



Women in partnership: Making justice work for women

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1. BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Making Justice Work for Women: Rights, Resilience and Responses to Violence Against Women in Northern Uganda, Kenya and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is an interdisciplinary multi-partner research collaboration between Sydney University's Law School; Cosmopolitan Civil Societies at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS); ActionAid Australia; and ActionAid Kenya, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The research is identifying women's priorities in transitional justice in northern Uganda, Kenya and the DRC and the obstacles that prevent women from accessing justice and human rights.

Women survivors of violence face psychological trauma, social ostracism, economic disadvantage and lasting reproductive and other health problems. Through ActionAid's experience on the ground and work with communities affected by violence, it is apparent that existing formal justice measures are not adequately engaging with women to address their justice needs. Further, there is little empirical evidence beyond the anecdotal of women's lived experiences that advocacy organisations such as ActionAid can draw on as a platform to engage with policy and decision makers around these issues.

In late 2012, AusAID (now the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade) released the Australian Development Research Awards Scheme (ADRAS). ActionAid Australia staff recognised that the scheme provided an excellent opportunity to collaborate with academic researchers to collect credible evidence that could be used to inform and influence key actors in this space as well as inform programming decisions. ActionAid approached the International Portfolio within the Office of the Vice Chancellor at the University of Sydney for recommendations of academics who would be interested in the research idea and partnering under the ADRAS scheme. Researchers from the Division of Humanities and Social Sciences including Sydney Law School were identified and contacted. (One of these academics has since moved to UTS.)

After an initial meeting, shared interests, values and goals were identified and a research proposal was developed. The project was successfully funded, commenced in April 2013 and will be completed in the second half of 2015.

2. OBJECTIVES AND RATIONALE

Academic-NGO partnerships may be susceptible to misunderstanding and weakened because of paradigmatic differences and, at times, divergent objectives. Whilst unified in ensuring a high quality and successful project, as realised through this case study, such differences can also challenge NGO-academic partnerships and need to be recognised, discussed at the outset and revisited throughout the project.

For ActionAid Australia, working with academic partners from research institutions presented an opportunity to generate a strong and robust evidence base to inform and direct policy and programming that can withstand scrutiny. This evidence can be used to develop alternative ways of working and engage

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meaningfully with policy makers and donors. To date, ActionAid has outsourced much of its research work to external consultants, and thus opportunities for deepening research capacity within the organisation are often lost. Partnership and collaboration with academics offer the opportunity for strengthening organisational and staff understanding of research skills including research design, methodology, sampling, recruitment, data handling and analysis among ActionAid partners involved in this research.

Further, ActionAid expects research processes to be non-extractive, findings to be presented in a way that supports wide uptake, and structural causes of poverty to be influenced and challenged. This project seeks to address the current paucity of empirical evidence on the needs of women affected by violence and their unequal status and position in transitional justice processes compared to men. Similar to other, International Non-government Organisations (INGOs), ActionAid seeks to develop, share and validate research with communities that participate in research. For example, in this project each of the country-specific communication and engagement plans is being shaped to ensure that research findings can be shared in ways accessible to women participants and their communities. This approach also reflects ethical and responsible academic research.

The academic researchers involved in this project were interested in undertaking this research because each is committed to better understanding violence against women as a phenomenon, to better understanding how justice processes are responding to women's needs, and how women's lives can be improved. However, each of the academics also held a commitment to seeing their research have a practical impact, towards improving justice and equality for women through generating robust evidence to inform policy and law reform that directly benefits women and their communities. Exploring a partnership with ActionAid strengthened the potential for such real world impact. ActionAid brings to the research local, in-country knowledge, creates access to affected populations and provides pathways for communication and engagement with local communities and stakeholders. The partnership with ActionAid helps to legitimise academic involvement in the research as 'outsiders' – ActionAid represents a bridge between the academic world and the lived world, between out of country and in-country.

