A Critical Reflection on the Feminist Research Methodology

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1.0 Introduction

This paper presents my experience of applying of a feminist research methodology in development research between 2002 – 2006 for the award of a doctorate in development studies. It provides a critical analysis of the various principles of feminist research methodology in a development context, and discusses how these principles could prove useful to the subject matter at hand. According to this paper, the issue is not whether the researcher adopts a 'feminist' research methodology, but the extent to which broadly feminist research principles can prove useful for the overall research topic and approach. This paper starts with some critical reflections on the strengths and limitations of the feminist research methodology generally. It concludes by reflecting on the potential usefulness of such an approach in research.

Harding, who has proposed 'a feminist standpoint' in research, has asserted that much of the misunderstanding about feminist methodology has been due to different levels of analysis being confused - method, methodology and epistemology (Harding, 1987). It is thus important to understand the difference between these three levels and Letherby (2003) distinguishes this very clearly. As she explains, method refers to the tools used in the research such as surveys and interviews. Methodology is the overall research framework. It is the process of theorizing and critiquing the research process and product. Epistemology is about 'theories of knowledge' and 'theories of knowledge production' (Letherby, 2003:3-5) and it is especially at this level that feminist research departs from more conventional social science research. It is for this reason that this paper pays much attention to the issue of knowledge production within the broadly 'feminist' research framework as adopted in the case of my research.

1.1 Introducing Feminist Research Principles

There are some quite complex debates about what precisely constitutes feminist research (Harding, 1987). This is partly due to the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary nature of feminism itself; whose major preoccupation across the disciplines has been the social construction of inequalities between men and women and the implications of these inequalities for all aspects of their lives. Thus feminism

is politically motivated. Feminist research seems to be preoccupied with the question: why are the worlds of women and the worlds of men constructed the way they are? In attempting to answer this question, feminist research has critiqued established knowledge construction and has generated new data on women's place, experiences and contributions in relation to men's, across cultures past and present. Feminist research can be distinguished from other forms of research by three principles. These are:

1. Feminist research puts women's experiences at the center of its inquiry.
2. The researcher locates herself within the research
3. It aims at transforming gender relations

1.2 Women's experiences and feminist research

According to feminist research, problems are generated from the perspective of women's experiences with the purpose of overcoming women's subordination (ibid.). The same experiences form the reality against which the hypothesis is measured. It can be argued that by focusing on women's experiences, feminists have encouraged new perspectives in social research and new research priorities. The justification for focusing on women's experiences is rooted in the argument that traditional research began its analysis by focusing almost exclusively on men's experiences, which were defined as the 'norm'. According to feminists, what may appear to be critical or problematic from the perspective of men's experiences may not necessarily appear the same from the perspective of women's experiences (Stanley and Wise, 1983). Gender bias in the past has meant that women's experiences generally did not appear in most academic research in the social sciences until quite recently, with the emergence of feminist social science scholarship in development studies in the 1970s (Smith, 1987). The advent of feminist research had methodological implications as well:

> Having challenged the reliability of traditional knowledge collected solely by men or within male structures, feminists are posing new questions that considerably alter the search for explanations (Ruth, 1980:185).

The principle of women's experiences forming the basis for the problem in feminist research was relevant to me. My research focussed on power relationships and the construction of the feminist advocacy agenda of NGOs in Uganda. It was influenced by my experiences as a Ugandan woman and development practitioner involved in advocacy work of gender focused NGOs in Uganda. I was also influenced by the continued gender inequalities experienced at the grassroots of Uganda and a lot of gender advocacy by gender focused NGOs, especially women NGOs, at national level (Nabacwa, 2002). In doing this research, I hoped that it would be possible to better understand the complexities of the inter-relationships among the various actors, and that I would be able to come up with some modest suggestions that might improve NGOs advocacy performance. Thus my various identities and experiences not only affected the research focus, but also the subsequent analysis adopted, and finally the interpretation of the research findings, which was from both a feminist and a broader development theory perspective (Devault, 1999). Experiential knowledge is useful in the analysis of power dynamics in development processes. By placing my own work experiences in the research design, while recognising the significance of broader development theories, the aim was to enrich our understanding – from an 'insider' perspective - of gender and development in practice in a country such as Uganda.

Feminists recognise that women do form a distinctive social group that needs to be acknowledged as having its own identities, interests and priorities. They would also stress that male bias rather than female nature is responsible for women's invisibility from more conventional history and social science. The mere fact of being woman meant having a particular kind of social and hence historical experience (Kelly-Gadol, 1987: 18). Sex differences have a role to play in the nature of the research outcome (Oakley, 1981a: 61). Being a woman and interviewing women contributes to having an insider perspective because the researcher will inevitably participate in what she is observing and this factor will tend to reduce the social distance between the researcher and her 'subject', partly due to the shared gender interests (Oakley, 1981b: 57). Women may have an advantage over men in interviewing women in the sense that

they have the capacity to translate their own experiences into the dominant and male defined language (Devault, 1999: 62).

However, the use of women's experiences as the basis for feminist research is not straightforward. The meaning of the term 'woman' in the historical or social sense is not always obvious; there is no single 'women's experience'; instead women's experiences are likely to vary greatly (Harding, 1987; Hammersley, 1995). General claims by feminists about 'women's experiences' come under question whether an insider or an insider conducts the research. Conducting research using the feminist perspective is most difficult in situations where there are significant differences between the researcher and the researched, including differences of power. One feminist researcher who highlights this problem is Luff (1999), who in her research with the British Women of the Lobby, from a 'feminist standpoint', questions what constitutes a feminist methodology and logically what it is not. She also asks what a feminist methodology entails and how one can identify the existence of such a methodology (Luff, 1999: 693).

Harding (1987) believed that starting from the feminist standpoint would produce experientially tested, and thus "more complete knowledge" (p. 184). She suggested that feminist research would offer a 'successor science'. Feminist standpoint epistemology seems to draw its inspiration from Marxist ideas in that women just as the proletariat are,

> …an oppressed class and as such have the ability not only to understand their own experiences of oppression but to see their oppressors, and therefore the world in general, more clearly (Letherby, 2003:45).

The above assertion seems to suggest that women may have the advantage of a wider view of the women's world and produce knowledge that is closer to a realistic, more accurate picture of reality (Hammersley, 1995). However other scholars argue that one woman interviewing another woman does not necessarily remove the differences or the power inequalities between them (Luff, 1996: 41; Luff, 1999: 693; Letherby, 2003:

46; Oakley, 2000: 36). Class, religion, race, sexual orientation, culture and even age affect the experiences of women and hence there are multiple and diverse women's experiences of the same phenomenon rather than just one (Harding, 1987; Luff, 1996; Luff, 1999; Phoenix, 1994; Ramazanoglu, 1992; Oakley, 2000; Letherby, 2003).

The concept of 'fractured foundationalism' is useful here since it acknowledges "judgments of truth are always relative and necessarily relative to the particular framework or context of the knower" (Stanley & Wise, 1990: 41). In essence feminists seem to concede that there are several truths and not one truth as scientifically claimed (Luff, 1996; Luff, 1999; Cain, 1990; Oakley, 2000; Letherby, 2003; Stanley, 1990; Harding, 1987; Stanley and Wise, 1990). This may explain why there are so many labels of feminist identity - black feminists, socialist feminists, liberal feminists, American feminists, and separatist or lesbian feminists. These fragmented identities all provide an insight into feminism (Harding, 1987:8). To illustrate this fragmented identity, I quote Mohanty (1991) in her discussion of what is termed, 'third world feminism'.

