
Research Article

Researching Men and Women: Field Experience of a Female Researcher

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Abstract: This article focuses on the experience of a female researcher, researching on both men and women in Bangladeshi society. It has been well documented in academic literature that in qualitative research data collection is a joint effort between the researcher and the research participants and hence, the role of a researcher is of critical importance. This article argues that the subject position of a researcher can both be facilitating and constraining in various ways. This article, however, also demonstrates that the differences on the basis of gender, class, power and education between the researcher and research participants pose many challenges and ethical dilemmas. Again these challenges and dilemmas help researchers to develop useful strategies to resolve these issues.

Keywords: men, women, interview.

Introduction

Earlier studies (e.g., Reay 1995; Rahman 2010; Kakuru and Paradza 2007) show that conducting empirical research in most cases generates formidable challenges and obstacles to a researcher. And this is particularly so when qualitative frameworks are employed. Studies (e.g., McKee and O'Brien 1983; Smart 1984; Arendell 1997; Kilkey 2010; Reay 2010; Lee 1997) reveal that gaining access to the participants, building the relationship of trust, interviewing a male participant as a female researcher and vice-versa and moral dilemmas usually are the most pertinent issues encountered by a researcher. My experience to explore women's (and men's) lived experience regarding gender relations and the constructions of masculinity and femininity in contemporary Bangladesh seeks to address the issues mentioned earlier. Forty female and 20 male participants were purposively selected for this study. All my female participants were construction workers and male participants were either construction workers or husbands of female construction workers. Both female and male participant construction workers were recruited from *Amberkhana*, *Madina Market* and *Niorpool point* of Sylhet city.

Gaining access, building rapport and constructing women's experience

My experience of researching female construction workers shows that if the participants are directly approached, they are reticent, not wishing to talk to an unknown person without prior permission of their *sardars*¹ or the influential people of their community. However, I never involved *sardars* in selecting my participants. They (*sardars*) introduced me to 1 or 2 female construction workers and told them about my intention to talk to them, than I continued in my own way. In the effort to familiarise myself with the female construction

workers and to establish contact with the participants, I spent some time in the congregating points where the participants wait every morning to find work. I visited some of the participants' houses and the construction sites where they work. I visited one of the construction workers congregating points and approached one of the participants each morning and subsequently talked to him/her. At the beginning some of the participants seemed hesitant about the nature and aims of my work. Women were aware of their own well-being and as a reflection of it they seemed to be very cautious while talking to unknown people in private places. However, after my meeting with one or two participants, things changed dramatically. All of the female construction workers of *Amberkhana*, *Niorpool* and *Madina Market point* who became aware of me and my research, showed an interest in talking to me. My participants told me that they talked about me among themselves and also encouraged their co-workers/friends to share their experiences with me. Some of my participants even suggested that their husbands come and talk to me if I am interested. Wives' enthusiasm to send their husbands to talk to me emanated from their wishes to know what their husbands think about them and was also guided by the hope that their husbands would be more understanding about their (wives') plight if they discuss their lived experience with me in greater detail. My own subject position as a middle-class, educated woman played a significant role in earning this acceptability among female construction workers and even their husbands (see Hammersley and Atkinson 1997; Coffey 1999). The participant construction workers and husbands of female construction workers never turned down my request to have a conversation. In cases where this was not possible due to their work schedule (that had been fixed prior to my approaching them), they promised to talk to me again at a mutually convenient time.

