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Between Fatigue and Silence: The Challenges of Conducting Research on Sexual Violence in Conflict

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Abstract

This paper discusses the meanings of research fatigue and silences in conflict-related sexual violence research. Drawing on field experiences in Liberia, Tanzania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Peru, we discuss some of the unintended consequences of persistent focus on victim-survivors' narratives and argue for a reflexive feminist perspective that allows us to question the need and context of interviewing survivors and the associated insistence on disclosure.

I am fed up with documentations of my grief –
journalists asking me to sing a lullaby for my
dead children, to broadcast during commemorations,
government officials using my story as propaganda
during elections, women activists forcing me to talk
about rape only to prove that women are oppressed,
researchers claiming to record history when
all they do is pick my wounds.

This is my story, not yours. Long after you
turn off your recorder I stay indoors and weep.
Why don't people understand? I am neither hero,
nor God, cannot stand the talk of forgiveness.
For years I went to every wake. Wept at every man's
funeral. Kept asking: why? Realised I will never
understand. Now I just endure the days, by planting
cucumbers which you interrupted, by believing

in another world where there is justice, by watching my
remaining children as the sleep. Spare me your despair
and understanding. You can't resurrect the dead, feed
my hungry children, bring me recognition and respect.
Take history with you and go. Don't come here
again, I just don't want to know.

'The Angry Survivor'

Choman Hardi, 2015 From *Considering the Women*

Kurdisch scholar and poet Choman Hardi, in her reflections on research she carried out with women survivors of the Anfal genocide in Iraqi Kurdistan, concluded that her interviewees often felt exploited by those who came to ask questions but gave nothing in return. Interviewers –scholars and journalists in particular- can benefit professionally from women's accounts of violence while those very women's lives may continue as they were, and worse yet, with no improvement (Ybarra 2014). What are the challenges (to researchers and researched) in interviewing survivors of atrocities, particularly victims of sexual violence, for the purpose of academic research? For survivors, talking (for the sake of talking) might not be beneficial enough, as Hardi's poem suggests; talking to researchers where this leads to mental health and/or economic support, symbolic and economic reparation, and/or recognition of harm done may be just some of the expectations that are deemed meaningful, but are not always attainable through the research encounter (Hardi 2011, 200). In this paper we ask what research fatigue means in a context of conflict related sexual violence, and how this relates to what is often seen as a pervasive silence around the topic.

To a great extent, the overall theme and the collection of articles in this issue are a call for more attention to the challenges, dilemmas and benefits of in-depth qualitative research and analysis in understanding sexual violence in, and during,

conflict. This focus is in direct response to an emphasis in policy circles and an enduring desire for a certain form of 'evidence', which tends to reflect *patterns* of prevalence in different conflicts as discussed elsewhere (Boesten 2017, Engle Merry 2016, Koos 2017, Skelsbæk this volume). This is particularly problematic, we argued in the introduction, because quantified evidence or rates of prevalence divorced from, and used in isolation from, the broader socio-political contexts within which sexual violence occurs, can contribute to a distraction from, and depoliticisation of, particular foundations and the subsequent harms facing women and men in conflict settings. This suggests that contextualized qualitative research is a necessary complement in order for numbers to be meaningful and useful in policy terms (see also Hoover Green 2012, 2013). And we argue that qualitative research is particularly necessary and beneficial because it focuses on and highlights perspectives directly from the source: survivors who have experienced varied forms of violence within their everyday lives and within the context of diverse communities. However, seeking those first-hand accounts is not unproblematic.

This paper examines some of the challenges of doing qualitative research with victim-survivors of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). We argue that while listening to the affected population is essential to developing an adequate understanding of survivors' lives and needs and for ethically-sensitive and practically-appropriate responses (Burgess-Proctor 2015, Easton and Matthews 2016, Taylor, Sollange and Rwigema 2015, Skjelsbæk, this issue), there are also risks attached to a singular focus on one particular conflict phenomenon (sexual violence *per se*), and on specific populations. Using our own field experiences in Tanzania, Peru, Liberia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) as starting points, we argue that

research fatigue and (re)traumatization are research problems that not only affect participants, but also shape the research findings and the nature of possible interventions (Houge and Lohne 2017).[1] First, we discuss the idea of over-research and research fatigue amongst populations, and specifically among survivors of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), followed by a discussion of silence among respondents. We discuss silence, because we suggest that it is intimately bound up with feminism and feminist methodologies as key to this normative project; and because it may drive us in directions that either contradict or justify research decisions about which populations and which places to do research with and in. In addition, we will demonstrate that the nature of sexual violence itself is particularly prone to silence, as social stigma related to sexuality prevents many victim-survivors from speaking out. Disclosure of experiences with sexual violence can have devastating effects in the everyday lives of survivors, in spaces where researchers may not enter, or after they have left. It is this ambiguity between the potential benefits and risks of disclosure that makes research among survivors of sexual violence particularly challenging.

