Female Researchers in a Masculine Space: Managing Discomforts and Negotiating Positionalities

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This article reflects on my experience as a feminist-activist researcher conducting ethnographic work in a masculine space. I characterize how sexist encounters come into play in a research context and argue for the need to consider gender-sensitive methodologies not only for vulnerable female subjects but also for female researchers. I also discuss the methodological and practical strategies used to carefully manage this experience. Insights on this article are based on my field work in Biñan, Laguna for a project that examines the impact of the government’s inclusive growth agenda on workers in the manufacturing sector.

Keywords: masculine space, female research, fieldwork, ethnography

Qualitative feminist research practices “continue to be diversified, contentious, dynamic and challenging” (Olesen 2011:129). There are many ways of conducting feminist research, from focusing on intersectionality, advancing a decolonized feminist research methodology and promoting a transnational feminist research agenda (see Olesen 2011:131). Although these approaches are split in various epistemological camps and methodological preferences, they are united by the aims of giving voice and visibility to oppressed women, examining relationships of power and powerlessness and establishing a relationship of accountability, ethics, and solidarity between the researcher and respondent (see Sultana 2007).

In this article, I wish to focus on one aspect of feminist research that has been relatively peripheral to the discussion on feminist methodology—the politics and methodological challenges of conducting research by self-identified feminist-activists in masculine-dominated spaces. While there is plenty of literature providing guidelines on how researchers can be sensitive to vulnerable female respondents, less is said about the ways in which female researchers themselves can circumvent vulnerabilities like physical dangers and sexist encounters in the field.

Often, researchers are assumed to hold higher status in the research-respondent relationship, especially when the topic of study focuses on underprivileged or marginalized groups. However, one’s occupation as a researcher is not the only status at play in the field. Female researchers, particularly ethnographers living in the study community are not insulated from respondents’ sexist insinuations and security risks. This poses a tension between a feminist-activist’s commitment to challenging norms of everyday sexism to acting as a social scientist who primarily aims to capture, document and analyze complex social realities. These are the issues I wish to unpack in this article.

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In the first part of this article, I will provide a brief review of literature on the experiences of female scholars conducting research in male-dominated spaces. I underscore common experiences of these researchers and the ways in containing these challenges. In the second part, I will provide the context of our research. I will delineate my status as a twenty-two year-old female researcher-activist conducting research in a community in Biñan, Laguna, where our respondents— male workers in the manufacturing sector— reside. In the third part, I will reflect upon my experience and research strategies as a female researcher. I will draw on the literature on reflexivity and positionalities to structure my reflection. I will conclude this article by providing some recommendations on how female researchers can prepare for and manage conducting research in masculine spaces.

CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN MASCULINE SPACES

There are several articles examining the challenges of conducting research in masculine spaces (Easterday, Papademas, Schorr, and Valentine 1977; Gurney 1985; Russell, Touchard and Porter, 2002; Kosygina, 2005; Curato 2010; Rush 2012; Soyer 2013). However, for the most part, differences in gender between researchers and respondents are less examined in qualitative research than differences in race and class (Williams and Heikes 1993). Often, instruction on qualitative research assumes that the fieldworker is “anyman,” ignoring the gender differences between the fieldworker and the respondent (Gurney 1985:42). This limitation can be particularly challenging to female sociologists who may have received respondent-oriented training on gender-sensitive research, but are left on their own devices when translating gender-sensitive research to their experiences as researchers in the field.

Al-Natour (2011), a male researcher with Arab ancestry, provides an example of this challenge. He argues that an Arab woman doing the same study as him would experience more difficulty in data gathering and may experience violence. El-Solh affirms this observation. In her study of Egyptian peasant families, she felt the need to enlist her husband’s assistance in obtaining permission to conduct research. She shares, “the lower down this [bureaucratic] ladder we ventured, the more I found myself relegated to the role of silent, tea-sipping wife while my husband did his best to explain my reasons for wishing to study the Egyptian peasant families in the Khalsa Settlement” (El-Solh 1997:97). Similarly, Sultana (2007) reported how men especially in a rural area disapproved of her asking questions or going around unchaperoned by men. The men were threatened by the increased power and transgression of gender norms by the female researcher. Joan Gurney summarizes these experiences well:

Female researchers must work especially hard to achieve an impression combining the attribute of being nonthreatening with that of being a credible, competent professional. By failing to acknowledge this problem, the fieldwork instructional literature does not offer realistic guidance to novice female researchers (Gurney, 1985:43).