> The term feminism is itself questioned by many third world women. Feminist movements have been challenged on the grounds of cultural imperialism, and of short sightedness in defining the meaning of gender in terms of middle-class, white experiences and in terms of internal racism, classism and homophobia (Mohanty, 1991: 7).

Questioning cultural imperialism within feminism raises the question of the relationship of gender to other forms of oppression - those of race, class, colonialism, religion, racism, globalization - and the need to address them (Maynard, 1994; Jayawardena, 1986; Cornwall, 1998; Mohanty, 1999; Parpart, 2002). Since third world women have always engaged with feminism (Mohanty, 1991; Mohanty, 1999) the problem is not with feminism itself but its epistemological underpinnings that have narrowly focused on patriarchy. Third world women are no more homogeneous among themselves than women in general. They have hugely different experiences depending on geographical location, culture, class and specific past and present economic, social and political conditions.

The inevitability of relativism introduces what has been termed a form of feminist postmodernism, which asserts that: "knowledge is rooted in the values and interests of particular groups" (Letherby, 2003: 51). It can be said that knowledge is relative and non-objective. In other words,

> …there is a variety of contradictory and conflicting standpoints, of social discourse, none of which should be privileged, there is no point trying to construct a stand point theory which will give us a better, fuller, more power neutral knowledge because such knowledge does not exist (Millen, 1997: 7.7).

Scholars have critiqued the use of 'postmodernist feminists' arguments as undermining the political struggle of feminist research that originates in women's experiences of male domination because relativism may affect the possibility of feminist politics (Letherby, 2003; Oakley, 2000: 298; Hawkesworth, 1989; Luff, 1996; Millet, 1969). Feminist politics that is the struggle for the recognition of women's experiences in research forms the distinction between feminist research and other forms of research (Stanley, 1990: 14) Jayawardena, in her writing about feminist movements in Asia in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, views feminism as "embracing movements for equality within the current system and significant struggles that have attempted to change the system" (Jayawardena, 1986: 2). The above arguments reflect universality amidst relativism within the concerns of feminist research with a focus on gendered oppression embedded in the complex social, political and economic human relations within and across races, classes, households, communities, and nations (Smith, 1987, Jayawardena, 1986; Mohanty, 1999; Oakley, 2000; Letherby, 2003).

Feminist research points to another important insight namely, that identity affects our experiences. Experiences affect our world-view and our conceptual understanding and interpretation of knowledge. That is to say

> …knowledge comes to us through a network of prejudices, opinions, innervations, self-correction, presuppositions and exaggeration, in short through the dense firmly founded by no means uniformly transparent medium of experience (Adorno, 1974: 80).

Since human experiences vary due to changing context and time, it means knowledge changes, especially knowledge related to the multi-level nature of this research where the context is constantly changing. The feminist researcher also needs to recognize that constantly changing human relationships are relationships of power, located within social structures, cultures, classes and ethnicities (Kabeer, 1989). It thus became clear to me that I should be careful not to fall into the very dichotomy that I was critiquing. The way women, men, boys and girls negotiate and understand these relationships will affect the way they relate to one another and with the wider community (Marchand & Parpart, 1995; Bhabba, 1994).

My recognition of the diversity of women's experiences precluded the view that my research represented the views of third world women on gender equity or agenda setting in gender advocacy. Instead, I decided that it was important to recognize the diversity of women's experiences and to show through the research process that women do not live in isolation of men. Women have relationships with men as brothers, fathers, husbands, sons, and uncles, among others. The social relations between men and women and the implications of such for gender-focused advocacy work in Uganda made it necessary to interview men. Another reason for including men was to clearly understand the perspectives of both men and women in order to compare them, at least on some key issues related to NGO gender advocacy work (Letherby, 2003). The men who participated in the research were included mainly because they were perceived by others to have valuable knowledge of gender focused advocacy work in Uganda.

1.2.1 Combining Feminist and Qualitative Approaches

Overall I adopted a process approach that was adjusted flexibly according to the researcher's experiences and the learning that takes place during the course of fieldwork (Westwood, 1984). I had originally intended to use two methodologies: qualitative and quantitative for objective and more valuable data. I administered the questionnaires but the complexity of the issues being researched soon made it apparent that questionnaires could not reveal much of importance about advocacy relationships,

interests and agendas. It was not clear how I was going to qualify the relationships and what meaning would be derived from such quantification (Kabeer, 1999). In the end, the interest was in the different perspectives of people regarding advocacy. Qualitative methodologies ended up being used not only to collect data from the field but also for triangulation purposes. According to Abbott, the desire for neutral and credible information may make it difficult for the researcher to actively engage with research participants (Abott, 1998; Luff, 1996; Roseneil, 1993).

Early feminist studies relied heavily on qualitative research methodologies, including, in-depth interviewing, which has remained "the predominant approach within sociological research on the family" (Devine and Heath, 1999:43). This is because qualitative methods were viewed as more effective in the study of women's experiences of the family, and gave women a voice in their own right:

> Introducing this 'subjective' element into the analysis in fact increases the 'objectivity' of the research and decreases the objectivism that hides this kind of evidence from the public (Harding, 1987: 9).

In other words, qualitative methodologies provide the researcher the opportunity to engage in the research actively and subjectively. In her experience of doing insider research on Greenham women, Roseneil noted how important were, "the social location and experiences of the researcher" in shaping the choice of qualitative and quantitative methods (Roseneil, 1993: 192).

It is against this background that feminism claims to provide alternative theories of knowledge, which legitimise women as knowers. Women are studied from the perspective of their own experiences so they can understand themselves better and have more voice in the research itself. Feminists recommend women studying themselves and

> …studying up' instead of "studying down"…in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter thereby recovering the entire research process for scrutiny in the results of research… the beliefs and behaviours of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of the research (Harding, 1987: 8-9)

Taking into account the advantages, concerns and challenges of undertaking research from an experiential insider perspective, qualitative rather than quantitative methodologies were used. This decision was not so much based on the argument of providing better knowledge in comparison to quantitative methodologies as on the extent to which such methodologies were appropriate to the research questions (Oakley, 2000). The aim was to analyse the implication of the relations among Ugandan gender-focused NGOs and between them and other actors in their advocacy work. I needed research methods that could venture beyond face value analysis of 'facts' to explore the terrain and look for explanation of patterns of behaviour that these institutions and individuals including myself were not aware of. One of the important aspects of qualitative research is that it takes the subjects' perspectives.

Qualitative researchers search for information about what was said by the respondents and also seek to understand the context. Qualitative researchers focus on the daily, and apparently insignificant, details of data collected from respondents within their setting.

> …its emphasis on the visible, official portion of social life [social science research[1]] has overlooked important support structures to social enterprise because they were not in public view…The importance of the mundane aspects of our social life becomes more prominent in a feminist perspective (Millman and Kanter, 1987: 33).

This makes it possible to describe and understand the actions and meanings of the research participants within given circumstances. Thus the research context and process are critical to effective qualitative research which favors flexible, open and relatively unstructured research design (Bryman, 1988: 61-66; Silverman, 2001: 38-46; Hammersley, 1992: 160-172).

