

# Feminist participatory methodologies in geography: creating spaces of inclusion

**Martina Angela Caretta**

Stockholm University, Sweden

**Yvonne Riaño**

University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland

## Abstract

This introduction prefaces a special issue on the topic of feminist participatory methodologies in geography. Drawing upon the experiences of the contributors in developing new tools and methods to facilitate interaction with participants and working *with* groups that tend to be forgotten, subordinated and/or alienated, we argue for the methodological significance of instating a feminist perspective to participatory research. Although much theoretical debate has taken place among feminist and post-colonial scholars on unequal research relationships between 'researchers' and 'research subjects', the literature on how to operationalize greater equality remains quite limited. We attempt to fill this research gap by bringing together scholars working in both the Northern and Southern hemispheres in order to illuminate the multifaceted ways in which these methods can be used not only to debunk hierarchical research relationships, but also to produce new scientific insights with greater validity.

## Keywords

ethnography, feminist methodology, geography, participatory methods, spaces of inclusion

Feminist geographers are acutely sensitive to the intersection of power with academic knowledge. Academics are in a position of power, owing to their ability to decide what questions to ask, how to interpret the data collected, and where and in what form the research results should be presented (McLafferty, 1995; Staeheli and Lawson, 1995). Accordingly, feminist participatory methodologies aim to democratize research methods (Jaggar, 2008), and to subvert power-loaded research relationships by engaging in a

## Corresponding author:

Martina Angela Caretta, Human Geography Department, Stockholm University, Svante Arrhenius väg 8,  
10691 Stockholm, Sweden.

Email: [martina.angela.caretta@humangeo.su.se](mailto:martina.angela.caretta@humangeo.su.se)

process of knowledge co-production between researchers and research participants (Maynard and Purvis, 1994; Rose, 1997). Post-colonial critics argue that knowledge production in the social sciences is often linked to aspirations to control societies, and is therefore an integral part of colonial projects (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), raising the question of how Western academics have represented the studied ‘other’, and with what consequences. For example, Spivak (1988) shows that in the work of some European intellectuals the colonized subjects or ‘subalterns’ – women in particular – are represented as incapable of thinking for themselves, requiring mediation and representation by the ‘first world intellectual.’ Consequently, Tuhiwai Smith (1999) calls for academics to critically reflect on how to decolonize research methodologies. Despite an intense theoretical discussion on these issues, the literature on how to operationalize greater equality in the process of knowledge production remains rather limited (Pain et al., 2011).

Among critical geographers, participation and dialogue have become buzzwords (Chilvers, 2009; de Leeuw et al., 2012; Kitchin and Hubbard, 1999; Wynne-Jones et al., 2015). Participatory approaches are generally understood as a practice whereby academics and participants work together to examine a problematic situation, and change it for the better (Kindon et al., 2010). Researchers have also seen such approaches as a way for research participants to craft an alternative narrative to the predominant negative discourses about marginalized populations (Cahill, 2010). Dialogue is inherent to participation. In social science, dialogue is conceived as communication among participants triggering a collaborative process of knowledge production. Communication is not a unidirectional flow from the researcher to the research subject (Freire, 1970); it is rather the main prompt of a process of co-determination whereby different types of knowledge are exchanged in order to create an inclusive space. This process has the potential to empower both the individual and the group, and can lead to a more balanced relationship between power and knowledge (Phillips et al., 2013).

Already in the 1970s Paulo Freire argued that research needed to be practiced as a process of co-determination between researchers and participants, and that dialogical interaction should trigger mutual learning (Freire, 1970). Engaging further with this claim, feminist theorists (Maynard and Purvis, 1994; Reid, 2000; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Wolf, 1996) highlighted that new methods should be employed to facilitate research subjects partaking in data collection, analysis, and distribution. Moreover, critical reflexivity to improve the quality of scientific research, should strive to include multiple lenses of analysis for interpreting observations and final results (Domosh, 2003; Nicholls, 2009; Pillow, 2003; Stapele, 2013) However, the question remains: how can research participants become engaged in this critical process of self-awareness and positioning?