The literature identifies several practical setbacks encountered by female researchers in masculine-dominated field. One disadvantage relates to gaining access to respondents. Even if she wished to, a female researcher cannot expect to be “one of the boys” because males would certainly behave differently in the female researcher’s presence” (Easterday et al. 1977:338). Soyer (2013) claims that it can be challenging for female researchers to take on the “apprentice role” in spaces which she characterized as “predominantly shaped by male subjects.” While male
researchers can take on the apprentice role to learn the ropes, freely move, and ultimately become part of masculine spaces, women cannot do so without facing difficulties such as outright rejection of access, exclusion, or abuse. Warren and Rasmussen (1977:366) observe the following:

Where the setting is perceived by the members as dangerous, deviant, or seamy and where males are in control (police, ambulance, firefighting work), males may have easier access than females. Where the setting is routine or administrative and where males are in control (courts, many formal organizations), females may have easier access than males. Where the setting is deviant and both males and females are participants, either sex may have easy access so long as they demonstrate themselves to be fellow travelers (nude beaches). Where the setting is routine and both males and females have leadership roles, male and female researchers are both enabled to use sex role strategies to gain access to data (the news room, the welfare office).

Another setback relates to the tendency of male respondents to sexualize female researchers. Some men tend to foreground one’s status as a “female” rather than a “researcher.” Therefore, male respondents tend to treat female researchers like how they treat other women. This can be attributed to the fact that dominant ideologies on gender are highly evident in masculine spaces, thus affecting how individuals perform gender roles. Female researchers may experience sexual hustling, being the target of sexist jokes, and being treated as inferior (Gurney, 1985:48-49). Soyer (2013) narrates how some respondents, despite being ten years younger than her, offered indecent proposals to have sex or coerced her to do certain favors. Rush (2012) shared how she felt uncomfortable when males would attempt to step into her private space while observing and taking field notes in the park. In male-dominated settings, female researchers can be seen as sex objects and potential sex partners (Warren and Rasmussen 1977). According to Kosygina (2005:93), “Gendering each other changes the self-representation of people and as a result a female interviewer may receive different stories from her respondents than a male interviewer.”

Female researchers overcome these limitations by repositioning their social characteristics. Women can emphasize the desexualized aspect of femininity, such as that of being a mother or a sister. This can deter a female researcher from being seen as a “girlfriend material” and may even enable access to the personal lives of male respondents (Soyer 2013). In her study of male juvenile delinquents, Soyer (2013) reported that highlighting her mother role while doing fieldwork was beneficial to her data collection because the respondents perceived her in a desexualized way. Despite limitations in collecting data about the street life of these juvenile delinquents, Soyer was able to probe the personal lives of her respondents and their relationship with their families.

There are, of course, tradeoffs when a female researcher recalibrates her positioning in the field. In her fieldwork in a prosecutor’s office, Gurney (1985) was barred from attending certain meetings of male prosecutors and investigators, and was relegated to doing clerical tasks which are traditionally for females. This is both an advantage and a disadvantage in data gathering. Although being a woman limited her chances of observing and participating in certain activities, it also enabled her to get access to important documents.

Another example relates to the issue of rapport. Kosygina (2005:89) explained that men are more reluctant to open up to a female researcher because they are less used to being questioned by a woman, and they do not expect her to understand their experiences. On the other hand, some male respondents can perceive female researchers as nonthreatening thereby
encouraging male respondents to disclose personal information to the female researchers (Easterday et al. 1977:344; Williams and Heikes 1993:281). Needless to say, the type of relationship developed by male respondents and female research are highly contextual, making the calibration of positionalities an agentic activity requiring careful reflection on the part of the researcher.

The age of female researchers also affect the conduct of social interaction in the field. In interviewing immigrants to Russia, Kosygina (2005:93) recounted how men over sixty years old treated her not only as a researcher or a young woman, but as a young person who can be given pieces of advice on life. Some female researchers were met with paternalistic treatment wherein researchers were treated as daughters who must be given protection (Easterday et al. 1977). Sometimes, “male informants may seek to protect female researchers from the seamier ‘realities’ of life” (Golde 1970:6 in Warren and Rasmussen 1977:360). In these instances, female researchers can use “lost inquiry” as research strategy because there are notions that women are incompetent and therefore must be instructed (Warren and Rasmussen 1997:364). Sometimes, in wanting to appear less sexist, male respondents sometimes phrase their statements in ways that they think will sit well with female researchers but tend to be more direct when sharing with male researchers (Williams and Heikes 1993).

