
ACCESSING RETURNEE REFUGEE WOMEN IN POSTCONFLICT LIBERIA: PRACTICAL, ETHICAL AND GENDER CONSIDERATIONS IN RESEARCH*

By
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ABSTRACT

The central objective of this paper is to identify and analyze certain practical problems, ethical dilemmas and gender factors that affect access to research participants, in this case returnee refugee women in Liberia, and the possible implications for research outcomes. Various authors have noted that while there is agreement about the perils of doing research in post conflict areas, little is known about other important aspects of carrying out such research, and particularly, about the problems of accessing research participants. This paper helps us conclude that addressing the various practical considerations, ethical dilemmas 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.

Key words: Access, ethics, gender, research, returnee refugees, postconflict, women.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a discussion of certain practical issues, ethical dilemmas and gender-related factors that emerged in research carried out in Liberia in September- October 2006 to explore the gender dimensions of the reintegration of returnee refugee women in Liberia. The central objective of this paper is to identify and analyze these issues as they affect access to research participants, in this case returnee refugee women in Liberia, and the possible implications for research outcomes. It is generally agreed that rigorous research presents challenges that must be anticipated in the research design in the planning stages of the study. However, researching conflict and post conflict has peculiar challenges as attested in various research reports from various backgrounds including political science, sociology, anthropology, economics, international relations and peace and conflict studies¹. In spite of the burgeoning literature on the challenges of doing field research in post-/ conflict regions, some writers have observed that there are some gaps in the literature that need to be addressed by scholars.

In a review of the literature on the ethics of research in conflict and post- conflict zones, Susannah Campbell² notes that authors fail to clearly specify what is different about doing research in conflict zones other than the heightened vulnerability of the research subjects due to the potential threat to their lives and livelihoods posed by the conflict. The reality in truth is that there are so many other important issues arising from such research that need to be identified and given explicit treatment in the literature. Olawale Albert³ identifies one of such difficulties, the problem of access: "People doing research in conflict zones face essential difficulties, not only because of the physical risks involved, but also in terms of the problem of access...." And in broad disciplinary terms, Cristof P. Kurz⁴

¹ Elisabeth Wood, 'The ethical challenges of field research in conflict zones,' *Qualitative Sociology* 29 (3) 2006, 373-86; Carolyn Ellis, 'Emotional and ethical quagmires in returning to the field,' *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 24 (1) 1995, 68-98.

² Susannah Campbell, 'Literature Review: Ethics of Research in Conflict and Post Conflict Zones,' Workshop on Field Research and Ethics in Post-Conflict Environments, the Program on States and Security, City University of New York, Dec 4-5 2008, 2.

³ Olawale Albert, 'Applying Social Work Practice to the study of ethnic militias: the Oduduwa People's Congress in Nigeria' in E. Porter, G. Robinson, et al eds. *Researching Conflict in Africa: Insights and Experiences*. (Tokyo: United Nations University, 2005), 64-89, 67.

⁴ Cristof P. Kurz, 'Eyewitness to conflict and peace: Key Informants and Causal Accounts of War and Peacebuilding,' draft paper for Workshop on Field Research and Ethics in Post-Conflict Environments, Dec 4-5 2008.

observes that the discipline of Political Science (from which this researcher also writes) does not provide enough guidance about reaching micro- level informants: “Little guidance exists for students of political science or international relations (IR) on how to conduct interviews with individuals in conflict and post-conflict settings...”

While this paper seeks to address the above gaps, it also attempts to provide possible recommendations and suggestions to other researchers in meeting these challenges in the field. Specifically, this paper will be useful for providing guidance for ‘outsider’ researchers, because, “although most authors call for a high degree of sensitivity on the part of the researcher to the culture under study and the particular dynamics of the conflict or post conflict zone, they provide few recommendations as to how an *external* researcher can build this degree of sensitivity.”⁵ This paper thus further makes this important contribution to the literature.

The questions addressed and raised in this paper are many: What is different about doing research in a post war context? How can the peace/postconflict researcher define access to research participants and attempt to achieve this? What are the various challenges the researcher faces in accessing or reaching the potential research participants in a precarious post war context? How does the outsider researcher gain permission to carry out research in the proposed research field? What peculiar challenges arise from the sampling design employed in this kind of (qualitative) research? How do logistical problems impede the researcher's physical access to research participants in such a context? Are there peculiar problems to be encountered in accessing returnee refugee women specifically? How can the researcher ensure the security and safety of both the research participants and him/herself in an uncertain post conflict environment? Can the psychological safety of traumatized participants be guaranteed in the researcher's research design and procedures? If so/not, how/ why? What other ethical issues arise for the researcher while conducting field work in a delicate post war context? How does the outsider researcher gain the trust or confidence of the research participants? To what extent should the researcher give full self disclosure in attempting to gain access to the research field? How do the involvement of several ‘gatekeepers’ and ‘middlemen’ facilitate

⁵ S. Campbell, ‘Literature Review,’ 2, emphasis added.

access and/or compromise access simultaneously? How do underlying societal gender norms influence access to women research participants? Are there advantages/disadvantages in being a female researcher in an opportunistic post war environment? These questions amongst others are addressed in this paper in the context of this researcher's field work in Liberia.

