Enacting FPAR in Human Rights Organizations: practices, challenges and tensions

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Abstract

This article examines how Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) is utilized by the largest feminist network in Asia-Pacific for the purpose of advancing women's rights. As part of this exploration, the study also identifies challenges with realizing participatory principles as well as tensions that emerge between the logic of the human rights organization (HRO) and the tenets of FPAR. This research is based on semi-structured qualitative interviews with seven Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) workers at the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) with experience as FPAR facilitators. It investigates their perspectives and beliefs as practitioners of the method to provide a deeper understanding of how theoretical conceptualizations of FPAR are translated into practice. Findings demonstrate that FPAR is used as a method to co-create knowledge based on grassroots women's subjective lived experiences which function as evidence that they can act upon when advocating for the rights of their communities. Meanwhile, language barriers constrain the practical use of FPAR and limit equal participation. Finally, findings indicate that the organizational structure of APWLD with its overreliance on predetermined frameworks coupled with donor requirements may be ill-suited to the implementation of FPAR principles. In extension, an examination of FPAR reveals new lessons for the wider practice of human rights, suggesting that our focus should be on political tools and practices that target the structural causes behind human rights abuses.

Keywords

feminist participatory action research, human rights, human rights organizations, knowledge production

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Introduction

Participatory research practices have been around for decades and are used today by a range of actors in different institutional settings including academia, government and business as well as by radical civil society organizations and social movements. One of the most widespread methodologies is Participatory Action Research (PAR) which is said to emerge from both northern and southern traditions (Macaulay, 2017). Many trace its beginnings to the 1940s and the work of German social psychologist Kurt Lewin along with his critique of positivist approaches to research (Pant, 2014: 583). The term PAR was coined by Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda in the 1970s (Schugurensky, 2014: 370), with his focus on a 'science of the proletariat' or 'popular science' (Rahman, 2011: 52), and was heavily influenced by the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and his theories of critical consciousness and liberatory pedagogy (Lykes & Coquillon, 2007: 308). PAR sought to redefine the notion of knowledge production as objective, neutral and apolitical and the subject-object distinction that characterizes many forms of research. It does so, in part, by allowing marginalized peoples to own every step of the knowledge production process including identifying the problems they face, carrying out the research, and analyzing and acting on the results produced (Schugurensky, 2014: 367). In turn, feminists developed Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) in response to PAR's androcentric focus on the basis that it does not adequately consider gender issues nor patriarchal structures as barriers to women's meaningful participation (Maguire, 1987: 66). For the purposes of this paper, FPAR as described by Reid, Tom & Frisby (2006: 316), is defined as "(...) a conceptual and methodological framework that enables a critical understanding of women's multiple perspectives and works towards inclusion, participation, and action, while confronting the underlying assumptions that researchers bring into the research process". Both PAR and FPAR contain an inherent agenda of social change (Pant, 2014: 583). These approaches are often practiced with and for underprivileged groups in which research is understood as a political process (Harding, 2020), aimed at transforming social relations, oppressive societal structures and working towards emancipatory goals.

This research is grounded in theoretical debates and concepts from two main bodies of literature: previous work on gender and participation as well as work centered on human rights institutions. Much of the general literature on FPAR tends to focus on theory and normative aspirations of what FPAR should achieve (Maguire, 1987; Reid & Frisby, 2008; Lorenzetti & Walsh, 2014). More critical emerging work on the interface of participatory research and gender within the fields of development (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000; Cornwall, 2003; Cornwall, 2008), social work (Johnson & Flynn, 2021), women's health (Ponic, Reid & Frisby, 2010) and university-community partnerships (Langan & Morton, 2009; Gustafson & Brunger, 2014) demonstrates the pitfalls and limitations that feminist participatory practitioners may face in practice. Literature centered on human rights institutions and practices have tended to focus exclusively on the largest and most established human rights organizations (HROs) in the Global North, partly because Western HROs have disproportionately shaped the imagination of what human rights are and what human rights work entails (Krause, 2020). However, human rights work is not understood or practiced in the same way ubiquitously and there is value in redirecting our focus to alternative practices, particularly across the Global South. The use of FPAR for the purpose of advancing human rights is understudied and therefore warrants investigation. Such an investigation can allow us to question taken-for-granted conventions and practices that have become the legitimate way of carrying out human rights.

In the context of these debates, I argue that an exclusive focus on the theoretical aspects of FPAR carries two key risks, the conceptualization of FPAR in the abstract and a tendency to view FPAR solely in a positive light. In order to transcend the above-mentioned risks and fill an important gap in the literature on FPAR and its place in human rights institutions, it is important to examine empirical cases. Previous research shows that enacting FPAR principles in practice is rarely a smooth process. This research seeks to build on this critical work by examining the use of FPAR by the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), a regional HRO whose expressed mission is to advance women's rights in Asia-Pacific, particularly the rights of grassroots women. The study draws on seven semi-structured interviews with FPAR facilitators from APWLD. The purpose of this research is to examine how FPAR is used in practice by a feminist HRO to move beyond

claims about what FPAR achieves at face value, identify potential challenges when realizing participatory principles and explore the logic of the HRO versus the tenets of FPAR. In doing so I seek to answer the following questions: 1) how does APWLD use FPAR to advance women's rights?; 2) what are the challenges of conducting FPAR in practice?; and 3) what tensions arise in upholding the principles of FPAR within the organizational structure of a human rights organization? This article begins by describing the research context and introducing key theoretical observations from previous research that provide entry points into critical debates. I then proceed to provide justifications for the methodological approach adopted and close by discussing findings and research contributions.