This research focused on the advocacy relationships and specifically on relationships in gender advocacy in Uganda through exploration of both the researchers own subjective experiences while giving a voice to the research participants. A flexible research methodology that could open up new ways of critical self-reflection in approaching and understanding NGO relationships proved necessary. Elements of a number of theories

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[1] The words in the brackets replace the word sociology for purposes of this research.

were taken on board instead of being guided by one single theory (Silverman, 1993). This was done with a view to generating knowledge that would help us to better understand gender advocacy within the Ugandan context.

Positivists tend to view qualitative research as a relatively minor methodology that can be used at the beginning of the research process to assist in identifying the key questions or enabling the researcher to become more familiar with the research setting. This is taken to be appropriate prior to the use of more 'serious' quantitative methodologies (Silverman, 2000; Hammersley, 1992). The representativeness of the sample of qualitative research is an issue of great concern to positivists. Since qualitative methodologies are usually conducted using small samples, and since the relationship between the researcher and the respondent is usually defined in political rather than scientific terms, this poses a challenge for quantitative notions of representative and replicable research (Silverman, 1993). However, qualitative research in turn has its own criticisms of more quantitative approaches. Explanations of behaviour that reduce social life to responses to particular stimuli or variables are distrusted and seen as largely descriptive rather than explanatory.

Research methods such as unstructured or semi-structured interviews use open-ended questions in a bid to understand the underlying meanings attached by the participants to the social phenomenon being researched. This is a more complex way to explain forms of social behavior. The qualitative approach may therefore be more likely to yield insights into how people's relationships are constructed and negotiated, than a quantitative approach, however reliable its data or valid the correlations established between variables. Qualitative methodology is often concerned with inducing research hypotheses from the field on social processes, occurring in context. A qualitative approach uses accounts of experience, stories and descriptions provided by participants in the research, to assemble an overview. Qualitative research aims at getting an authentic understanding of people's experiences rather than making any claim about the representativeness of the sample (Silverman, 1993; Mikkelsen, 2005).

There are also some difficulties to guard against in adopting a qualitative methodology. A

dominant group, or prominent individuals or facilitator may influence the research agenda and findings. It is very likely that the views of some will be left out. This can foster inequalities in terms of the agendas and priorities being expressed and analysed in the research process (Silverman, 1993; Oakley, 2000). I was careful not to get caught up in the methodological "paradigm wars" (Oakely, 2000). The challenge was not so much to establish facts or 'objective knowledge' as to present different perspectives and interpretations of what was happening. I tried to creatively negotiate my way through a range of research methods (case studies, in-depth interviews, participant observation, and textual analysis) which could help me to understand the perspectives of those engaged in gender advocacy work either as development practitioners or as targets of the advocacy programmes. Triangulation was used not so much for the sake of ensuring objectivity but to critically understand the various perspectives on gender advocacy through comparing subjective interpretations of reality.

1.3 Locating the Researcher within the research: Towards a Critical Feminist Ethnography

I did a critical ethnographic study. In ethnography, interviewing and other qualitative methods are combined with an emphasis on participant observation, often over an extended period of time. The relationship with the interviewee goes beyond what is said, and generally involves more than one interview. Close attention is paid to the interview context (Davies, 1999; Burawoy, 2000). Ethnography is a piece of writing describing the social world of a particular group of people. The work should also describe the process of arriving at this in-depth knowledge of a social group. Ethnography has its origins in anthropological studies, with anthropologists arguing that an extended period of observation was vital if one was to even hope to understand the values, social structure and practices of a group of people. Thus, "Anthropological fieldwork routinely involves immersion in a culture over a period of years, based on learning the language and participating in social events with them" (Silverman, 1993: 31-32). To a certain extent, this reflected my experience of working on the priorities in gender-related advocacy

terms of NGOs in Uganda and those they claim to represent the grassroots women and men.

However feminists have critiqued conventional research including ethnography and it is this criticism which led to the second distinctive feature of feminist social research in that it challenges the notion of scientific objectivity by arguing that the researcher should be located on 'the same critical plane' as the researched.

> Feminists have argued that traditional epistemologies, whether intentionally or unintentionally, systematically exclude the possibility that women could be "knowers" or agents of knowledge (Harding, 1987: 3).

Feminists argue that the vision of social life embedded in conventional social science has been limited to the male, dominant, western and white perspective. Traditionally research has mainly relied on the agency approach that operates by way of images of mastery control (Millman and Kanter, 1987: 31). Agency is identified with a "masculine principle, the protestant ethic, with a Faustian pursuit of knowledge, as with all forces toward mastery, separation, and ego enhancement" (Carlson, 1972: 20).

 In the agency approach, the scientist is the master, and has power and control over the research process. For purposes of objectivity, the scientist remains detached from the research process. This can be compared with the communal approach which involves "naturalistic observation, sensitivity to intrinsic structure and qualitative patterns of phenomena studied and greater participation of the investigator" (ibid.).

The communal approach is seen as much humbler, and disavows control because control spoils the results. However, both approaches (agency and communal) focused on the public and the visible and tended to ignore the informal, private and invisible sphere where women are mainly located. Either approach thus fails to capture the most important features of many women's social world due to their focus on the formal and public forms of relationships and actions (Millman and Kanter, 1987: 31).

The focus of traditional research on the public and visible manifestations of power and social action can make it difficult to understand how social systems function. This is because one of the most basic processes is the constant interplay between the informal and interpersonal networks and the more formal and official structures (ibid.). The same interplay exists between the researcher and the subjects of the research. Feminists assert that subjectivity and reflexivity on the researcher's part are very important (Smith, 1987; Roseneil, 1993; Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994; Luff, 1999; Letherby, 2003). Since the varying locations of the researcher within the research will result in different outputs, the researcher needs to declare her/his standpoint in relation to the research. This will include her/his intellectual autobiography and the role of her/his race, class, gender assumptions, feelings, beliefs and interests in the research process (Roseneil, 1993:181; Harding, 1987: 8).

Third world feminists and post-colonial feminists have also critiqued anthropology as an outcome of imperialist definitions of self and other during colonial rule; it misrepresents women, arguing that anthropology signified the power of naming. The people of the third are reduced to the 'other' reinforcing exploitation; distorted representation; one-stop solutions and even war as a weapon for democracy in a neoliberal context (Cornwall, 1998; Harding, 1998; Mikkelsen, 2005: 326). In other words, they argue that the inherited categories of anthropology are those of white, western masculinity. Sexist and racist stereotypes have historically been used to consolidate particular relations of rule in which third world women have been portrayed as inferior to the western men/women. Anthropology has often led to the formation of a superior/inferior dichotomy that converts research into a justification of existing power structures, reinforcing inequalities (Mohanty, 1991: 31-32). Being a woman from the third world, I struggled with using ethnography as the term to describe the approach that I adopted in my research. The ethnographic method after all, has its origins in anthropology, a discipline that has misrepresented my own history with devastating effects. This research is geared towards at least partly to undoing some of these historical mistakes.

> Questions of definition and self-definition inform the very core of political consciousness in all contexts, and the examination of a discourse (anthropology) which has historically authorized the

objectification of third world women remains a crucial context to map third world women as subjects of struggle (Mohanty, 1991: 32).

