

# It was Rocky, Long, Winding and Twisted....

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## Introduction

This piece works to explore my long and winding research journey in the area of gender and sexuality, a journey that has positioned me as both researcher and the researched. I argue that the research experiences of individuals matter and should, in fact, be part of what any researcher theorizes in writing up their work. Most text books on research methodologies portray the research process as linear or perhaps circular, offering neat steps for the would-be researcher to follow. They hardly ever inform the readers of the realities that sensitive and complex areas (such as sexuality) bring to the research process. Neither do the research reports, to which a new researcher may have access, hint of the tortuous nature of the process. Researchers who learn “doing research” predominantly from these texts find themselves lost and wondering if they are really in the world of research. With this piece, I reflect on some of the challenges I had to negotiate as a researcher, challenges about which I never read in methodology guidelines and with whose impact I have wrestled.

My research, towards a PhD, investigated the experiences of young women who became pregnant while at school. I was interested in finding out how their experiences were shaped and the effects they had on the young women’s educational trajectories. I wanted to investigate the way in which history had shaped the construction of womanhood, family, sexuality, motherhood and young women’s pregnancy in Lesotho, and locate the young women’s experiences within contemporary beliefs, perceptions and education policies on teenage pregnancy.

My research was qualitative, and I interviewed young women who were, or had been pregnant while still at school, their teachers and parents, some of their family members, and representatives from churches, the Ministry of Education and other bodies. In exploring my experience of becoming a researcher while listening to a multiplicity of voices, I cannot help but state

(cliché or not) that the telling and reliving of a story and an experience is a challenge. As I scratch my hair to try and think, some experiences of my own interactions with different individuals remain blurred while others are as sharp as though they happened yesterday. I was a researcher in the study and at the same time, I used my personal story as a pregnant teenager many years ago as part of the data. Additionally, as I carried out the study, my life did not stand still, and all the roles and responsibilities I undertook, which I try to fit snugly into my life remained active and interactive.

I could choose to begin from the point at which I actually began to identify myself as a “researcher in sexuality and gender”, but it is important to take note of the fact that my engagement with questions of sexuality started long before the research itself. Hence, questions that I faced as a researcher should probably be understood as questions about gender and sexuality I encountered as a girl, and a woman, and as a result the patterns in my narrative of “research” cannot be positioned simply as rooted in that phase of my life alone. Narrating my research thus involves rethinking my life, moving between and across different periods of time, and this kind of movement suggests that my past is tied quite closely both to the steps taken to conduct the study on sexuality, and to the way that research unfolded as a process.

### **Where Did I Come From?**

From as far back as I remember during my childhood in a village in Lesotho, issues around gender and sexuality had always stood out through the power of discourses in which I was told precisely what I could or could not do “because you are a girl”. My brothers’ “dos” and “don’ts” were very different from my own. As a girl in the family, I was continuously warned against engaging with any form of sexuality; I was taught how to sit properly which was always expressed as “like a girl”, I was warned against “playing” with boys because they were dangerous. My brothers however, were encouraged to make sexual advances towards girls without fear of being rebuked. The differences in the household were also obvious in the community in different ways. The female body I was born into was always a cause for social and family concern, a focus for total community control.

Given this environment, it is impossible to say that I chose to focus on gender and sexuality as a researcher (indeed, one could say the sexuality focus chose me). In the spaces I occupied when I began to think of myself as a

researcher – such as being a “*Mosotho* woman”, mother, Christian, wife and many others – sexuality was discussed in the context of morality: “do not”, “it is bad for you”, “good girls do not go near those areas”.

Being a *Mosotho* woman is a very loaded status, and her sexuality is constructed as one full of passivity and innocence (or, ignorance). Statements such as “*Mosali oa Mosotho ha a itsoare joalo, ha a robalake hohle*” (a *Mosotho* woman does not behave like that, she does not sleep around) are rife, and locate her as the epitome of sexual respectability. The discourse on respectability includes reference to her clothing; everything from a neckline to a skirt length is of concern: “*O tenne letolo ekare ke letekatse*” (she is putting on a short skirt, she must be a loose woman).

In the Christian space, in which I am fully identified as “one of the faithful”, constructions of a “good woman” are to be found all over the Holy Book and one of the most commonly invoked in my community is: “Thou shall not commit adultery”. As a wife to a miner, a migrant worker, travelling into South Africa for months at a stretch in the 1980’s, I was bombarded with injunctions about maintaining a sexless life because “my husband would have a fatal accident if I had sex with other men”. This was usually expressed by relatives and neighbours as “*Monna o tla oeloa ke tafole ‘maeneng koana*”. The warning came from family members, neighbours, strangers, teachers, priests and government through the mouths of senior officers.

