



An Ansoms

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Navigating research as a female 'prostitute' researcher

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Female researchers' work is often discredited within academic communities, especially in male-dominated fields such as security studies. But female researchers can also be undermined during fieldwork, where the role lies outside of local actors' frame of reference for female professions. An Ansoms and Irène Bahati share personal experiences and outline the space needed to deal with the specific challenges women researchers face.

This post was produced as part of the [Bukavu Series](#), a series of blogs highlighting the violence that persists in the process of academic knowledge production.

Working in a conflict zone is difficult for any researcher. For female researchers, the security challenges are even more complex. First of all, local actors don't always know how to interpret the role of a female researcher, as that role often lies outside their reference frame for female professions. Yet

it's even more difficult when the role attributed to the female researcher is that of a prostitute. We have both faced this challenge. Being portrayed as a 'prostitute researcher' is intended sometimes as a joke, other times as a threat. And it's done by a number of actors: those in the research field, politically engaged actors who want to discredit the researcher's analyses, and sometimes even members of the academic community. Let's take some specific examples.

In an [earlier blog](#), Irene Bahati analysed how miners in the field in Mukungwe (Walungu, eastern DRC) welcomed female researchers with comments such as: 'There, the *écomogues* are arriving,' or in other words, 'The new prostitutes are arriving.' Like Irene, several other female researchers who have worked in conflict zones in eastern DRC – and elsewhere – have heard similar or worse comments.

This type of joking and ridicule puts women in a vulnerable position because it carries an implicit threat. At the same time, the researcher can't adopt an avoidance strategy, since the profession itself involves interacting with actors in the field. Requesting access or information while interacting with participants in the field can lead to a request for something in exchange. One day, one of us had to negotiate the integrity of her body with a soldier in the field who was demanding her 'services'. 'A woman researcher ... well then, if you are searching for something, I'm going to help you find it.' Getting out of such a situation requires a lot of rhetorical effort and strategic humour. But it may also result in lingering frustration and even trauma.

Along with difficult encounters in the field, there are other times when the 'prostitute researcher' image can be evoked. When the researcher's analyses don't please certain actors in a policy discussion, portraying her as a prostitute researcher is a powerful way to delegitimise her professional qualities. One of us experienced several of these incidents during her research, especially when her analyses of official policies were considered too critical, or not critical enough. Anonymous calls or messages accused her for 'the way in which you prostitute yourself to please the other side' or adopted less polite and more explicit phrasing.

Even the academic community can be implicated in reinforcing the vulnerability of female researchers by portraying the researcher as a prostitute. Sometimes, these are flagrant incidents. When a woman has a career in a field dominated by men (such as the field of conflict studies), being portrayed as a prostitute can be used to discredit the researcher's abilities. For example, we have had reports of incidents in which a female researcher was interrogated by her academic colleague, asking her 'who she slept with to get ahead so quickly.' In other cases, colleagues were asked why they wanted a man's profession, and if it was because they wanted 'to be with men all the time.' Although these types of incidents are rare, they're rather telling about the manner in which women can be viewed and treated in their research careers.

In most cases, the pressure on the female researcher is more subtle but nevertheless tangible. Within the academic community, doing research in and about conflict zones, there's very little space for the female researcher to share experiences, exchange ideas and discuss the research challenges associated with her gender. When the topic is brought up, there are often two reactions. First, when testifying about stories when one was portrayed as a prostitute researcher, people often laugh about and trivialise the matter. This reaction – often well-intentioned but nevertheless tactless – pushes women to instinctively relativise or play down the incident in order to not appear weak. The second reaction is to question the place of women in research in conflict zones, and the additional security challenges associated with their gender. 'If it's so dangerous and difficult, maybe women shouldn't engage in these research areas. Maybe some research domains are simply reserved for men.' Once again, such a reaction puts the female researcher in a defensive position, having to justify why she thinks it's appropriate for her to be in this field. Indeed, there are many situations in the field when being a female researcher may have major advantages. Having to justify her added value takes away her right to talk about the importance of considering security issues for female researchers in conflict zones.

Female researchers need particular forms of exchange that allow for sharing experiences and developing strategies to deal with the specific challenges women face. There's a great need for a space where the discussion goes

beyond sharing the 'little anecdote of the day where I was taken for a prostitute' and giving the room a good laugh. A space in which women can explain what it means to barricade themselves in their room or wrap themselves up in three layers of clothing to make a possible 'unwrapping' as difficult as possible. A space in which women can discuss how to respond to explicit or implicit intimidation in order to destabilise her morale by attacking her legitimacy as a researcher. A platform where female researchers without a voice can open up and share the challenges and burdens of research.

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