Sexism in the field can sometimes go unnoticed by female researchers due to strong feelings of gratitude towards respondents and informants. Others may only spot sexism upon careful reflection of one’s experiences in the field (Gurney 1985:45). Therefore, reflexivity while doing fieldwork is important to identify and address discomfort stemming from gendered views on the female researcher. Reflexivity also enables researchers to actively examine the practical and political consequences of one’s methodological decisions.

This insight, together with the review of literature presented above, serves as foundations for the subsequent sections of this article. I focus my reflection on the tensions I have experienced not only as a female researcher but also as a feminist-activist sociologist committed to challenging oppression in both theory and practice. My aim is to characterize the challenges I have faced in the field and map the strategies I have used to overcome them.

CHARACTERIZING TENSIONS: FEMINIST ACTIVISTS RESEARCHING WORKING CLASS MEN

My reflection draws on my experiences in a one-month ethnographically-inspired fieldwork in Biñan, Laguna. I started my research in March 2014, when I was employed as a full-time research assistant for a Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research-funded project which assesses the impact of the government’s inclusive growth agenda to laborers in the CALABARZON region. At that time, I was a fresh graduate of BA Sociology from the University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman. My activist background began in my undergraduate years and the membership in the mass organization Center for Nationalist Studies opened my eyes to student activism. I also served as the Chairperson of UP Praxis, an academic and socio-civic organization which aims engage sociology in facing social issues and realities, from 2012-2013. Until I graduated from the university, I was an active member of the political alliance STAND UP and Saligan sa CSSP, its chapter in the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy. Affiliation with these organizations made me see the necessity of social change in order to resolve issues faced by students and other sectors in society. I was hired together with another research assistant, Jeremy Pancho, who shares the same activist orientation in sociological
research. We were members of progressive student organizations and have experience in organizing educational discussions on issues and basic masses integration with workers and peasants. We are convinced that gender inequalities are closely tied to class inequalities. However, unlike Jeremy, I am more comfortable in identifying myself as a feminist, or more specifically, a socialist feminist.

Jeremy and I were aware of the challenges research-activists face, particularly in negotiating responsibilities as social scientists who gather data and activists who raise the consciousness of oppressed groups. Such orientation was also the reason why one of the project’s lead researchers hired us as research assistants right after graduation. We were informed that our experience in organizing is an indication of our capacity to conduct independent research. This was a crucial skill because the research team is composed of social scientists based in different academic institutions in the Philippines, the Netherlands and Australia. Because the researchers were geographically dispersed and are unable to accompany us in the field, we were tasked to gather data by ourselves with occasional visits by our research partners. Our activist background gave us confidence in engaging with working class communities. We are used to engaging with workers from the manufacturing sector through our engagements with labor unions. My BA Sociology thesis on unionized female workers also prepared me for fieldwork.

My research partner and I were tasked to explore whether industry workers benefit from the government’s economic policies on inclusive growth. We would like to determine if the data illustrating economic growth is felt by laborers working in the Philippines’ fastest growing region. The methodology to ascertain these things include administering questionnaires among workers employed in a sample firm and workers in a specific area, looking into the life histories of selected respondents, mapping the movement of our respondents, and conducting in-depth interviews.

Part of the research required us to live in an apartment in a barangay in Biñan, Laguna for one month to recruit respondents and observe the area. In preparation for our fieldwork, we consulted a female sociology professor who has vast experience in researching masculine spaces to know about issues related to the fieldwork. Aside from the standard protocols such as getting an insurance, finding secure accommodations, setting a courtesy call in the barangay hall and preparing modest tokens, we were reminded to avoid staying out late for our own safety. She also warned us not to be involved in romantic relationships with anyone in the field, especially the respondents.

A fellow activist who experienced integrating in workers’ unions and in urban poor communities gave the same advice. She told us to be careful in dealing with young single men. Recalling her experiences, she told us that young men in lower class communities tend to get attracted to women from higher economic status who come to interact with them. She clarified that she was not demeaning the young men but wanted us to recognize realities in the field. Dealing with men who are older and married was much easier, she said, because they were less likely to make sexual advances and they could be counted on for helpful advice or for valuable information.

Being naïve at that time, I thought it was preposterous for us to encounter sexist advances while doing fieldwork. Our experiences in the field, however, highlight the complexity of social relationships between female activist researchers and male respondents. In the next sections, I

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2 The name of the barangay is deliberately left anonymous to protect the identity of respondents.
will characterize the types of sexist behavior we have experienced and the ways in which we have tried to respond to these behaviors.

