



The Planning and Practice of Feminist Fieldwork Methodologies in Conflict and Post-Conflict Contexts

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Abstract

This case draws lessons from feminist fieldwork methodologies in three West African countries to inform the study of international relations. It uses the implementation of the UN Security Council's Women, Peace, and Security agenda to examine the meanings of peace and security for women and how women's local activism works with national governments and international agendas. This case study demonstrates that feminist-driven field research is a valuable research methodology in that it is, at its core, highly reflexive. One of the benefits of using feminist fieldwork practices to study the impacts of international policies is that the researcher is continually working to avoid exploitation and the pretense of objectivity. In particular, this case explores how researchers and participants in conflict and post-conflict contexts can share knowledge and mobilize collectively, as well as how researchers can understand their data relationally across sites and crises.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Explain the key principles of feminist fieldwork methodologies
 - Recognize how their subjectivity can change what they observe in their field research
 - Develop a methodology that accounts for subjectivity, reflexivity, and ethics when working with human participants
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Project Overview and Context

How are women's experiences different from men's experiences? How do international policies reflect certain men's experiences, and how do women adapt these policies to their own experiences? I've thought about these questions for years, and they guided my political thinking throughout my research process. My earlier research had explored theories of language and discourses that are used in international relations and how assumptions about gender shape the very words we use to describe politics and security. For this project, I wanted to ask whether policy language matters to the policy's implementation.

One of the more recent policies addressing women that has been acclaimed as transformative is the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. This resolution, passed in October 2000, was the first time that the UN Security Council had fully engaged with ideas of women's peace and security, and it called for women's increased participation in initiatives to prevent and resolve conflict, as well as their protection during conflict and post-conflict situations. This resolution, along with seven subsequent Security Council resolutions, is collectively known as the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. Feminist scholars have documented how the language of the WPS agenda simultaneously valorizes women as peacebuilders—the glue that holds

communities together—and positions them as victims, forever at risk. Less research has been conducted about the implementation of the resolution through National Action Plans (NAPs), especially in the Global South. I determined that conducting fieldwork, especially interviews and participant observation, could reveal how this language influences the policy implementation process.

As a methodology in political science and international relations, “fieldwork” can take a number of different forms, from a densely scheduled, in-and-out few days; to hiring local survey staff to collect large amounts of data over a fairly short period; to spending weeks or months learning about the specific context. Methodologies are driven by the research questions as well as the funding available. My developing research was about context and language in interpreting and implementing policy, so my goal was to live in the region I wanted to study. That way, I could contextualize interviews, tease out meanings, and more deeply understand the political and social situations into which international policies were being applied.

I wanted to understand how *international* peace and security policy is implemented at a *national* level and becomes the work of implementing organizations at a *local* level, as well as how local implementing organizations in post-conflict contexts incorporate and push back against international policies. My project probed how local and regional women’s non-governmental organizations (NGOs) translate and localize international agendas and work with local women to achieve peace and security. I asked whether local NGOs working on women’s security prioritize their goals the same way that national governments and the international community define them and, further, how these NGOs manage their advocacy work. I embedded my research in feminist international relations scholarship, and I cultivated a corresponding feminist methodology for my fieldwork.

Case Selection

Choosing a research site is a matter of both scholarly and practical considerations. Even before I had finalized my topic, I investigated research funding to judge whether I could answer my research questions with the time and money available for fieldwork. West Africa topped my list of where to research women’s NGOs in post-conflict contexts; the region had seen several civil wars in the prior two decades, and several of the countries had also developed NAPs to implement the WPS agenda.

If research factors determined the region I would study, funding determined the country. I received a 9-month U.S. Student Fulbright Fellowship to conduct research in Côte d’Ivoire during the 2014–2015 academic year. As I had noted in my Fulbright application, the country was the first African country and the first post-conflict country to establish an NAP to implement the WPS resolutions. In contrast to its neighbors, Sierra Leone and Liberia, Côte d’Ivoire did not receive the same level of international attention during the conflicts, nor did it receive the vast amounts of humanitarian assistance in the post-conflict peacebuilding period.