Some of our own fieldwork experiences allow us to discuss these ambiguities, even if they relate to very different cases: in Tanzania, the research focused on people living with HIV/AIDS, and not on sexual violence per se. However, HIV shows similar elements of social stigma on the one hand, as well as similar levels of 'hype' - the idea that a particular social problem attracts sudden and massive interests from a range of interest groups who all make a claim on victim-survivors, as we will

[1] Research fatigue and re-traumatisation are not only problems that occur in relation to qualitative research---however, they are often discovered during the course of interviewing or speaking at length with survivors and as such are more likely present where qualitative methods are employed.

explain below- on the other. The research was carried out by Boesten between 2005 and 2007. The case of Liberia involves investigating the connections between wartime and peacetime incidents of sexual violence. In particular the research aimed to draw on theories of the continuum and political economy in order to understand the complexity of barriers and underpinning structural inequalities preventing survivors from attaining wellbeing. While in the case of BiH, part of the same study as Liberia, victim-survivors faced similar institutional and foundational barriers but over a longer period of time (BiH has been postconflict for 23 years). However, because of this time, there has been both a hype and an abandomment of BiH as a site to study sexual violence. Both these cases were researched by Henry in 2016. The Peru case refers to victim-survivors of sexual violence perpetrated by the Peruvian military against local populations in its counter-insurgency campaign against Shining Path between 1980 and 1992. The research was carried out by Boesten between 2004 and 2011. The experience of collecting data in these four contexts allow us to reflect on the methodological challenges in researching sexual violence.

Finally, in our conclusion we suggest a series of reflexive exercises that could help researchers decide if, how and when to interview victim-survivors, and when not to do so. In particular, through a concentration on the intensity (fatigue/over-research) and the erasure (silences) of some research topics and sites, we argue for a specific and stronger form of reflexivity when it comes to researching sexual and gender-based violence in postconflict contexts, in order to ethically orient ourselves as researchers to victim-survivors and to the academic field of study.

Over-research and research fatigue

The literature on over-research and research fatigue in qualitative methodologies covers a range of topics, disciplines, and areas of research (see Clark 2008, 955 for an overview) and is not limited to researchers studying violence, women, or 'developing' contexts. However, we outline some of the main issues with overresearch and research fatigue and draw on our own research experiences in order to reveal some of the challenges that arise in the context of research on CRSV. Academic scholars have recently suggested that 'over-research' is an *effect* of continual and repetitive research of particular communities or populations, while geographers have tended to discuss over-research as an effect generated from research which has 'spatial bias' (Neal et al. 2016, Sukarieh and Tannok 2012, 496).

In contrast, 'research fatigue' –or a reluctance to participate in, or a disengagement from, research because of previous experiences with research – occurs in contexts that require participants to engage over a long period of time (i.e., some health research), or among research groups that are relatively rare or hard to reach (Clark 2008, 956). In this way, research fatigue is a concept which centres the research participant's experiences in and beyond the field---it is not related, directly, to the fatigue, if there is any, of the researcher or 'fieldwork site saturation' with an emphasis on the emotional depletedness of the researchers engaged in long studies with a similar population (Mandel 2003, Wray, Markovic and Manderson 2007). However, it can relate to fatigue caused and generated by a series of researchers continuously entering a specified research field and is therefore connected with the concept of 'over-research'. Previous studies with Indigenous communities around the world reveal the extent of the 'resident anthropologist phenomenon' –the idea

that an indigenous community comes into being by having anthropologists in its midst (Sukarieh and Tannock 2012, 496). Sukarieh and Tannock (2012) conclude that while over-research can indeed happen in a range of disciplines and participants groups, as Clark (2008) sustains, it is most prevalent in communities that

> are poor, low-income, indigenous, minority or otherwise marginalized; experienced some form of crisis (war, natural disaster etc.) and/or have engaged in active resistance to the conditions of their poverty or marginalization; and communities that are accessible to outside researchers (Sukarieh and Tannock 2012, 496).

Clearly, there is a connection amongst research fatigue, over-research and vulnerable populations, and this may be why certain populations and places gain prominence or are continually ignored. This is certainly true for research with survivors of sexual violence in a number of conflict sites, and we will return to this point below.

Clark's study of research fatigue (2008) discusses the experiences of researchers studying a range of issues concerned with children and families between 2000 and 2005 in the UK. The results show that participants become disillusioned about their participation in research if they feel that the work does not lead to any tangible change –no improved services, or increased voice or otherwise promised social change. Participants may also report that they lose interest in the focus of the research, the questions asked might not feel relevant to participants. Sukarieh and Tannock (2012), looking at research fatigue in Shatila, a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, found that community members were disappointed about the unmet

promises of social change as well as with researcher practices, agendas, and identities, in addition to the focus of research and the questions asked.