**ISKOLARS IN MASCULINE SPACES**

When introducing ourselves to our respondents, Jeremy and I referred to ourselves as researchers from UP. “Aba, matatalino pala kayo” (Oh, it means you’re intelligent) and “Siguro mga aktibista kayo, ‘no?” (You must be activists right?) are common respondent reactions. In some instances, we talked about our prior experience in integrating with unionized workers as undergraduate students. To a certain extent, positioning ourselves as scholar-activists led our respondents to think we are in a position of power, thus some expressed hope that the concerns they shared with us would be communicated to the government (*Sana makarating sa gobyerno ang mga hinaing namin/We hope our concerns reach the government*). Such treatment gave me and my research partner a sense of esteem. Our respondents respected us because we came from a reputable university. Built-in the design of our research is a developmental function, where our findings would be communicated to relevant government agencies and key stakeholders so we can lay credible claim to our desire to help.

However, our positioning as scholar-activist-researcher had limitations. We could not always rely on our status to make our fieldwork experience predictable and comfortable. A few days after getting settled in our apartment, we observed that our field site is a predominantly masculine space. According to Rush (2012), the masculine character of a certain space can be invisible to the unsuspecting eye. At first, we were not fully aware of the masculine character of our field site. As we stayed longer in the field, we became more sensitive to how gendered hierarchies in the barangay affected our status as researchers.

We lived in an apartment along the Biñan highway. The caretakers were mostly men. We approach them for assistance on household matters such fixing the doorknob and borrowing a few household items, but we chose not to be friendly with them. We reckoned that most of the tenants are also men, from students studying in the nearby university to employees of manufacturing plants. Outside the four-story apartment, there was a shop selling surplus items from Australia. There were several auto parts, mechanic and hardware shops in the area which employ mostly men doing physical labor such as unloading supplies from trucks, fixing cars and other appliances. The shops close at around eight in the evening. In early evening, two beer houses catering to male patrons would open. A smaller bar beside the eatery where we usually buy viands would also open with women dressed in skimpy clothes sitting outside.

In our month-long stay in Biñan, we heard catcalls from males in the vicinity of our apartment and in certain areas of the barangay. Some respondents said overtly sexist remarks that we would not put up with had this happened in the university or in non-fieldwork settings. In her field notes, Rush noted that catcalling is not about eliciting sex but about control, dominance and power. “It’s like they want us to know that they are judging us constantly, every time we go out in public” (Rush 2012:10). Similarly, Gurney (1985:46) identified sexual hustling as a common practical problem female researchers encounter. Sexual hustling includes behavior such as sexual flirtations, sexually suggestive remarks, and overt sexual propositioning, while sexist treatment includes behavior that puts the researcher in an inferior position.

Indeed, field sites are never neutral spaces. They are “reflections of our ideologies” and can give dominance to particular groups while excluding others (Rush 2012). Our site is a masculine space where men are able to move around freely without fear or discomfort while we, as female residents, felt insecure so much so that Jeremy and I came up with a security plan in
case someone barges in our apartment. Our movement was limited by fear and cultural expectations (Easterday et al. 1977:338), an uncomfortable experience for two women who lived away from home for the first time. We use the term “masculine space” to describe our field site which is a hospitable space for men who congregate in beer houses for leisure and repair shops for work. Women, on the other hand, are expected to be discrete and live with sexist insinuations.

Attempts to Blend in

Our first attempt to overcome our discomfort was to exert more effort to blend in. Soyer (2013:3) noted that female researchers “find that their bodies are on display when they conduct fieldwork in male-dominated settings.” In effect, researchers become the subjects of research who are observed, labeled and analyzed by respondents (see Al-Natour 2011). Whenever we roam the barangay, I notice people taking simple glances or inspecting us outright. This was uncomfortable but I chose not to blame them for doing so. I surmise that the residents of the barangay are quick to identify those who are “mga taga-rito” (residents of the barangay/insiders) and who are “mga dayo” (foreign people or people who immigrated to the area/outiders).

My research partner and I made conscious efforts to blend in (physically) so our presence does not disturb the community. Female researchers are advised to wear casual clothes and go without make-up or jewelry to de-sexualize their appearance and therefore protect them from sexual hustling (Russell, Porter, and Touchard, 2002). The professor we consulted and our activist friend also reminded us not to wear revealing clothes while doing fieldwork. As a feminist, I generally view “covering up” as a form of sexual control, but I see the necessity of doing so for the sake of safety in the field. Jeremy and I refer to certain articles of clothing as “field clothes,” composed of simple loose t-shirt (no bright colors), jeans, and slippers or rubber shoes. We attempted to look like long-time residents in the community so our presence does not disrupt the everyday lives of the residents.