¹ *Sardars* are the construction sector middlemen

On the occasion of conducting the life histories of female construction workers in order to generate data, the interview/conversation sessions on most occasions lasted between 6-8 hours over the course of several repeated sessions. The follow up meetings with the same participant did not take place on consecutive days. Generally they took place a few days after the initial meeting. Although I went to visit my participants in their home, I did not interview them in their own house. The reasoning behind this was a desire to avoid interruptions. These were likely in their dwelling environments as they predominantly live in crowded slums and, the visit of a stranger may incur inquisitiveness among other slum dwellers. Therefore, by removing these factors, interviewing women outside of their own home meant that theoretically at least, they might be able to converse more freely (see Hearn 1998). Having long conversations with my participants in a café was not the ideal situation in Bangladesh as the cafés are always crowded and long conversations with my participants might draw undue attention of other people which could make both of us uncomfortable so I intentionally avoided the idea of meeting my participants in cafés. Fortunately I had access to the house of one of my contacts, which was an old but comfortable, quiet house surrounded by trees and with a wide yard at the front, and was located in an easily accessible locality. The house owners had not been living there at that time, although there were both male and female caretakers to look after the property. I found this place suitable for our interview sessions as it was relatively easy to ensure privacy and uninterrupted conversations, and the place was not far from my participants' dwelling places and congregating points. When I recruited my first participant, I explained to her the need to sit in a quiet and comfortable place and gained her consent to take her there for the interview. Female construction workers often go to different places with recruiters so it was not new for them and my gendered identity as a woman also provided them with some sense of security. I introduced her to the house keepers and she appeared to be comfortable. After meeting 2-3 women in the same venue and conducting their life history interviews, I never had the necessity to explain more about the place as most of the women already knew about the place through word of mouth of the women I interviewed and were happy to meet me there for interviews.

Feminist research places emphasis on power relations and suggests that the power relations between the researcher and the researched should be as non-hierarchical as possible (Oakley 1981; Letherby 2003; Clisby and Holdsworth, 2014). Following this advice I tried to apply different techniques to lessen the hierarchy between me and the participants. During the discussions, conversation did not flow at all times. Participants used to take rests, we used to drink tea with cookies or light snacks, and sometimes we had our lunch together. Although I do not chew *pan-supari* (betel nuts and leaves), I used to buy *pan-supari* for my participants if they wished as this is commonly used in Bangladesh, especially by poorer people, maybe because it quells hunger. However, regardless of the availability of food, there are some people

who can manage long hours without having a proper meal but it is unthinkable for them to do without *pan-supari* (see Kabeer 1994). Additionally, from the discussions with the participant female construction workers over the issue of their co-workers' behaviour towards them, I realised that offering *pan-supari* means someone is extending his/her friendship and I also wanted to use this opportunity to express my friendliness (see Malinowski 1922). Offering tea, *pan-supari*, light snacks, and sharing my food with them helped to develop relationships in the field. It appeared that food sharing conveyed the message that I am not only with them in order to generate my research data, rather, I wanted to show them gratitude for their help and I valued them as individuals.

Oakley (1981) places emphasis on reducing power differentials in the researcher and interviewee relationship. As mentioned earlier, it should be a joint effort, including reciprocity on behalf of the researcher i.e., talking about herself and answering questions that participants may pose. Reflecting upon my fieldwork, I can say that I followed this approach throughout my life history interviews. I replied to different questions about my personal life and when the participants used to make comparisons between themselves and me, I highlighted the commonalities we share as women but acknowledged my weaknesses, such as my physical inability to do the levels of hard they engaged in everyday on the construction sites. In this way I tried to give my participants more control over the interviews and thus, in turn, more control over the whole process of research (Letherby 2003). Drawing on a life history approach was also part of my feminist methodological approach because, '[l]ife history interviews have long been a favoured method for many social scientists and feminist researchers, noted for their humanizing and empowering capacities in which participants are better able to determine the focus and direction of the research' (Clisby and Holdsworth 2014:15).

Clisby et al. (2007:10) commented although telling their own stories may involve revisiting painful experiences for many women, they, however, can find this opportunity a 'rewarding' one as it allows them to share their stories with compassionate listeners. Reay (1995) observed that women who are more marginalised generally feel that it is a pleasurable experience to 'have someone to listen to them'. I also experienced something similar during my fieldwork with female construction workers. I observed that the participants seemed to like it when they were encouraged to talk about their own lives and everyday experiences.

Whilst this may seem somewhat patronising and Spivak (1988) also argues an 'interlocutor' (in this case me) needs to renounce the benefit of all sorts of privilege even to have a rudimentary form of understanding of 'subaltern' women's lives, I however, believe that acknowledgement of my position as an educated, middle-class, relatively liberated woman facilitated both me and my participants to reconstruct their experiences in their own terms. I never tried to restrict their conversations to my area of interest and this enhanced the process of making them more comfortable. However, there

were a few participants who did not like to talk about painful experiences particularly regarding financial hardship of their lives. They considered the difficult events as their destiny and felt that it would not make things better if they talked about it. With the exception of a few occasions the participants were generally happy to tell their stories. Given my educational and class background, my efforts to minimise the distance between me and the participants seemed to make the female construction workers sympathetic to me, and which eventually directed the participants to express desire to help me in any possible way they could.