Research Context

In the wake of the landmark adoption of the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the 1980s-90s saw a surge in the global mobilization around women's human rights. Spaces opened up for civil society which afforded feminists unprecedented opportunities to organize and advance their causes on a global scale. Through concerted efforts, including relentless lobbying by a Global North and South feminist coalition, women's issues were successfully situated onto the United Nations (UN) agenda (Keck & Sikkink, 1998: 187). The 1985 Third World Conference on Women held in Nairobi, Kenya culminated in the establishment of various regional feminist networks. APWLD is one of three networks specializing in women, law and development.

APWLD was founded in 1986 by women lawyers and activists from Asia-Pacific who established headquarters in Chiang Mai, Thailand and a satellite office in Penang, Malaysia. The all-female, all-Asian secretariat is mainly responsible for program implementation. As a feminist membership-driven network and non-governmental organization (NGO), APWLD takes its directive from its membership composed of 265 members from 30 countries across Asia-Pacific. APWLD is the largest feminist network in the region and has 37 years of experience working to advance women's rights. Since its inception, APWLD has utilized a range of strategies and methods to further women's rights. Initially, the organization carried out more conventional human rights work such as fact-finding missions, field visits and in-depth interviews with women from marginalized communities. Through many years of engagement with different forms of feminist research, the organization identified participation and community-led research as guiding principles for APWLD's work. APWLD's broader goal is to have women organize themselves by fostering autonomous women's movements to bring about structural change, in part, by influencing laws and policies that promote gender equality and women's rights in the region (Chakma, 2016; Godden et al, 2020). The organization has used FPAR as its key methodology to achieve this objective following the run of its first FPAR cycle in 2012. Participatory and action research involves collaborations between those directly affected by an issue, often called 'insiders', 'participants' or 'community members', working alongside others with technical skills and formal knowledge, referred to as 'outsiders, 'researchers' or 'facilitators' (Lykes & Hershberg, 2012: 332). APWLD's work is centered on amplifying the voices of women most impacted by human rights violations and global crises. The organization therefore works specifically with marginalized women such as rural, urban-poor, migrant, and indigenous women. Within APWLD's FPAR program, these diverse and distinct groups are referred to as 'grassroots women' and 'partners'. In this paper, I will use the established term 'participants' and APWLD's preferred terms, i.e., 'grassroots women' and 'partners' relatively interchangeably.

Human Rights Practices

Research centered on human rights institutions can be divided into two waves (Krause, 2020). The first wave of scholarship is characterized by a focus on HROs' stated values and ideologies, evaluating whether they are able to effect change in line with their stated values. The dominant view of HROs at the time was that they fundamentally differed from other international organizations such as for-profit businesses because HROs were be-

lieved to be "(…) motivated by values rather than material concerns" (Keck & Sikkink, 1998: 2). Second wave scholars have moved beyond the focus on values and idealized views of HROs and expanded the literature on human rights institutions. Whilst some scholars have explored the different practices of international HROs, others have looked at the full range of effects of human rights work, including negative, intended and unintended consequences (Barnett, 2002; Kennedy, 2004).

Second wave scholars such as Krause (2020) argue that Western HROs base their work around a specific yet limited 'repertoire of practices' that have, in at times unquestioned ways, come to be considered the legitimate way of carrying out human rights work. Some of these practices include research, report writing, campaigning and training (de Waal, 2003: 239). Human rights research as a practice has been particularly influenced by legal understandings of what constitutes research. Large HROs are often dominated by highly educated lawyers from or trained in the West. Indeed, several scholars have problematized the increasing professionalization of human rights (de Waal, 2003: 241) and excessive focus on law (Moon, 2012; Nash, 2015: 5), pointing to their negative consequences. One effect is the exclusion of the voices and perspectives of non-lawyers and those of local and grassroots activists (Choudry & Kapoor, 2013). Another effect is the dismissal of alternative, non-legal tools and methods that might better suit both human rights practitioners and the needs of people affected by human rights violations on the ground. The moral ideals that embody human rights have in the past half-century been subject to legal principles and discourse at the expense of other disciplines (Blake, 2008). The exclusionary nature of contemporary human rights practice with its focus on international law as the primary vehicle carrying the ideals of human rights forward can arguably be traced to its very foundations. Although the origins of human rights are highly contested, many connect the modern invention of human rights with Western liberalism and jurisprudence. It is a history that has incited criticism around the global spread and domination of a Eurocentric tradition, which some view as a continuation of the Western imperial project (Moyn 2017: 274). Ignatieff (2001: 102) engages with critique of what he describes as the powerful yet imperialist makeup of the human rights doctrine centered on its claim to universality. Others, such as Mutua (2001; 210, 237), argue that Western powers, backed by powerful institutions such as the UN, are engaged in a "civilizing mission" intent on imposing Eurocentric political structures, norms and traditions onto the rest of the world in the name of human rights. Given the historical entanglements between imperialism and human rights that these debates point to, it is unsurprising that the exclusionary nature of international law persists in contemporary human rights law and practice.