Sexism in the Field

Despite these efforts, there were instances when stares and sexist remarks were done up-front. I do acknowledge that I was not exempted from sexism, even if I tried to present myself as a serious and professional researcher. I call the forms of sexism we encountered as overt and covert. Borrowing Swim and Cohen’s (1997) definition, overt sexism refers to blatant forms of sexist behavior that is “intentional, visible and unambiguous.” On the other hand, covert sexism is the type of everyday sexism, which usually goes unnoticed because they are “built into cultural and societal norms” (Swim and Cohen 1997: 103). These experiences underscored the tension between my identity as a researcher and a feminist.

Overt Sexism: The Language Of Masculinity

The overt form of sexism I experienced has to do with the everyday language used by our male respondents and key informants. This is exemplified by our interactions with brothers Dok, the owner of the rented apartment; and Kap, the barangay captain.
Dok is a jolly fellow in his forties. He is called Dok as a shorthand for doctor because he is a well-known dentist in the community. As we moved in the apartment, Jeremy and I talked to the caretaker and one of our key informants. Dok joined our conversation, presumably in the context of a landlord getting to know his tenants. Our chat went to a discussion about my status as a single woman. Dok made explicitly sexist jokes about this, such as “Paano ka kaya humalik?” (I wonder how you kiss?). “Kung bata-bata lang ako, papatulan kita eh” (If only I was younger, I could hit on you). To cultivate goodwill, I tried to go along with this. I laughed at his jokes. While I could easily dismiss his remarks as harmless or common in masculine spaces, the feminist in me felt that these comments had little regard for my sensitivities as a woman. Perhaps power relations also had something to do with this, given our relationship as landlord and tenant.

We had the same experience with Dok’s brother, Kap. As a matter of courtesy, the research team met Kap to explain the purpose of our project. Kap asked one of his staff members to prepare soft drinks for the research team, whom he treats as “guests” (mga bisita). While chatting, I was trying to get the fizz out of my drink using my straw. The drink then overflowed from the bottle and spilled on the floor. Kap shared his brother’s humor. He was quick to joke, “Ikaw naman kasi eh, ang hilig mo dumutdot” (You seem to enjoy poking) while gently slapping my hand. He made several other several sexist jokes, mostly in relation to us being women in the field, and to his brother who has fondness for women.

In both instances, we inadvertently prioritized our status as researchers. We went along with the jokes, laughed and build rapport with important personalities in the community. Getting along has its advantages. We enjoyed the warm reception of personalities in the barangay hall and our key informants. As Gurney notes, female researchers tend to tolerate sexist remarks and behavior or to hide their objection against these kinds of behavior to maintain rapport (Gurney 1985: 43-44). The consequence of this, however, was our failure to call out sexist behavior and try to prompt reflection among respondents that such remarks are demeaning.

Both Dok and Kap are powerful personalities within the community who can be influential in promoting gender-sensitivity in the community. However, I opted not to wear my feminist-activist hat in this instance given my own concern for my safety, as well as not to displease powerful people whom I have only met for the first time.

Covert Sexism: Invitations to “Hang Out”

In the course of our fieldwork, we have learned to set boundaries between ourselves and our respondents. While rapport and trust are important virtues in data-gathering, I felt the need to do “boundary work” to protect myself and the integrity of data-gathering. I had to always consider whether I should aspire to get closer to my male respondents or take a step back. Being close to respondents may give access to their candid thoughts and personal narratives which are important sources of data but our closeness make me vulnerable to sexual advances. This dilemma is best illustrated in instances when our male respondents attempted to develop relationships with us outside the context of research.

Throughout our fieldwork, Jeremy and I would receive text messages from our male respondents. These text messages are casual in nature, mostly trying to engage in small talk and, in some instances, invitations to “hang out.”

Tony, a respondent in his late 20’s sent a text message to me after we administered a questionnaire to him. He asked how old I am. My intuition was to avoid responding to this
question. I said I could not disclose this and asked him about the reason for inquiring. His reply was “ang suplada naman ng mga taga-UP” (seems like people from UP are snobbish). He continued to send friendly text messages made to elicit responses, such as asking questions about when will we come back to the barangay and when will we go back to Manila. I answered questions like this truthfully. When responding to SMS, the boundary was replying to questions I consider personal. My sense is he stopped texting me when he noticed that I am not open to go beyond a researcher-respondent relationship with him.