Although female construction workers work outside with men for payment, conversations with them reveal that their husbands do not feel entirely comfortable in allowing them to mingle with unfamiliar males. When I went to talk to them, it seemed my gendered identity as a woman made the process easier. Even a few of my participants reported that their husbands said “she is a woman. It is not a problem if you talk to her. Go and see what she says”. Consequently, the husbands were comfortable when I established rapport with their wives (participants of my research). Overall, since the participants in my study received approval from their *sardars* and husbands, they also appeared to be very comfortable to talk to me.

Therefore, I managed to talk to the participants without any major obstacles and in a conversational, informal and casual manner. In addition to my position as an educated, middle-class woman, my position of ‘being a married woman’ acted as an additional qualification (see Lee 1997). I felt that participants tended to believe that as a married woman I was able to understand their domestic responsibilities, the techniques they employ to deal with different situations, reasons underlying their conjugal conflicts and the ambiguity they suffer through. Usually, in Bangladesh, talking publicly about someone’s sexual behaviour or even making comments regarding the decisions of having a baby, taking contraception and so on is considered as shameful conduct. However, married women themselves frequently make fun of each other pointing towards their own situation. Thus, my status of being ‘married’ made it easier for me to open up discussions regarding these sensitive issues. Reflecting upon my research, I believe, I tried to minimise the power gap between myself and the participants as much as I could. I chatted with them, shared food with them, visited them at their houses and construction sites, encouraged them whenever they said something, spent time with them and satisfied their curiosity regarding my personal life, work and experiences in order to minimise the hierarchy based on relative levels of economic and cultural capital. Because of the friendly informal relationship between us, the participants did not appear to feel the pressure that may arise from being interviewed. Rather it was always a lively, informal and friendly discussion about diverse issues of everyday life. This even extended to them actively trying to help me, through for example, ensuring that I clearly understood what they were saying when I was taking notes.

All the information generated through the life histories was

documented. If further clarification was required, I had further long conversations with the same participant. Notes were taken and communication continued until I was convinced about my understanding of the data. Since the majority of the participants in my study were unschooled, they sometimes were unable to provide consistent information regarding numerical issues, for instance their own age, children’s age, duration of conjugal life, duration of paid work etc. In Bangladesh, birth, death, and marriage are not regularly registered and poorer people generally do not celebrate birthdays or anniversaries (Chowdhury 2000; also see Gardner 2008). Therefore, people can find it very hard to recall when they were born, or married, or migrated. I tried to obtain accurate data by relating the participants’ experiences with collective issues such as war of independence, party in power etc. However, Kakuru and Paradz’s (2007:289-290), field experience highlighted that such collective events ‘carried very limited meaning to individuals’. Instead of collective events, individuals structured their memories and explained things relating to their own personal circumstances. Women generally include family events such as death of the participant’s husband or immediate family member, birth of children, participant’s own or children’s marriage, and events that had directly impacted on a participant’s own or family’s misfortune or well-being. I found this to be the case for my female participants.

In order to explore female construction workers’ lived experiences in an extensive way it was imperative to investigate the day-to-day experiences of other people who are closely related to them and thus impacting on their lives in many ways. Consequently, in my research, I intended to incorporate men vis-à-vis women. Letherby (2003) pointed out that in order to fully understand women’s lives in a patriarchal society, researchers also need to have a proper understanding of the experiences and perceptions of men. Kelly et al. (1994) also presume that the perspectives of both men and women need to be explored in order to address women’s oppression and put it in context. Hence, to supplement women’s narratives, gain men’s perspectives and attain a wider representation of women’s lived experiences, I aimed to incorporate men in my study. I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with husbands of female construction workers to obtain an insight about their views regarding masculinity, femininity and women’s work in general and their wives’ work in particular. I also carried out in-depth semi-structured interviews with male construction workers to gain a better understanding about female construction workers’ workplace experiences and men’s perceptions about women’s presence in the ‘male sphere’.