Added to this mix of Christianity, superstition, and gendered community norms, was a state-designed discourse around HIV and AIDS, one which became increasingly omniscient and omnipresent as Lesotho moved into the 1990’s, under an epidemic of HIV-related illness and death. This “official” confirmation around the connection between “loose women” and death due to HIV and AIDS found fertile ground for the long-held Basotho belief that sexuality was a dangerous zone, one in which the control of women amounted to the hope of escape from the perils of disease, anarchy, and godlessness (Mapetla, N. and Tuoane-Nkhasi, M, 2003).

## How Did I Get Here Then?

In formal settings, my first encounter with issues of patriarchal control over women’s sexuality was when I began a professional career after completing a thesis at Masters Level in Science Education at the Reading University in the UK. I worked as an inspector of schools and one of my roles included visitations to schools where I dealt with management issues as well as subject

inspection in agricultural science. My interest got drawn to the way school in which principals dealt with issues around young women's pregnancy despite the fact that at the time, there was a strong state emphasis on the importance of human rights at all levels of national policy-making and implementation. The policy environment explicitly prohibited the expulsion of girls from schools, but principals continued to get rid of the pregnant girls by ill-treating them till they left school or expelled them. Even as I interacted with the unfairness of all that was happening, I did not code the analysis I was making of the injustice meted out to the young teenagers as primarily an injustice rooted in the politics of gender and sexuality. In part, this was because at that time I did not have access to frameworks about "gender and citizenship" or "sexual rights" which became powerful to me later (I was a scientist). It was also due to my concern with each school as an individual site, for inspection – where principals were mistreating pregnant girls, they struck me first as "unfair principals", rather than as patriarchal agents. While in the job as inspector, I also became active in environmental education and I became more exposed to issues of gender in the area in relation with distribution, use and control of resources. It was clear to me on a daily basis that gender was one of the routes through which access to land, sustainable livelihoods, and government support was being determined, and that women were consistently being overlooked. After spending about three years working with schools, I decided to apply to study for a PhD.

### **Those Weekend Seminars**

I was admitted to do my studies in Science Education. The degree was structured through sharing facilitated through bi-monthly weekend seminars. In the very first seminar I attended, students shared the research that they proposed to do. Lecturers also shared the kind of research work they were previously engaged in and their current research interests. Among the stories I was attracted to was a study that employed feminist methodology. The study investigated the career trajectories of female academics in South African universities. As the researcher shared her work, I felt relaxed and comfortable with the work she had done on women and higher education, and in retrospect I think there were three reasons for this. Firstly, I learned for the first time that I could do a PhD study of the kind that allowed autobiographical experience as data and took the researcher's positionality seriously. Secondly, in listening to this study, I became aware of a theorization of the connection between the

body, the politics of gender, and the systematicity with which people gendered as women encounter exclusion through their “bodily” experience. Thirdly, I recognized the value of research on “barriers” as a route to transforming educational institutions themselves. I decided there and then not to share my intended Science Education study since I knew I had changed my mind.

I went for consultations with the supervisor and shared the kind of study I wished to undertake: I wanted to study my own experience and the experiences of the dozens of teenage girls of whom I had heard (some of whom I had met), of being pregnant at school-going age, in Lesotho, an environment deeply hostile to them. The supervisor warned me of the dangers of undertaking such a study especially since I intended to use my story as part of the data. The hostility of the environment was not a “theoretical construction”. We spoke of the fact that for me to expose myself could also make participants vulnerable: in the eyes of those who knew of my interest in their stories, I could well be interpreted as a “bad influence”. Nonetheless, after many hours of conversation, we agreed that my conviction about the importance of my undertaking the study was critical – I may have been chosen in my own way. In retrospect, this sounds like sentimentality, and yet surely it is vital to respond to the urgencies placed in our minds as “key research questions”. At the very least, I felt that I was the best-placed individual to do the study as researcher and research instrument.