Jeremy, on the other hand, would always receive invitations “to hangout” (tambay) from Carlo, a male respondent who was about our age. During our fieldwork, Jeremy would contact Carlo to inquire whether he could refer co-workers willing to answer our questionnaires. Carlo would respond positively, and then make invitations to hangout, usually at night. Jeremy was wary about this. We wondered if there was a transactional aspect to the researcher-respondent relationship, whether we have to return our respondents’ goodwill by granting their invitations to develop a social relationship. After much thought, Jeremy and I opted to ignore text messages of this nature as part of our boundary work.

These experiences prompted me to realize that everyday sexism does not exempt female researchers. We are still subject to respondents’ insinuations because after all, for them, female researchers are still “females” (Fine1993:283). I considered the text messages from our respondents as sexist insinuations because these indicated their failure to acknowledge our status as professionals. Both Jeremy and I turned down the respondents’ attempts to form personal friendships. We would sometimes tease each other about our respective “textmates” and the possibility of utilizing this connection to recruit more respondents. Of course, we were firm not to do so since there are ethical issues regarding manipulating respondents’ feelings to serve one’s own agenda. We talked about this experience in jest as a way of managing our discomfort. In hindsight, it was unfortunate that we were not able to form lasting friendships with them but we knew it was the right thing to do at that time. Gurney (1985:49) suggested that if female researchers want to avoid sexual advances, they must also avoid behaviors which may lead their respondents to think that they accept being sexual objects.

Covert Sexism: Politics of Naming

How our respondents and informants perceive us can be gleaned from the way they refer to us in the third person. Most of the time, they referred to us as “mga taga-UP” (from UP). However, there were instances when we were described differently. Ate Linda, our key informant referred to us as “mga alaga” (people under her care). Her brother, Kuya Randy referred to us as “mga sisters.” Another male respondent referred to us as “mga magagandang babae” (beautiful women). It was noticeable how males pointed out our “femaleness”—particularly our physical characteristics—when they referred to us, while female key informants referred to us as their ward, as if we were children that had to be looked after.

Moreover, certain events highlight our female status even if they were meant, presumably, to be gestures to accommodate us. When we administered the questionnaires to Tony and another male respondent, the latter distanced himself from us because in his words “Baka mausukan yung mga bisita natin” (Our visitors might inhale the smoke). He served drinks because “Nakakahiya naman sa mga bisita nating mga babae” (It is embarrassing to our female visitors). Some events highlighted gendered expectations. When we visited our key informant, Ate Linda, to catch up, she told us that her brother, Kuya Randy and two of his friends who
answered our questionnaire were asking whether I was a lesbian. Ate Linda told me that these men were thinking that I was a binata (young man) because of the way I dress and behave. This may have been a fair deduction, considering my demeanor in the field. I deliberately acted less feminine and talk like “one of the boys” as part of maintaining a de-sexualized and professional identity. I explained this to Ate Linda. However, this only led her to ask more questions. “Bakit wala ka pang boyfriend? Baka binata ka?” (Why don’t you have a boyfriend yet? Are you lesbian?) and “Sayang naman kung binata ka. Ang ganda mo pa naman” (It is such a waste if you are a lesbian. Look how pretty you are). I just answered that having a relationship is not yet my priority.

Evidently, men are not the only ones who perpetuate patriarchal ideology. Our interaction with Ate Linda, among others, was amusing and disturbing at the same time. Although her questions and remarks were not threatening compared to Dok and Kap’s banter, it still made me uncomfortable. As female researchers in a masculine space, my research partner and I followed the literature’s prescriptions to downplay our femininity. However, the conversation with Ate Linda brought to the surface the expectation of still having to act in a traditionally female way. It would be unsettling if we use curse words, smoke cigarettes, or engage in drinking sessions while doing fieldwork. Doing fieldwork as a female researcher then entails repressing some aspect of femininity on one hand, and performing some aspect of femininity appropriate to the situation on the other.

