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Female Fighters Shooting Back: Agency, Representation and Filmmaking in Post-Conflict Societies

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This blog was first published on the International Feminist Journal of Politics blog.

I wrote [my article](#) in the midst of a participatory documentary filmmaking project on the long-term reintegration of female ex-combatants. We had received half of the raw video footage, from Burundi and Aceh, and were waiting for the second half from Nepal and Mindanao to arrive. I am now revisiting it in this blog in the midst of a global pandemic that is forcing researchers around the world to reconfigure their research methods.

In this context, participatory methods are becoming increasingly important as Global North academics can no longer travel to the Global South contexts they are working in/on and cannot rely on mainstream methods like in-person semi-structured interviews anymore. Maybe this moment can spark serious reflection about what it means to “do” fieldwork and interviews, still the hallmark of much “serious” qualitative conflict research. As a Sierra Leonean researcher recently remarked in a meeting: “We cannot fly in white ‘experts’ and expats anymore but we can still do our research. Maybe it’s time to rely on our expertise.”

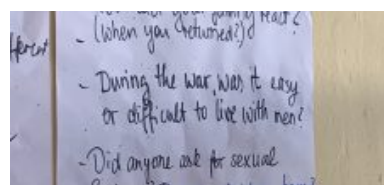
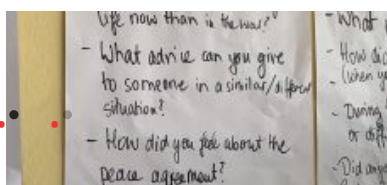
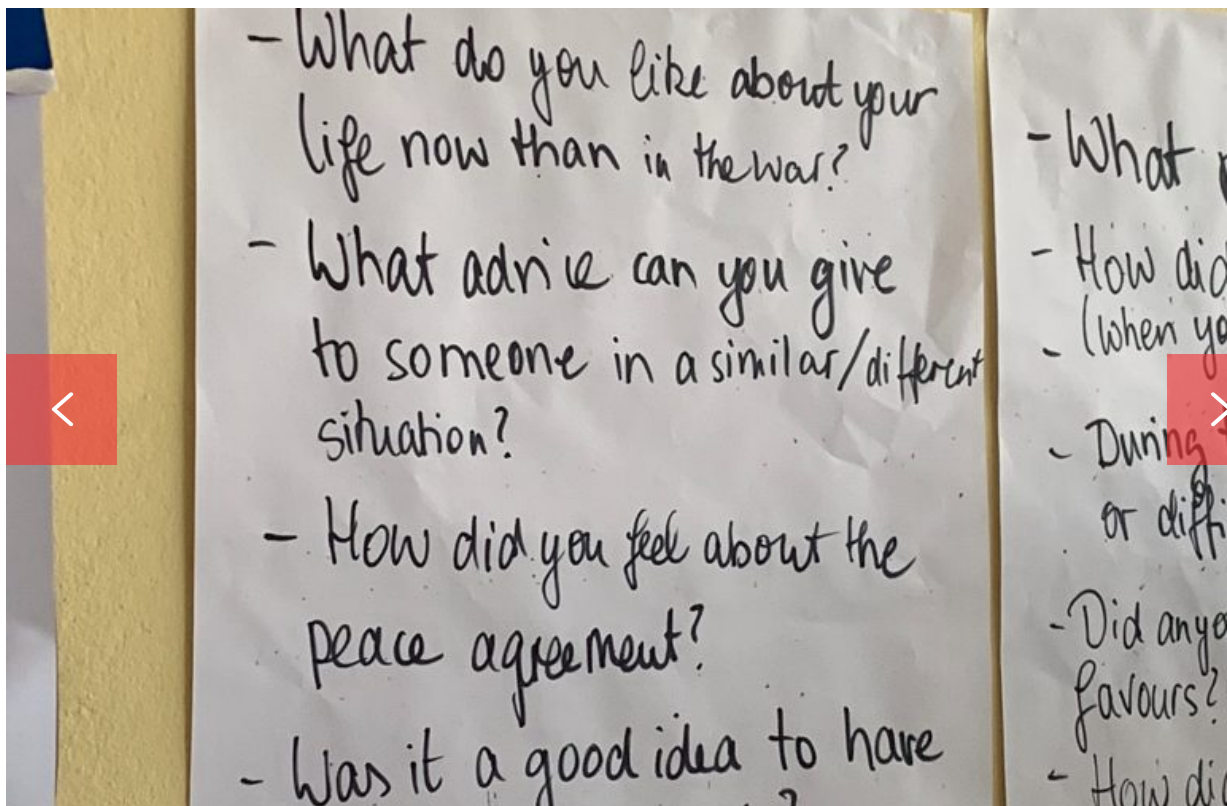
In this spirit, this article asks feminist scholars to take participatory methodologies seriously. Particularly scholars researching the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and its effects on women in and after conflict around the world, who want to acknowledge and grapple with the hierarchies and power dynamics inherent in the WPS agenda and the research on it, might want to consider expanding their methodological approaches and explore participatory filmmaking. Film as a medium can also open the door to new and broader audiences beyond academia.