The consequences of over-research are various: first, as Clark (2008) emphasizes in their research, we need to understand the phenomenon in order to deal with it if the academic community wants to continue to do qualitative research with populations that are traditionally marginalized (957). But secondly and perhaps more importantly, the problem might be less about how researchers can maintain engagement with participants, but about identifying and preventing the negative effects felt by over-researched communities. Research often has unintended, and unmitigated, effects upon social relationships and identities in fieldsites, which can generate discontent amongst participants. Individual research participants then, are not lone individuals embedded in the research---but part of a network of community that is impacted upon by decisions and practices of researchers. In a similar vein, the research carried out by Boesten in a Tanzanian town with a community of people living with HIV/AIDS showed how long-term research relations created rivalries and fragmentation between different groups of people living with HIV, as well as among community members more broadly (Boesten 2011). Even supposedly less–extractive research methods such as action research or participatory research do little to avoid generating such negative dynamics. Instead, the power dynamics continue to be unequal because participation is always limited to some members of a community and not all (for perhaps logical reasons), and expectations of social change from participants tend to be higher than any research project can realistically meet (Boesten 2008). All of these factors contribute to ongoing inequality within the research relations at the meso and macro levels (see also McCorkel and Myers 2003,

Pascucci 2017). Arguably, these inequalities are exacerbated by the social and emotional sensitivities of traumatic experiences (i.e. HIV/AIDS, violence, and extreme poverty), and the risks of participation in research –(i.e. disclosure), - might be high. Residents of Shatila also felt they were often misrepresented, obliging to the agendas of researchers rather than the needs, or lived reality, of inhabitants. Poverty and abuse might be narratively and strategically 'exaggerated' and political positions insinuated, rather than corroborated, for purposes of fundraising, or book writing and publicity. This suggests that academic careers might stand in the way of both research objectivity and prioritizing participant engagement over a 'good story' (Sukarieh and Tannock 2012, 502; Lal 1996).

For Henry, Bosnian organizations providing support to victims and survivors of conflict-related sexual violence twenty-two years after the end of the war, collectively argued that the issue of sexual violence had been over-researched, and that survivors had been asked to give testimonies too many times. With a formal tribunal set up in The Hague, the total number of sites where victims were asked to speak about their experiences had reached an unsustainable height (Skjelsbæk, this issue). Throughout the postwar period, the issue of sexual violence and the survivors associated with it became a highly politicized field (Weitsman 2008). In particular, civil society organizations received a great deal of funding and support from various donors, yet there seemed to be little trickle-down effect on survivors themselves, many of whom faced a number of barriers including the ongoing bureaucratic problems of the Bosnian (and Federation) state (Clark 2017a, 2017b). Again, these are all also relevant to conflict-related sexual violence research, more generally (Mertens and Pardy 2016, Hilhorst and Douma 2017). In addition, as we

discuss below, (re)traumatization is an additional risk related to over-exposure in research to conflict related sexual violence.

Research with refugee camp-populations, sexual violence-survivors, and people living with HIV, have in common that they attract not only academic researchers and students, but journalists, aid agencies, and national and international political actors who all contribute to what Hilhorst and Douma (2017) call 'hypes'. Hilhorst and Douma refer to reinforcing 'loops' of media, general public, aid agencies, and political actors that escalate attention for particular crises, bringing about simplistic understandings, disproportionate and badly managed resources, and a disregard for complexity and nuance and related problems and needs. Laura Heaton (2015, 625) speaks of 'one story and one type of victim', such as 'amputees in Sierra Leone, victims of kidnapping in Colombia, victims of chemical weapons in Syria', or one particular injustice such as 'landmines, female genital mutilation, child soldiers'. These are small hypes according to Hilhorst and Douma; sexual violence as a weapon of war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a big hype, having all but defined the violence in the DRC and the aid directed to it (Hilhorst and Douma 2017). This hype is, of course, also defining global policy in relation to violence against women, and sexual violence in particular, throughout the world. Academic researchers feed off, and into, these hypes (Meger 2016).

Often, researchers are already present, or they may become attracted by the hype. Academic funding bodies also play into humanitarian hypes by prioritizing certain themes and regions of the world that are often in line with broader attention. Kirby (2013) and Baaz and Stern (2013) have suggested this is also the case for many academic studies of conflict-related sexual violence, where the

narratives, repetoires and registers tend to be more simplifying and obscuring, rather than allowing for complexities. Either way, researchers will inevitably become part of the hype whether they want to or not, and of the effects this has on communities. For example, while working with HIV positive activists in Tanzania looking at local political activism and patterns of stigmatisation, Boesten became part of the problem of the fragmentation of aid money which poured in (2011). Around 2005, the global AIDS industry had turned their gaze to grass roots organizations of people living with HIV, hoping that such organizations could support or even provide community-based services, including encouraging behavior change. But the funding was unreliable and never enough, as funding bodies tended to change their gaze from target group to target group. Necessity taught the participant activists how to 'play the game', navigating expectations and fashions in the aid industry (Boesten 2011, see also Baaz and Gray this issue; Mertens and Pardy 2016). As a researcher studying these trends, it is inevitable to reinforce or disturb the political strategy designed by studied populations merely by identifying and therefore exposing them (Boesten 2008). Clearly, the problem goes beyond 'over-researching' certain communities, or research fatigue, among participants, but is deeply embedded in political geographies of power and inequality between researcher and researched, between those studied and those who temporarily focus their gaze.

