
3. clearly established guidelines or memoranda of understanding to guide the partnership process.

While we demonstrated our belief in and ability to compromise and work as equals, our community was not necessarily built on clear expectations and prior knowledge of each partner’s strengths and limitations. We could also have encouraged the researchers to see the group as a source of power and directed their contributions more to the group as a whole, rather than their own research pathway. By this, we mean that we could have done more to focus energy within the group toward the collective, rather than to each partner as an individual participating in a group project. As facilitators, but also as group members, we needed to work more toward defining a shared sense of purpose to enable the group as a whole to monitor contributions and gaps in support.

**Privileging individual voices**

Feminist practice is to carve out safe spaces for “students” to express their opinions, experiences, fears, and frustrations “without interruption” (Parry 1996, 50), because “[i]f the only voice heard is the instructor’s, the students are deprived of a primary and critical way of knowing” (Gawelek, Mulqueen, and Tarule 1994, 181). Standard feminist practice, then, is to ensure that every person in the room has an opportunity to contribute to each topic or discussion point.

A starting point for us was locating our researchers at the heart of the research process – literally and metaphorically. In our documentation with IWDA and in face-to-face meetings, we presented a diagram that showed our researchers as the “stars of the show” as a way of privileging individual voices. More substantively, however, we strove at all meetings to dedicate time to reflections and sharing of experience. All of our workshops carved out spaces in which the researchers were able to express their fears, joys, and frustrations in undertaking the research.

The greatest barrier to privileging individual voices in a group composed of women from five countries is language. The project brought together people with varying levels of English and asked them to share their experiences and even their emotions in a language other than their own. As
women who speak more than one language and not all of them as proficiently as English, we understand that we lose a part of our identities when we are robbed of the opportunity to speak in our native tongue. Research tools were translated into local languages and data were translated back into English, but reflecting in English was easier for some members of the research group than for others. With the exception of the RST, none of the research group members had native-level proficiency in English. This had consequences for the degree to which the researchers could share their thoughts, not least of which is the loss that comes in translation. Culture can also act as a huge barrier to privileging individual voices. Some of the research partners live and work in very hierarchical societies and emerged from education systems that emphasize rote learning over critical thinking, impacting the degree to which they are comfortable with full and honest disclosure of their feelings and ideas or challenging others’ views.

As one partner reflected, the language barrier seriously limited the research in one of the five countries:

We didn’t have an interpreter during the first workshop in 2017 in Bangkok to help us understand the overall research objective, its processes, and expectations. While the workshop materials were provided in [our language], it would [have been] good to have [an] interpreter to help us in all the discussions. Because of that, we had less understanding of the feminist context, and we did not really pay attention to the objectives of the research. Now [after three years] we have realized that the research focused on women’s individual experiences, and that we needed to dig deeper, including into their background. (Researcher E, 2020)

A key lesson for us is to be as faithful as possible to the views expressed – in whatever form – by all of the researchers, and to find more innovative ways to facilitate their expression in safe, but still critical, spaces. We must reduce language inequalities by fully resourcing translation and interpretation from the beginning of these projects. We need to be vigilant about the way in which we structure face-to-face group discussions so that questions are directed to the group, rather than to us. It is incumbent on us as feminist facilitators to create the space in which the research group feels confident in expressing views even when they think that we might disagree (and indeed when we do in fact disagree).

**Respect for diversity of personal experience**

For feminists, diversity is a virtue. Diversity enriches our analysis because it recognizes that our place in the world – which varies by gender, race, ethnicity, class, ability and mobility, sexual identity, and so on – creates the lens through which we see and experience the world. Bringing diverse perspectives together to analyze a problem therefore produces a more complex and accurate understanding of its reality. Feminist pedagogy makes an
additional assumption: that our personal experiences, diverse as they may be, are the starting point of learning. As Webb, Walker, and Bollis note, feminist pedagogy asks that we “carefully [consider] the input of each team member on each point, including logical analysis of personal experience” (Webb, Walker, and Bollis 2004, 420).