CONFRONTING DISCOMFORTS
As a feminist, I felt frustrated about being unable to address sexism head on in the course of our fieldwork for fear of losing rapport and access. Liz Rush (2012), a female ethnographer, discussed the importance of challenging the anti-woman ideology, refusing to accept an exclusionary status, and asserting women’s right to a truly inclusive public space in masculine spaces. It is not difficult for me to support this view but this is particularly problematic in practical terms as researchers manage a range of considerations in data gathering. While female researchers like Curato (2010) have provided some prescriptions on transforming “masculine spaces” to “shared spaces” where male and female respondents could interact and build a de-sexualized research relationship, this approach still fails to overcome issues of gender inequalities in the field. It merely puts issues under the rug, instead of using research as a process of dismantling patriarchal relations. This, arguably, is an important direction for future research, especially for researchers like myself coming from a feminist-activist tradition.

In this section, I limit my discussion to practical solutions my research partner and I employed to manage sexism in the field, and my attempt to reconcile this with my feminist perspective. I identify three practices that worked given the context of our research.

First, having a dependable female colleague and key informants in the field was helpful. Jeremy and I have known each other in our undergraduate years and we have a shared experience of looking out for each other. Every night, Jeremy and I would discuss our experiences and plan for the next day. These may appear mundane but this practice created habits of openness—to recognize experiences that caused discomfort and reflect on possible ways to manage these concerns. We also had several female key informants who were generous with their time, advice, and friendship. They warned us against going out at night and referred us to trustworthy male respondents. Most importantly, their warm reception allowed us to feel safe—to have a sense of
home— in a different environment. Having a strong female support system helped lessened my discomfort, even though this did not enable me to address sexism outright.

Second, it was important that I constantly reflected on the limitations as well as advantages of my positionality as an outsider. Being reflexive about the ambivalences, discomfort, tensions, and instabilities of subjective positions is important in working and reworking positionalities and finding common ground in doing fieldwork (Sultana 2007:377). As a female researcher in a masculine space, I understand my position as marginal. But as a feminist in a masculine space, I was critical and reflective of my marginal position. By reflecting on marginality, I was able assess where I, as a female researcher have access (Gurney 1985:57-58), be it in actual physical areas or within certain groups of people. During our fieldwork, there were places considered unsafe for us to visit. We had a self-imposed curfew so we have to be in the apartment usually before it gets dark. Being an “outsider” limited my interaction with people in the field but it also enabled me to see things which are usually taken for granted (Easterday, 1977). We may have not captured the reality of the native in the field site, but we did have lived our own reality as female researchers doing fieldwork in Biñan, which remains a masculine-dominated space.

Finally, this research experience encouraged me to rethink of my understanding of the relationship between being a feminist activist and a researcher. Gurney (1985:56) expressed her regret of being “courteous” in the field, which, in effect tolerated sexism. She wished she had taken a militant feminist stance and lectured male respondents to be sensitive about women’s concerns and issues. This, of course, conjures the dilemma of maintaining access and rapport in the field in order to obtain more data in exchange for enduring uncomfortable situations or tolerating things one perceives as wrong.

This was exactly my dilemma. As someone oriented “not only to interpret the world but change it,” it was frustrating that I was not able to do much to correct the flaws of the system. A closer reflection of my position as an activist allowed me to get a better sense of my frustration. I had to acknowledge that in taking on this research project, changing mindsets was not my primary goal. My personal goal was to hone my methodological expertise and to be better informed of the labor conditions in CALABARZON. Wishing that I could have done something surfaced only after employing my feminist-activist orientation to reflect on my experiences in the field. In activist practice, a clear and systematic social investigation is necessary before formulating steps to address oppression. After reflection, I have come to view my fieldwork as a form of social investigation. It may be too early to address sexism and other gender-related issues when we were doing fieldwork. Social investigation requires more time and deeper integration with the groups being studied.

When Al-Natour (2011) did his research, he was conscious that his role as researcher was not to judge people as being racist towards him, but to qualify how racist views impact the dynamics in the field. This requires a researcher to momentarily be detached from certain aspect of his identity in order to focus on acquiring more data. He subscribed to the dominant idea in qualitative research, i.e., avoid stirring political and moral debates and instead focus on gathering information. This is similar to what I did in this research. I gathered as much data as possible without causing changes in the field site. After all, I went to the field not as a messiah sent to “correct the wrong ways.” I recalled my activist training wherein it is the people in their communities who can make changes because the field is their lived reality. As a researcher, my challenge is to better understand the forms of oppression in the field and be diligent in examining those realities. That in itself contributes to the division of labor in activist research. One does not
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In the field, I was quick to dismiss whether certain practices are sexist or certain people tend to commit sexist behavior. However, the sexist ideas and behavior that I have encountered in the field were products of broader social processes such as history and culture. Linking certain individuals’ behavior to the social context made it easier for me to deal with sexism. This makes me curious if, for instance, Dok and Kap were raised in a dominantly “macho” family, or if Tony and Carlo initiated romantic relationships by being aggressive males, or if Ate Linda was convinced that women should be feminine. I would not know the answers to these issues unless I dig deeper into their lives. What I can establish for now is the fact that the men and women I encountered were engaged in practices I perceived to be sexist not because they are ethically-challenged persons or have inherent character flaws but because they were so shaped by prevailing structures and processes. The likelihood of people committing sexism and being victimized can be ascertained by how each is positioned within structures and processes and by what these positionalities can or cannot do.