The approach that I adopted in my research might be described as critical feminist ethnography. It was critical of my relationship with the research context, and research subjects. It was aware of how our identities have been formed in particular historical, social, political and economic and developmental contexts as the 'natives' or 'the other' and how our colonial legacy pervades the whole development process (Parpart, 2002; Harding, 1998). Values, cultures and norms form the perspectives that act as our yardstick and point of reference in our 'fields of vision' and ultimately in our interpretation of actions and ideas". Our interpretation of research is affected by our commitments to a particular community or to processes such as achieving gender equality, for example. Our analysis will also be affected by our political, religious, economic and social beliefs, by our methods of communication, our professional attachments and our own agendas (including those of organizations) (Blackmore & Ison, 1998; Hammersley, 1995).

Deciding to locate myself squarely within the study had the potential to affect the research both positively and negatively. My previous work with an international NGO had involved providing the gender focused NGOs, especially women's organizations, with technical support, and assisting them to access funding and linking them with the international NGOs field programmes. This experience enabled me to easily contact other organizations and individuals. In addition to working with these groups, I was also at one time the chairperson of the donor committee on gender (2001 – 2002) and I knew the staff members in charge of gender issues in the various donor organizations. My previous close work relations with politicians and the national government technical staff on gender and land issues proved an advantage in making research contacts in the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, and the Ministry of Lands and Water.

Reading through intellectual autobiographies which seem to serve as litmus tests of feminist researchers, made me wonder the extent to which the researcher should share

her sexual orientation, marital status, class, nationality, number of children and so forth in order to be approved as an insider feminist researcher. I chose not to seek to prove myself as a feminist researcher but to acknowledge the importance of the feminist research methodological principles, in particular by seeking to locate myself on the same critical plane as the research subjects. This made it important for me to identify the critical areas of focus; choose and contact the representative sample; and to conduct the interviews in a non-hierarchical manner. Being an insider is easier in some ways than being an outsider, since a stranger is perhaps more likely to be:

> misled and distracted (since) there are many social setting which would be inaccessible to an 'outsider' researcher, even one who was trying very hard to participate fully (Roseneil, 1993:90).

Having background knowledge and relationships proved vital assets in deciding on the relevant questions to guide this research. Knowing what documents to read and where to find them, also helped as well as knowing the people to contact for interviews, how to conduct the interviews themselves and how to hold informal discussions. Establishing rapport with research subjects from the early stages enabled me to understand issues from their perspective and relate their views and actions to the structural conditions governing advocacy work in Uganda. Prior knowledge of NGO gender advocacy work in Uganda made it possible for me to link the detailed, individual information collected from interviews and textual analysis to wider developmental debates, both in the country and beyond. It was also easy for me than it could have been for an outsider to gain information from policy makers and NGO staff. The relations and prior knowledge were thus critical to the success of the research process as a whole. As Roseneil said in a very detailed context:

> I am convinced that the degree of intimacy between myself and the women I interviewed was the product of our shared experiences, and was only possible because they knew that I was a Greenham woman and a feminist first, both temporally and in allegiance, and a sociologist second (Roseneil, 1993: 91).

This applied to me as a Ugandan woman and gender and women's rights activist. The importance of my identity in this research should not be over emphasised. My identity[2] has been shaped in the contradictory and complex processes that form the interface between the western and African contexts. Talking of the need for gender equality on the one hand, while being obliged to accept gender (and other forms of inequality), whether unconsciously or consciously, has been a major source of creative tension in my work and in this research. My attitudes as an elite Ugandan woman may be 'distorted' due by work and education experiences, and may be different from the attitudes of women at the grassroots level, sometimes I found myself in situations of distrust. While working in Kapchorwa District for instance, I was frequently asked where I came from, which meant that they did not identify with me. I also observed that during the focus group discussions, men, in particular, were reluctant to discuss or acknowledge gender inequalities within their communities in my presence, suggesting a lack of trust. Men frequently laughed when spousal co-ownership of land was mentioned. They might have felt this was impossible; they might have been amused by the discussion of gender equality abstract, or they might have found the notion of equality ridiculous. It is also possible they suspected a hidden agenda behind the discussion, and feared losing their land, the most valuable asset they have. This suspicion was understandable if, in their view, I was associated with the government land law and policy review process[3]. However what is clear in all this is that they felt I was an outsider whom they could not trust and thus they needed to be cautious in their relations with me.

As a women's rights activist, I do not agree with the gender inequalities that mark most women's experiences in comparison to their male counterparts. However I realise the difficulty of using ongoing development work to overcome gender inequalities. Some artificiality in development methodologies, including capacity building programmes and

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[2] I grew up in a typical Ugandan culture, where gender inequalities were considered virtues rather than injustices, On the other hand, growing up in a single mother's home, I appreciated how myths formed the basis for many culturally and socially sanctioned gender inequalities. As a woman, I have experience of gender inequalities in the Ugandan context, and indeed advocacy has been undertaken on my behalf. I was actively engaged in advocacy work on gender issues in order to 'transform' the lives of women as well as men in Uganda. My education in Uganda could be termed western, and British-oriented (Obbo, 1988). My experiences may be different from those of other women in Uganda.

[3] People in Kapchorwa are suspicious of discussion on land issues because most land is reserved under the Mt. Elgon preservation policy

other strategies, is palpable. At times such methodologies ignore or manipulate local knowledge and experiences to fit into ready-made agendas and stereotypes of ideal gender relations (Nabacwa, 2002; ActionAid Uganda, 1999). Other scholars have made a similar argument, that people's priorities are not paramount in the dominant development planning models, and that capacity building programmes tend to ignore local knowledge (Holland & Brocklesby, 2002; Wallace, 2004). I hoped that undertaking this research would help to understand the ways in which NGOs can work to improve the status of women in Uganda. The time for this was overdue, and people affected by development needed to be given the opportunity to decide their own gender relations and identities as men and women. Perhaps this could be described as the hidden agenda of the research, the motivation for carrying out the study in the first place. To paraphrase Marx, the point of Development Studies, after all, is not just to understand the world, but about practice and about how to change things for the better.

At the start of the research process I found myself at crossroads with regard to both my feminist identity and making sense of my previous work experience. Like many development practitioners in many settings, including Uganda, practicing in development left only limited time for thinking and reading about theory (Mikkelsen 2005; McGee 2002). This has made it a quite difficult task to connect theories with specific development practices, but has made it more important to do so. There has been a constant struggle to integrate methods and methodology with the epistemology, as well as with empirical material collected in the field and learned from experience. It is important to note that since my objectivity would inevitably be questioned, I needed not to claim authoritative knowledge of the topic, but rather to use my subjective position to collect knowledge that was realistic, in as informed a manner as possible.

The epistemological struggles involved in embarking on research on complex relations in a field like gender advocacy, showed the need for flexibility and reflexivity (Silver, 2000). A detailed dissection of the ideological and epistemological underpinnings of this research seemed necessary because of the consideration of the context and subjects of the research. It seemed, I had adopted a postmodernist feminist position based on the idea

that "…knowledge is rooted in the values and interests of particular groups" (Letherby, 2003:51-52). The danger is that a thoroughly relativistic position denies the possibility of any form of 'authorized' knowledge" (ibid.). An extreme relativist position can thus lead to the absurd conclusion that gender inequalities are apparent rather than real, and in any case not universal. Such a position would be invalid, on the basis of available evidence (Harding, 1987). It would also undermine the basis for this study in the first place. As Letherby observes, skepticism can be taken too far if it

> … raises questions not only about the possibility of any theory of women's subordination but also about the systematic description of subordination, or even that subordination exists at all (Letherby, 2003:54).

