



Ethnographic research with victims of gross human rights violations: The case of post-conflict Nepal

Simon Robins

Post-war Reconstruction and Development Unit,
University of York, UK

This paper describes the experience of research into the needs of families of persons disappeared during the decade long Maoist “People’s War” in Nepal. The research aims to inform the ongoing transitional justice process in the country following the end of the decade long conflict in April 2006. It raises a number of methodological and ethical issues.

The Maoist insurgency in Nepal, and the state’s response to it, occurred largely in rural areas and disproportionately affected indigenous populations that are traditionally marginalised and disempowered. Disappearance was a favoured tactic of both the state and Maoist forces, with Nepal having the highest numbers of disappearances of any country for some years of the conflict. This research aimed to understand the global needs of families resulting from a disappearance in the family, most often of younger men. The typical research subject was thus an indigenous woman of little formal education, disempowered both within her family and community and in the broader society.

Challenges to this research have included:

- Ensuring the security of research subjects in areas where the population is divided by the conflict, and that remain under de facto Maoist control, or under the influence of those close to the state security forces.
- Ensuring that re-traumatisation does not occur in those who have suffered the extreme effects of exposure to violations involving both themselves and their loved ones.
- Creating an ethical framework that balances the potential benefits and risks of the research to subjects.
- Understanding ‘informed consent’, an alien concept in a peasant society that remains extremely deferential to any educated outsider; ensuring that trauma does not impact on decision making ability.

The solution to these issues was found by rooting the research in an effort to produce a tool for advocacy that could be used both *for* the families of the disappeared and *by* them. The research was steered through a participatory relationship with associations of families of those missing. This enabled members of the affected communities to act as a bridge between the researcher and victim families. The family associations were involved in developing the methodology of the study that was ethnographic, using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The interview format was developed through a pilot phase in collaboration with the family associations. The associations also provided advice about security and psychological aspects concerning particular families and individuals and were able to provide counselling and support to families around the research process.