The professionalization of HROs is perhaps most clearly visible in the reports that HROs produce. Several scholars have focused on the centrality of the human rights report (Cohen, 1995; Moon, 2012) as possibly the most important practice that HROs undertake. Dudai (2009: 246) conceptualizes the modern human rights report as a description of suffering and violence. He argues that the typical human rights report is characterized by a 'forensic stockpiling' mode. This style aims to present facts in a rational, objective, non-emotive tone by deliberately excluding historical, moral and political frameworks, relying instead on international human rights law (Dudai, 2009: 249-250). Many HROs and NGOs tend to reject storytelling and narrative styles of reporting in favor of the forensic stockpiling style because "(…) it establishes their authority to speak. We can all tell stories and be emotive. But only professional experts can produce a forensic report, and the potential readers would recognize this style and locate it above all the ordinary storytellers" (Dudai, 2009: 255). Yet, this style of reporting also comes at a cost. A drawback is the depoliticization and decontextualization of human rights violations, which Dudai claims has the effect of merely treating the 'symptoms', i.e., individual policies or incidents that violate human rights rather than their underlying causes. In extension, I argue that radical approaches may help circumvent the professionalization of human rights work centered on the forensic report and the subsequent depoliticization of human rights issues.

The 'F' and 'P' in FPAR

It is widely agreed that feminism and what constitutes feminist research lack universal definition (Freedman, 2001: 1; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2003: 146). FPAR scholars contend that as a methodological framework, FPAR blends participatory action research with critical feminist theory (Reid, Tom & Frisby, 2006; Reid & Gillberg, 2014: 344). Critical feminist theory "(...) uses critical inquiry and reflection on social injustice by way of gender analysis to transform, and not simply explain, the social order" (Ackerly & True, 2019: 1). This perspective highlights the uneven distribution of power and the social structures that reinforce inequalities and perpetuate the subordination of underprivileged groups; key is the aim to create transformative change. Whilst recognizing both the diversity of feminist perspectives and that FPAR researchers may draw on a range of different approaches, this research builds on previous work that explicitly relates the 'f' in FPAR with critical feminist theory. Some feminist theories, not least mainstream academic feminism, have been criticized for being too far removed from on-the-ground-realities and the lived experiences of women and marginalized groups. Scholars have criticized feminist theories for having become so esoteric and elitist that they are both irrelevant and detrimental when used in top-down and colonizing ways (McEwan, 2001; Oliver, 2014: 375). Frisby, Maguire & Reid (2009) argue that the participatory and action components of PAR can serve to offset the distance between feminist theory and the lived experiences of diverse groups of people by engaging them in transformative research that better serves these groups. At the same time, a feminist perspective addresses PAR's gender blindness and points to the way that power is shaped along gendered lines and intersects with multiple axes of oppression (Reid & Frisby, 2008: 98). Indeed, Reid and Gillberg (2014: 344) assert that PAR and critical feminist theory coincide ontologically and epistemologically since both approaches seek to disrupt dominant and hierarchical forms of knowledge, whilst aiming to advance social justice. In several respects, critical feminist theory and PAR complement one another and, when used jointly, the strengths of each approach address the limitations and gaps of the other (Reid & Frisby, 2008: 94).

The concept of 'participation' started gaining traction in the 1980s, particularly within the field of development (Pant, 2014: 584). FPAR is one within a set of participatory approaches that emerged at the time. Since its popularization, participation has become somewhat of a buzzword used by a range of different actors including NGOs. Yet, participation as both a theoretical concept and a practice is highly contested and can range from tokenistic to transformative forms. Participation orchestrated by an external agency, including NGOs, has been classified as 'invited participation' (Cornwall, 2008). Cornwall speaks of the various benefits and drawbacks of invited participation. Most markedly, this form of participation has the potential to create accessible spaces for marginalized groups with limited power where they can receive support and acquire skills and confidence that help amplify their voices. Cornwall also points to two potential drawbacks. These spaces "(...) are often structured and owned by those who provide them, no matter how participatory they may seek to be" (Cornwall, 2008: 275). Furthermore, whilst this form of participation opens dialogue, it does not necessarily ensure full and effective participation. Instead, participation is premised on a range of factors, including whether or not people are able to take advantage of the opportunities on offer.

In many ways, the notion of participation carries several normative aspirations that might not necessarily translate in practice (Lenette, 2022: 42). Cornwall (2008) emphasizes that it is common to find claims of full participation in official NGO documents and reports that depart from realities on the ground. This is tied to the widespread assumption across NGOs that "(...) getting the mechanisms and methodologies right will bring 'full participation'" (Cornwall, 2008: 279), and the idea that people would invariably participate if only they were given the opportunity. However, in practice, there may be various reasons for non-participation. Participation can rarely involve all stakeholders at all times, and sometimes the opportunity costs of participating in a project or initiative may outweigh the potential benefits. Project participation takes up a considerable amount of time (Maguire, 2008: 420), and in many cases, people are simply unable to participate due to personal commitments or responsibilities (Agarwal, 1997). More often than not, women tend to be overlooked in participatory processes (Guijt & Shah, 1998: 1), or unable to participate often due to expectations assigned to them as 'carers' by virtue of being female.

Whilst what Cornwall (2003: 1327) refers to as "gender-aware participatory approaches" may appear seamless in theory, there is often a disconnect between rhetoric, which she claims tends to be replete with promises of empowerment of the oppressed, and what NGOs do in practice. As a result, several tensions can arise in the application of gender-aware participatory projects. Cornwall (2003) notes that gender and development (GAD) approaches tend to be top-down, imposing culturally specific frames of reference that provide limited leeway for participation in agenda-setting and implementation. Other scholars have similarly cautioned against the risks that researchers run of imposing meaning rather than constructing meaning through negotiation alongside participants (Lather, 1991: 59). This is especially relevant when working with women who may openly reject the need for emancipation and feminist understandings. As feminist researchers with liberation as their goal, Gatenby and Humphries (2000: 100) reflect on this risk when they ask, "But in what way do we combine both feminist understandings, and the lived experience in all its variety, of the women participating in the research?".