In BiH, certain organizations gained publicity in the media as being the primary ones to address the needs of survivors. For example Medica Zenica became the primary organisation supported by celebrity humanitarians, in some cases gaining not only the largest share of researchers, but also charitable donations (see

also similar in relation to other conflict sites Mertens and Pardy 2016). Tensions between and amongst survivor organizations are often exacerbated by researchers continually entering the community and perhaps enforcing the inequality of attention by focusing on a larger organization that already has longterm funding and international recognition. In this way, over-research coincided with a form of territorialisation over victims' and survivors' accounts, control over access to resources and redress and importantly as gatekeepers or interlocutors for researchers (Cohen and Hoover Green 2012).

Hilhorst and Douma (2017) use the term humanitarian 'hypes' specifically to analyse the excessive attention given to conflict related sexual violence in the DRC, particularly between 2010 and 2012. While the authors recognize the benefits of such attention as resources poured in, they are particularly concerned with the many negative effects the hype has had on local communities. All other issues that needed attention, including non-violence related health problems but also intimate partner violence, were ignored in favor of sexual violence perpetrated by armed groups. A competition among aid agencies over beneficiaries emerged which generated tension among community members, and facilitated the rise of 'fake' victims. Sometimes, fake victims (see Hoover Green 2013) emerged at the encouragement of community leaders or by individual women and their families to avoid stigmatization. For some communities, if the whole village was raped then no single woman would be stigmatized or ostracized. Or victims were given access to much needed aid, which might encourage victim-status independent of actual experiences (Heaton 2014). Health care facilities also inflated numbers of women they treated for rape-related injuries, particularly fistula, in order to secure

continued funding (Hilhorst and Douma 2017). Similar to the experience of Tanzanian organizations of people living with HIV (Boesten 2011, see also: Beckman and Bujra 2011), these are strategies of local leaders and service providers with little to no access to funding other than from aid agencies, and hence, they have to play to the fashion tunes of the public in Western countries, who feed into media attention, funding bodies and aid agencies.

In contrast to the cases above, it seemed that while there was an initial hype in the context of postwar Liberia (Hoover Green 2013), this hype has not had the same spread or depth as in other settings. For example, one survivor organisation that Henry consulted outside of Monrovia had established a 'good' mechanism for bringing perpetrators of sexual violence crimes to justice. Their techniques, which focussed on perpetrators acknowledging their crimes and the effects of their actions, were lauded by UN agencies and donor governments. The organisation was the subject of several media campaigns celebrating the work of governance institutions. Yet, the head of the organisation, stated that the organisation had not secured any long-term funding or commitments from those same agents. Importantly, she also claimed that researchers continued to visit the organization to ask survivors questions but that survivors no longer believed that this would benefit them in any way as years had passed with many visits and promises, and little returns. The organizational headquarters still remained quite simply equipped---with no central computing facilities for keeping in correspondence with donors, or recording data or activities completed. In addition, when other activities were proposed, where sexual violence was not the main focus, funders and researchers appeared to lose interest. Unlike in BiH, but more similar to funding structures for people living with HIV in

Tanzania, Henry understood that the mass-scale funding and therapeutic services---the sexual violence industry—was excessively diffused across Liberia, despite a continual interest in victims and survivors of wartime sexual violence.

Why and how, and with what consequences, the hype around wartime sexual violence has emerged, in the DRC as well as globally, has been widely discussed (Engle 2014, Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013, Heaton 2014, Hilhorst and Douma 2017, Meger 2016, Mertens and Pardy 2016, Skjelsbæk 2010). What is important is how, as researchers, we approach research on conflict-related sexual violence and take seriously the problems of over-exposure of some affected communities. Sukarieh and Tannock (2012) have some very clear-cut recommendations which we concur with. First, they feel that the issue of over research needs to be at the 'forefront of […] the politics and ethics of social science research' (507). Second, simply looking for less researched communities cannot be the solution: rather, they suggest, the likelihood of over-research should always be taken into account, and hence, considered, discussed and mitigated beforehand. This would mean discounting some research sites at the earlier, design stage. Third, alternative research methodologies may not have a mitigating effect. That is, no matter how sensitive the design, it may be that the population is locked into a state of vulnerability that will take some years to remedy. In these situations a type of moratorium on researching these communities might be necessary. Perhaps the response should be, in specific cases, that no new research should be carried out, and instead, other activities should be developed in order to support specific communities. Fourth, they argue, over-research cannot be approached simply as a methodological or ethical issue, but

rather, as a reflection of the inherently skewed power relations between researchers and research populations:

> For, at its heart, the problem of over-research pertains to the question of the relationship of social scientific research and researchers to the wider society and economy as a whole. Only by paying direct and critically reflective attention to the positioning of researchers, research projects, research practices and research institutions within local, regional, national and global structures and processes of power, identity, inequality, interest and control can the problems of over-research and over-researched communities begin to be understood and addressed (507).

