



Accessing Returnee Refugee Women in Post War Liberia: Practical, Ethical, and Gender Considerations

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In the aftermath of the cold war, African states have experienced violent conflicts mostly within rather than between states. The small West African country of Liberia was plunged into a brutal 14-year civil war between 1989 and 2003, a period during which an estimated 350,000 persons became refugees in various West African countries. According to UNHCR (2006), an estimated 200,000 refugees had returned to the country by the end of 2005 with females constituting about 51% of the returnee population.

In order to examine various gendered aspects of refugee return as part of my doctoral work, field research was carried out in Liberia in September-October 2006. A triangulation of (qualitative) methods including interviews, focus group discussions and non-participant observation was utilized. The underlying methodology was interpretive, constructivist and post modern feminist, while the theoretical framework employed was an innovative integrated gender theory. However the research outcomes were to be determined by the problems of accessing the returnee women who were the proposed primary participants in the research - both in terms of access to the setting and “extracting useful answers” (Albert 2005: 67)

Hence, practical problems relating to access had to do with locating the returnees who were dispersed throughout the population; reaching remote regions that hosted the preponderant number of refugees in a dilapidated post war situation; security problems that also placed the researcher in-between disputing community factions; probing silence and taboo; insider-outsider issues and; the use of research assistants. Peculiar ethical issues that dogged the research in the field related to measures needed to gain trust among suspicious Liberians; disclosing sponsorship and uses of the research; the use of middlemen (government, NGO, UNHCR staff and logistics); paying the participants-subjects; use of tape recorders and cameras; and ensuring validity and reliability of information gathered. Gender considerations related to the researcher herself being a woman in an opportunistic environment; and probing how underlying societal gender norms influence data collection.

In general, a triangulation of methods was used to achieve validity and reliability, to confront the various challenges of doing research in a post war context as well as to achieve ethical accountability to the research participants and academic tradition. The research results help us conclude that addressing the various practical considerations and gender sensitivities in post conflict research, though a delicate process, will yield results in affirming the authoritativeness of the researched and the integrity of the researcher.