Methodology
Research design and methods

This research adopts a single case study approach. A case study entails a detailed investigation of a single case and allows for an in-depth understanding of the case including its complexity and context (Punch, 2005: 144). The case in focus is the HRO APWLD, selected on the basis of the organization's distinctive approach to human rights which I observed during my internship at the Chiang Mai office between September 2019 - January 2020. Case studies are often subject to criticism for not being generalizable (Bryman, 2012: 71). However, the purpose of this research is not necessarily to generalize its findings. Rather, it is to investigate a case that is unique and relevant enough to merit particular attention and intensive examination (Punch, 2005: 146). Although there are other, smaller NGOs in the Global South involved in alternative and radical forms of human rights practices, including participatory approaches, this work is often limited to local contexts. Additionally, in cases where NGOs and other actors engage in PAR and FPAR projects, these are typically one-off initiatives for shorter periods of time. Between 2012-2020, APWLD worked with over 80 communities across 20 countries. APWLD is a distinctive case to study precisely because it is the only regional, cross-country organization in the Global South routinely engaged in FPAR as its main strategy.

I conducted semi-structured interviews as the main data collection method. I interviewed seven former and current staff members at APWLD in June-July 2021. The interviews were conducted virtually, lasting between 1-1.5 hours and carried out in English. I asked questions about their experiences of FPAR including its challenges; the content of the FPAR trainings; how FPAR fits into APWLD's broader work; how they conceive the relationship between facilitators and participants; what a successful and failed FPAR looks like to them; and their understandings of the feminist dimension of FPAR. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using an intelligent verbatim transcription format. I adopted a semi-structured interview method because while I wanted to cover a range of specific topics, I also wanted flexibility to ask open-ended questions, seek elaboration on answers given (May, 2011: 134), and adapt my questions based on the interviewees' responses for a freer dialogue (Lichtman, 2014: 248). This method allowed me to understand how interviewees attach meaning to and make sense of social life from their own particular perspectives in order to answer theory-driven questions (Esterberg, 2002: 87).

I adopted what Bryman (2012: 418) refers to as 'generic purposive sampling' wherein the criteria for selecting participants is established *a priori* at the outset of the research. The interviewees selected had to (1) be or have been part of APWLD's secretariat, either as Program Associates or Program Officers and, (2) have or have had direct experience with the APWLD programs that utilize FPAR as their core method. I aimed for diversity in terms of age and experience and chose to interview both Program Associates and Program

Officers with more experience of FPAR. Following the interviews, I adopted open coding which involves constructing codes during the examination of data and attempting to refrain from imposing a predetermined interpretation on the data based on existing theory and literature (Gibbs, 2018: 59-60).

This study was funded by the LSE Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Center (SEAC) through the Student Dissertation Fieldwork Grant. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and travel restrictions, I was unable to travel to the field site. I transcribed three interviews and used the grant to professionally transcribe the remaining four interviews. This study underwent ethics review in accordance with the LSE Research Ethics Policy and Procedure. Prior to the interviews, all participants signed a consent form to be interviewed and cited without attribution. Oral consent was also obtained at the start of each interview. All data collected from the interviews were anonymized and treated confidentially. To protect any potentially sensitive information disclosed by the interviewees and their personal data, I requested that the transcription company sign a non-disclosure agreement and delete copies of the interview recordings and transcripts.

Limitations

Considering the participatory nature of FPAR, the research could have benefited from participant observation or organizational ethnography. Due to time constraint and the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to travel to the field site and engage in such methods. Nonetheless, there are several advantages of using interviews as a method to examine another method, in this case FPAR. I concur with Krause (2020) who contends that there is value in interviewing professionals in relation to their paid employment and membership in a group of experts, as it can provide important insights into the organizational practices and processes in which they are engaged. Dudai (2009: 260) claims that human rights researchers are often "(…) socialized into the common mode of NGO work" and as a result, rarely pause to reflect on the nature of such work. The same could be said about NGO workers, and I maintain that it is important for FPAR facilitators as practitioners of the method to reflect on their own preconceived ideas and understandings of FPAR. By doing so, I hope to move beyond official claims-making by HROs and acquire a more nuanced understanding of how FPAR is conceptualized and translated into practice.

I had applied for an internship opportunity at APWLD to pursue a personal interest in gaining practical experience of women's rights work in Southeast Asia and did not have a prior connection to the organization, nor to any staff. Though I was able to observe organizational practices and support the coordination of two FPAR trainings during my internship, I did not systematically record those experiences. Whilst I may attempt to separate my internship experience from the present research, I acknowledge that my interpretation of the data collected will be impacted by subconscious biases based on my time at the organization. What I consider a 'semi-insider' position allowed me to quickly acquire interview participants as they were already known to me. McConnell-Henry et al (2009) suggest that rapport building is rapidly accelerated when the researcher and the interviewee have a pre-existing relationship. My pre-existing professional relationships, and in some cases friendships, with the interviewees generated a level of trust that allowed interviewees to speak openly, influencing the depth of the data obtained.