This is a question not only of the politics of knowledge production, but about the 'industry' that is generated from widespread attention to certain research sites and communities and feeds into a larger question about the politics of methodology, epistemology and research on the subject of sexual violence more specifically. Because researching issues of violence, harm and trauma may necessitate a retelling of the initial traumatic experience and experiences from wartime, questions of methodology and epistemology cannot be considered too late. Importantly, it is necessary to reflect on the politics of doing research predominantly in spaces where geopolitics and global inequalities intersect. Why is it, for example, that researchers continue to return to contexts such as Bosnia, DRC, or Liberia? What are the research questions that are to be answered, and what methodologies are seen as most effective, and why? These questions are important to consider early on, as they affect the design and process of research projects and therefore have incredible

significance for the types of findings that in turn influence academic and policy-making fields.

Research fatigue and sexual violence

There is something unique about interviewing victim-survivors of sexual violence and their experience of overexposure to researchers. Research on stigma demonstrates that there are a number of complex social and community responses to disclosure of sexual violence (Theidon 2013, 2015, Lee 2017) and as researchers we know that protecting survivors is important and as such disclosure must be managed well. The issue of 'fake victims' discussed above reminds us of the social particularities of disclosure of conflict-related sexual violence, and the need to work sensitively, ethically and carefully. After all, stigma is often foisted upon survivors precisely because the effects of sexual violence move well beyond the body (Annan et al., 2015). That is, various cultural and religious views on the meaning of sexual violence illustrate that victims may be subject to suspicion, derision, shame and deprived of the possibility of marriage or inheritance. They may be exiled from the community in quite visible ways (Coulter 2009, 134, 227). In many contexts conflict-related sexual violence has been continually and intentionally kept hidden, by victim-survivors as well as by witnesses. There are often very good reasons for not talking about such experiences; the social consequences of speaking out can be very negative for victim-survivors (Coulter 2009, 132). Part of the current academic and policy attention to sexual violence in wartime (and sometimes in peacetime), is to explicitly and collectively break the silence in order to counter stigma, and thereby, reduce the negative social consequences of rape. However, willing ourselves to

'break the silence' or 'combat stigma' is not always the preferred strategy of those who were subjected to the violence, nor is it clear whether they prefer the silence to be broken for them (Porter 2016).

In recent exploratotry research on Liberia, stigma was an absent presence. Henry found that survivor organizations did not focus on war-related trauma as this did not offer much 'purchase' in the contemporary aid culture and context. Instead, they focussed on pushing such narratives to the margins, in favour of recounting widespread adult, adolescent and child sexual violence in the contemporary moment (Thornhill 2017). Since there was little interest amongst local and international aid actors, organizations had collectively vowed to 'move on' and to accept that survivors would 'keep silent' (and stoic) about rape during wartime. In most cases, survivors talked about the effects of stigma more generally, in terms of isolation and dependence on informal economic networks, without attribution to whether the violence occurred in wartime or peacetime. While the contours of stigma in an everyday sense were made explicit, victim-survivors shared that they feared the 'potential stigma' associated with disclosing 'old' experiences of CRSV. Vastapuu's (forthcoming 2018) work with female combatants in Liberia revealed that community stigma sometimes resulted in the complete physical isolation for many of the former combatants and survivors, as well as a new found dependence on illicit drugs, and on researchers coming to seek out their testimonies. In this way, survivors had become dependent upon a number of insecure sources of income and aid and as such their accounts were shaped by the epistemic 'market'.

Similarly in Liberia, second families (with new formations), stepfathers and other new kin, did not like the presence of children born as a result of sexual

violence. These children were stigmatized on an individual basis as well through the mothers who bore them. In order to remove stigma, mothers were encouraged to reject these children and many were subsequently neglected within the community. Aid and development workers often conducted informal 'checks' on these sometimes abandoned or homeless children who became increasingly at risk of sexual and gender-based violence themselves, if they were not already victims. Paradoxically, the silence was visible, palpable and present. Sexual violence was the public secret that no one wanted to talk about, but hung heavily in the air (see also Coulter 2009). It was precisely because it failed to be a topic that could be communally agreed upon as sufficiently important that it became so toxic for the survivors and those working with survivors. Stigma could be attached to individuals without their having publically disclosed any incident of rape. In such circumstances, while stigma is clearly harmful to the women and children involved, researchers are not necessarily best placed to contribute to breaking silences and combatting stigma in conflict-affected communities. Locally-led initiatives may be in contrast to a researcher's aims and objectives and this is where a range of ethical issues are raised about any homogenous or universal ideology of 'breaking the silence' that is imposed on survivors, or the repeated questions from researchers –academics, journalists, NGO personnel or government agents- to expose silence. Importantly, exposing survivors may have harmful effects.