Midway through my fieldwork in Côte d’Ivoire, I explored other funding opportunities that would allow me to provide a well-rounded perspective on the phenomenon of women’s organizing around security. In 2016, I

was awarded a National Science Foundation grant sponsored by the U.S. government to, in short, make the feminist argument that context matters. Fresh off my findings from Côte d'Ivoire, I conducted six more months of fieldwork in the bordering countries of Guinea and Mali. Each had similarities with and differences from Côte d'Ivoire. All three had similar cultural contexts and political histories, and each had developed NAPs for the WPS agenda. By contrast, Côte d'Ivoire's civil war was largely over, while Mali's was ongoing, and Guinea held long-simmering ethnic tensions but had not seen large-scale conflict. I wanted to use the similarities and differences between the countries to make meaning of women's experiences and activities that foster security.

Research Design

I chose to focus my research on local women's organizations working on peace and security because women have been largely excluded from formal peacebuilding processes. Women in post-conflict contexts often act as bridge-builders between their local communities and policymakers. Facing male-dominated political processes, many women instead work through civil society—in the company of international organizations and transnational NGOs—to set security and peacebuilding priorities for women. Therefore, exploring local understandings and practices could explain how the WPS agenda is actually implemented and the factors that comprise the implementation.

I entered this project already a feminist but not really knowing what it meant to do feminist research. Two books guided my process of both honing my research question and thinking through what it means to design and carry out feminist research. The first, *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*, is an edited volume by Brooke Ackerly, Maria Stern, and Jacqui True (2006) that offers theoretical discussions on the basis of feminist methodologies as well as case studies from a number of feminist international relations scholars. The second, *Doing Feminist Research in Political and Social Science*, by Ackerly and True (2010), explicitly guides readers through the research design process with a feminist eye to the social world. Both became bibles for me in the early stages of my project, but neither provided real details on what feminist fieldwork would actually look like.

Designing my research project was an exercise in asking myself feminist questions every step along the way, especially the question that started this case study: How are women's experiences different from men's experiences? And by extension, how can the way I conduct my research best reflect women's experiences? Even though my project focused on women, feminist methodologies do not simply incorporate gender. They privilege subjectivity (the identities that shape the way someone sees the world and interacts with it) and reflexivity (self-reflection on one's own assumptions in the choice of research questions and methods) while avoiding exploitation to the furthest extent possible. In her study of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Catia Cecilia Confortini (2012) notes that one of the key features of feminist methodologies is that they also allow for the potential for meaningful engagement and empowering women.

To research the implementation of the WPS agenda, I attempted to incorporate all these insights from feminist

methodologies but focused on three:

1. Reflexivity in my own research process;
2. Sharing knowledge and mobilizing collectively; and
3. Understanding data relationally across organizations, sites, and crises.

First and foremost, incorporating reflexivity pushed me to account for how my identity as a White, female, American researcher would influence how research participants responded to my presence and my questions. Although it was not apparent while developing the research design but in the research process itself, being reflexive about my subjectivity meant that different participants would respond to me differently, depending on their own subjectivity.

The second insight, seeing my research as a group effort rather than my sole work, ultimately revealed a key aspect of what I was researching. My interview participants and I co-developed a body of knowledge about the language of the resolutions, the limits of activism, and the practices of related local organizations. With my expertise in feminist theory and deep knowledge of each of the resolutions in the WPS agenda alongside my respondents' extensive practices of implementing processes and programs, we unpacked possibilities of ideal implementation and how the national governments might better support women. This process helped me see that collective mobilizing was central to the work of these women and that collaboration between civil society groups was vital to their success.