Findings
The FPAR cycle

To understand how APWLD uses FPAR to advance women's rights, it is important to examine how the FPAR trainings are organized as the main space where facilitators and participants gather, co-create and transfer knowledge. An FPAR cycle typically lasts eighteen months and includes three week-long training sessions and one reflection meeting. These are usually facilitated by APWLD program staff who are from the Asia-Pacific region and possess knowledge of the communities they work with. There is an open call, after

which a number of applicants from different countries in the region are chosen to participate in the FPAR cycle. Shortlisted applicants become partners and each FPAR batch includes eight to 12 partner organizations. Partners are comprised of a young woman researcher and her mentor, at least one of whom must come from the community in which the research is conducted. The following description of the FPAR trainings is based on interviews with APWLD's facilitators. The first training provides an overall introduction to FPAR, including core FPAR principles and methods. Most importantly, the partners are introduced to APWLD's (2019a; 2019b) various frameworks, including their Theory of Change (TOC) and the Globalization, Fundamentalism, Militarism and Patriarchy (GFM-P) model which guide APWLD's work in line with the organization's feminist values. The TOC states that autonomous feminist movements led by grassroots women are necessary to bring about and sustain structural change. The four key components behind fostering autonomous movements are: (1) capacity-building; (2) producing evidence-based knowledge and tools; (3) undertaking policy advocacy across national and international levels; and (4) developing spaces, networks and alliances to drive collective change. As a feminist organization, APWLD's work is grounded in the use of feminist analyses such as the GFM-P framework which asserts that the root cause of women's oppression stems from the pervasive forces of globalization, fundamentalism and militarism and their intersection with patriarchy. Although APWLD defines itself as a feminist organization, it does not embrace a specific understanding of feminism. The organization also recognizes that not all women whom they work alongside may self-identify as feminists.

After the first training, partners conduct a pre-research consultation in their communities to identify the issues facing grassroots women, their priorities and the changes they want to see happen. In essence, the consultation functions as a basis for the entire FPAR research design. The second training focuses on data collection using feminist participatory methods where partners are introduced to a range of tools and methods for data collection, including basic documentation and interviews and focus group discussions. Participants are also encouraged to engage in creative presentation of FPAR data using photography and film, poetry, theater and dance. These expressive methods may "(...) help participants express their idiosyncratic, subjective experiences from the 'bottom up'" (Brabeck & Brabeck, 2014: 342). After the second training, partners return to their communities to gather and analyze the data. In the third training, partners present their research findings and identify evidence that can be used for advocacy purposes. In this session, facilitators enable participants to develop a range of skills and advocacy strategies including how to create a successful advocacy campaign, engage in digital storytelling and improve public speaking skills. As part of the FPAR, participants are required to write and submit a mandatory research report including the evidence of their research as well as community-based recommendations and solutions. The FPAR cycle is closed with a final reflection meeting where participants and facilitators come together to jointly reflect on the impacts, successes and challenges of the FPAR process.

The use of FPAR in practice

The tradition of participatory research involves facilitators coming together with participants in a partnership of sorts. Thus, participatory research is based on the assumption that all parties enter the research process with situated knowledge to contribute. The interview data shows that all facilitators at APWLD possessed a shared understanding of what the co-production of knowledge entails, i.e., the research that partners take on. They understood their role as 'guides' who transfer knowledge in the form of skills, tools and capacity-building. In contrast, the interviewees conceptualized the participants' contribution to the knowledge production process as one based on participants' stories and lived experiences. Facilitator 6 (F6) highlighted that partners' stories are the "evidence" Another interviewee expressed that "(...) stories are really powerful, and if the stories are coming directly from the people who are experiencing the injustices that can be quite powerful" (F2). She emphasized that from those stories, partners generate "knowledge products" which can include a range of activities and practices such as articles, video campaigns and even theater. The knowledge products are viewed as evidence used to influ-

ence duty-bearers i.e., governments who often cause, perpetuate or ignore human rights violations committed against the grassroots communities in question. Another facilitator highlighted that the knowledge products are not only used by the partners who generate them, they are also used directly by APWLD:

> APWLD gains enormous knowledge from the partners themselves when they come and share their lived experiences in their communities, their political systems, the institutions that work for and against them and so forth. So, that's one way that we generate our knowledge and we're able to then form our own political advocacy strategies in that country for us to work with when we go to national, regional and international spaces (F1).

Facilitators' perspectives align with literature on participatory approaches which view participants as experts in lived experience (Brabeck & Brabeck, 2014: 342). In contrast to large HROs where outsider "experts" determine which human rights violations and crises are worthy of attention, bottom-up approaches informed by women's lived experiences help cast light on issues that might have otherwise gone under the radar. FPAR allows the people affected by human rights violations to use their own stories grounded in subjective and lived experience as evidence for advocacy purposes. The knowledge produced is also used by APWLD which has the capacity, resources and standing to engage with UN human rights mechanisms such as treaty bodies and special rapporteurs. In this way, APWLD acts as a bridge between various levels of government across local, regional and international spaces. The view of grassroots women as experts can be attributed to the valorization of a multiplicity of ways of knowing. F2 went on to stress that:

> (...) everything is data, anything can be coded and analyzed. What I like the most about FPAR is when I was working with a group of women that couldn't read or write (...) they would think, 'on no, never, I don't know how to do that, how could I be a researcher?'. (...) That is not a really special thing to have, so many people in the world can read and write right? What is special is, they have their very specific experience and knowledge, and they can express it through speaking, oral histories, they can draw it, they can tell us. There are so many ways to express it, which can be coded into data.