Respect for selective silence

In their edited collections *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process* (2010), Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff argue that the research process must include not

only what is said, but the myriad ways in which participants (and researchers) convey information, data and experience through both non-verbal modes (much of it embodied)---sometimes importantly by not saying anything at all. Silence, we know from feminist research, can be an important signifier of the future of a research project. In Kamala Visweswaran's *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (1994), one whole chapter is devoted to the issue of silence as an act of counterethnography. In her ethnographic account, Visweswaran learns that she can still generate ideas and knowledge from a participant who 'refused' to participate. Famously, in the book *I Rigoberta Menchu*, Menchu reveals that she must keep her community's knowledge secret and that she cannot share or else betray her community as well as her ancestors (1984). Likewise, Kimberly Theidon, in her research on Peru, also emphasizes the need to respect as well as read the silence of those affected by extreme violence (2013).

The experience of doing research in the Peruvian context is somewhat different from carrying out research in over-researched contexts such as Bosnia, Rwanda, or DRC. In Peru there is no international hype around sexual violence, or indeed anything else in terms of public or international humanitarian concern. If anything, international aid agencies have withdrawn since the economy started growing fast in the mid-2000s. While a Truth and Reconciliation Committee in 2003 concluded that sexual violence had been widespread during the conflict between Shining Path and the military between 1980 and 2000, and was in majority and systematically perpetrated by the military and police, this fact has led to little international outrage or attention. Peru's economic stability and rapid poverty reduction post-2000, and its political resolution (despite, arguably, democratic and

institutional deficits) may have contributed to the relative lack of international media attention of its transition to democracy, and hence, weak visibility of the atrocities of conflict and the battles for post-conflict justice. Hence, while local social, political and economic dynamics need to be taken into account when doing research on sexual violence in Peru, international interventions feature very little. Over-researching was thus not necessarily an issue in Peru between 2005-2011, but the local dynamics around exposure were at least as urgent as discussed above. As Sukarieh and Tannock indicated (2012, 507), simply moving to a less researched community, such as Peru, does not necessarily resolve some of the ethical dilemmas raised above.

After hundreds of victim-survivors of sexual violence had given testimony to the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Committee (2001-2003), Lima-based NGOs started working with women to provide social-psychological support and to develop judicial cases against perpetrators. They identified and traced victim-survivors using testimony provided to the TRC, with their approval. However, for private reasons few women were willing to talk beyond the TRC. While educated middle classes working for NGOs in the capital were keen to break silences and seek redress, victim-survivors had not yet found sufficient family and community support to take that route.

For example, one day in 2006, Boesten joined a psychologist employed by an NGO to visit a victim-survivor at her home. The woman, Sra Alicia[2], pushed the researcher and psychologist out of the doorway and onto the street indicating clearly that she refused to talk there and then. The psychologist and the researcher

[2] Not her real name.

went their ways, and Boesten went to talk to a human rights lawyer in the neighbourhood. Half an hour in the conversation with this lawyer, Sra Alicia stepped into the building indicating she was ready to talk. The lawyer left the building, the psychologist was not present. There, in that space far away from the gaze of family or community, lawyers and psychologists, she talked for two hours about her intimate experiences with violence during and after the conflict. She asked for nothing but a listening ear when she was sure she could not be identified as the speaker by any one in the community.

When Boesten asked the NGO to travel with them to remote areas of Peru where they set up meetings with victim-survivors this request was rejected. The NGO was aware of the precautions women took to participate –they often told their families they were going to a meeting of a women's organization, or were going to a particular market far away- to justify their absence without disclosing the actual reason. According to the testimonies given to the TRC, many victim-survivors were harassed and abused at home, called 'soldier's whore' by their partners and were barely tolerated by their communities (Boesten 2014). Human rights organizations keen to seek justice for crimes committed by the state, or simply keen to support women and help them 'break the stigma' for the common good, had a hard time convincing victim-survivors that such a strategy would be to their advantage. By 2016, the case of a group of women who worked for more than ten years with such NGOs, went to trial. The trial itself is testimony of how disclosure tends to re-victimise rather then break any stigma, as the Peruvian judiciary does not provide the women with psychological or material support for the duration of the trial, nor does it take into account the complainants desire for transparency. The judges

reproduce harmful stereotypes, and favour the requests from the accused over those of the victims. The trial is already in its second year, and no end seems in sight, less so of a positive outcome.[3]

The NGOs' decision not to allow a foreign researcher to join their efforts might have been well judged, and helped to avoid resentment from participants. The rejection also raised serious questions about the validity of the researcher's methodological decision to interview victim-survivors: what answers would women be able to give that the researcher could not find elsewhere? Were the questions in need of answering about individual suffering, and if so, would their suffering rightfully generate public knowledge? Or might there be other ways to highlight suffering, and instead, study and analyze the social structures at the source of that suffering? Sukarieh and Tannock (2012, 501) ask 'why study the Palestinians to understand their lack of rights? Why not study the international community and the Lebanese government who are responsible for this lack of rights?' In order to understand the social dynamics, processes, and structures of widespread sexual violence in conflict, using secondary sources, already recorded testimonies (via the TRC for example), and interviews with those who work with or for victim-survivors goes a long way (Boesten 2014).