The paper is discussed in five major sections: a description of the background and conceptual framework of the paper, discussion of the practical challenges, the ethical constraints, the gender considerations and then conclusions for field researchers and other academics are drawn based on the experiences narrated.

SETTING THE CONTEXT: Researching Post War Liberia

In the aftermath of the historic cold war, African states have experienced a proliferation of violent conflicts subsisting mainly *within* states, rather than between states. Another important characteristic of these uncivil "civil" wars in Africa is that they tended to be protracted, simmering and flaring up repeatedly over extended periods of time, eventually resulting in the weakening of state power to such an extent that the reconstruction of the state often becomes necessary at the end of the war period. Another important outcome of these wars is the large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) produced. However refugee statistics worldwide today indicate widespread repatriation, that is, return of refugees to their country of origin, either because the conflict situation that propelled their initial flight has abated or simply because they are no longer very welcome in the refugee- hosting country.

Within this scenario, the small West African country of Liberia presents a typical case of all of the above. In spite of its remarkable history of being a settlement of returned freed slaves from the Americas, and in spite of its history of almost 133 years of relative calm after independence in 1847, Liberia was plunged into a brutal and protracted civil war between 1989 and 2003. This fourteen year period seriously retarded any progress the country might have gained in the long years since it was founded. At the height of the

war, 700 000 Liberians fled to neighboring countries in a single year.⁶ It is estimated that in the entire course of the war, three-quarters of the 3 million strong population became either refugees or internally displaced. By the end of the war in 2003 when a Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed, about 350 000 persons were refugees in various neighboring West African countries. However, by the start of 2006 (the time of data collection for the research on which this paper is based) the UNHCR⁷ estimated that about 200 000 Liberian refugees had returned to the country, with females constituting about 51 percent of the returnee population.

The main objective of the research described in this paper was to explore various gendered aspects of refugee return and reintegration in Liberia. The issues that were to be discussed with the returnee refugee women related to their various experiences and challenges of return; specific socio-personal factors affecting their reintegration; the women's knowledge of and participation in the governance processes relevant to their reintegration; and their perception of the success or progress of their reintegration. For this purpose, field research was carried out in Liberia between September and October 2006.

The choice of methods was influenced by feminist research approaches that embrace qualitative methods. In an article reviewing gender research in violently divided societies, Erin K. Baines⁸ observes that feminist methods "potentially provide more context-rich analysis by situating research subjects in their everyday lives and collecting data that specifically seeks to reflect the participant's perspectives." Consequently this exploratory research adopted a triangulation of qualitative methods, specifically, the semi-structured interview, in-depth/ unstructured interviews, focus group discussions, non-participant observation and documentary review⁹. The target population for the research was primarily adult returnee refugee women who returned to Liberia between 2003 (the

⁶ Lester Hyman, *United States Policy Toward Liberia 1822 to 2003: Unintended Consequences?* (New Jersey: Africana Homestead Legacy Publishers, 2003) 30.

⁷ UNHCR, *UNHCR News Stories*, January 16, 2006.

⁸ Erin K. Baines, 'Gender Research in Violently divided Societies: Methods and ethics of "international" researchers in Rwanda,' in E. Porter, G. Robinson, et al eds. *Researching Conflict in Africa: Insights and Experiences* (Tokyo: United Nations University, 2005) 140- 155, 146.

⁹ Abdussalami A. Sambo, *Research Methods in Education* (Ibadan, Stirling-Horden, 2005); A. Lacey & D. Luff, *Trent Focus for Research and Development in Primary Health Care: An Introduction to Qualitative Analysis*, Trent Focus, 2001. <http://www.trentfocus.org.uk/resources>

suspension of active hostilities following the exit of President Charles Taylor) and September 2006 (the time of main data collection for this research). Other participants included community leaders, government officials, and staff of both international, local and community based non- governmental organizations.

Non-probabilistic sampling methods were employed involving a combination of purposive sampling and the snowballing or referral method. Four of the five administrative counties in the country with the highest number of returnee refugees were purposively selected; while returnee women were identified primarily by referral from family members, agency staff involved with their reintegration or trainers in their skills training centers.

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.

CONCEPTUALIZING ACCESS

It is pertinent to clarify the concept of access as used in this research paper. Two semantic meanings are relevant here: access defined as a means of entering or accessing a place; and access defined as to get information, or to have the opportunity or right to experience or use something. Both meanings are intertwined and express the right or opportunity for approach, entry, contact or use (The Encarta Dictionaries). These meanings fit this work well. However, from the African literature on doing research in conflict or post war areas, I find most apposite Agyeman and Albert's definitions.

Agyeman¹⁰ who studied Liberian and Togolese refugees in Ghana differentiates between the problems pertaining to gaining *physical* access and those pertaining to gaining *social* access. Physical access has to do with approaching relevant authorities to gain permission to conduct the research and to gain their cooperation in guaranteeing passage to the actual site for the research or survey. Social access however has to do with apprehending the refugees themselves and getting them to be available and willing to grant

¹⁰ D. K. Agyeman, 'Accessing Refugees as a Minority Group in an Economically Depressed Host Society: The participatory approach and ethical implications – the case of Liberian and Togolese Refugees in Ghana,' *African Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies*, 1 (2) 2003.

interviews- something entirely up to the research subjects themselves. Albert¹¹ classifies the above aspects of gaining access simply as “access to the setting.” He however adds a further definition of access as referring also to the possibility or opportunity of “extracting useful answers” from the researched.

Based on the above definitions by the scholars cited, I here reformulate the concept of access as consisting five levels: gaining permission from relevant authorities to conduct the research; physically getting into the research field; locating the research population/subjects themselves in their usual/ habitual setting; gaining the participants’ willingness to grant an interview or participate in a group discussion, and; digging out honest (true?) information.

This definition is depicted in Figure 1 below. The concentric circles indicate that, the researcher must penetrate the outer concentric circle (gaining permission) before other decisions related to access become possible, and s/he must penetrate the next concentric circle (physical presence in the field) before the next level of access become possible; and so on.

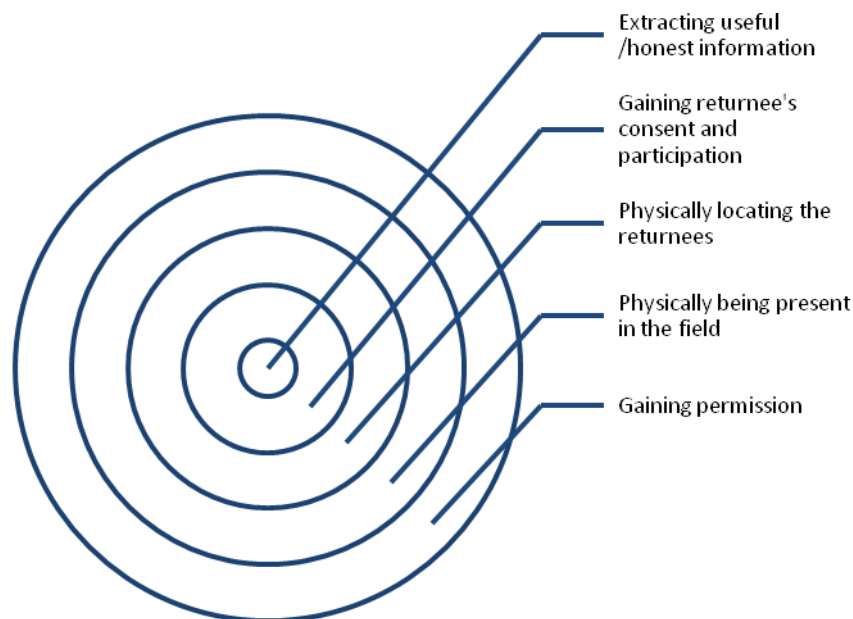


Figure 1: Five Concentric Levels of Access to research participants

¹¹ O. Albert, 'Applying Social work Practice.'

The problem of access is discussed in the following sections as it affected the Liberia study.

PRACTICAL PROBLEMS OF ACCESS

It is pertinent to note here that many of the issues discussed below were anticipated before the fieldwork started, and accommodated in the research design which remained flexible. I also consulted a variety of persons with experience in doing field research and attended several workshops and seminars specifically about carrying out field work in conflict affected settings. In spite of this, many of the issues raised below were surprises, or they were simply manifestations of old problems in a unique way in the Liberian setting.

Getting permission to carry out the research in Liberia was not a problem at all. As an ECOWAS citizen, I was given free entrance into Liberia with a visa upon entry, and only given a one month limit, renewable subsequently at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As soon as I arrived in the country, I reported to the Nigerian embassy to register my presence and see what possible ways I could gain their assistance during my stay in the field. It was definitely a waste of time, as I was given the barest courtesy and no opportunity at all for any other interaction. My next port of call was the government agency with the mandate for refugees, returnees and internally displaced, the Liberia Refugee Repatriation and Rehabilitation Commission (LRRRC), armed with a letter of introduction from my institution, the University of Ibadan. Express permission was granted and throughout my stay in Liberia, the agency and its staff accorded me every compliment in terms of access to documented information, time for interviews, linkage with their officers in the field, and even facilitating communications with the field on my behalf.

However, no agency was able to give me a sampling frame consisting all returnees to the country and their areas of return and specific addresses. This is because the majority of refugees return “spontaneously”, that is, without assistance or sponsorship from the government or UNHCR and they are not always systematically registered as they enter the country since immigration authorities may not be alerted as to their passage. Besides, the majority return and are dispersed into rural areas where they blend into the landscape as they are taken in by relatives and friends. A large number also do not return to their counties of origin for various reasons, and thus remain untraceable. It was for this reason

that non-probabilistic sampling methods were necessary and the purposive and snowballing methods preferred for this study.

Related to the above problem is that of *physically getting to the research areas* I needed to visit for the study. In spite of all I'd heard and read about the post war setting, I was still a little bit flabbergasted to find that it was much easier for me to enter Liberia from outside than it was for me to visit other counties *within* Liberia outside the capital, Monrovia. While there was virtually no problem getting around Montserrado County (after all, scarcity of cabs to and from the business districts is a problem to be found in every city around the world), and getting into neighboring Grand Cape Mount County, the rest of the country seemed inaccessible to me from reports I received about the road conditions. Specifically I was discouraged from attempting to get to Nimba and Lofa counties, because in the case of Nimba County, a former rebel stronghold during the war, roads and bridges were badly damaged and in need of repair, disallowing access for small vehicles and the roads virtually intercepted in places due to the effects of the heavy rainfalls on the earthen parts of the road. In the case of Lofa county, once the country's breadbasket, and also one-time rebel stronghold, it would be impossible to make the journey in only one day due to the distance coupled with the terrible conditions of the roads, far worse than the Monrovia-Gbarnga- Ganta (Nimba) route. I was given a picture of pathways filled with rivers of mud and rocks, and the possibility of being waylaid by miscreants was also a concern. The consensus by all my advisers on the best route to Lofa was to board an UNMIL helicopter. In both cases, my journey would be further hampered by rainy weather conditions¹².

It was imperative though that I visit these two counties firstly to observe for myself the post war situation given the historical significance of these two counties; and secondly, because the two counties host a preponderant number of the returnees to Liberia from Guinea and Sierra Leone especially, with Lofa alone hosting the highest number of returnees in the entire country¹³. Additionally, I was aware that research carried out in conflict and post conflict settings is inherently difficult and consequently the breakdown of infrastructure in Liberia could never be accepted as a defensible justification for omitting

¹² Never mind that I had watched the weather in Liberia for months before getting there; the rains remained a challenge.

¹³ According to both UNHCR (2006) and LRRRC (2006) figures.

these regions from my study. Thus to reach Nimba County, I eventually hired a four wheel drive with a driver who claimed to have been a driver for Charles Taylor back in the days, and who knew the route and countryside intimately including alternative routes if necessary. The journey which covers approximately 200-300 kilometers took five hours to enter Ganta, the first major town in Nimba county, and an additional two hours the next day to reach Saclepea, another town closer to the Liberian border, and probably no more than 50- 60 kilometers from Ganta, save for the bad roads. In order to reach Lofa, I waited in line (in order of priority) to board an UNMIL passenger helicopter flight. However I was stranded there for two additional days due to bad weather conditions that inhibited the helicopter flights from flying out of Monrovia to Lofa. Indeed only conflict research in Africa could possibly boast such an interesting milieu.

Physically locating the returnees. Arriving at the selected regions raised the need to work with ‘middlemen’ – government, NGO, UNHCR staff and others who are more familiar with the terrain and locality and have the needed facilities to aid the success of my work. Besides, given the difficulty of locating the returnees, short of going door to door with its attendant risks, the help of agency staff was imperative. In Monrovia, for example, my initial contact with returnee women was made possible by the LRRRC who assigned a field monitor to assist me, and then other contacts in Monrovia was made by referral or snowballing from the initial group of women I met. The same process was used in Grand Cape Mount County, and in Ganta and Saclepea in Nimba County. In Voinjama, Lofa County, the only way to get around the hilly town was with a four wheel drive, this time provided for me by the UNHCR sub-office there¹⁴. Although these solutions I adopted helped me to retain my research design, undeniably, this might have had some effect on some of the participants in the study who found it hard to believe that I was an independent researcher, not funded by UNHCR to somehow do a covert evaluation of their activities.

It was also practical to employ research assistants as the volume of work to be achieved within the period of my stay in Liberia was too much for I alone to accomplish. The research assistants were needed to help in conducting a few interviews with returnee women when I would be unavailable due to other appointments; to facilitate focus group

¹⁴ Of course, I had to sign a waiver absolving the organisation of liability in case of any injury to my person et.c.

discussions by taking notes; and at least in one case, interpreting questions during group discussions into the Liberian pidgin English (which I could understand from many years of interacting with Liberians in Nigeria, but which I could not speak). I was looking for smart young, preferably female persons with a good command of English, at least a high school education and preferably a college student or graduate, a little experience with conducting field work, with as little prior connection to my research participants as possible, and with good people skills. I was particular about these criteria because I wanted someone who would be able to understand the objectives and scientific/academic requirements of my work, who was not so close to the research participants that she would presume knowledge of their experiences and thereby bias the study, and who was not so experienced in doing research that she would impose her prior experiences in other researches on my own research design and thereby alter the outcomes of the work. Given the particular sensitive nature of the kinds of questions we would be asking, I required someone of high integrity, and who would yet be comfortable with the different kinds of people we would be working with. I also knew I would need more than one such person, as the research would be conducted in various locations that are far away from one another and I would probably need to get different assistants in the different research locations.

It was an extremely uphill task locating the right kind of people as assistants given my prior non-familiarity with the country and, given the potential damage or good these persons can do to my research, I was extremely picky. Eventually I was able to recruit persons who speak English well (and thereby would be able to understand my instructions explicitly), and who possessed at least a high school education and had worked with a government or other agency, as well as one college undergraduate and one masters' degree holder – all of which understood how to carry out research for academic purposes, and had participated previously in other research efforts.

I took time to train them for my study and gave them copies of my research proposal and the interview guide(s) to read, digest and practice with. Admittedly though, one can never exactly measure to what extent the research assistant's presence or participation affected the research process and outcomes. Therefore, I conducted all in-depth/unstructured interviews by myself^{1,2} and the preponderant number of semi-structured interviews, allowing the assistant to conduct the latter only when I had to meet

up with other interview appointments, or as in when I had to travel out of Monrovia to Nimba County. In all cases, the assistant's work was closely supervised and daily reviewed.

Gaining returnees' participation. As a Nigerian, I was at a basic level, an outsider in Liberia, and thus faced certain challenges on this basis that probably would not have arisen for a Liberian researcher. In the first place, on getting to the field I needed time to orient myself to the environment and locate necessary agencies and ministries. Therefore I spent the first 30% of my stay mingling with the Liberian people at home, in taxis, restaurants, at church, in the market, on the streets, in offices- simply to get a feel for the local ways of thinking and doing and speaking, and to better attune my ear to their distinctive pidgin English, sometimes referred to as 'Congo'. I also listened to people talking, or struck up conversations about the general situation of things for the ordinary Liberian in the post war period, and about ways the country had changed for them- issues I could never read from any well researched magazine or agency report.

The time invested was not a waste. By the time I began interviews in the middle of my second week in the country, I had developed an empathy and sensitivity to the context that I believe opened so many doors for me, and made people relax around me. By mixing Nigerian pidgin with a little Liberian pidgin, some regular English and some common Liberian expressions, I was able to communicate far better than a non-African could have. Therefore in some ways I was both an outsider and an insider. As Marie Smyth¹⁵ in the path breaking edited book *Researching Conflict in Africa: Insights and Experiences* puts it: "Perhaps I am an 'insider' in a group of those who have experience living for protracted periods in divided societies. And perhaps 'insider' and 'outsider' experience is multiple and layered, rather than singular and one dimensional...." Certainly, in terms of my gender, I was an 'insider' able to talk woman-to-woman with the returnee participants in the study and broach subjects that they would not have felt comfortable discussing with a male, Liberian or not. Obviously then, part of the problem of *extracting useful answers* was addressed by my identification with the research participants in the above ways, while at the same time, as a non- Liberian I was highly sensitive to peculiarities of behavior and

¹⁵ Marie Smyth, 'Insider- Outsider Issues in Researching violently divided societies' in E. Porter, G. Robinson, et al eds. *Researching Conflict in Africa: Insights and Experiences*, (Tokyo, United Nations University, 2005) 9-23, 12.

meaning that enabled me to discover and appreciate facts that would have been hidden to the insider Liberian eye.

Due to the nature of my study, a couple of issues that I intended to broach with the research participants were declared taboo by at least two of my key informants. These issues were the practice of female genital cutting and the activities of secret societies for women and men. Having been warned not to speak openly of these, I faced a dilemma as to whether to probe into them, or to avoid them in the interviews, and if so how to otherwise collect information on them. Two solutions presented themselves to me. First, I decided to ask about these taboo issues from the very key informants who told me to avoid them. Since these persons themselves were Liberians, staff of two key international NGOs, they had the knowledge and sophistication to share at least *some* facts with me as a researcher, and at the same time this freed me from the possibility of endangering myself and the ordinary people who are my primary participants. Secondly, I decided not to remove these issues from the interview schedule given to the research assistants who interviewed returnee women and who are themselves young Liberian women. Their discussion of the matter with their fellow Liberian women was not taboo, and therefore could bear no possible negative consequences. Although the information I eventually retrieved was small compared to what was originally intended, the research design did not suffer for it as the issues were not central to my study at that point, and neither did the research assistants report any problems as they also skipped the question whenever they felt they couldn't ask it.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS AND CONSTRAINTS

Everywhere I went in the field, and in virtually every situation I found myself, I was constantly reminded of the precarious post war conditions in Liberia at the time, as I had to be mindful of personal security, as well as the security of my informants. This is because, in doing research in deeply divided and conflict or post conflict settings, the ethical principles of non- maleficence (or the do no harm commandment) takes on a peculiar seriousness.

According to Abdul Karim Bangura¹⁶, “the peace researcher should evaluate the costs and benefits with respect to the participants and their society... any risks to the participant(s) and society should be minimal or non-existent.” Sambo¹⁷ iterates that “the ethical burden is on the researcher to ensure that no harm comes to [the target population for the study].” I also believe that attending to my personal security is a matter of responsibility to my research participants as the sharing of their time and emotions with me must not be in vain as it would if harm came to me.