In the past few decades, Ugandan feminist researchers and practitioners have often found themselves in the uncomfortable position of being viewed as adopting gender relations models wholesale from the West. In this way, they have been seen as forcing women and men to view gender from an outsider's perspective, without giving Ugandan men and women the opportunity to decide for themselves what their ideal gender relations might be. Moves to promote gender equality have been unwelcome in many circles in Uganda. Religious and clan institutions[4] perceive gender equality ideas as indoctrination. Hence, perhaps the laughter in Kapchorwa. Many Ugandans, especially women, who have put forward alternative Ugandan models of gender relations have been resented by active feminists, and labeled as anti-feminist. The result is that Western gender models are in turn resented and labeled elitist and imperialist, and those who support them described as alienated from their own Ugandan culture and unconcerned with its preservation (Obbo, 1988; Amadiume, 1997). Generally, the pressures on women are to be 'nationalist' first and feminist second are a feature of most state systems (Amadiume, 1997). Thus values are part of research and they thus raise ethical questions that are described in detail in the next subsection.

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[4] I need to declare here that I was raised up as a Christian and I have by and large continued to subscribe to Christianity.

1.3.1 Ethics of the Research Process

My prior relationships with some of the research participants raised a number of ethical questions especially with regard to confidentiality, the category of people that I may have interviewed and probably the research methods used (May, 1993). By and large, there were differences in the nature of interviews. The interviews with men and women that I had had minimal contact or had been connected through other research subjects tended to start on a rather formal note, were usually shorter and were less rich in content in comparison to interviews with women (and men) with whom I had direct contacts or had previously interacted with in great depth (Roseneil, 1993:197).

Since I could hardly avoid getting caught up in the controversies surrounding gender issues during my fieldwork. I chose to conduct the research in ways that would not generate any additional resentment due to my perceived 'feminist standpoint'. As some scholars have argued, research investigations are "rooted in several traditions or histories, intellectual, cultural, political and developmental" this reflects in our understanding, conception and interpretation of the research problem (Potter & Subrahmanian, 1998: 39). The starting premise was that ethical issues are unavoidable since:

> The researcher, whatever their perspective on values and research is still faced with choices about what is right or wrong in the conduct of his or her research. For this reason, ethics are part of the research practice (May, 1993: 39-41).

Values in research depend on a number of factors including education, and geographic location (May, 1993). Ethics can also be seen as being about moral deliberations, choice and accountability by the researcher (Edwards and Mauthner, 2002:15) or "a set of standards used to regulate collective behavior (Flew, 1984: 112). Bailey's definition is that, to be ethical is to "conform to accepted professional practices" (Bailey, 1994:454). He further states that disagreements about codes of ethics are likely in situations of conflict of interest. There is general agreement on what is unethical in research that includes harming anyone in the course of the research. Harming also includes deception about the nature of the research, causing injury and generating unwanted emotions in the

respondent such as embarrassment, stress or anxiety due to the nature of the questions asked and the implication of the research output to the research subjects (ibid.).

The issue of ethics and values raise a number of dilemmas. How can a researcher maintain the professionalism that is part of the requirements of research ethics when dealing with people he or she knows personally? Related to this is the question of the unequal exchange of information and the degree of control exerted in post-fieldwork data analysis and report writing (Wolf, 1996:2). Most important, how can a researcher manage the balance research ethics and political obligations or priorities? Like other feminist scholars, my decision to locate myself on the same critical plane as the researched has led to some difficult decisions about the rights and wrongs of the research process.

Values enter into the research process because the researcher's location in the research affects of what is normal gave me one perspective and that had changed to something closer to an independent scholar. This might have affected my changing conception of normality in this research. As a Ugandan development worker, I was conscious of the implications of my research for the development business. I was concerned in the early stages to the extent to which the research subjects would view me as a researcher. Instead I felt that they would view me as an international NGO Uganda staff, appraising their work and feared this might affect their access to financial and technical support from this NGO. I also became anxious about my 'objectivity' or lack of it, taking into account the fact that I had been an active participant of the 'architectures' of some of the programmes I was now researching.

Many researchers and respondents have commented that research can be especially stressful (Maynard, 1994:17; Luff, 1999:695). The magnitude of conducting doctoral research caused me stress at the personal and professional level and the magnitude of the costs (financial and non-financial) of undertaking such an undertaking certainly did not seem normal to me. Until recently, it has not been a major role of African scholars to critique development processes and as an independent scholar, critiquing

processes that I am a part of[5] was not easy. At the beginning of the research, I wondered how I would manage the research process without trespassing boundaries at both institutional and personal level. What would be the role of my sponsors and employers? What were their expectations of the research? Discussing problems of research sponsorship, Robson states that:

> … the powerful influence virtually all aspects of the research process from the choice of the research topic (controlled by which projects gets funding or other resources) to the publication of findings (Robson, 2002:73).

Through explicit or implicit means, sponsors can expect particular type of results (Warwick, 1998). During the early stages of this research, I was asked to clarify the benefits of my research for policy. By the middle of my studies, my sponsors terminated their sponsorship and as I looked for independent resources to complete the research, it seemed the disengagement of my sponsors could free me from certain rather narrow expectations of policy 'results' or 'lessons'. In ethical terms, my room for maneuver increased as the urgency of completing my studies and moving on professionally intensified. Being freed from my previous institutional affiliation from the international NGO was also disorienting.

The informal nature of the interviews and the fact that I knew most of the research participants in the NGOs enabled me to gain a lot of information that was useful. However, the question was how to distinguish what the respondents were telling me in their individual capacity versus their capacity as representatives of their own organizations. At times they shared information that was useful to the study but, I could not be sure what the implications of writing this information would be for their personal interests and identities. Some scholars (Cotterill and Letherby, 1994; Letherby, 2003) have problematised the implications of researching people close to us, especially friends and relatives. It has been found that it is often difficult to establish the boundaries of the research in terms of what constitutes data in such a relationship.

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[5] More often development knowledge in form of solutions to development problems has been given to Africa of which appreciation rather than critical engagement with such knowledge is expected from Africans

Informal research relationship may cause tension due to the mistaken assumptions of both the researchers and the researched. Questions of probing research subjects may seem 'artificial naivety' and this can limit the researcher's willingness to critically engage with them. On the other hand the desire to cooperate may lead to over exposure of oneself on the part of the research subject (Letherby, 2003: 126).

It was often tricky to know what to with the sensitive information I was provided with by research subjects I knew well. Were they hoping to use me as a conduit to pass on their dissatisfactions to others? When it came to situations where the research subjects seemed to view me as a counselor I did not know what to do, since:

> …respondents may feel patronized if they sense that the researcher is taking on the role of counselor…but it is still likely that when a respondent gets upset the researcher may be left wondering if they handled things in the right way (ibid.:127).