Researching men: glimpses from the fieldwork

Conducting research with men as a female researcher in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh is quite an intricate task, though not impossible. When I went to talk to the men, I found it difficult to approach them directly. In Bangladeshi society, it is considered socially unacceptable for a woman to initiate a conversation with an unfamiliar man. Maybe this is

why when I approached (after talking to the gatekeeper) a male construction worker at *Amberkhana point* to talk to him, he seemed hesitant and unenthusiastic about talking to me. As I did not want to make him talk if he was not willing, I almost gave up on including him in the study. However, his wife, who was present at the time of this exchange (being employed as a construction worker), took on the role of a negotiator and encouraged him to talk to me. This situation provided me with the understanding that gaining access to married men via their wives would be easier. This assumption is supported by Kilkey's research (2010), where she also successfully recruited male participants by approaching their female partners first.

Although the first man I approached agreed to talk to me on the basis of his wife's insistence, he relaxed as the interview progressed. The conversation went fine. He explained that he did not initially wish to talk to me because he thought I worked for an NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) where (in the supposed office of that NGO) people (NGO activists) forcibly sterilise poor men and women, or persuade them to adopt permanent birth control measures. When I pointed out that I had already made it clear to him what the intention behind my approach was, he responded that "these people (NGO activists) also speak softly like you. I have experience, NGO people approached me before. This is why I became suspicious about you". After talking to me this participant introduced me to another male construction worker, and this time he assured that man that he could come and talk to me as I am not going to cause any harm to him.

Jeff Hearn (1998:48) draws our attention to the argument that 'two hours is a reasonable time limit for interviewing a man and beyond that, men's patience might be exceeded'. Although this contention may hold validity regardless of the gender of the participants, I found it to resonate particularly with my experiences of interviewing men. For instance, one male participant seemed particularly impatient, wanting to finish our exchange quickly. However, it appeared to me that this participant's status of being a 'single' man made him feel reticent in talking about women with a female and that might be one of the reasons behind his edginess. It is worth mentioning here that I experienced such edginess only among two of my male participants and also only in the first meetings. When subsequent meetings (planned/ unplanned) took place with them in different places (e.g., construction sites, congregating points) and we became more familiar, it appeared to me that the nervousness also faded which effectively facilitated us to make longer conversations. Though Hearn (1998) revealed that long conversations may cause intolerance among participant men, he also made us aware that given the difficulties of arranging a meeting it is better to complete as much as we can in one setting. Following his advice, I tried to discuss as many issues as I could with the male participants in one meeting.

Lee (1997:554) in her article proposed that an interviewer's 'vulnerability' should receive due attention in discussions of 'woman-to-man interviewing'. She further elaborated this by

suggesting that researchers making home visits to carry out interviews or interviewing on a one-to-one basis in a private place 'might not be an entirely safe proposition'. Hearn (1998) was also in favour of avoiding the possibility of interviewing men in their own home primarily because of concerns associated with the safety of the interviewer. Understanding Lee (1997) and Hearn's (1998) concerns I also considered it a high risk strategy to conduct a one-to-one interview with an unknown man. This is particularly so in the context of Bangladesh, where a vast majority of the men are not accustomed to talking to an unfamiliar woman, and so I supposed the risks might be even higher. Friendship between a man and a woman in Bangladesh is still predominantly a middle and upper-class phenomenon.

Although I interviewed male construction workers, I did not try to socialise with them in their workplace or the points where they congregate to be hired (by an agency or individual), because socialising with unknown men (construction workers) in a public place could effectively tarnish my image as a culturally defined 'respectful' woman (see Lee 1997). Congregating points are not separate places, rather all three congregating points I selected for research are busy intersections of Sylhet city and the workers would wait on the pavements and streets for the potential recruiters to recruit them. Especially *Amberkhana point* intersects all important establishments of the city such as, the university, court, main shopping places, airport, train and bus stations, major schools and colleges of the city and residential areas. I, too, am from *Sylhet* and it is relatively a small city; my family's and friends' routes also transect the congregating points and it was very possible that they might have seen me socialising with construction workers in the congregating points and wondered what I was doing there. It was not possible for me to explain my situation to everyone and also to make them understand what I was actually doing in congregating points; this concern also raised different issues. Momsen (2010) pointed out that people who are not used to seeing females in a public place (in this case a middle-class woman researcher) may often believe that a woman visible in public places is sexually available. Since I did not want to jeopardise my reputation, I had to remain aware of my behaviour, even as a researcher. Thus, in the process of talking to men I was careful about my own reputation and security at all times. I arranged meetings with my male participants in a place which was both known to me and where we could talk without interruption. Moreover, I ensured that there were people around to support me in case of necessity.