In the WLP project, diversity of personal experience was significant. The researchers lived in community contexts that were vastly different from our own and frequently from those of each other on a range of indicators, including socio-economic status; family structure, roles, and responsibilities; and religiosity. The impact of this diversity on data collection was significant: in doing this work, the researchers had to manage family, community, and cultural expectations, which were not always supportive, as well as the logistical challenges of working in places with limited infrastructure, including internet connectivity, as one of our partners noted:

For the interviews, it was difficult to contact some participants because they are from the mountain areas and the [internet and phone] connection is weak compared to the city. We had to call them again and again. Sometimes, they were very busy and we could not interview them in time [for the project schedule]. For the video diary, only two people could do it because some leaders were not familiar with the technology; and some leaders were very busy and they could not dedicate enough time to the project. In addition, it was difficult to organize the focus group discussion, because the participants were from different places [and] different organizations, and had different work plans. (Researcher F, 2020)

Diversity also has an impact on data analysis. Both in our face-to-face interactions and through our research briefs (guidance notes for research), we encouraged the members of the research group to reflect on their positionality and how this influenced the way in which they understood the responses from their research subjects. This message clearly resonated with some of the researchers; as one research partner commented: “A feminist research project to me means to try and do away with the imbalance between researcher and subject; and it is motivated to capture women’s experiences and change social inequality” (Researcher C, 2020).

Overall, however, it is likely that our reflections on diversity were often more “bilateral” rather than “multilateral.” We could have done better at encouraging the research group to consider the diverse perspectives of each member and how that diversity impacted the research project as a whole, rather than thinking about the diversity of each individual researcher in their own specific context. Even “bilaterally,” however, we could have pre-empted the effect of the WLP project on our researchers. For example, during an in-country workshop, it became clear that one of our researchers’ husbands appeared to be frustrated with his wife’s longer hours away from home, reminding us of the criticality of the “do no harm” principle of development (Eves et al. 2018). While the research project’s ethics process considered a
range of eventualities for our research subjects (that is, the women leaders), it did not fully consider the potential side effects (positive and negative) of placing our researchers in potentially vulnerable circumstances. A “needs assessment” process – administered at multiple points over the course of the project in the form of individual self-assessments or group assessments – might have helped us (and the project more broadly) to identify the diversity of experiences and needs among the research group, and to keep this diversity in mind in both the data collection and analysis processes.

**Challenging traditional views**

By definition, feminists are engaged in an emancipatory project that aims to eliminate the subjugation of women by challenging the status quo (Ackerly and True 2020; Ahmed 2017; Aneja 2017; Fonow and Cook 1991; Martin, Nickels, and Sharp-Grier 2017; Sun 2014; Tickner 2005). Key feminist struggles have been in challenging the nature of knowledge, research, teaching, and learning. Our experience of the WLP project has more than a little resonance with Webb, Walker, and Bollis’ finding that “thoughtful and reasonable queries regarding traditional, empirical research methods cause the teacher occasionally to question the necessity of procedures that she learned by rote … in her training” (Webb, Walker, and Bollis 2004, 421).

Substantively, the WLP project challenged the traditional lens through which women’s leadership in Asia and the Pacific is explored – by focusing on positive stories of women’s experience of leadership, taking an inductive approach to understanding women’s leadership based on individual journeys, and expanding the definition of leadership. This aspect was highly valued by both the researchers and the women leaders whom they studied:

> I found it really rewarding listening to the women members of parliament that I interviewed, especially with the passion, motivation, and inspiration they had to become the leaders they are today. The challenges they have had to overcome to make a change in their communities which [were themselves] a motivation for them to do something to help their communities. (Researcher G, 2020)

> What surprised me was the response I received from a majority of the women leaders after they filled in the survey questionnaire. They had never answered these types of questions before. They felt relieved after sharing so much information on their experiences. This exercise gave them the space to provide insights and inspiring quotes to other women. They had always hoped for an experience like this to be given to them. (Researcher A, 2020)

The project also challenged the status quo in terms of the people usually trusted to carry out research, given that non-traditional researchers collected and analyzed the data.