Overall, each partner entered into the project with an understanding that the partnership represented an opportunity to pursue rigorous, ethical and principled research, shaped by the realities of the communities the research seeks to involve. Such research ultimately has the potential for real life impact rather than limiting it to an academic audience through publication of scholarly journal articles only.

There is common ground in the knowledge that academics generate and the knowledge that NGOs use in their work. While we need to be careful not to overestimate what this kind of research can realistically achieve and the extent to which it can directly influence positive change, it has provided each partner with the opportunity to conduct ethical and rigorous research, which allows us to amplify voices and reflect priorities of poor and excluded communities.

3. RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP IN PRACTICE

Our research team invested substantial time initially in getting to know each other and understanding each other's perspectives, institutionally and individually. A meeting on partnership principles and associated behaviours at the initial stages of the research aimed to put these issues on the table and create relationships built on mutual understandings, trust, open and regular sharing of information, and active collaboration between partners. This resulted in the development of a Partnership Agreement; though not legally binding, it made explicit partners' commitments to a set of principles and ways of operating to guide behaviours and interactions within the limits of individual organisational



accountabilities and legal requirements. This was useful in anticipating and recognising potential challenges and putting in place related strategies. It also made explicit the shared values and interest in contributing to improvements for women affected by conflict which underpin the project. Initial efforts in building the partnership have also proven vital in strengthening the project and creating a solid foundation to enable challenges to be more easily tackled and surmounted.

It was very important to set up and agree on clear project timelines, roles, responsibilities and communication protocols between partners. This is particularly significant given the multifaceted, sensitive and complex nature of this research project, involving several partners across multiple countries, short-time frames and significant outputs.

We invested considerable time interrogating the overarching research questions and ensuring that all staff involved were on the same page regarding the core research aims and objectives of the partnership. We were clear that we wanted this to be a genuine partnership, and that the role of ActionAid country program staff should go beyond simply collecting data from the field for the university researchers to analyse. Early in the project we convened a week-long participatory research workshop in Nairobi, involving ActionAid country directors, women's rights coordinators and other key staff from the countries involved in the research. The research questions were explored in greater depth to ensure that they reflected the context across the three countries, adjusting the research questions and tools as needed for interviews with women affected by violence and key informants. Further, a communications, engagement and dissemination plan was discussed, looking at how to maximise strategic attention to and uptake of key findings in each country program, helping to ensure buy-in and engagement from in-country teams.

Following this workshop, an ActionAid Australia staff member, a university researcher and the local ActionAid staff responsible for the bulk of the collection of data pre-tested the research tools and processes in one research site in each country. These tools were adjusted as necessary through a process of collaborative reflection. This was invaluable for all involved, creating strong pathways for skill development and capacity building amongst ActionAid field staff. It also provided a rich opportunity for academic researchers to experience and understand first-hand the project context, an experience that affected how the academic researchers considered certain issues.

The level of relationship building and collaboration within the partnership is resource intensive and requires careful planning. Significant budget for travel and staff time both within NGO head offices and at the field level has to be factored in to project planning. For academics, this has meant balancing time for teaching and conducting the research along with budgeting for casual or sessional teachers to take over classes when travelling. There needs to be flexibility, margins for error and space for genuine and responsive processes among those involved in a partnership. Finally, it is important to recognise that a solid partnership often rests on intangibles such as the goodwill of individual researchers, their commitment and their passion for the cause.

The literature suggests that 'individual chemistry' is an important factor in research collaboration. 'Whilst institutional buy-in is crucial for academic-practitioner research collaboration, project team skills and knowledge, collaboration experience and personal motivation are key determinants for successful collaboration.' (Aniekwe et al., 2012) Our experience in this research confirms this, and significant energy has been directed to building and maintaining good relationships, open and respectful communication and mutual care between team members in Australia and across the three research countries.