### **Setting the Stage: “Me” in the Research**

Feminist views of research base some of their assumptions around the researcher as a knower, and thus, the researchers’ opinion and experience forms part of the data (Stanley and Wise, 1990). This sounded like a strong platform when I began the work, acknowledging that I knew what it meant to be a pregnant teenager. Yet, when I opted to use my own autobiography, I found myself uncomfortably negotiating different spaces and locations at different times in the study. One example of this comes from my experiences of listening to participants, who were young, often scared, and pregnant as a researcher. Because of my status in the community as an adult, a Mosotho woman, a church leader, participants allowed me to “claim the power seat” as they shared their feelings of powerlessness. But I viewed them differently: they were the ones who had information and they owned the data that I was so eager to get from them. In addition, I “saw” myself (a memory of myself) in their stories, and found myself simultaneously proud of their courage (in

talking with me) and enraged by the conditions of discrimination they were facing. My connection to my own autobiography positioned me as “insider”, when in fact issues of age, perceived status, and education separated me powerfully from the young girls talking to me. How girls being listened to “saw” me became a continual area of tension for me. The relationship of interviewer/interviewee has been characterised by a sense of give and take (Beoku-Betts, 1994). There is an advantage to observations that power can be both a benefit and a drawback at the same time. As I communicated with the participants there was a time when I wished I could be less of “this” or “that”, in order for them to “take” the power (which of course, in turn, would mean re-empowering the young Karabo, who had endured so much impotence of her own).

When I began the field-work, I expected few teenagers to be willing to share their experiences. But when they learned I had been a pregnant teenager they unfolded and I ended up getting more participants than I had initially planned. However, parents who learned about the study and how I came to be involved in it had mixed feelings. Some parents thought I would assist them to discourage teenage pregnancy while others felt I was a bad influence who was set out to target their young daughters to become pregnant again.

I had to constantly reflect on the things I knew and how I came to know them and sometimes I struggled with my own value systems. For example, when participants spoke to me about how they “felt bad because they had disappointed their parents”, I wanted to know what they felt for themselves. This question troubles the line between “researcher” and “counselor”, especially as the idea that they *could* have feelings about themselves which were separable from what they had been told by parents or teachers was very difficult for most of them. They had accepted that they were guilty of the pregnancy and as a result deserved to be punished in all ways. This I found unbearably painful at times, evoking memories of my own internalized guilt, the journey I had travelled to discover that such guilt was unnecessary, and then, the exposure to the reality, through the participants’ pain – that despite the decades between us (decades which include Beijing and a host of other feminist commitments to change), the environment of conservative gender and sexuality norms had not shifted.

The discomfort brought about by my occupation of more than one space at the time (researcher, woman-who-had-experienced-teenage-pregnancy, Mosotho woman) was difficult (though perhaps typical) for a researcher

who worked between the public and the personal. However, although I had read about the value of the personal to the design of research processes in feminist research methodology texts, *living* this connection in practice was something on which I found very little guidance. Belonging to very diverse worlds was enriching in terms of epistemology, but deeply troublesome in terms of coming to a place of peace and acceptance in the face of my own past (constantly being re-evoked, spoken about, and thought through as I listened to the participants).

My location within the research was also complicated by the need to place my work into the “literature review”, so important to academic work. Because I dealt with a topic that was predominated by medicalised views (occupying the same space as homosexuality, or infertility – a deviance) teenage pregnancy in African contexts (where not portrayed as sinful) was largely written about in terms of risk to the physical body. My review of the literature found that while worldwide, the subject of teenage pregnancy has been widely researched, the overwhelming paradigms involved concern medical and social “deviance” frameworks. Young girls become pregnant because of ignorance about reproductive and sexual health and/or because of social failure to address poverty, alcoholism, or poor schooling. Although I found material on teenage pregnancy in South Africa and Botswana (most of which drew from the two frameworks above), there was no research into what happened to pregnant girls in Lesotho schools. More significantly, school-based research by the teachers and pregnant girls was unheard of and the little available research by researchers who were not schools-based, was not relevant to experiences within the schools. Research from Lesotho was from commissioned studies by the Ministry of Health. This meant that the studies were dominated by biomedical research, while international studies were working at levels that were too sophisticated to be useful for my context, where what I needed was “basic” – knowledge of the experiences of pregnant girls themselves. I thus found myself positioned as simultaneously “behind the times” as a researcher working at the very beginning of a set of questions about teenage pregnancy in Lesotho, while others were writing about sophisticated questions of sexual and reproductive health and radical (even dangerous) idea with reference to my own context. I found this contradictory space epistemologically destabilizing, making me unsure whether I was a radical subversive at a doctoral level of research, or an old-fashioned empirical “data-gatherer”, working at the edges of an out-moded social anthropology.