Negotiating our positionalities with the socio-cultural structures and processes of the field site was a difficult yet necessary aspect of doing research. It was necessary in gathering meaningful data. However, the kind of data we obtained was more or less affected by how we negotiated our positionalities. On one hand, it can be said that being a non-threatening young female enabled us to be perceived as trustworthy and gave us access to the personal lives of some respondents. On the other hand, it closed some opportunities to see some aspects which could have been explored if we were not what we are. The data we have obtained reflects the objective reality in the field, but it is the reality that is perceived from our own positionalities, which we nonetheless tried to embed in the social context of the field site.

As much as it is important to discuss the discomforts I faced during fieldwork, it is also important to show how I negotiated my positionality as a young female researcher within the local norms and attitudes. As mentioned, my research partner and I had to alter our behavior and appearance in order to ease our access into the field, gather as much data as possible, and avoid uncomfortable or dangerous instances. It was indeed difficult to momentarily let go of my feminist stance and to let events unfold as they did. It is the case that we had to put our activism “on hold” for certain parts of the project, particularly in relating with people in the field, since we cannot impose our own beliefs as we are still getting acquainted with them. For instance, instead of asserting our status as educated UP students knowledgeable on the issue of sexism and as activists advocating for ways to end sexism, we resorted to become more tolerant of certain ideas and attitudes. This could be seen as a betrayal of what we as activists pledged to fight for. However, I practiced restraint in terms of challenging dominant views outright may be rooted in the belief that the enemy is not the particular individual but the system that allows certain individuals to commit sexism towards others. Therefore, it is reasonable and just to think of large scale solutions to battle sexism which of course could be done slowly and systematically through time, after of course, enough research on certain groups and processes. Doing fieldwork in Biñan did not provide enough avenues to battle sexism, but it provided the opportunity to look at ideas and practices and to reflect on them.
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conducting my first month-long ethnographically-inspired research challenged my preconceived notions of what it means to be a feminist researcher-activist. Engaging in fieldwork is “contextual, relational, embodied, and politicalized” process (Sultana 2007:383). Being pushed out of my comfort zone challenged me as a researcher. My firsthand experience with sexism enriched my knowledge about gender inequalities and made me a credible feminist. Finally, seeing my ideal notions of the working class as source of cross-gender solidarity get shattered made me a more determined activist.

Despite all the difficulties in doing research in a masculine space, I argue that being put in an uncomfortable position enables critical reflection of the field dynamics. Being a feminist researcher in a masculine space makes one less idealistic in doing research and trying to change the world immediately. What it does is make the feminist researcher more rooted in social realities and more reflexive in the use of sociological theories and research methods.

The experience of doing fieldwork in a masculine space does not only foreground our personal struggles, but also the limitations in qualitative research. Martin and Barnard (2013) talked about the marginality of women in certain work environments. What if the lack in guidelines for female researchers reflects just their marginality in the field of research? What if research is still a male-dominated field? Martin and Barnard (2013) observed,

> Very few supportive organizational practices are at the disposal of these women and organizations often leave them to their own devices when it comes to coping in their respective male-dominated occupations. Nevertheless, organizations can motivate women to remain in male-dominated work settings if they provide the women with tangible physical support and female-focused policies, visible career opportunities, challenges to entice their personal drive for achievement and different ways of recognizing their success. Gender balanced mentorship is vital for assisting these women to cope and persevere.

At present, feminist methods in qualitative research have been developed to give voice to the marginalized, mostly directed at certain groups of women. Feminist methods were also developed from feminist theory. These methods may be useful in certain contexts. However, these do not primarily address how females do research in masculine spaces or male dominated settings. Perhaps it is not accidental that most of the literature I have cited in this piece are at least thirty years old, indicating that while these has moved on, they are still very relevant in practice. The discussion on gender-sensitive feminist research oriented towards female researchers must continue.

References