Managing my informal relationships with most of the subjects I had worked with before became critical to the success of this research. I did this by making appointments with them in advance to explain the purpose of our meeting. In order to reduce mistrust or lower expectations, I worked closely with the personnel of the gender focused NGOs under study to implement the research. They acted as interpreters, advisors, and facilitators. In other words, the research had elements of action research. It is argued that action research privileges the world-view of the researched community and it provides the researcher with valuable insights into locally diverse relations and thus understanding of the research subjects' positions (Amina, 2000: 188). However one needs to be careful in asserting that the views of the researched prevailed. Other factors come into play including issues of class, and ethnicity. After all:

> What counts as evidence? It is commonly understood that personal testimony (emic data) may be unreliable; there is the issue, of subjectivity, of perspective, of lack of insight, even of deceit. Yet even purely objective, researcher–based analysis (etic) may suffer from ethnocentrism or over simplification, and even with physical evidence the problem of interpretation remains (Ruth, 1980:189).

Some third world feminist have critiqued Western feminist scholarship of reinforcing "Western cultural imperialism" (Mohanty, 1991:73). Some third world women have felt to be under pressure to adopt beliefs of western women regarded as more advanced, more empowering and generally worth copying (Kabeer, 1995; Mohanty, 1991; Lal, 1999). Feminist research has raised some critical questions related to definition, power, context, location and reliability of the knowledge produced (Mohanty, 1991; Lal, 1999; Amadiume, 1997; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Kabeer, 1995). Perhaps the most important of these is the question of power differentials between the researched and researcher, which is hereby explored in the section that follows.

1.3.2   Power Relations and the Question of Location

Any feminist researcher needs to recognise the effect of power differences (irrespective of sex) between the researcher and the researched on the research process and its findings. Ideological beliefs as well as race, class, and culture influence the extent to which I can claim location on the same critical plane as the researched (Riesman, 1987; Luff, 1999). Such differences may prevent collaboration between researchers and the researched. Positivism may be a problem but so may alternative necessarily research frameworks (Wolf, 1996:5).

My experience was that it was easier working with women and men with whom we shared a similar background in the NGO sector or government technical staff than working with grassroots women and men. Relationships with elite women, irrespective of the sector or their understanding, identification or appreciation of gender work in Uganda, were more relaxed, in-depth and seemed to be more meaningful to both the researcher and the researched. The discussions with elite men were also mostly in-depth, fairly relaxed with moments of tension where the research touched on gender relations. Discussions with seemed to demonstrate a pattern in which men seemed to dwell on reiterating the socioeconomic cultural justifications for the social status quo and the problems these posed for change. The experiences in this respect tally with those of Luff (1996) who through her research experience with the

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British Women of the Lobby worked mostly with older middle-class women, accustomed to public speaking and on familiar verbal territory in the interviews (1996: 41). Power in such cases is relatively evenly distributed in the relationship; communication becomes a two- way process (Luff, 1996; Brannen, 1988: 554). Negotiation and development tend to enhance the usefulness of such interviews (Luff, 1999; Roseneil, 1993).

Whereas I felt as an insider undertaking research with the staff of the NGOs, I felt more as an outsider researching with the women and men at the grassroots level. As an elite woman in the Ugandan context, there were communication difficulties with the women at the grassroots level and I cannot claim I was able to overcome our class differences. I tried my best to bridge the gap between us in a search to understand their worldview. For example, during the single sex focus group discussions, women complained about men's control that denied them the opportunity to own land. However, when it came to the mixed group discussions, some women justified men's control of women by saying that men bring women into their (men's) houses, and they pay bride price. I felt this justification was a façade, intended to overcome ostracism from the male counterparts. I had hoped women only group discussions might give the women power, a group voice in mixed focus group discussion. However, it came as a surprise that the women changed their position during the mixed group discussions. I was not able to resolve this tension, as the women were not treating me as an insider. My experiences show that even with a gender sensitive research process, precautions need to be taken to ensure that men and women's interests are articulated, through having mixed forums and private spaces for women and men (Murthy, 1998; Cornwall, 1998; Guijt and Shah, 1998). Even so, it needs to be recognised that deeply embedded power inequalities can prevent poorer women from making their views known in mixed public forums.

Another example of the limitations of my insider location within the research was when during the mixed group discussions in Kapchorwa a man tried to justify men exclusive ownership of property including land. Interestingly, the other men booed

and stopped him. They also advised me to ignore what he was saying, saying he was drunk and was speaking under the influence of alcohol. This brought home that men like women were not willing to openly deal with gender issues in front of me. Later on the interpreter told me that the male participants did not want me to have a bad image of the men in the community as oppressors of women. My interpreters, who happened to be men and also in charge of the project, may have helped me to access the community and understand the research context from a male world view; they could not overcome the communication barriers that arose from inequality between me and the village men and women. The participants in turn had their own interests that affected our ability to be on 'the same critical plane'. The interpreters seemed careful to interpret what the community people said. At times when the participants giggled, I would realize that there is a gap in the information that they were sharing with me and I would seek for some clarification. Language barriers made me an outsider and visitor to their community. Giving a good impression and serious impression to the visitor was treated as important. One male research participant asked me where I came from[6] reminding me that as a visitor, the participants become calculative in what they told me. These kinds of issues complicate making conclusions based on limited stays, with language barriers and limited practical experiences of the culture of the areas under study (Warwick, 1998; Mikkelsen, 2005; Abbot, 1998).

Being on the same critical plane as the research subjects was also complicated by the fact that I had come with the staff of the NGO. The image of this NGO was as important to participants as to the organization itself and community leaders (who were also participants) received allowances for attending meetings. Being seen to be collaborating with this organization as representatives of the community also enhanced their identities within the community. By providing leaders with training and exposure visits on a regular basis, NGOs can make these leaders knowledgeable in comparison to other men and women within the community. The desire to make the research participatory thus posed another set of ethical dilemmas including the selection of the research team, and control of the project (I did not select the

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[6] He was asking about my ethnic group

communities to visit; they were decided by the organizations under study including the persons to be interviewed). Thus, increased involvement of research subjects does not necessarily balance the power relations in the research process. This is because:

> "…inequalities cannot necessarily be addressed through use of participatory research methods"…There are no guarantees that empowering outcomes will be obtained" (Mayoux and Johnson, 1998: 163).

My experience in this research concurs thus in some important ways with the view expressed by other researchers that "whatever our involvement with the issue and the respondents, at some level we remain 'outsiders': strangers" (Letherby, 2003: 130). In Kapchorwa communication boundaries that I was aware of and not necessarily agreed upon, seemed to be understood by all research subjects. My various identities including gender, ethnicity[7], education, association with the NGO and, language affected my perception, rapport and ability to be on a par in terms of engagement with the research subjects (Abott, 1998; Edwards and Mauthner, 2002; Letherby, 2003). It was important to realize that being on the same critical plane as the researched is not always possible.

My research experiences thus show how power dynamics can influence the relationship between the researcher and the researched both positively and otherwise. Being on the same 'critical plane' as the researched is desirable but not always possible (Letherby, 2003: 131). Thus, it can be said that "it is by listening and learning from other people's experiences that the researcher can learn that 'the truth' is not the same for everyone" (Temple, 1997: 5.2). This was true for the men and women in the NGOs and the where truth for women was clearly different from that of men and public truths diverged from private views or opinions.