Challenges with conducting FPAR

This article has thus far outlined how APWLD understands and implements FPAR. I will now explore some of the challenges that facilitators face in practice. This section explores the participatory nature of the organization's use of FPAR within the context of what Cornwall (2008) refers to as 'invited participation', i.e., participation organized by a third party. Though I recognize that the bulk of the FPAR happens on the ground by participants, the questions posed were specifically related to the FPAR trainings as the space where facilitators and participants come together. The principle of equal participation arguably lies at the core of FPAR. Yet, interviewees spoke of several difficulties with attempting to ensure equitable participation in FPAR trainings. For instance, when it comes to agenda-setting, it is evident that the trainings are fully orchestrated and owned by APWLD. F6 acknowledged that "(... some parts of the training might not be fabulously participatory" where knowledge delivery is key. Similarly, another facilitator explained that: "The training program is designed entirely by APWLD. (...) We develop and almost, I think, curate a program according to the partners who we've already shortlisted and we already have identified the issues that they're going to have" (F1). This view was shared by a third facilitator who indicated that: "(...) the training itself in a way it is participatory because they need to actually use the tools and practice it, but I wouldn't say that it is that participatory in a sense that we have goals and objectives with the sessions that we want to put them through. (...) It's not like we have a lot of room to change that" (F3). A second recurring issue that over half of the interviewees (F1, F3, F4 and F5) raised relates to the difficulties facilitators experience when relaying highly technical information to grassroots women. Interviewees spoke of how challenging partners found it to fully absorb technical knowledge transferred from facilitators. One of the interviewee's revealed that:

> A lot of them find it extremely technical, extremely challenging. (…) I mean, many of them have not even caught a plane and then show up to a training for a week where they're learning about globalization and capitalism, it's very difficult. For me, I think the greatest challenge (…) is how do you unpack and break down (…) human rights to grassroots women in a way that is participatory rather than more educational or informative. (…) making technical aspects participatory is still a challenge that we find (F1).

In the same vein, F3 disclosed that "(…) just using these words like neoliberalism and patriarchy just throws people off. And I have had people say, I mean 'oh my God I can't follow'". The interview data demonstrates that as a space, the FPAR trainings are fully controlled by APWLD. The fact that they include largely predetermined sessions leaves little room to change or develop the trainings organically alongside participants. Additionally, findings suggest that facilitators struggle to adapt the trainings to grassroots women with different backgrounds, levels of educational attainment and frames of reference. Both sets of challenges reveal issues of power imbalances. Although participatory approaches seek to equalize power dynamics between researcher or facilitator and participant (Pant, 2014: 585), two facilitators (F1 and F7) described the relationship as that of a teacher and student, going against their own understanding of FPAR. When probed further about the technical aspects of APWLD's FPAR trainings, F1 stated that:

> A lot of that information is actually just taught, rather than there being a participation of sorts. (…) So while the research methodologies and tools are all participatory because they're through games, they're through creative expression and other activities, the technical part of FPAR (…) is actually taught and very much we have the whole teacher and student relationship.

Findings echo previous research which calls into question FPAR's ability to "(…) truly deconstruct social hierarchies grounded in social and professional status" (Johnson & Flynn, 2021), particularly between university-trained facilitators and marginalized women. Despite the best of intentions, it can prove difficult to move beyond power imbalances between researcher and participant (Ozkul, 2020), even when adopting participatory approaches. Whilst FPAR methods, tools and on-the-ground work that partners engage in alongside their communities may be considered participatory, facilitators grapple with ensuring equal participation in the trainings. As participants are unable to influence the structure and content of the trainings, the sense that some facilitators take on the role as teachers casts uncertainty on the extent to which FPAR trainings can be conducted in a truly participatory way.

Language barriers were a salient issue raised by all seven facilitators as the primary barrier to full participation. APWLD conducts its FPAR in English. However, since most of the participants are grassroots women, the organization brings in translators to assist them during trainings. Godden (2017: 9) speaks of the problems associated with using interpreters in participatory inquiries as it may result in filtering of information which can restrict "(…) the extent to which the co-operative inquiry process authentically enshrines collaborative knowledge and decisions arising from the group." Interviewees raised concerns about using translators when communicating with participants. Concerns included the risk of translators misinterpreting the information relayed and knowledge being lost in translation. Some interviewees highlighted the struggle of finding interpreters who understand feminist principles and the technical contents of the FPAR trainings. Other interviewees acknowledged the difficulties facing participants in making their voices heard during FPAR trainings. Whilst addressing language barriers an interviewee recognized that:

> It's brutal to put someone who is illiterate in their own language through an English training and listen to the interpretation for the whole time and find it difficult to communicate. But, that said, I feel like regional work still has its value in terms of bringing people together. Personally, I would say it's best when it's done locally (F7).