This documentary film project started with a prompt by a Nepalese women’s ex-combatant organisation (*Former People’s Liberation Army Women Academy*) that the [Berghof Foundation](#), the NGO I was working for at the time, had known for many years. They were looking for a way to memorialise their wartime stories and to reflect on what they had experienced and achieved after the war.

Although female combatants are technically part of the 1325 WPS agenda, we still have limited knowledge about how they see themselves, how they evaluate their conflict experiences and how these experiences impact their lives after the war. For the overall project, I worked with six researchers to collect stories of female ex-combatants in four contexts – Aceh, Burundi, Mindanao and Nepal – this article talks about the first two. The booklet [“I Have To Speak: Voices of Female Ex-Combatants from Aceh, Burundi, Mindanao and Nepal”](#) includes some of these stories as well. All the researchers were female combatants themselves who were or still are active in post-conflict ex-combatant organisations.

Instead of conducting traditional research, where the principal researcher travels to the case study to interview participants, a filmmaker, Juan Camilo Cruz Orrego, and I held research and film workshops in Aceh and Burundi with the researchers who then filmed and interviewed other female combatants over 3 months largely independently.

During these film and research workshops, we first focused on technical filmmaking skills and practical exercises of working with the camera. The second key aspect of the workshop was a collaborative session on designing the research questions and interview questionnaires to guide the research. The article highlights the challenges, complexities and possibilities of this approach – it is one way for Global North researchers to have continued access to research sites (in terms of language, trust, context knowledge, presence despite COVID-19, ...) but also slows down the research process and makes it more expensive. This is assuming that local researchers are appropriately remunerated for their labour and the participatory process includes research design, implementation, and analysis.



In recent years, there has been a growing acknowledgment of the [discomfort in co-production](#), especially around financial and material imbalances. The article provides examples of how I attempted to navigate hierarchies brought to the forefront by this process. These were primarily between myself as the representative of the organisation providing funding, salaries and travel expenses and the researchers, and between the researchers wanting to complete the project and the ex-combatant women they needed to interview for that.

This setup inevitably put the local researchers in the intermediary position where they had to balance the difficulties and sensitivities of working with their peers and my expectations. While not claiming to overcome or dissolve existing power hierarchies between Global North actors and female ex-combatant communities, participatory filmmaking can provide a format to grapple with these issues more transparently.



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Collaborative research is laced with difficulty, discomfort and structural inequalities based on the fundamentally different life realities of researchers based in Global North academic institutions, researchers living and working in conflict-affected areas and research participants. As Sophie Harman, who produced the feature film and participatory research project [Pili](#), notes in her book [Seeing Politics](#), there is often still a lack of honesty or reflection on how the shift away from presumed neutrality manifests in practice, based on concerns about potential critique for admitting where ethics have been complicated or compromised.

Thus, if we are serious about participatory research, we have to be honest and transparent about how we intend to approach ethical dilemmas and the possibility that the researchers—despite their best intentions to the contrary—end up reproducing hierarchies. As researchers are turning to participatory research during the pandemic, often supported by virtual workshops or trainings, this article will hopefully encourage them to reflect on the complexities of engaging in this kind of research.

Read the full article: [Female fighters shooting back: representation and filmmaking in post-conflict societies](#)

The views, thoughts and opinions expressed in this blog post are those of the author(s) only, and do not necessarily reflect LSE's or those of the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security.

Image credits: Evelyn Pauls and Juan Camilo Cruz Orrego

About the author



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She recently led a participatory action research project on the long-term reintegration of female ex-combatants using documentary filmmaking in Burundi, Indonesia, Nepal and the Philippines. She completed her PhD in International Relations at the LSE in 2019, which focused on international norms and child soldiering in Sierra Leone and Myanmar.

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