Finally, I focused on relationality between crises and contexts, between ideas and experiences, echoing what the women's organizations were doing in their work. This happened both within each country (What were different organizations doing? Did priorities change relative to the level of support from the United Nations, transnational NGOs, or national governments?) and between the countries (How did a country's relationship with the United Nations change how women's activism was perceived? What techniques were used that other organizations could learn?). I pushed myself to consider the effects of actors on one another and the relationship between theories and practices. Because I was ultimately examining an *international* phenomenon, I wanted to know whether and how patterns of security and peacebuilding concerning women were replicated in multiple countries.

Research Practicalities

A research project of any size requires planning and organization. One with fieldwork demands even more, and because feminist research involves a high degree of reflexivity, having plans and contingency plans is important. I pushed myself to think beyond the requirements of the university's ethics board to consider the content of my questions through an ethical and reflexive lens. What did it mean that I was asking these questions from my own identity, and how they might respond from theirs? What would happen if I didn't get answers I expected to hear or that didn't really answer my questions? What would that tell me? How would I "avoid exploitation," an important feature of feminist research, even though I was asking questions for a

project that would not directly benefit them? What could make my work valuable to my participants, if not pay them back? These questions whirled through my mind as I was planning the research and thus planted the seeds of anxiety.

One foremost concern was how to contact local women's organizations and how to gain their trust. Through some pre-dissertation work at an internship in a regional office of UN Women, I had contact information for several organizations in Côte d'Ivoire. When applying for the Fulbright Fellowship prior to my fieldwork, I cold-emailed these organizations a summary of my research and asked whether I could work with the organization and attend some of their meetings and training sessions. I noted that I would be self-funded and required no resources apart from their accommodation of my observations and questions. My academic advisor also provided a formal letter to assure these contacts that my university supported my project and that I was not requesting financial support.

Thinking through potential objections (or worse, dismissals) of my requests was one of the first points of feminist fieldwork methodologies in action. First, even though I knew that many of the individuals I was contacting were fluent in English, I wrote to all of them in French, as French is the official language of each of the countries I was studying. Furthermore, I did not want to just "take" from these organizations, so in exchange for observing their work, I offered my assistance as a native English speaker with a background in writing reports and promotional materials for NGOs and UN agencies. Making these efforts in introducing myself was a practice of reflexivity as well as knowledge sharing, recognizing my positionality and explicitly noting it to establish a relationship.

My two planned methods of collecting data during fieldwork were interviews and participant observation. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to start with a set of questions and then follow wherever our conversation went. The standard questions asked how the organizations worked on the WPS agenda, what types of security were most important to them, and about their relationships with other local organization and with donor NGOs and governments. I also interviewed national government officials and UN representatives about how they relate to and support local women's organizations in peacebuilding. With the feminist insight of understanding data relationally, I could link the organizations and offices beyond their stated intents, highlighting their interconnectedness, which influenced the questions I asked and the conclusions I drew in my data analysis.

In addition, I wanted to conduct participant observation at the local women's organizations to gain insight into the strategies that they employed in their communities. Participant observation allows researchers to take first-person notes of interactions, discussions, tensions, and agreements. It allowed me to see how local contexts are important to the understanding of women's individual and collective experiences of security and activism, not just how the more elite women leading the organizations would describe them. The organizations' various activities, including organizational meetings, training workshops, and donor evaluations, showed me the varying priorities involved in implementing the WPS agenda.

Now, an admission. I thought my French skills were adequate when I planned my fieldwork. They weren't.

While I could research potential co-participants and write formal emails to introduce myself, I struggled with professional conversations, much less the participant observation with interjections, overlapping speech, and informal vocabulary. This terrified me. When I first arrived in Côte d'Ivoire, I could perform daily activities, but I was a long way from doing what I had gone there to do. This terrified me. If my language skills weren't strong enough, then what was I even doing? By focusing on the technicalities of my research design, I overlooked a basic principle of reflexivity—understanding my limitations. I lost confidence in my entire project, both in the quality of it and in my own ability to carry it out. I had successfully fooled everyone, I thought, and soon everyone would see what a disaster everything was.