There are various benefits and disadvantages with APWLD's use of interpreters. On the one hand, it allows grassroots women from different countries and communities across Asia-Pacific to come together for the FPAR trainings. On the other hand, and building on previous work which also identifies language barriers as a challenge to participatory approaches (Lykes & Hershberg, 2012: 353), I argue that language as a barrier limits partners' ability to partake in FPAR on equal terms in two ways. In addition to facilitators facing difficulties in relaying highly technical aspects to grassroots women in a participatory manner, the fact that the FPAR is facilitated in English impacts not only how inclusive the trainings are, but also has inadvertent exclusionary effects. The design of the trainings does not necessarily ensure that all participants are able to freely express themselves, which serves as a reminder that "being involved in a process is not equivalent to having a voice" (Cornwall, 2008: 278). Finally, findings demonstrate the role that language barriers play when conducting FPAR across borders. APWLD works with many communities across 30 countries and the scale of the work tends to be larger than the typical participatory project. Indeed, in order to build a large-scale feminist movement, as is one of APWLD's main objectives, a regional approach is required. Yet, in practice, it appears that when applied regionally, FPAR inevitably loses its participatory quality, and several interviewees (F2, F3, F7) agreed that FPAR is best suited at the local or national level. Overall, and despite the various challenges with carrying out FPAR, interviewees expressed support for the method. A majority of interviewees (F1, F2, F4, F5, F6 and F7) described their experiences of FPAR as meaningful and viewed it as superior to more conventional approaches to women's right work.

Tensions Between the Logic of the HRO vs the Tenets of FPAR
The use of political frameworks

APWLD's use of FPAR as its main strategy distinguishes the organization from other HROs. Yet, the use of FPAR within specific organizational structures is rarely free of tensions. This section is divided into two parts, each dealing with issues in attempting to follow FPAR principles within the structure of an HRO. The first part explores how APWLD differs from other HROs with a focus on political frameworks and the second part examines the final report and the importance of the written word. Whilst APWLD is engaged in typical human rights practices such as (1) research and (2) report-writing, the victims themselves of human rights abuses undertake these practices, whereby the report takes center stage as the evidence marshaled. At the same time, APWLD departs from the forensic stockpiling style as described by Dudai. In contrast to the generic NGO report which presents facts in a rational, objective and non-emotive tone, interviewees highlight the importance of subjective storytelling as a valid form of knowledge. Secondly, Dudai (2009: 254) claims that the goal of the forensic report is not to mobilize the oppressed but to gain the attention of an 'other', usually a perpetrator government. There is a driving assumption underpinning the broader human rights movement that "(...) if only people knew they would act" (Moon, 2012: 877). However, the report produced by the participants, with support of APWLD, contains multiple objectives. One such objective is the self-mobilization of women. This goal is informed by the action component inherent in FPAR, where the aim of the report goes beyond merely describing human rights violations in the hopes that human rights abusers will change their ways when presented with facts. In fact, as F6 noted, the analysis in the reports is "(...) even more powerful because the effort doesn't stop there (...), it's about coming up with plans to change laws, policies and power structures" grounded in the realities and needs of the people. A final way in which APWLD challenges taken-for-granted human rights practices is its explicit use of political frameworks such as the TOC and the GFM-P. These frameworks essentially function as the macro lens through which APWLD urges participants to frame their research report. Through the use of political frameworks, APWLD is able to do what many other HROs refrain from doing, i.e., point to the structural causes of human rights violations.

Although there are benefits of using political frameworks, some facilitators (F4 and F5) expressed a degree of skepticism. F5 spoke of the need to adapt and review existing frameworks and tools. F4 described both the TOC and GFM-P as "non-negotiable" and similarly claimed that: "(...) our analysis, because it's not being totally updated... a lot of new trends that happening, it can be one or very many root causes of problems, but we still stick with the same framework throughout the years" (F4). The use of political frameworks is part of APWLD's broader agenda of advancing women's rights in the region through the mobilization of grassroots women *en masse*. One interviewee (F7) indicated that this agenda is integrated into the entire FPAR cycle, including the trainings. Yet, at times, the importance of the political frameworks appeared to override full commitment to FPAR principles as the observation of one facilitator suggests:

> So while we know that we can't just tell them what it is they need to do, we do it through prompting by asking them questions for them to then come to that themselves, 'okay, so this is what's missing from the analysis and what needs to be analyzed' but in some cases, you know, we just say 'look, there is no gender here so that is a problem' (F1).

Whilst most interviewees understood FPAR as described in the literature, i.e., as a collaborative process where power is shared, knowledge is co-created and neither party holds the definitive answer (Brabeck, 2004: 48), the experience of carrying out FPAR in practice does not necessarily align. This is exemplified by one interviewee who spoke about what facilitation means for her:

> (...) participatory facilitation is where you don't know or you don't give an answer. And you are guiding everyone through a journey of finding the answer and you do it together and in the end, it's everybody's effort. But in the FPAR trainings it's more like, here are the answers! (F7).

There appears to be a dogmatic focus on frameworks based on stringent and seemingly ideological criteria regarding what the report needs to contain. The "non-negotiable" adherence to frameworks, which some facilitators recognize might also be in need of revision, suggests a rigidity and inflexibility to certain aspects of APWLD's FPAR. The focus on frameworks coupled with facilitators' prompting and potential interference with participants' research analyses demonstrate the difficulty that participatory researchers face when negotiating rather than imposing meaning (Lather, 1991: 59). I concur with Creese and Frisby (2011: 6, 233) who underscore the need for increased reflexivity, i.e., "(...) interrogating how differences in power and privilege shape research relationships (...)," to ensure that power is shared more equality in processes of collaborative knowledge production. Engaging in reflexivity opens space for negotiations over knowledge claims, who makes them and to what end (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002: 119), a practice which I argue may help facilitators relinquish some degree of control over participatory research processes.