## On-going Challenges

At a personal level, despite my eagerness to conduct the research, I was scared. What I was about to tell the world through the study would not only affect me as my family and friends were a part of me and I had to consider their feelings. Thinking about my friends and family reading my work made the writing process complicated. Discussions with the family members and a few other people who would remember that more than twenty years ago, I had a baby out of wedlock were not quite the same as a book that would be on the different shelves of academics, or university libraries. I discussed the issue with some family members, in ways that alleviated my fears, but realized that family members of my research participants were also crucial. Given the ways in which issues of gender and sexuality are intimately constructed through close relationships, one individual's "sexual" experience implicates and influences the experiences of others, and no research on gendered sexualities can afford to ignore this.

As I shared my intended study with colleagues and friends, people who were close to me said "*Ke haeba ene e se uena*", meaning "it could not have been you if you could not do a study about teenage pregnancy". What the statement said to me was that it was typical of me to want to get involved in issues that others may be uncomfortable tackling. Sometimes I understood the comments as "labelling" me in a troubling way (although it was good that they saw me as different to an extent that I could be allowed certain special treatment). This "difference" was in itself a revelation to me. Before initiating my PhD work, I never knew that difference was an attribute that could be celebrated. I grew up in a world where conformity earned people status, no matter how uncomfortable one was within the space into which I had been crammed as a "woman" in Lesotho.

I also found myself criticised by peers and colleagues who felt I should have "looked at something else because pregnant teenagers were nothing and not worth the trouble, they were just promiscuous little things that are not that important". This was said to me by people who did not know that I had been "one of those promiscuous little things", and their condemnation was both infuriating and positioned me awkwardly: to reveal my own story to them as a response to their commentary would not have served my research interests well; to be silent was to rehearse the environment faced by my young participants. Some peer researchers believed that the motive behind the study must be economic – some donor paid me to do it. In conversations with

peers and professors, the “loss to the science world” was always emphasised. This in particular positioned me within a nexus of epistemological pain I still find hard to accept: that the experience of pregnant girls is not “worthy” of scientific study speaks volumes for the length of the road we still have to travel as feminists to redefine the parameters of “science”.

The decision to use my own experiences as a major part of the data, for a topic that seemed so sensitive at a cultural level, also challenged me. Narrating what had happened to me in the context of the study went far deeper than anything I had shared with friends or family before. As I wrote, I struggled with how much narration of the sexual experiences was sufficient for the study. When I chose to leave out certain parts of the story, I was plagued by whether I still felt and carried the shame that I was taught was appropriate for pregnant teenagers. For instance, I realised that the story I told very skilfully side-tracked issues around desire, pleasure and arousal.

How pregnancy out of marriage continues to be viewed in Lesotho stems from religious teachings and interpretations. My church upbringing, degrading my fertile young body as “impure” surfaced continually as I tried to adhere to my chosen frameworks of feminist appreciation for my right to choose, sexual choice, reproductive health, and pride in my body, as an individual woman (regardless of age) I found, as I wrote my story for the study, that I was asking questions about the institutions in which I was brought up and taught never to interrogate authority, and often I found the idea that I was doing this to be unnerving. The participants also constantly referred to the wrong they had done to God and they were not ready to interrogate some of the issues any further, and in their reluctance and fear, I could hear my own anxieties at the back of my heart. The research process put me into an intensive negotiation with the meaning of God, my church, and my love for faith in a way that the actual experience of surviving teenage pregnancy and a lonely and abusive marriage had never done. The demand of the research to explore meanings, to look at the construction of values and principles, now and then, put me at the coalface of much more demanding questions than those raised by school principals’ intransigence or teenage girls’ hopes for their future.

### **Local Costs of Doing Research**

During my study period, I was a single mother and had three children and one grandchild. My divorce had just gone through and I was a mess. I had to leave my children for days and go to university. I worried constantly about whether

I had made the right decision to choose the research journey and yet, I knew in my heart that at the end all sacrifices would be worthwhile. Sometimes, however, I looked at the children and I wondered if they would understand and if they would not hold the absences, the preoccupations, and the fact that my attention was on my research against me – I told myself that it was the benefit for us all. I also hoped that with my doctorate would lead to a better job which would lessen the financial constraints on us as a family. Studying sexuality and gender, especially in Lesotho where national emphasis is on the need for research which will address economic issues, was and is still seen as a waste of time and money