As feminist researchers, we have always been more than comfortable with the project’s aim of challenging Western-centric findings on women’s
leadership. For years, we have questioned masculinist knowledge and understandings of the world around us in both academic and practitioner pursuits, and we understand these lines of inquiry to be precursors to feminist innovation (Hoskin 2017; Kishimoto and Mwangi 2009). We perhaps found it more challenging, however, to step back from the traditional role of researchers ourselves and allow others to own the process of data collection, analysis, and communication. Over the course of the project, we came to realize that we would not be required to analyze the data ourselves and were discouraged from showcasing the project in too many academic settings. In this sense, a key challenge for us was to redefine our traditional roles and responsibilities within the research group and recalibrate our initial expectations and personal objectives in being involved in this project. In meeting this challenge, however, we were supported by the researchers themselves, with whom we built strong relationships that we hope will continue into the future. The data collected by this research group are remarkable and invaluable and often beyond what any Western researcher might have found.

**Conclusion: requirements of teaching feminist research**

Feminists reflect. We reflect purposively, with the intention of evaluating what has come before and what is further required to reach our emancipatory goals. In this article, we have reflected on our involvement in a complex, multi-stage, and multi-stakeholder research project, realizing that what the project achieved was the result of constant reflection and refocus. At the heart of our reflections was the significant change in the project’s objectives, from evidence gathering for advocacy purposes, to the empowerment of activists as skilled researchers to gather that evidence. In many ways, we might argue that cultivating strong research skills among non-traditional researchers is, in the long run, more emancipatory than producing new knowledge because it can bring – at least potentially – sustained, long-term benefits.

Critically, this seismic shift changed not only the nature of the project, but also our role and the skill set that we needed to bring to it. Comparing the approach that we took with the key tenets of feminist pedagogy shows us that as feminists we were able to meet a basic standard of good teaching practice. By establishing a research group, we were able to divide the research tasks and responsibilities equitably, share learning and knowledge, infuse enthusiasm and positivity into the group, and encourage reflection. We learned that while a differently designed project might have been more conducive to capacity building and our feminist teaching of research methods, we could also have encouraged more interaction and sense of purpose among the group, encouraging the group’s shared ownership of its own work processes and products.
Notably, some of the suggestions made in this article for improving our pedagogy would have a considerable price tag attached to them – pointing to the resource implications associated with conducting a genuinely feminist, collaborative project with multiple stakeholders in different locations. Indeed, without a substantial investment of resources for travel and translation, we wonder whether feminist research can be undertaken across five countries with language and cultural differences.

This notwithstanding, we share our reflections in the hope that more emancipatory research projects will be designed and built into development programming. Although iterative and adaptive approaches to development programs have become more popular over the past decade, this has not extended – in similar measure – to the design of development research projects. Regardless of who is doing it, research remains a critical strategy for social change, including the achievement of gender equality. Encouraging and nurturing a broader cohort of researchers who have invaluable knowledge about local contexts can only lead to more nuanced, sophisticated understanding of development problems such as women’s under-representation in leadership.

In our experience, working to this end requires specialized training for both researchers and facilitators. Writing about feminist participatory action research, Ackerly and True (2020, 202) note that it “may involve additional time and capacities that not all researchers are equipped with … [and is] best developed through relationships with organisations adept at the community level with advocacy and adult learning.” We would extend this finding to any feminist cross-cultural collaborative research project and encourage more discussion and reflection on the personal and structural requirements for exactly these kinds of projects.

Notes

1. The work was carried out through a contract with Le Groupe-conseil Baastel ltée.
2. The project ended in June 2020, resulting in its own findings report, which is available at www.iwda.org.au.
3. Due to the limited number of researchers and their countries and organizations of origin, we anonymized each person quoted in this article and allocated an alphabetical character to protect their privacy. Permission to use partners’ quotes was sought and obtained in July 2020.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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