Constant vigilance was needed during fieldwork to understand the research subjects meaning of our social world even though it might have been expressed in ways very different and at sometimes very 'distant' from my own understanding. The process of

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[7] I am a Muganda a dominant ethnic group in Uganda. Its dominance is at times resented by other ethnic groups and at times this resentment presents itself in the nurtured relationships and communication.

understanding this truth may call for some pretence on the part of the researcher as shown in my experience in Kapchworwa. Being non-judgmental even when I did not agree with some of the views expressed was important. Thus, while I felt that the community approach to gender issues reinforces gender inequalities, rather than challenging the people in the focus group discussions, I chose to listen and encourage dialogue (acting like an outsider).

I tried to relate with the participants in ways that would not alienate me or affect our rapport. My past experiences, as a development worker in rural areas was useful. I sat on the ground with the women even when chairs were provided to me as a visitor. I was able to do this without appearing to refuse hospitality that is offensive. Ethical decisions were thus flexibly adjusted on the basis of continuous reflection according to the expectations of the research subjects and my "relationships to those that are party to the research process" (May, 1993:43). In such a model, "…the rightness or wrongness of actions is judged by universalistic cost benefit pragmatism" (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002: 19).

1.4 Transforming Gender Relations

This brings us to the third factor, listed at the beginning of section 1.1 of this paper, of what has been argued to be distinctive about feminist social research. It is claimed that feminist research is carried out for women with the aim of transforming society to overcome patriarchy and ensure equality (Harding, 1987; Maynard and Purvis, 1994; Letherby, 2003; Roseneil, 1993). The idea is that this kind of research can: "… contribute to the understanding of women's oppression and to further the struggle for women's liberation" (Roseneil, 1993). This is in a bid to overcome the historical mistakes in which, "the questions about women that men have wanted answered have all too often arisen from desires to pacify, control, exploit or manipulate women" (Harding, 1987: 8).

The focus of feminism is on women's status, that is, women's place and power; and the roles and positions that women hold in society in comparison with those of men. Men have had an advantage due to the fact that knowledge was constructed in their

favour in the first place (Kelly-Godol, 1987). Feminist research has a value judgment and a political agenda, transforming society for women's sake or empowerment (Cook and Fonow, 1986; Hammersley, 1995).

The role of feminist research in feminism is to contribute to the production of knowledge by women for women and about women with the hope that such knowledge will directly contribute to the transformation of their lives. Due to the transformative aim of feminist research, the people being researched are very important as subjects rather than simply as objects of the research, "it is the relevances of the women's place that govern" (ibid.). In other words, women are supposed to be fully involved in the research. Feminist research gives women the opportunity to explore and construct their own investigation as a result of their engagement with the research and the researcher's ideas (Roseneil, 1993: 180).

My experiences showed the need for caution concerning the whole notion that 'it is women who govern' and that the research is for 'women'. It is important to move beyond making social science issues relevant to the world of women by addressing what has been overlooked. This is a mere extension of the existing social science procedures with women's issues as addendum.

> The world as it is constituted by men stands in authority over that of women. The effect of the second interacting with the first is to impose concepts and terms in which the world of men is thought as the concepts in which women must think their world. Hence, in these terms women are alienated from their experience (Smith, 1987: 86).

It is on these grounds that men, like women, need transformation because addressing women only will not address the problem of women's exclusion. It is apparent that "the institutions that lock" social sciences "into structures occupied by men are the same institutions that lock women into the situations in which they find themselves oppressed" (ibid.). I realised that addressing the world of women does not analyze the relationship between the two worlds. Studying worlds involving only women may systematically prevent the eliciting of certain kinds of information yet this

undiscovered information may be precisely the most important for explaining the phenomena being studied especially in relation to gender.

Even casual actions could seem quite significant to the researcher. Methodological assumptions that limit the focus on women may affect the researcher's visions and produce questionable findings. Arguments about men's limitations in identifying with feminist research subjects (Millman and Kantar, 1987) may ignore the limitations of women researchers. In my case, having a male interpreter who worked for an NGO embedded in the community enriched my understanding of the men's world. In order to address the men's world that may be negatively affecting women, it may be relevant to have a man do the research in a bid to change the status quo in favour of women.

In taking on a transformative character, feminist research in this case becomes closely associated with critical theory because transformation based on self reflection nurtured through "intersubjective social action" is an important component of the foundations of critical theory (Rasmussen, 1996: 19). However there is need for precaution in the transformative claims of feminist research. It is difficult to know if transformation has taken place as a result of the application of any particular feminist research principles. Based on their understanding of the research, the subjects directed me to the persons they felt had the relevant knowledge leading to the adoption of the snowball sampling method. Though the participants were engaged in the research, it is not clear the extent to which one can claim that they were transformed. This is because it is difficult to provide clear answers to questions such as what is transformation and when and how can it be claimed that transformation has occurred?

My experiences clearly showed that the researchers possess the power to "define and redefine" the role of the researched (Letherby, 2003) based on their conceptual and experiential understanding of the research context (Hammersley, 1995). Specifically, the assertion that the aim of feminist research is to address and improve women's status in relation to men raises some ethical and definitional issues. If it is a question of inequality, what does inequality mean? If there is inequality in power, then is it

political or personal power or both? If it is about status, what constitutes status? If it is about subordination, what is meant by subordination and how can we address subordination across cultures or even within one national culture but with several sub-cultures, in the case of Uganda? Use of the researcher's experiences may limit ability to contest or notice certain important effects beyond the parameters of the frames of reference of our worldview (Scott, 1999). This means the researcher who provides meaning to the concepts used in the research is as important as the output from the research because meaning is contextual and contestable. This can be contrasted with the 'instrumental reason' of Horkheimer and Weber, who describe it as: "…purposive rational action. Reason, devoid of its redemptive and reconciliatory possibilities, could only be purposive, useful and calculating" (Rasmussen, 1996: 22).

Thought is here seen to be for selfish reasons, 'self preservation' and not necessarily redemption of the unprivileged. "Reason under the image of self preservation can only function for the purposes of domination" (ibid: 27). For example discussions on third world women and development policies by Western feminist researchers can at times be about social control. The same can be said of the relations of Ugandan elite women with those at the grassroots, where control is often exercised in similar ways. The politics of self and identity constantly complicate feminist research. Being on the 'same critical plane' as the researched, reflexivity and claims of transforming the lives of women may be specifically for selfish reasons. Such reasons could include access to financial resources, academic and self gratification or making others take on your world-view and not necessarily for the benefit of the participants or in tune with their interpretation of their social world (Mikkelsen, 2005).

Most often the notion of transformation as defined by the researcher is different from that of the research subject. Race, ethnicity, class and power relations complicate the possibilities of exploration of the research at the same level with the research subjects (Lal, 1999; Letherby, 2003; Roseneil, 1993; Luff, 1996). There can be "multiple meanings of the discipline of self and the institutional repression of the subject" (Rasmussen, 1996: 27) due to the multiple identities and interests within the research thus reducing the claims of the subjective nature of feminist research.

For all these reasons, it is important to subject self-reflection and transformation to criticism. In this context: "…critical theory could be legitimated on the basis of making apparent the undisclosed association between knowledge and interest" (Rasmussen, 1996: 31). Nonetheless self-declaration can assist us in understanding the relationship between knowledge, interests and power (Rasmussen, 1996; Foucault, 1982). The non-instrumental claims of communicative actions are subject to debate unless there exists as Rasmussen states, "a contra-factual communicative community which is by nature predisposed to refrain from instrumental forms of domination" (Rasmussen, 1996: 36).