Although I provided them with tea and snacks, I did not have lunch or dinner with my male participants. In the event of researching female construction workers, I tried to break the hierarchies as much as I could between me and the participants of my study. On the other hand, I did not try to eliminate the socially ascribed distance between male participants and me. Rather, I maintained this distance as a technique to refrain from providing the impression that I was overfriendly and by extension, that my intentions could be

misinterpreted, which may lead to inappropriate (sexual) behaviour. Following McKee and O'Brien's (1983:158) advice to maintain a 'professional manner', in most cases I tried to behave like a serious person with the appropriate mix of friendliness and orientation to the research. Maybe this is why the participants also did not ask me personal questions, and all their queries were limited to my work which was comforting for me to a great extent, given the above discussion.

Smart (1984) pointed out that 'female interviewers may feel constrained not to jeopardise the interview by challenging sexist comments made by interviewees' (cited in Lee 1997:559-560), and at the point of interviewing men, I went through similar experiences. One participant, for example, made a comment "women are like shoes. They should remain under feet". Being a woman it was very difficult for me to put up with such a chauvinistic comment, nevertheless, I did not challenge him directly. Throughout all 20 interviews I conducted, I had to listen to sexist comments as we discussed household divisions of labour, division of labour in the workplace, women's paid employment and women's contribution to the households, equality between men and women and other pertinent issues. Instead of challenging these participant males' chauvinistic attitudes, I tactfully tried to highlight women's achievements and contributions. From these experiences I have learned how it was sometimes possible to keep the interview going while also overtly not agreeing or disagreeing with the comments made by a participant (see Smart 1984).

Arendell (1997) found herself in an ambiguous position while interviewing men. She discovered that, although the majority of the male participants were critical of women in many respects, these men unveiled their experiences and feelings to her emphatically and meticulously only because she was a woman. Arendell's observation was also supported by McKee and O'Brien's (1983) research. However, in this respect my own experience of conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with men reveals that, the extent to which a participant is going to divulge his or her story to the researcher not only depends on the researcher's gender, but also on the position of the participant. I spoke to 6 single men and 14 married men and my experience provided me with the understanding that in the context of Bangladesh where unattached men and women usually do not mingle very freely, single and young men sometimes find it a bit embarrassing to communicate with a woman. However, my own subject position as a middle-class, educated woman is also likely to have had an impact on their behaviour. I also noticed that my position as a married woman acted as a catalyst to make things easier in our discussion regarding marriage, conjugal conflict, status of women in general and wives in particular.

In Bangladesh women's age and position in the life cycle have a direct bearing upon her mobility (Chowdhury 2000). In congruence with this assumption I discovered that my position as a married woman helped me to convince my family members regarding the nature of my work and subsequently lessen many restrictions on my own mobility. Maybe it is

worth mentioning here that my mobility is, however, not restricted to the same extent as many other women in Bangladesh because of my background as an educated, middle-class woman who is engaged in full-time paid employment. Yet, it is no use denying the fact that, given the security constraints and prevailing social norms of the society, women's mobility is restricted to some extent irrespective of their position.

Conclusion

Conducting life history and in-depth interviews with both men and women in the context of Bangladesh provide unique contextual experience. Bangladeshi society is predominantly, though not exclusively, hierarchical on the basis of gender and class and as such it remained a challenge throughout the research to minimise the power gap between me and my research participants. This study however found that the effort made by the researcher to minimise power gap often received greater appreciation from all the participants regardless of their gender identity. In Bangladeshi society gaining access to a female participant, building rapport and conducting life history interviews as a female researcher is undoubtedly much easier in comparison to interviewing male participants as a female researcher. The prevailing gender norms in Bangladesh to some extent puts additional pressure on both the male participants and the female researcher. The study demonstrates that the cultural norms of Bangladeshi society and socioeconomic position of the male participants guide them to act in certain ways which on many occasions put the female researcher in an ambivalent position. Notwithstanding, I must say that in general male participants were enthusiastic about my research and they actively tried to facilitate my access to adequate data and this rendered me capable of developing different strategies to deal with the uncomfortable and/or intricate situations that arose during the interview sessions.

Note: This study narrates my MA and PhD field experience.

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