So do first-hand accounts add anything to research? In the Peruvian contexts there are still many questions to be answered, such as how women perceive their own experience, how they survive day-by-day, how they have (or have not) established intimate relations with life partners and children, either born of rape or

[3] 'Justicia para las mujeres de Manta y Vilca: Carta abierta a la Corte Suprema de Justicia' http://www.demus.org.pe/noticias/justicia-para-las-mujeres-de-manta-y-vilca-carta-abierta-a-la-corte-suprema-de-justicia-2/

not, how the experiences of wartime sexual violence have influenced their opportunities (but see: Escribens 2008, 2011, Theidon 2013). In Liberia, first hand accounts need to be carefully parsed out, over long periods of time, where the 'past' can be unfolded in fuller ways---and not in the shadow of funding scarcities or hype loops. Qualitative research is one such method for 'breaking the silence' ethically and carefully, by connecting past experiences with contemporary everyday lives. But there are specific contextual elements that make the desire for silence also understandable. As Karen Engle has argued, too much emphasis on wartime rape as exceptional violence may actually reinforce the shame of rape, rather than undermine it (Engle 2014, 25). The passing of time might help, not only in terms of survivors' own distance to a traumatic past, but to how a society changes under the influence of a traumatic past and how recognition may or may not emerge at national and community levels. The ongoing trial against Peruvian ex-military for sexual violence could, for example, be a watershed moment that may allow others to come forward and speak -if the trial is decided in favour of the victim-survivors. However, as the case of BiH shows, such societal change might not happen in one or two generations.

Discussion

There have been numerous fields of study concerned with exposing some of the specific pains and pleasures of doing qualitative research. In particular, feminists writing about research with women, or on gender topics, have made clear that partiality is a necessary feature of the research process, but something that needs to be tracked, reflected upon and acknowledged (England 1994, Gluck and Patai 1991,

Haraway 1988, Simic 2016, Srigley, Zembrzycki and Iacovetta 2018). Considered as 'reflexivity', feminist qualitative researchers have suggested that paying attention to the qualitative process is the mechanism for holding qualitative researchers accountable both to the academic communities they belong to, and the research participants they have worked with (England 1994, Gluck and Patai 1991, De Langis 2018, Rose 1997). After all, the way to demonstrate systematic and focussed research is to show how methodological and epistemological thinking along the way has influenced and shaped the research outcomes. In this way, reflections on qualitative methodology have enabled researchers to make connections between decisions and experiences of conducting the research and the way in which findings have emerged as contingent on the research process, rather than through an objective set procedure (McCorkel and Myers 2003).

In this article, we have reviewed the idea of over-research, research fatigue and the silences in research on conflict-related sexual violence. We are particularly concerned with the potential harmful effects that non-reflective methodologies and universal beliefs in the benevolance of disclosure can have on victim-survivors' lives, the unsettling consequences on community structures and dynamics of too much attention for conflict-related sexual violence as a singular issue, particularly in resource poor settings, and the way in which such considerations skew the data and influence the research outcomes. In many cases, such as in contemporary Bosnia or the DRC, seeking out victim-survivors of rape for research and/or international support and visibility has little to no benefits at all to survivors, and arguably, does more harm than good if it continually misaddresses the needs of survivors. This does not mean, of course, that the issues at hand are not worthy of attention and that as

researchers we should divert our gaze (the violence of looking away may create new ethical challenges); on the contrary. It does mean, however, that researchers need to consider their research choices carefully before embarking on the search for vulnerable interviewees or survivors of sexual violence.

Building on the above discussion, we propose some possible strategies that researchers could use before embarking on qualitative research on sexual violence in conflict. We also suggest alternative methods of data collection. Our suggested strategies are organized around five main questions: what is the [research] question? What data is [already] available? What will the research do for the subjects of the study? What are the geopolitical contexts that shape disclosure and the field more generally? And lastly, what are the geopolitical contexts that shape our research?