The primacy of the written word

A condition of the FPAR is that participants submit written reports at various stages of the 18-month FPAR cycle, including the final report. Tuhiwai Smith (2021: 224) argues that processes of knowledge production are dominated by Western methods that confer greater legitimacy to the written word, which risks reproducing colonizing ideologies and perspectives. The interview material shows that interviewees placed considerable importance on the written word. When asked about the significance of the final report, F5 stated: "I think if we call it research, we need to see it in concrete form right, and writing is one way of doing that." The report is so vital that non-compliance can lead to the termination of an FPAR partnership. As one facilitator explained:

> The most struggle we have had is with the groups in the Pacific. Starting from the fact that they are an oral culture, like storytelling, but not really record writing or documentation, you know producing that written thing. While our journey requires a certain level of reporting. (...) I wouldn't say it was a failed FPAR but anyway it ended up with an agreement termination. To some, especially funders, it could be labeled as a failed FPAR (F6).

Literature on participatory approaches emphasize the need for user-friendly dissemination of knowledge. Pant (2014: 586) notes that PAR principles call for "(...) the use of innovative, creative methods of describing and reporting results that may not involve writing at all, for instance, video, art, community theater or quilting". Whilst APWLD encourages partners to engage in creative processes when undertaking FPAR, the reporting of results is based on an unbending written requirement. This requirement is tied to conditions set by funders and serves as evidence that FPAR has been developed at any given community. Several facilitators (F2, F3 and F6) spoke of APWLD's accountability to its donors. F2 noted how "(...) if partners fail, you know, to deliver those deliverables from their end, then APWLD would fail to deliver those, and some of those are really the reports". Another facilitator described how reporting requirements can hamper the FPAR process:

> (...) one of the problems I see is that as APWLD receive larger grants from Sweden and Norway, we're required to do more stringent reporting. (...) this has really put such a burden on groups that we work with who are grassroots. (...) this kind of stuff needs like a full-time accountant or financial officer but they are like home-based workers in Pakistan. (...) and I find that it actually stalled the entire process because we couldn't close one tranche of the grant. And so that means if they can't close out with like a full financial reporting, we can't transfer them the next tranche (F3).

As an HRO APWLD answers to its donors, most of whom are based in Northwestern countries. Donors determine the deliverables, set around the tradition of writing reports as obligatory to the disbursement of funds. Findings indicate that the reporting requirement may conflict with FPAR principles which favor multiple ways of expression other than through written means. An undue reporting burden may also pose practical obstacles for loosely organized partners and their ability to progress through all stages of the FPAR cycle. Most notably, the report conflicts with the practices of communities that value oral traditions and other means of communication and serves to exclude groups that do not subscribe to Eurocentric processes of describing and reporting results.

Conclusion

This article has endeavored to examine how FPAR is used in practice by a feminist HRO to advance women's rights in the Asia-Pacific region. APWLD's method is based on a co-production of knowledge that embraces subjective storytelling and narrative traditions. As a conceptual and methodological framework, it encounters several challenges and contradictions. Findings emphasize language as a key barrier to equal participation when the backgrounds of those involved are vastly disparate, leading to difficulties in ensuring equitable participation during FPAR trainings. It appears that within the context of 'invited participation,' there is no simple solution, though I suggest that the use of FPAR is perhaps better suited to the local level.

Research findings show tensions between the juxtaposed logic of the HRO, with its focus on report-writing, and the tenets of FPAR which require some liberties, malleability and a degree of creativity. Human rights work and FPAR appear to belong to two different ontological and epistemological perspectives that in some ways prove incompatible. Whilst APWLD deviates from the forensic stockpiling traditions of large HROs, a dogmatic focus on frameworks demonstrates the impossibility of adhering to the spirit of FPAR. As a feminist organization, APWLD's work is inherently political and contains set goals. Findings suggest that the political agenda of the actor facilitating the co-production of knowledge may heavily influence the content of participants' research if predetermined frameworks are imposed from above without thought to the negotiation of meaning. I suggest that practitioners seek solutions to mediate the challenges and tensions that can arise from enacting FPAR, some of which have been illustrated in this study. This starts with making explicit the contradictions and limitations of the FPAR process. PAR, just like feminist methodology, is dynamic and ever-changing (Brabeck, 2004: 49). Therefore, FPAR practitioners may benefit from engaging in processes of reflexivity, opening up to restructuring FPAR trainings and adjusting methods where appropriate in dialogue with co-researchers. Finally, findings indicate that APWLD follows the logic of the HRO and is restricted by

donor requirements and a culture of deliverables centered on the written word, which further conflicts with participatory principles. These organizational constraints serve to shape and limit APWLD's work and unwittingly exclude groups with traditions different from the Western donors who fund its FPAR.

Finally, it should be noted that whilst a close examination into APWLD's use of FPAR reveals challenges and tensions, this does not imply that the method should be dismissed. Instead, the purpose of such scrutiny is to provide a deeper understanding of FPAR to improve its application in practice. HROs have been criticized for addressing narrow policies and individual human rights violations, thereby refraining from engaging with political issues presumed to be better left to policy makers and other actors. I argue that APWLD's use of FPAR as a distinct political methodology allows the organization to carry out a type of human rights work that has the potential to contextualize, historicize, and target the structural causes of human rights abuses, fundamentally departing from the practices of larger international HROs. Through APWLD's engagement with underrepresented groups such as grassroots women, FPAR uniquely affords this diverse group a central role in knowledge creation processes as driving, rather than passive, actors in the human rights field. It is difficult to deny the groundbreaking and radical potential contained within FPAR as an unconventional human rights practice. Human rights advocates stand to learn valuable lessons from the practice of FPAR. The fact that human rights remain elusive for a large proportion of the world's population points to the need for structural change as a radical vision requiring a radical approach.

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