Feminist participatory methodologies contribute to this question in several ways. First, *co-determination* uses a variety of participatory methods and tools to involve research participants in all stages of knowledge production, from identifying the research problem to latter phases of data collection, data analysis, and data distribution (Reid et al., 2011). Second, issues of *scientific validity*, *reflexivity*, and *positionality* are placed at the core of participatory research practice. Whereas a foundation of feminist critical thought is that knowledge is not objective, *scientific validity* is an ideal to strive towards. In order to reach this goal, academics must be clear about the unspoken procedures they put in place to create participation (Baxter and Eyles, 1997). How do we ensure validity

through participation (Cho and Trent, 2006)? Feminist researchers propose *reflexivity* in order to analyze power dynamics and reach scientific validity (England, 1994). This means reflexively acknowledging how our interaction with all research participants influences the research process and outcomes, even if it means acknowledging failure. Hence, the research outcomes of reflexivity are more rigorous and valid (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004).

Situating the production of scientific knowledge is another central theme of feminist participatory methodologies (Kobayashi, 1994; McDowell, 1992; Rose, 1997). The need to situate knowledge is based on the argument that the kind of knowledge researchers produce depends on its makers (Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1991). Feminist researchers call academics to reflect on how their *positionality* (in terms of race, nationality, age, gender, social and economic status, and sexuality) may influence the 'data' collected and the information that becomes coded as 'knowledge' (Mudge, 1993: 296). Overall, a distinctive aspect of feminist participatory methodologies is that they strive for a more valid interpretation of research results than conventional research methodologies, as well as the facilitation of a deeper understanding of the complexities of the lives of research participants (Riaño, 2012).

Conducting feminist participatory research requires academics to share some of their power within the research process, which makes the work more complex because of the necessity to redefine and transform traditional power relations in research (Reid et al., 2011). However, full participation often remains an ideal: scientists hold power over knowledge production in the writing process, and participants are not always acknowledged as co-authors. Moreover, spaces aimed at mutual learning and co-determination can be encompassed by conflicting interests, and can create tension. The 'co' of co-production, co-determination, and collaboration can engender friction and strain (Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen, 2013). Research partners and gatekeepers are, however, not 'powerless' as they control access to the field, and are able to negotiate the conditions of their participation (Caretta and Vacchelli, 2015; Riaño, 2012).

In light of these debates, the key questions addressed in this special issue are as follows: how do we carry out socially responsible research that aims at investigating *with* participants rather than *about* research subjects? Which methods do we employ? What subjects do we engage with, and in which contexts? What forms of inclusionary spaces can be created to co-produce knowledge with our research partners? How can participatory research contribute to greater scientific understanding? How do academics, facilitators, and participants enact counter-power? How are these challenges resolved through collaboration? And most importantly, how can participatory research contribute to social and personal change?

## **The collection of articles**

The idea for this special issue began at the American Association of Geographers annual meeting in 2013 in Los Angeles at a session on participatory methodologies. Realizing that a debate on participatory approaches is carried out more intensely in the Anglo-Saxon context than in continental Europe, we decided to organize a session at the International Geographical Union Conference in Krakow (Poland) in August 2014. This

session, entitled ‘Feminist Participatory Methodologies: Creating Spaces of Inclusion’, was sponsored by the International Geographical Union Commission on Gender and Geography. Given the great interest that the session sparked, and with the desire to contribute to advancing our understanding of feminist participatory methodologies, we put forward an international call for papers for a special issue in *Qualitative Research*.

In selecting the six papers for this special issue, we aim to present an array of contributions addressing research partners who have so far received insufficient attention: highly skilled migrant women, young people identifying themselves as queer, gatekeepers controlling access to the studied communities, children, and the elderly. The issue’s contributors also bring new emerging methods and tools intended to produce inclusionary spaces of knowledge production such as street theatre, pamphlets in local languages, arts-based workshops, and Minga workshops. