

COMMENTARY

Where There Is No Hashtag: Considering Gender-Based Violence in Global Health Fieldwork in the Time of #MeToo

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In global health, we prioritize work where there is no doctor—often in remote and sometimes dangerous places—and certainly where there is no #MeToo hashtag, no groundswell of activism to support women’s rights. In such contexts, women in the field face distinct challenges. Through sharing my own experiences, I hope to encourage open dialogue and action to address gender-based violence within global health.

Gender-based violence in an evidence-based field

Global health aspires to be evidence-based, yet a lack of data on gender-based violence among fieldworkers hinders our ability to address it comprehensively within our institutions and protocols. Here, I offer two personal fieldwork experiences as small data points of this vast but unmeasured phenomenon. My experiences are limited and privileged by virtue of my education, ethnicity, and status as a foreigner in the Guatemalan field site where I have worked for nearly 15 years. So many women contribute to global health in important and varied ways—as community partners, local staff, and international researchers and facilitators—but I can only speak to my own experiences in hopes that others will add theirs. I acknowledge that sharing details of sexual assault can re-inscribe a narrative of women as sexual objects, but I believe we must not obscure the “hard facts of corporeality” in fieldwork.¹

This first incident took place when I was a doctoral student, and the second occurred nearly ten years later when I was working as a principal investigator on a large research grant.

Soon after moving in with a Guatemalan family in an urban area, it became clear that I would have to arrange research activities and outings during daylight hours. They warned me that the streets were not safe after dark, and that I should not be seen out at night. Months later, I was walking home in the early evening with the daughter of the household, married and in her mid-20s like myself at the time, after an afternoon spent running errands together and chatting with other neighborhood women. We sped up to get past men gathered outside the small shop on the corner of our street. It was not my first encounter with men on street corners, who often catcalled me as I passed in the daytime: “hello, Barbie” and “come here, baby.” My body had learned the geography of the street,

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and I hunched my shoulders and lowered my gaze reflexively as we approached. This time, the group was emboldened by numbers and beer, the empty cans marking ownership of the street as clearly as traffic cones.

The heavy metal door to our house came into sight as my friend and I rounded the corner, with gazes, words, and whistles raining over us. A tug on the blue nylon of my raincoat, and I was suddenly off the street, pulled through a creaking piece of sheet metal into the disorienting dark of a quiet alley. I heard the footsteps of my friend running home as I felt hands pushing my shoulders down against a cinderblock wall, followed by the sound of a zipper. I was on the ground looking at a dog bowl half-filled with water in the dirt. My nose filled with the sour smell of second-hand alcohol, and a man's voice said, "I'll show you, bitch." ... When I realized we were alone and that my attacker was very drunk, I pushed, twisted, and pulled away, aided by the loose slickness of my raincoat.

I pushed back out into the glare of the street and ran home, where my friend was waiting inside the door. Just as the pit of fear in my stomach had time to bloom outward and rubberize my limbs, my friend cautioned me not to say anything to others in the house. Everyone would only think less of me. Anyway, she was the object of the men's attention before I arrived, so I should not get ideas about being special. I was confused by her response, expecting to bond in outrage, and ashamed by what felt like a failure to navigate an obvious fieldwork risk, despite all of my efforts to avoid it.

I published a partial account of this incident soon after returning to Boston following my doctoral fieldwork.² Co-authored with a dear friend and classmate who heroically escaped from kidnappers in Syria, the short piece fulfilled in some small way our mutual feelings of obligation to share our experiences of gender-based assault with colleagues and future fieldworkers, particularly as we had struggled to connect our experiences to existing fieldwork literature. (Afterward, however, neither of us included the experiences reported in the article in our dissertations. We just did not see them as "data.") I did not discuss this experience with my graduate school advisors at the time. I now recognize how much I value(d) my persona as a successful fieldworker, "tough" and "self-sufficient." The image of me as weak and vulnerable,

literally brought to my knees because of my gender, felt like something to keep to myself.

Embodied inequality

Fieldwork happens through the movement, interaction, and labor of human bodies—it is an exercise in embodiment. Fieldworkers' bodies and identities are often objects of scrutiny within the communities in which they work, particularly as they may defy or confound local taxa.³ Women, both local and foreign, must navigate gender norms in the field while sometimes purposefully deviating from them to achieve project goals. Women in the field sometimes gain "honorary male" status, meaning they can (partially) transcend local gender norms.⁴ Perhaps most importantly for fieldwork, women are often able to circumvent local public/private dichotomies that establish which genders can be in particular spaces at particular times. Yet in doing so, they also further become dangerous "matter out of place," which symbolic anthropologist Mary Douglas has notably posited as the very definition of dirt.⁵ While "out of place" women can potentially claim greater freedom of movement than local women, they may also be subject to disdain, social censure, and mistreatment because of it. This duality of privilege and susceptibility is central to the embodied experience of fieldwork for women.

I am often amused when Guatemalan friends and colleagues point out that I dress like a man in my loose pants and button-down shirts, sometimes providing fodder for good-natured jokes and offers of more appealing clothing. Other women conducting fieldwork in Guatemala have reported similar experiences.⁶ During a walk through a bad neighborhood at dusk, a male Guatemalan colleague once laughed and said I was physically intimidating—meaning it seemed I could handle an attack. As a short, small-framed woman, I was a bit proud of this acknowledgment of my honorary male status and joked back that I would protect him. I took his comment to mean I was doing something right and that I had adapted to my research context. At the time, I did not question what that said about gender norms and violence in my research site or prob-

lematize my tacit aspiration to best them. However, in this second experience of gender-based violence, I was reminded of the limitations of my ability to transgress local gender norms during fieldwork.

During a recent implementation project, I drove out to a rural Guatemalan community on a short visit to local project participants. I was very friendly by then with one woman who was a community leader, and she and I had planned for me to stay overnight in her family's home. When I arrived, it seemed prudent for her husband to lock my shiny rental car from the airport into a carport structure at the base of the steep hill to their home, removing it from public sight. We spent a friendly evening in the kitchen cooking and chatting with their kids, and I excused myself to my bedroom (borrowed from the couple's older children) soon after dinner, not wanting to intrude further on family routines. I organized some paperwork and data entry and fell asleep. Not long after midnight, I awoke to hear a key unlocking my door from the outside. My door wedge blocked easy opening of the door, and I heard my friend's husband muttering at the unexpected obstruction. I jumped up from the bed and prepared for a physical confrontation that thankfully never happened. I heard him move away and softly shut the door to his own bedroom.

I spent the rest of the night awake in the dark, my mind scrolling endlessly through lists of possible people to call for help and strategies for leaving safely. In the end, I waited until I heard the familiar sounds of tortillas being made for breakfast and emerged from the room. I greeted my friend, backpack already over my shoulder, saying I needed her to unlock the carport because I had an early meeting. She obliged in leading me down the slope to the car, but the warmth and ease of the previous evening and our friendship were gone. More than anything, I wanted to apologize to her as she stood watching me drive away.

The symbolic violence of fieldwork

When I first shared my experiences of gender-based violence on fieldwork within a professional context last year, a well-meaning colleague asked why I did not avoid the street corner where my attacker grabbed me. (It was the only way home. And there was always a corner to be avoided, no matter the variation in route.) Another asked what kind of door

wedge I used. (Soft rubber seems to work best.) But these questions seemed to indicate a larger point getting lost. My technique and skill as a fieldworker was being questioned in light of gender-based violence—not our paradigms of conducting fieldwork or assessing its successful completion. Nell Gluckman's recent article on the fate of Henrietta Schmerler, an anthropology graduate student who was raped and murdered on fieldwork in 1931, illustrates how women have long been blamed for their own experiences of gender-based violence in the field regardless of their competence—the professional equivalent of “what was she wearing?”⁷ That women in the field will be assaulted is taken as the natural “order of things,” unquestioned and largely unseen, in global health—fulfilling the archetype of symbolic violence in the sense that we fail to recognize it as such.

Within a system of symbolic violence, inequalities are taken to be inherent and immutable, and they remain unquestioned by either perpetrators or victims.⁸ Hence, victims of symbolic violence are complicit through their perpetuation of the system of violence, however unwitting it might be. I have taken on the machismo attitude that I am a tough and resilient fieldworker—failing to see how this contributes to a patriarchal system that keeps human moments of fear and weakness hidden away. I limit opportunities for helping other women and creating shared recognition of common experiences. Moreover, the privileges of “honorary male” status have profound limitations. After each of the experiences described above, my relationships with local women were damaged, irrevocably in the second case. I felt my culpability as an outsider deeply, having unwittingly upset a fragile local equilibrium; this is the antithesis of the solidarity with communities that fieldwork seeks to build.

Women's rights and the promotion of health as a human right

Much work has been done in recent years to ensure that women's rights are viewed as human rights. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, adopted in

1980, did not explicitly address violence as a form of discrimination against women.⁹ In 2017, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women issued an updated General Recommendation that acknowledges widespread violence against women as both a human rights violation in itself, as well as inhibitory to the enjoyment of other fundamental human rights, including: “the right to life, health, liberty and security of the person, the right to equality and equal protection within the family, freedom from torture, cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment, freedom of expression, movement, participation, assembly and association.”¹⁰ This more expansive positioning of the reality of violence against women within human rights frameworks is important, but it points to a significant challenge for global health. This is a field dedicated to the promotion of health as a human right, but we fall short in ensuring that right to women in global health as we fail to adequately address gender-based violence in the field.

There are many barriers to reporting gender-based violence in global health fieldwork. Women who experience it may be disempowered to do so by virtue of their geography or organizational position within the complex power dynamics of global health. Perhaps above all, global health is populated by workers who want to improve the world—to push forward in making the right to health a reality—and it can be difficult to include one’s own rights as a fieldworker alongside our focus on the rights of communities in which we work. I am very aware that, in the end, my female Guatemalan friends stay, and I go. They live in places where there are no hashtags, where there is no #MeToo, and no functional reporting procedures or formal support systems to counteract gender-based violence. We must ensure that gender equity is for everyone, regardless of their position, power, or role in global health.

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