First, researchers need to be encouraged to think carefully about research questions, and what the varied answers might contribute to a field of understanding. This is an obvious first lesson in any research degree, but one sees that the same research questions are asked over and over again by different people seeking to understand particular phenomena, not to increase overall understanding of that phenomena, but rather as a shortcut to increasing individual knowledge on a subject (Henry 2013). In BiH, survivors and survivor organizations complained that the same questions had been asked but they could not understand why the analysis of the data had not been widely shared (as in the case of pubications). They were critical of the academic publishing industry, which they argue, contributes to this repetition. As Daphne Patai asserts (2018, 48), each new generation of researchers tends to ignore older research, and often wants to reinvent the wheel. In cases where populations

are vulnerable (for whatever reasons) it is particularly important for each new researcher in a field to determine if the research questions have already been framed and 'launched' previously. For example, can questions be answered by doing a rigorous literature review? If yes, this would mean that further interviewing of vulnerable populations is unnecessary. So, what is worth knowing and what data do we need to produce new knowledge? Is this question still relevant, or has it been answered elsewhere/already/ by others? In what ways does our question need the primary input of survivors, how necessary is that, or might there be other, existing sources that could be used, such as Truth Commission testimonies and interviews done by other researchers?

Second and intimately related, what data is already available and what is missing? If a population is already over-researched, as the residents of Shatila, or women survivors in parts of the DRC and Bosnia, then there must be a wealth of information that could be used to ask new questions. This is what Kirsten Campbell did for her research in Bosnia (this volume), and what others have done in different contexts, as Boesten in the Peruvian case (Boesten 2014). A thorough review of a variety of literatures is crucial and this means going beyond the superficial searches of studies in any one academic discipline. A rigorous investigation includes studies conducted with different methodologies, such as those employing different types of qualitative approaches, and a review of older work and what kind of dilemmas, questions and answers these might have raised. In the case of Henry's research, carefully examining the quantitative data on sexual violence in both Liberia and Bosnia, might enable a delay in engaging, or a more nuanced approach to, previously researched communities.

Third, what do participants gain from research? In what concrete ways does research contribute to their wellbeing (if at all)? In some cases, if the researcher has something to offer, such as psychological support, then interviewing survivors might indeed help. However, as Sukarieh and Tannock (2012) so convincingly argue, sometimes research is not the priority for the interviewees. Instead, the main aims of research could be help and support for victim-survivors. But this is not so straightforward either; just as happened during the height of HIV interventions in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa (Boesten 2011). By focusing attention on one particular issue all the other issues that need urgent attention were overlooked. Honing in on one particular problem in communities –in this case, sexual violence in conflict- also isolates the problem from the wider issues that allow it to be named a problem in the first place. As scholars of the DRC have shown, the 'hype' around sexual violence has had perverse effects on disclosure, on victim numbers and on the interventions designed to help victim-survivors. Hypes, for example, do not afford a respect for silence, instead, keeping silent is shown to jeopardise access to all kinds of benefits that are available if the victim-survivor admits to having been raped. This creates a dilemma for individuals meeting their basic needs, by feeling compelled to report a rape in order to gain access to resources. Of course this not only skews the research outcomes, but unsettles the fragile forms of social cohesion that communities might have after conflict (Boesten 2011). Finally, it removes survivors' agency and puts them in the vortex of a global single-issue hype.

Fourth, what are the cultural and geopolitical coordinates that shape disclosure in any given context? As we saw above in 2005 Peru it was inappropriate, potentially harmful, and ultimately undesirable to forge disclosure or reveal the

identities of the majority of victim-survivors of sexual violence in a context in which family and community closely policed women's behavior. But now, in 2018, things have changed, with a high profile human rights trial against nine ex-military in process, with profound pressure upon civil society at large to disclose 'peacetime' gender-based violence, and on the state and the judiciary to act on such disclosures and accusations. These are different times for survivors and researchers. Perhaps it will become possible or desirable for survivors to speak up now. Hence, stigma and silence are not permanent features of societies' approaches to sexual violence; as we are currently witnessing throughout the world, with the use of social media, it has become much more acceptable to disclose, be that in Peru or in the US. Nevertheless, it is not up to the researcher to start processes of disclosure, especially other people's pain if that has not clearly been agreed upon with the victim-survivors. Hence, researching and learning to understand the cultural and geopolitical coordinates that shape disclosure in any given context is essential before approaching survivors for interviews.

We have highlighted above that the actions and methodologies of researchers cannot be judged on their own, removed from the geopolitics that drive the questions in the first place. So lastly, it seems important to reflect on what factors (funding priorities, policy fashions, academic careers, political trends and discourses) shape the questions we ask, the populations we seek out, and the social changes this may engender. While researchers may adhere to the central principle of 'do no harm', they do not operate in isolation, and one researcher's perceived generosity may cause harm in unexpected ways. In sum, following Kirsten Campbell (this volume) and Doris Buss (2014: 15) we 'should refocus our attention on what we

know, how we know, who knows, and what we still need to know about women, conflict and sexual violence'. Perhaps, keeping a respectful distance until we are sure that we have done our homework and are invited in is the best way to avoid the survivor becoming just a means to an end. As Choman Hardi so aptly writes, we must not allow our research to pick the wounds of survivors (*The Angry Survivor* 2015).

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