It is the political nature of feminist research that demonstrates the complex presence or absence of restraint from relations of domination and control. The aim of feminist research is about political struggle to liberate women across and within all social strata. On the other hand, complex debates over what constitutes feminist research and the tensions in the ideological underpinnings of feminist research make it difficult at times to understand the political aims of feminist research.

This paper has highlighted conflicts over meanings and communication of feminist interests. During fieldwork, it was observed that grassroots women in the districts under study wanted to overcome their barriers to ownership of household property to be like their male counterparts. However unlike the elite women who openly articulate their feminist interests and do not mind the radical changes, partly due to instrumental reasons (interests), the peasant women prefer to deal with these issues in a less confrontational manner. Grassroots women fear being subjected to ostracism in their social groupings (such as family, clan, church etc). Social groups perceived to be patriarchal sources of women's subordination by both the elite and non-elite women, also act as social welfare securities and thus are of great importance to these women's daily survival (Kabeer, 1999; Tripp, 1994). The elite women have an individualist approach to life because they have incomes and their survival is less dependent on these social groupings. This feminist methodology shows that human relationships are relations of power. Thus,

> "What is needed is a radical reconsideration, not of science alone but the knowing individual as such… Critical thinking is neither the function of the isolated individual nor a sum total of individuals. Its subject is rather a definite individual in his relation to other individuals and groups, in his conflict with a particular class, and finally, in the resultant web of relationships with the social totality and with nature (Horkheimer, 1972: 199-211).

This means that there is need to link the research, the researcher and the research subjects within the micro-macro context, something that I attempted to do (Lal, 1999). When a researcher finds herself in situations where her understanding and interpretations of women's accounts is either not shared by the women, or represents a challenge to their perceptions, the question is how to respond (Kelly, Burton and Linda, 1994: 37). The management of this situation, while ensuring trust and achieving acceptance, can raise ethical issues. I found myself holding back my feminist thoughts on several occasions for fear of offending the research subjects (especially men) or obstructing their active participation.

My experiences are similar to those of other researchers. In her study of Women of the Lobby with different ideological beliefs on feminism, Luff nodded her head and seemed to have agreed to issues that she disagreed with. She found her research falling between covert and overt research (Luff, 1996). In order not to compromise the research project, she was careful in her communication. In the case of my research sympathetic tones, 'yee' or hmmm, signs of listening in the Ugandan context or smiles might inaccurately have conveyed agreement, with the views of the research subjects (Herman, 1993:15, Herman, 1994). I found myself confronted with the situation in which I pretended that it was okay to be sarcastic about gender issues. In reality, I felt so sad and uncomfortable that although huge investments have been made to foster gender equity and equality, most men did not take these issues seriously. The men hardly relate to gender inequalities experienced by women within their communities. Women are viewed as no more than children or as extensions of men's household property, resources for men's self gratification.

The learning from all this is that alongside the search for 'truth' a great deal of tact and diplomacy is necessary and important (Luff, 1999).

> If we are to be truly open to what our research subjects tell us we must be willing to read against the grain and yet within the larger contexts that situate their responses… incorporate(s) research subjects' voices…engage (d) in a mutual though unequal, power charged social relation of conversation…Erasing the boundaries between theory, methodology and political practice (Lal, 1999:118-123)

On the basis of my experiences, it can be said that while recognizing the methodological concerns and transformative aims of feminist research, a process approach may be useful in terms of the design of the research. Research methods can be reflexively adapted to the research context. In this case, the research participants subjectively explore the study with the researcher and are in position of providing their own understanding of gender issues rather than imposing them on the researcher's own variety of feminist beliefs and transformative aims. The researcher's location within the research and thus relationship and level of interaction with the research subjects can be adapted, depending on the context, to make optimal use of the multiple identities.

1.5 Lessons from applying the feminist Research methodology

There are a number of methodological considerations that can be deduced from this paper. The first insight is that the context, the actions and indeed the identity and experiences of the researcher are important to the extent that they are bound to affect the knowledge produced by the researcher. Knowledge of the research context is critical:

> At the most general level, interviewers must have some basic knowledge of the structure of social relationships and the complex of underlying cultural meaning in the society in which they are working (Davies, 1999:108).

The second point is that having an identity similar to that of the research subjects may help the researcher to access certain types of knowledge. Being an insider, in this case a Ugandan at one level and having the identity of an active participant in Ugandan

NGO work enabled me to have access to most of the informal discussions beyond the interviews. This proved to be more valuable in understanding some of the issues that were unclear during interviews. This enabled me to get an in-depth understanding of the research subject's perspectives and to more firmly establish the various perspectives on the data already collected. A checklist of themes helped me ensure that specific concerns in the conversation were not lost, and that focus remained around critical questions central to the research.

Thirdly, the researcher's identity cannot be identical to those being researched. Identities like human relationships change depending on the changing context or even within the same context. Feminist research shows that within limits, it is possible for the researcher to work towards reducing the differences between her and those she is researching. However it may be somewhat simplistic to imagine that relations of same location can be established, even within a non-hierarchical research process. This is because there are so many factors beyond gender differences that will affect our world-views.

The fourth and final insight is that theory and practice need to closely linked when it comes to undertaking critical feminist research. "The thinker must relate all the theories which are proposed to the practical attitudes and social strata which they reflect" (Horkheimer, 1972: 232). Implied in the tenets of critical theory and also in the principles of feminist research is the idea that theories and practices of social justice are closely related. This idea is clearly articulated by feminist researchers when they claim that their aim is to overcome the distortions of traditional research undertaken on the basis of men's experiences alone and with relatively limited flexibility in the research methods adopted. Critical feminist research methodology proved useful for another reason. Through listening and engaging in dialogue with the research subjects, it was possible to gain deeper insight into their experiences and the meaning of such experiences. By making it possible to build into this research the various perspectives of those being researched, as well as the researcher herself, a more realistic understanding of the subjectively and reflexively held forms of knowledge of people involved in gender focused advocacy in Uganda was possible.

1.6 Conclusion

From the discussion in this paper, it has emerged that a number of contradictions are embedded within the principles of feminist research and critical theory, contradictions that the researcher cannot easily overcome. What is important is not so much positioning oneself as a feminist or critical theorist, but being able to use a methodology that can tackle complex insider/outsider knowledge issues, and is flexible enough to be adapted to specific research contexts. Finding this kind of methodology is critical if the researcher is to engage creatively with subjects in the research process. Such an approach undoubtedly helps the researcher to include in the research both her own experiences and those of the research subjects. The insider/outsider dilemma is useful, not only in generating data from the perspectives of the research subjects, but also in providing a means of analysing this data. I undertook my research on the basis that greater reflexivity on the part of the researcher and the research subjects could lead to more meaningful advocacy processes on gender issues. The hope was that this would be of some benefit to grassroots communities, where gender inequalities continue to be one of the major structural causes of poverty.

Perhaps the most important insight in this paper has been that human relationships are invariably relations of power. In order to understand how relationships work, we may therefore need to go beyond the public, formal interests and relationships that people and organisations have with one another, to uncover the more informal and sometimes hidden webs of relations and interests.

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