For personal security, my budget for the fieldwork already contained an allowance for the provision of a bodyguard. However, I realized on arrival in Liberia that was quite unnecessary. All the security warnings I received from my Liberian hosts and garnered from the bulletin boards of the agencies I visited indicated that what was most needed was personal awareness of whatever environment I found myself in, and avoidance of late hours, or travelling alone as a foreigner. In truth I was already familiar with many of these security measures as living in Nigeria, the cities of Lagos and Port-Harcourt to be precise can be similar to living in a war zone. Once again I felt “at home” in Liberia. Not taking things for granted anyway, I always told my hosts my destination for the day, walked only in open, public places most of the time, held my bag close to my front on the streets, avoided crowds and suspicious looking characters and cabs, stayed out no longer than 6pm most days, carried two cell phones with batteries always well charged, memorized my host’s cell phone number... and always went out with a prayer for protection.

However in Monrovia, the greatest burden these measures placed on me was that going back to my host’s residence in one of the suburbs early in the evening sometimes required me to stop the day’s activities as early as 3pm to begin the journey back home and beat the worst of the traffic buildup at the close of business at 4pm. This irked me a lot as it seriously constrained my time.

In Nimba County, I almost (willingly, unknowingly) walked into trouble. I was interviewing a returnee refugee man, a Mandingo whose house had been seized and occupied in his absence, when in the heat of the moment he stood up and gestured for me

¹⁶ Abdul Karim Bangura, in Erin McCandless and Abdul Karim Bangura, *Peace Research for Africa: Critical Essays on Methodology*. Series edited by Mary E. King and Ebrima Sall, (Addis Ababa, University for Peace Africa Programme, 2007) 80.

¹⁷ A. Sambo, *Research in Education*, 378.

to follow him to see for myself some of the houses and lands taken away from his people. I willingly started to follow (since “seeing is believing”) when my research assistant- guide, who had worked in that community for over six years and had been waiting at a distance for me to conclude the interview stepped over and asked where we were going. When we told him, he cast me a long suffering look and turned to dissuade the elderly man from going in that direction. My guide told me later that not only was tension rife in that community between the disputing parties to the land issue, but riots had broken out spontaneously a number of times with people killed indiscriminately each time. I had obviously volunteered to be the match point for another confrontation between the disputing parties.

In terms of the safety of my respondents, their voluntary participation was emphasized and complete confidentiality guaranteed. However, Babbie’s¹⁸ observation is apposite in understanding research in the post conflict context: “Social research should never injure the people being studied, regardless of whether they volunteer for the study. Perhaps the clearest instance of this norm in practice concerns the revealing of information that would embarrass them or endanger their home life, friendships, jobs and so forth.... *It is possible for subjects to be harmed psychologically in the course of a study....*” Sometimes it is difficult to estimate the possibility of psychological agony a respondent may experience by talking to the researcher; sometimes it is quite obvious, as in one particular instance.

I was referred to some returnee women working in the same organization and after making an appointment to meet with each of them after work, I arrived for the interviews. One woman however, the last interviewed that day, did not say much, just said her experience of the war was not good, but she thanks God for everything. Considering that I couldn’t probe her without violating her privacy somewhat, I got ready to leave. Seeing that I was on the verge of leaving, my contact person in the organization came over to where I was seated with this woman and said something to the effect that I would need more time with this particular woman to hear all her experiences, and urged me to take her phone number and make an appointment for another time. Well, I did take the woman’s number, and made a tentative appointment that I eventually couldn’t keep partly because I was busy

¹⁸ Earl Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, third edition (California, Wadsworth Inc., 1983) 453-454, emphasis added.

elsewhere, but particularly because I was uneasy about the arrangement. I was uneasy because the appointment was not actually volunteered by the research participant herself; and secondly, I sensed the woman was really not ready to relive those experiences and, without any training in psychotherapy, I was not ready to dig deep into this woman's mind, and probably cause profound emotional or psychological disturbance. That would be ethically wrong.

Everywhere I went in Liberia I was immediately identified as an outsider and asked whether I am Ghanaian, Sierra Leonean or Nigerian – based essentially on my accent. The impression this gave me was that the people were rather suspicious of me and also somewhat curious as to my intentions: (Would I really come all the way to Liberia from Nigeria *simply* to do research? Or similarly, why would I come *all* the way from Nigeria to start asking them personal questions?). Thus in order to gain the cooperation and trust of the potential participants, two things were needed: an introduction of myself and my research; and informal one-on-one confidence building with the specific person.

While introducing myself and the aims and objectives of my research was quite easy, disclosing details about the sponsorship and uses of the research posed quite a dilemma to me. This is because, in some parts of the country I visited, the local people were used to being given 'tangible' incentives to participate in research and evaluation programs. Therefore, I was asked so many times, sometimes even before I'd said my name, who my sponsor was or for whom the research was being done. Honestly, I did not at the time have a sponsor for the research. However, the field work *alone* was sponsored by a small seed grant given by the New York- based Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation as I was a part of their African Young Scholars Program 2006, for which I was also supposed to produce an article. Beyond that agreement, I was essentially a self-sponsored student, with limited funds and yet a long way to go. Due to this I felt conflicted about how to respond to the imperative for self disclosure, and at the same time, not jeopardize the chances of cooperation since I could not give the expected incentives to the participants as an academic researcher. I decided then to explain my full sponsorship details to the government agency that granted me permission to conduct the research in the country; and approach other participants in the research ^(ch 17) simply as a student from Nigeria. Whenever asked directly though, I surrendered the information about my sponsorship. Concerning

the uses of the research, though, in all instances I made it clear that the results of the research would be published and distributed far and wide¹⁹.

Once I gained physical access to the participant, I still needed to somehow, subtly convince them of the need to give me their time. For some, the formal letter of introduction from my university was enough, for others, I needed to explain all about my country and my research and me before they felt relaxed enough to talk to me. With many of the returnees, I had to be introduced by someone they knew or by the Liberian assistant(s) with me, tried to find common ground with them, spent time with them, made them laugh or at least smile, ate with them, showed concern for their child(-ren), and so forth. I believe the interviews were all the better rewarding because of these efforts.

It was impossible to use my tape recorder and even camera in almost all interviews save a few. I was already suspect to most of the people I had just met and having worked hard enough to secure their willing and friendly cooperation it was entirely too obvious to me that I would risk the loss of that cooperation if I insisted on using the tape recorder. As it were, they were already unsure about the possible uses to which the information they gave me would be put in my far away country, much less if I recorded their very voices. Even one highly placed government official, one of my key informants, bluntly told me if I used the tape recorder he would edit his responses very carefully before voicing them. I had a choice to make between getting my verbatim copy, and losing the spontaneity and honesty I required for the study.

In every case where I was faced with this choice, I chose not to use the recorder, and for all interviews- even for those I was given permission to use the recorder, I recorded the sessions by hand in my unique shorthand for the best verbatim copy I could approximate. However, it was imperative to record the group discussions as there was no way the interaction could have been otherwise accurately captured. Interestingly though, all the participants still gave their permission for me to quote them in my study. As for the camera, which I always carried around in my bag, I could not summon up the courage to ask to take pictures with people whom I had just assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

¹⁹ Since then, various aspects of the research findings have been presented at various conferences and workshops as far and wide as Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; Kolkata, India; New York and California, USA; Geneva, Switzerland; Kampala, Uganda; Cairo, Egypt; Ibadan, Nigeria, and definitely in Monrovia itself.

So I used the camera basically as a tourist implement, taking pictures of interesting sights and places, never the people I interviewed.

Finally, I had to make an ethical decision about whether to offer incentives or payment to 'encourage' enthusiastic participation by the primary target population – the returnee women. This was an ethical problem based on the fact that in the academic tradition, paying the participants cash or kind in any direct way compromises the scientific uses of the research. However, many of the women I met were poor, unemployed, single mothers, or female heads of households – and just plain hungry. For many of these women, Liberia is far less developed and far much more difficult economically than the country of asylum where they had scraped a living and had refugee aid. Although I did apprise them of the possible longer term benefits of my research for their situation and for their country, and made no promises whatsoever to them, I felt utterly wretched leaving them hungry in the meantime. After all, they or their children might be dead from starvation, homelessness or disease by the time my research is analyzed, interpreted, converted to policy objectives for decision makers, disseminated to stakeholders and then policy options eventually adopted and implemented. That, I think is the real ethical wrong.

So, while I couldn't pay them, I decided after the interviews and group discussions in Monrovia and Saclepea, on the day I was to leave each area in which the women were clustered, I entertained the participants with food and drinks either prepared by them or bought in town. In spite of doing this, I still retain the feeling that I ought to have done more – but that can be debated.

GENDER CONSIDERATIONS

These issues relate to matters arising on the one hand from the gender of the research participants, and on the other, the gender of the researcher. Although I was mentally and physically prepared for any challenge I might meet in the field, I was startled awake to the reality of the impact of underlying societal gender norms on my research while moderating one focus group discussion in Nimba County. I had decided for the first time, and for reasons of expediency to allow a mixed group of male and female returnees in the focus group. When asked about the challenges of return and reintegration, the women responded first by speaking of their economic activities, various hardships such as the loss

of a child, and many other problems which they said were more than they ever had before. The women's narrative was interrupted by one of the men who said the only problem "all the Mandingo people" had was getting their houses and lands back. The two men in the group then took time to explain the issue as it affects them, and attempts by the moderator (myself) to move on to other issues basically failed as they simply defined everything else happening in terms of getting their property back. The women did get involved in the discussion, but they also concluded the session by stating that except for the land and property problem, "everything is okay." If I had not recorded the earlier part of the discussion, I would have concluded that I imagined it. That 'experiment' demonstrated to me how easily men's agenda become touted as 'everybody's problem,' ignoring the equally pertinent challenges of living for women.

I must admit that my own gender identity as the researcher did affect my access to the research field. I have already mentioned the fact that the returnee women felt comfortable talking to a fellow woman about sensitive issues such as abuse and abandonment. In gaining access to offices of key agencies and staff, I recall many instances in which I would enter an office, introduce myself and my purpose, and be met with a disbelieving exclamation that this "young girl" is conducting a PhD research; or instructions being given to someone to give every assistance to "this young lady." Although this indicated to me the low expectations that that society seems to have for young women and girls, it did open doors for me in almost every instance.

However this amusing friendliness was going to backfire when an extra-friendly agency staff, who had been instrumental in helping me gain access to so many other offices and officials, asked me repeatedly to agree to a dinner date with him, while on the other hand delaying the process of helping me access another part of the country. I have since debated with myself what could have been the harm in having a meal with the man; after all I *had* shared lunch with him and some other friends at the organization's cafeteria on one occasion. I believe my adverse reaction to, and interpretation of the dinner invitation was based on my own understanding of appropriate male - female relationships based on my own society's dictates and based on my personal background. In my country (as in many other places), it is deemed inconsequential to occasionally share a lunch table with a colleague of the opposite sex, but considered extremely significant to accept an invitation

to dinner to eat usually elsewhere, outside the 'restrictive' work environment. Such a rendezvous would be considered a 'date', and I had no intention of engaging in such a social engagement while on a 'business trip.' I would also be violating my personal code of ethics. In a sense then, while taking into consideration other limiting personal factors, I was as much an object of my society's gender dictates as the returnee women I mentioned earlier.

How I handled this challenge? I was too busy to even visit that particular office as I was visiting other locations meanwhile, so I could not take advantage of the open office I had been granted by going to someone else either to report or to get help in accessing this key research area. I had been corresponding with this individual by cell-phone, until I returned from my other trips out of town. I think Providence intervened, or mere coincidence if you please. Because, just as I had concluded work in all the other locations selected for this research, and just as I had exhausted all the excuses not to go on this ostentatious dinner, upon my return to that office, the man without further ado linked me up and even 'magnanimously' told me to forget the dinner. That stumped me effectively; I couldn't report, or legitimately go to someone else about the issue because he thereby made it essentially a non-issue.

This was an (ethical?) issue that I was never formally prepared for in all my academic and research training, and that I think is either cleverly or shamefully hidden, unrecognized, underreported or simply dismissed and probably scorned by the male-dominated research community.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has attempted to *summarize* the major issues related to accessing the research field and research participants in my study of the reintegration of returnee refugee women in post war Liberia. Post conflict research is particularly fraught with ethical and practical challenges for the researcher who dares to take on, and experience the conflict between practical needs and academic rigor and tradition. In this study, I had to make decisions related to overcoming logistic challenges to accessing the field; ethical challenges about disclosing information about myself, and ensuring the physical and psychological safety of the research participants and myself; insider-outsider issues related to gaining the willing participation of my participants and accessing useful information

from them; and issues arising from the gender of the research participants and of myself as the researcher.

Reflexivity at every stage of the field research made it possible to maintain the delicate balance of being an academic researcher and being a human being, as the two identities can sometimes conflict in the context of doing fieldwork in a conflict affected area like Liberia. Overriding all the concerns discussed in this paper was my desire to ensure as high as possible a level of validity and reliability of the data collected, while at the same time privileging the participation of the researched, and thereby affirming their authority as the repositories of the knowledge I craved enough to travel thousands of kilometers to acquire.

Lessons for other researchers in similar contexts. It is undeniable that similar research fields as I encountered in Liberia can be found in every part of the world, and even more especially on the African continent. Specifically, graduate students are to be found combing the various post-/ conflict regions of the world for data with which to acquire higher degrees. To them I would advise that it is crucial to obtain every possible information about the research field before getting there, and to consult other experienced researchers, if possible someone who has done work in the same setting, before the field work. Once in the field, the role of reflexivity cannot be overemphasized and the researcher must maintain a sensitivity to the context, remain continuously aware of the role of the self in the research process, as well as the possible roles of various 'gatekeepers' in determining access to the field. Above all, it is most essential to build flexibility into the research design, in spite of which one must still *prepare for the unexpected!*

Areas for further research and reflection. Certain dilemmas remain from this study that would benefit from further academic engagement and writing. For example, how does the researcher find a balance between local politics and the safety of the research participants? What does the researcher do when confronted by gender in the field? Even after accessing the needed information from the research field, to what extent should such information be disclosed? How can the academic profession be more insistent about researchers' responsibility to 'give back' to the community upon which they build their careers? To what extent can academic research retrieved in an ethical manner be later used

for advocacy purposes? How does the peace researcher deal with the 'secondary trauma' of doing research with sensitive subjects on sensitive issues in sensitive contexts?

I believe that the final stage in the ethical handling of peace and conflict research is the dissemination of the findings of the research to the research community, the communities from which it originated, and to the policy makers who have the capacity to use the information to improve the lives of the people who gave their time, energy, emotions and sometimes relived traumatic experiences for the study. This would complete the cycle of participation, and justify the challenges for the researched and the researcher. Unfortunately, not many funding agencies available to the African researcher provide for this critical stage of the research, and many researches done simply end up in libraries and archives of universities and other research institutions. From an African perspective, this is not only unethical; I consider it criminal.