4. RESEARCH OUTCOMES AND UPTAKE



The project is currently in the data collection phase, and team will also be moving to discussing research outcomes, preliminary findings or uptake at this point in the project is premature. However, there have been a number of strategic moments in 2014, including the Commission of the Status of Women (CSW) in New York and the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict in London in which we have participated. The team decided that such spaces would be useful for the purpose of introducing the research project to key stakeholders and discussing emergent themes. A number of strategic relationships were brokered at the CSW and the Global Summit which have laid an excellent foundation for the uptake of research findings. For example, the UN Coordinator for Sexual Violence in Conflict has offered to assist in launching the recommendations of the findings and is particularly keen to support our advocacy efforts for improving justice mechanisms to better address women's justice needs. Similarly, the Special Advisor on Gender to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court is keen to access our findings and recommendations. Additionally, they will be interviewed as key informants as part of the research.

5. LEARNING AND LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

Despite laying strong foundations for our partnership, a number of challenges have emerged for the team involved. Some of the lessons throughout this partnership have included:

- **Methodology and Recruitment.**

Differences between ActionAid's approach to research and academic approaches to research emerged during sampling and recruitment of research participants. As ActionAid often outsources research to consultants, ActionAid field staff were relatively unfamiliar with sampling methods and recruitment of research participants. In Northern Uganda, for example, the women who had been recruited for the pre-test had been sourced by ActionAid through three different NGOs. Each of these women, to some degree, reflected the views or focus of the NGO through which they'd been recruited and had previously engaged with. The approach to recruitment also resulted in a disproportionately higher number of women who were former combatants compared to the recorded incidence of women combatants in northern Uganda. Similarly, the ActionAid Kenya-based team recruited all women participants through their own programs. These modes of recruitment raised questions about representative sampling and potential bias and influence. Conducting the pre-test phase with ActionAid in-country staff and an Australian-based academic and NGO partner allowed us to identify methodological and practical issues which could affect the fieldwork and research outputs and further develop a shared understanding of methodology. Accordingly, we were able to review the field work guidelines for the field researchers and ensure that women participants would be recruited from diverse sources to more closely reflect the population's experiences, and that the process of recruitment would be documented.

- **Practical aspects of conducting research.**

The need for interviewers and translators to be women, and the need for interviews to be documented in ways that would ensure accuracy and integrity of the data, needed to be reconsidered. Further, in-country researchers have struggled with conducting semi-structured interviews. Despite several workshops on research methods and detailed country-specific research handbooks developed for the research, implementing these resources has been challenging. These difficulties have, at least in part, arisen as a consequence of interview schedules being developed for the purpose of academic human research ethics approval and then being shared with in-country researchers early on in the process. As a result, in-country researchers have struggled to use the interview schedule while conducting interviews, often following pre-set questions, rather than using the schedule as a guide for semi-



structured interview to obtain more nuanced and detailed data. Such challenges have revealed the importance of our training with researchers but also adapting research tools for their use, particularly when staff do not have prior research experience or confidence in conducting such interviews.

- **Translation and transcribing of interviews.**

Initially, some of the interviews were not translated and transcribed verbatim but summarised by the translators/transcribers. This has had the effect of diluting the data provided to the academic researchers for analysis. Conducting the research in phases and building in sufficient time for review of data and feedback to and from in-country researchers has assisted us in dealing with these challenges. It has also mitigated the potential impact on the research project in terms of time, cost and quality of the research data.

- **The different timeframes and speed at which the partners work.**

This has proved challenging throughout the course of the research. For example, strategic moments to discuss and present the research have arisen throughout the course of the project. These moments have led to opportunities to present some of the issues and themes that are emerging from the research in order to secure future funding and to promote policy and programming decisions with donors and duty bearers immediately. Academics are more guarded; they have a need to safeguard the integrity of the methodology and rigour of research data and findings to ensure credibility of the research. Agreement between partners on how and when to talk about initial research outputs has also remained important. Finding language that allows NGOs to discuss the initial research and their ongoing work that doesn't compromise the academic rigour or reputation of university partners is also helpful. Wording such as 'emergent themes' versus 'preliminary research findings' and understanding how to discuss the research outputs with appropriate caveats has been a way to mitigate such challenges.

REFERENCES

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