Someone suggested that I hire a French tutor, an Ivorian one, to help my comprehension and speaking fluency in professional conversations. Charles and I met twice a week for 4 months, discussing the history, culture, and politics of Côte d'Ivoire. Not only did these conversations quickly bring my language skills up to the necessary level, but they provided me a background on the country that I couldn't have learned through reading academic and policy texts. Working with Charles and engaging in deliberate conversations with people I met in my daily activities boosted my confidence to carry out my research, both the professional interviews and the participant observation. Learning the Ivorian dialect and colloquialisms in fact established me as slightly less of an outsider, or perhaps a more sympathetic one, because I could occasionally catch or make jokes that native European French speakers would miss.

As my confidence and contacts list grew, I asked friends of friends for recommendations of who I could talk to for my research. I approached the U.S. embassy in each country to ask for their recommendations. My formal and informal networks expanded quickly and began to include official government and UN representatives, though those interviews were more difficult to arrange. But many of the women in civil society had developed close relationships with certain officeholders and connected me in fortuitous ways. Keeping reflexivity and relationality at the forefront of my research process brought about good results throughout my fieldwork.

For example, in one of my research sites, about midway through fieldwork, I had easily connected with multiple representatives of women's organizations, but I could not find the contact information for the Ministry of Women in the national government. At the end of one interview, the NGO representative asked whether I had spoken with the Ministry of Women and subsequently texted my contact information to someone to set up an appointment with me. I was thrilled with her generosity and thanked her as she assured me that the ministry would respond soon. About 2 hours later, while I was alone in a noisy café for lunch, I received a phone call. The noise was such that I missed the first few sentences except for the detail that it was someone from the Ministry of Women. I made the appointment for the following morning (!) and politely asked whether the woman I was speaking to could repeat her name, as I had not heard it clearly. She gave me her name and her title as *the Minister of Women* just as I recognized who I was speaking with. In French, the word for "ministry" (a department of the government) is *ministère*, and the word for "minister" (the head of that department) is *ministre*. The woman on the phone was not just from the Ministry of Women, she was the head of it. After we concluded the call, I reflected that my French still had some gaps, but maybe this wasn't so bad: I would have been intimidated by the NGO representative who had connected us and nervous while

anticipating the phone call. Being a little clueless isn't always so bad.

Method in Action

When I started my fieldwork, I had prepared for months to consider feminist ethical issues. On the flight to Côte d'Ivoire, I made a pact with myself to not complain about my research or my life, to be open to whatever arose. I knew that the unexpected would happen, but I would not foreclose any possibilities. This way, the co-participants in my research and I could co-create knowledge. I would ask initial questions, and then I would allow them to steer the conversation. Instead of explicitly asking about priorities in their work, interviewees would thus reveal what they believed important.

Guides to feminist and interpretive methodologies note the importance of this technique, where researchers should follow their subjects to see what can be uncovered, rather than using a script to ask the same questions of each interviewee in the same order. I desperately wanted the people I worked with to speak to their priorities and to know that I did not assume that I was the hero in this project. My approach, then, was to not talk much, thinking that I should allow the participant to take charge of the conversation. This was also a piece of my hesitancy in French; I felt that my grammar mistakes were distracting and annoying. Quickly, however, I recognized that my belief that the co-creation of knowledge necessitated only my listening ear was misguided. While it was important to provide my interlocutors the space to speak their minds, most people also needed a structure, something to respond to; they were as keen as I was to give me something that I would find useful.

Furthermore, I realized that while they were experts in their countries and their organizations, I was an academic expert of the WPS agenda itself as well as the theoretical considerations that underlie the policies. As such, I shifted my understanding of the co-creation of knowledge to incorporate my own positionality. The interviews became conversations about policy and activism and women's needs and priorities rather than the extremes of a rigid Q&A or an unstructured testimonial. Although I still made sure not to interrupt or talk over someone—and I still cringe today when listening to my audio recordings—I increasingly felt more comfortable about participating in the interviews and engaging with the women I spoke with as peers with mutual interests, rather than as interviewer and interviewee. As my research continued over time, I was able to facilitate some of the knowledge sharing between organizations and across countries. With permission, I connected a few organizations so that they could learn from each other, and I was able to better understand the patterns that were emerging. By putting people in contact with each other, I was also putting my research data in deeper context, creating an interconnected web of people, organizations, countries, policies, and relationships.

