Panel Discussion

Feminist Participatory Action Research: A methodology of research and activism

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Abstract. This panel session examines Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) as a qualitative methodology for research and social change. The objectives of the panel session are:

• To discuss and critically analyse the theory and practice of FPAR.
• To share case studies of FPAR in Asia Pacific and Australia.
• To explore outcomes, issues and tensions with FPAR, such as impacts on policy, and ethical considerations.

Increasingly, feminist human rights movements around the world are using FPAR to generate knowledge and action to strengthen their movements, challenge power structures, increase their impact, and inform transformational change. FPAR is a cyclical methodology of collective planning, acting, observing and reflecting, whereby women document lived experiences of injustice and take action to demand their human rights and inform structural change (Lykes & Hershberg 2012; Reid, Tom & Frisby 2006). FPAR combines research, gender justice and activism (Chakma 2016), and can be used by feminist social movements to develop, implement and evaluate strategies to challenge and transform patriarchal power. FPAR is an iterative, democratized methodology, and research participants are ‘co-researchers’ and ‘activist researchers’ who collectively generate knowledge and action as experts in their own lives (Godden 2017; Kirby 2011).

The Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), a leading civil society organization in FPAR methodology, identifies nine key principles of FPAR:

1. Purpose is structural change: the purpose of our research is to bring about structural changes that women identify as critical to their enjoyment of human rights.
2. Amplifies women’s voice: the research gives voice to women as the experts and authors of their own lives and policy decisions. It strategically places them as researchers and experts and promotes them into policy dialogue.
3. Owned by community: Research decisions are made by the community of women who are the stakeholders of the research project.
4. Takes an intersectional approach to identity and experiences of discrimination, exclusion and marginalisation: recognising the diversity of women’s experiences, identities and power.
5. Aims to shift power: the research seeks to reconstruct traditional power imbalances such as researcher / subject and also aims to challenge and shift gendered sources of personal, political and structural power.
6. Fosters movement building / collective action: the research process itself should be seen as a collective process that strengthens solidarity, but in addition the research aims to empower women to work collectively for long-term structural change.
7. Builds capacity of all: FPAR always involves capacity building but also recognises that capacity building and learning is a collective, political action of all the players involved.

8. Free prior informed consent of all participants is prioritised in FPAR.

9. Safety, care and solidarity with participants is essential.

FPAR involves a range of participatory and creative data collection and analysis methods that encourage diverse participation, access and inclusion. Some examples include drawings, participatory filming/photography (Photovoice, Videovoice), social mapping, timelines, storytelling, participatory interviews, focus group discussion, reflective journaling, roleplay, mime, theatre, dance and song. In FPAR, these methods are implemented by and with women, and the data is collectively analysed and reported. FPAR also involves the use of tools such as power mapping and critical pathways to support activists to develop, implement and reflect on strategies to build social movements, advocate for just and equitable policies, and influence decision-makers.

FPAR is shifting the power of knowledge generation from academic researchers to communities. For example, a recent evaluation of a Climate Justice-Feminist Participatory Action Research program found that FPAR was a highly effective process for mobilising women to enhance their skills and capacities, knowledge, advocacy and movements to demand climate justice (Godden et al. 2020).

The panel session will share and critically examine experiences of FPAR in practice, briefly discussed below.

- **Grassroots FPAR in Asia**: For the past decade, grassroots feminist organisations in Asia have been using FPAR as a key methodology to foster autonomous women’s human rights movements in the region. Ms Chakma will explore how she and activist colleagues have supported young women to engage in regular FPAR training and undergo FPAR projects with women in their communities to document lived experiences of injustices, and develop and implement activist strategies to demand structural changes across the issues of labour, migration, land rights, climate justice and trade/economic justice.

- **Climate Justice research program, Edith Cowan University**: Edith Cowan University supports a climate justice research program that uses FPAR as its core methodology. Dr Godden will discuss how academic researchers are working in partnership with social movements in Australia, Asia and the Pacific to support collective research and action that address the injustices of climate change. Some example projects include consciousness-raising about gender and intersectionality in the climate movement; and strengthening the capacity of community sector organisations to mainstream climate justice across all areas of their work.

- **Pacific Girls in a Changing Climate**: Plan International Australia is engaging in FPAR with adolescent girls in the Pacific regarding climate justice. Ms Phillips will examine how the project supports adolescent to undertake research about the impacts of climate change on girls in their communities, identify actions that can be undertaken to address their needs, and strengthen their activism to demand these changes.

**Overview of the Panel Session**

During the Panel Session, panellists and audience members will explore FPAR through the following:

1. **Context**: The panel will discuss the theory of FPAR, including FPAR concepts, key principles, research cycles and creative, participatory methods (15 minutes, moderated by Ms Chakma)
2. Case studies: The panellists will each share presentations of case studies of FPAR in Australia, Asia and the Pacific (5-7 minutes each), plus 10 minutes for questions from the audience (total 30 minutes, moderated by Ms Phillips)

3. Moderated discussion about the outcomes, issues and challenges of FPAR in practice (Moderated by Dr Godden, 30 minutes).

4. Audience comments and questions (15 minutes, moderated by Ms Chakma)

Reflecting the feminist values of the panellists, the session will be participatory and inclusive, with opportunities for the audience to ask questions, make comments and provide feedback.

References


Keywords: Feminist participatory action research; women’s rights; social movements; activism; creative methods.

Necessary resources: The panelists will be teleconferencing into the conference via Zoom, which will require a projector, internet, and audio system.

Biographical note

Ms Trimita Chakma is an independent feminist researcher and MA (Asian Women’s Studies) student at Ewha Womans University, South Korea. She has over ten years’ experience campaigning for women’s human rights, six years’ experience in ICTs, and an M.Sc. in IT management from Carnegie Mellon University. For over seven years, Trimita worked with the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development to design and implement Feminist Participatory Action Research with over 80 grassroots communities across 20 countries in the Asia Pacific. Through FPAR, women influence policies and practices regarding labour, migration, land rights, climate justice and trade/economic justice.

Dr Naomi Joy Godden is a Vice-Chancellor’s Research Fellow at Edith Cowan University, Australia. She has a PhD in social work from Monash University. Naomi engages in Feminist Participatory Action...
Research with social movements in Australia, Asia and the Pacific to collectively understand the intersecting injustices of climate change and develop and implement actions to demand feminist responses in policy and practice. Naomi has 17 years of experience in community development, feminist research and activism in areas such as gender justice, poverty alleviation, and environmental justice, in grassroots community organisations, local government, international development agencies, universities and United Nations advocacy.

Ms Kate Phillips is Senior Advisor – Policy and Advocacy at Plan International Australia. She leads youth-led research and advocacy projects on issues identified by young people in Australia and the Asia Pacific. Previous projects include working with young women in Sydney on ‘Free to Be’ to advocate for an end to street harassment; with adolescent girls in Solomon Islands to identify and advocate for solutions to enable girls to complete secondary education; and with young women in Australia and Vietnam to dream the ‘new normal’ post-COVID19. Kate has over ten years’ experience in community and international development, feminist research and activism.