As an adult and part time scholar, I had too many roles to play in my home and work situation. Due to my focus on research, the amount of time I spent with the people who were close to me diminished. Consequently, relationships became strained. People expected me to continue behaving exactly as I had been doing before I embarked upon my research journey, but my life and thoughts were changing due to my research encounters and the intensive writing and contemplation where I was enclosed with my work. The dilemmas and triumphs of these spaces could not be easily spelled out for all to understand. I would sit down to have a drink with friends and would very quickly remember that I had to go and search out some information or type out some detail. The pressure of the demand to “be the researcher” would overwhelm me and I often had to excuse myself, which hurt some of my friends. I also got hurt because when I needed assistance, it was not forthcoming since many of the people around me felt inadequate in terms of providing support to a “researcher”, or felt I was theorising at a level that was “too advanced” for them. For some of my closest friends though, the reluctance to take me seriously emanated from their discomfort with the focus of my study. I also have to acknowledge that my children felt the impact of the study in terms of the demand to help out physically with photocopying and to stay up late just to be with me and give me support when I needed it. To this day, they are clear that they are not very keen on doctoral study after they saw me labour without much rest.

I have a strong belief that these intimate costs of the research were due to the gendered space of being a woman. I was living within fixed gender roles that could only increase as my status as a mother, and a community member, grew. My identity as an emerging researcher did nothing to shift the expectations which came with these roles, which were also gendered

(a man's role as a father may significantly decrease in certain ways if he is also a graduate researcher). In fact the study made my feminine burden even heavier. No matter how late I worked, I was still responsible for the family meals, laundry and caring for the sick. I still had to help with home work and listen to how the kids had been bullied in the play ground in school. I remained my mother's first born girl and still had to rush home to my village to take her to her medical check ups.

Then there were issues around my workplace which did not consider my studying as part of the institution. My supervisor had clearly indicated that the institution did not consider a doctorate as a requirement for its workers. My desire to study, as a working woman, was anomalous, a burden I had put on myself. What this meant was working during stolen time working during breaks when I should have been resting from a very tedious schedule. Staying in the office till very late had become the order of the day as well as working on weekends. All my leave was spent on my studies as I had to take days off to attend the weekend seminars and to write the final thesis. As I write, I wonder how I coped with all the stress of the time. Coping is a difficult word to use. I just dragged myself along. I did have excellent colleagues with whom I nearly formed a tears club – sometimes we just sat and cried while we prayed to God to assist us. Sometimes I was just too tired to do anything else. The issues of fatigue, lack of solidarity, and the implacability of reproductive labour are rarely discussed within feminist research methodologies. Nevertheless, learning how to negotiate with these became vital “research” skills.

## Ethical Considerations

In the context of sexuality and gender, the need to consider the ethics of what I wanted to undertake was serious, especially since I planned to discuss parts of individuals' lives that were considered to be private, shameful and therefore taboo. I found myself in a dilemma about how to make ethical decisions on how I could gather and collate the women's voices. I knew I had to learn to listen in a new manner, a way which would enable me to narrate what they said and present it in an acceptable academic manner.

However, the issue of what aspects of the study to share and which to retain as “notes for myself” became critical. Some parents wanted to know details of the meetings I had with their children. They even went further and pestered the participants, asking them to repeat the interview session, when I refused to share the contents of the participants' stories with them.

In addition, concealing the identities of participants was challenging. Although I used pseudonyms for places and participants, some readers who later read my research remarked that a particular story I had analysed in my work was similar to a certain individual's story. The idea of confidentiality in a closed, vigilant, deeply interactive community was very difficult. I was observed holding meetings with individuals and groups, and my research focus generated interest, scepticism, and suspicion.

Feminist research ethics stress (like other guidelines on research ethics) that interviewees' safety must not be compromised by the researcher. In my case, the mere fact that I was interested in their experiences as young, unwed, pregnant teenagers threatened to highlight their stigmatized status. There was very little I could do to shift this stigmatization simply by engaging with them openly as "research participants"; and this also raised my anxieties around ethics. Feminist research principles stress the need to transform oppressive conditions through the research process wherever possible. This is a noble but perhaps naïve goal. My research process could not – in any meaningful way – transform the environment of hostility which my participants endured during their pregnancies.