Another example of shifting my perspective during fieldwork in response to what I learned happened in my use of certain terminology. I began the project by referring to all of the organizations I was studying as “non-governmental organizations,” no matter where they were based or which populations they served; as long as the organizations were not run by a government or corporation, I termed them an NGO. Yet, although all of the organizations I encountered were officially registered as NGOs (as far as I was able to assess),

the representatives from the women's organizations drew a distinction between transnational NGOs—those that are usually based in Europe or North America and that serve populations in multiple countries—and local women's organizations, which are usually more loosely formed and definitely more poorly funded. My original research goal was to center the efforts of the local actors rather than concentrating on international, external actors. I wanted to make these women's organizations the primary actors in my study and not use my assumptions and terminology as the default. Once again, reflexive attention to my research process revealed that my positionality as an American who foregrounded transnational actors had influenced the language I used. From then on, instead of pre-defined categories to frame my research, I used "local women's organizations" as distinct from transnational NGOs.

This feminist method of listening, co-researching, and letting interviewees define their terms furthered my research in countless ways. Over a total of 15 months of fieldwork in three West African countries, I saw how the conceptions of security put forth by local women's organizations often come into tension with the national governments' ideas of security as well as how women's organizations work with and push back against international and transnational discourses of African women. My field notes documented events and recorded a thick description of formal and informal language, actions, and interactions during interviews and participant observation. In another section of my notes, I reflected upon my interviews and observations, recording my interpretations and paying special attention to my subjectivity. This was the place where I wrote about my feelings so that I could improve my research process and as a way to make sense of the new information and cultural contexts that I was taking in daily. As much as I could, I explicitly noted the insights given by feminist methodologies: my reflexivity and positionality, the ways in which we co-created and shared knowledge, and how the data I was recording could relate to what I had previously learned. Having the immediate record of my interpretations of events was useful as time passed, and I moved to the analysis stage of my research.

Practical Lessons Learned

Mentors and friends had told me that fieldwork was hard and that I would make a lot of mistakes. But what they didn't tell me was how much the mistakes could be turned into opportunities. The most notable of this was in my French language skills and in my positionality as an American.

My second interview during fieldwork was the first one conducted fully in French, and I was nervous. I audio-recorded all my interviews, with the permission of the participants, explaining that it was for my comprehension. Midway through the interview, I asked the participant to repeat something that I didn't understand, apologizing for my poor French. Kindly, she restated the remark, assuring me that everything was fine, and I replied with a self-deprecating phrase. My French tutor had endeavored to teach me some Ivorian slang along with the accent and vocabulary, which I thought at the time was just an entertaining addition. It turns out that the phrase was very Ivorian, rarely used in Europe, and this interview participant said that I was becoming a "real Ivorian woman." Of course, I would always be a foreigner; however, I took her statement as a compliment, that in some way, by learning local vernacular, I related to Ivorian women better than if I

had spoken standard French. Even better, when I read the transcriptions of this interview months later, her repeated response was substantively different from her first response, which revealed a conceptual distinction that was fruitful for my research. I carried this lesson over to the other two countries later in my fieldwork; understanding aspects of each culture formed a basis of conversation beyond the research, and learning common local phrases became my way of surprising people.