### **Hardest Patches on the Path**

It is very difficult to express in writing what I regard as rough patches in the research journey. The whole journey was for me a trial. When I look back, I embarked upon the study with very little information through which to make concrete decisions about how to live the research process. I did not consult people who had gone through their own doctoral studies and I guess at the end of my study, I was horrified by the cruelty I had experienced from the work itself: the implacability of the expectations that I continue to work as "mother", and "community member" even as I took on the task of "researcher"; the demands of transforming the participants' stories of shame, guilt, distress, and rejection into "data"; the loneliness of the late-night writing; the fatigue. For me it was a lonely route with very little support.

The most difficult part was the final writing. At the time, I was tired. I do not remember having had to write that much in my life. The challenge was with the quantity and quality of writing in the final document. I asked for support, and my location within material concerning sexuality and gender meant that most colleagues felt that I was working with "unfamiliar frameworks". The period of writing up was filled with sleepless nights and

many moments of uncertainty. This is also an area which is largely untheorized by feminist research methodologies, although it is one in which key concerns about femininity, authority, and subjectivity intersect.

I believe there is much to be explored by those of us creating knowledge, at doctoral levels, within African contexts, about the late-night wrestles with weak bibliographies, rich and heart-searing data, and the funding-fuelled pressure of writing within doctoral conventions which seem unmotivated by anything rooted within our own familiarities with text (no book, or research article, is written like a PhD dissertation – the format for this is unique).

### **Implementation “Researcher” versus “Activism”**

As I was writing, uncovering more and more material on the issues that had originally spurred me to work on teenage pregnancies in Lesotho (issues of unmitigated injustice), my supervisor stressed that I should complete my research and get involved in activism “later”. She said that I was “not yet an activist” and warned me to write in a manner which was acceptable to research conventions, moving away from assertions about injustice and concentrating on the representation of the girls’ experiences as diverse and contextually located. I must have followed her advice because I graduated.

Yet, there is a part of me that she did not know. Before I learned about feminist research, I was already an activist though I did not label myself as such. In fact, throughout the research process, I strongly believed that activism and research went hand in hand and that line of thinking made it very difficult for me to restrict myself to the confines of research away from activism. Like other authors such as Devault (1996) who believe that activism and research are intertwined, I found myself drawn into diverse spheres of activism while undertaking the research. Without identifying myself as activist, I had made moves to initiate policy change around the treatment of pregnant school girls, I had set up educational programmes around sexual and reproductive health, I had counselled teachers, parents, and community leaders, and had become visible as a community figure with both facts and opinions on gender, sexuality, and justice at my fingertips. I did this without announcing myself as an advocate, and this allowed me to make certain advances, although access to school cultures and management was difficult.

As I have moved beyond ownership of a PhD into efforts to make more changes in the environment faced by pregnant schoolgirls, the issue remains trivialized and my battles as an activist remain unalleviated by my possession

of the highest possible degree awarded by a university. This indeed raises certain questions for me about feminism and research – when I wanted to implement some of the recommendations within the research, I met with the same lack of seriousness that I had encountered when I conducted the study. There is an assumption in the literature on feminist research methodology that excellent research *will* open obstinate doors around policy and practice. I have not found this to be the case, which raises concerns for me about the conviction with which I spoke to my participants, that telling me about their experiences could be important to shifting the landscape of gendered prejudice around them.

Ironically, I have found that in Lesotho where the church plays a major role in socialization of individuals, it is difficult for one to operate outside it. The space I occupy within the church is the safest for me to initiate change as an activist. The placement of discussions about sexuality and gender in the church context results in protection and advancement of ideas, even where “morality” continues to serve as a basis for judgement. As a PhD graduate, my research ideas remain trivialized within university and educational spaces, but as a church member, people can approach me without fear and I am able to share with them the very ideas I believe in. This is a study in itself – where and how “research and activism” can coincide may be worth deep exploration. Yet, this exploration portrays me once again as “different” and writing about the alienation and difficulties I experienced as a researcher in sexualities and gender, in a contextually stigmatized area, has reminded me of how hard it is to take oneself as the “centre” of feminist reflexivity.

In this article, I have reflected on some of my feelings of loneliness and tiredness and I have shared some of the struggles as struggles of research methodology. I do this with the intention to create support for other researchers in the area of sexuality. The completed dissertation largely forbids expression of the “personal” implications of working within innovative, sensitive, and autobiographically complex zones, but the future of strong feminist research in sexualities and gender in our contexts demands that we begin to tell the stories of the “personal” where “the personal” means not simply experiences “outside” the academy, but the experiences of *living the academic*.

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