In all of the countries I studied, but Guinea in particular, my obvious non-native French opened doors that might not have been available to me had I been a more “official” interlocutor. Guinea has a complicated relationship with its former colonizer, France, and anti-French sentiment is still widespread in the country. As a result, many of the participants in my research were more openly critical of France’s level of intervention with me, an American, and what that meant for Guinean politics and the potential for women’s security there. For many in Guinea and Mali, where French fluency is much less widespread than in Côte d’Ivoire, my language mistakes seemed to put others at ease; we could communicate but not get lost in complicated vocabulary or grammar. Furthermore, aspects of my identity did not matter in the same way to different people. Some people appeared more open to me because I was not French, while others disliked U.S. foreign policy and thus were suspicious about my intentions.

“Mistakes” like these became a way to endear myself to organizations and the people that worked with them. They became part of my subjectivity, an identity meant to say, “Hey, we’re all learning together, so let’s see if we can help each other.” They became part of my research project, as much as the actual questions I wanted to ask. My identity became an asset to my work, and doors opened to me to attend workshops, to accompany groups on site visits, and even to meet participants’ homes and families and interact with them as a colleague. This is not to idealize my interactions; I still understood that I was a foreigner and that there would always be things unknowable to me. But I became comfortable with who I was and the things I couldn’t change about myself—this helped me realize that my work was unique.

Conclusion

Feminist scholars in international relations and political science, especially Cynthia Enloe, ask us to look for who is *not* present in formal politics, who is (or is made to be) silent, whose priorities are being followed. This guided me to ask which voices were being prized and who was not being listened to in the implementation of the WPS agenda. I learned that reflexivity is key in this sort of research. Because I was asking about what security meant to women, I needed those women to define their own terms. Because our cultures are so different, I needed to acknowledge my own subjectivity.

The driving factor in my research was describing women’s priorities and how they constitute alternative forms of security, which would illustrate the mechanisms through which the WPS agenda is implemented. The final full project made three central arguments. The first is that the United Nations and transnational NGOs implement the WPS agenda differently, the former through the national governments and the latter directly to local women’s organizations, resulting in poorly coordinated directives. The second is that the WPS agenda

at the national level in each country might be part of official policy but is hardly put into practice; instead, the implementation just adds women into existing structures of power. Third, local women's organizations perform a pragmatic skepticism, working with myriad actors to achieve their own goals. With insights from African feminism and critical feminist peacebuilding literatures, my findings call into question the assumptions about women and their security policies in international policy implementation.

Research design and the actual research process is rarely straightforward; most research requires a back-and-forth between the questions and the availability of data to see what will work. On the surface, choosing a feminist fieldwork methodology seems to make the process even more difficult, because it's all about questioning your own research and your identity; however, it can also reveal aspects of the research that you didn't know were there. Feminist fieldwork methodologies help us see how concepts and contexts are related and how we as individuals (researchers and participants) are part of this process. Feminist fieldwork methodologies can be used for any project in which the researcher is seeking meaning-making. Seeing how meanings of policies change across contexts requires a longer research timeline, but it can provide insights into behavior or language that are worth the time.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. Find a published, peer-reviewed journal article where an author has used fieldwork to make her argument. Identify the methodologies used. How has the author reflected on her subjectivity in relation to her research? What other feminist principles are evident in the article, even if they are not explicitly detailed as such? Notate the article to suggest how the author could use feminist fieldwork methodology for further research.
2. What do you consider your strengths? How do you envision using these strengths in conducting fieldwork? Considering these strengths, in what ways could your research stand out from others doing similar research?
3. What are your insecurities about conducting field research? Could any of these be turned into assets? How?
4. Write a short list of aspects of your own subjectivity. Separately, write a short paragraph of how your subjectivity influences the way you think about and study your topic or research question. Then, with a partner, trade research topics or questions and again write another short paragraph. Share with each other, noting where each of you has a differing approach and discuss why this might be.

Further Reading

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Web Resources

PeaceWomen, an information bank about the Women, Peace, and Security agenda from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. <https://www.peacewomen.org/>

International Feminist Journal of Politics. <https://www.ifjglobal.org/>

UN Women Africa. <http://africa.unwomen.org/en>

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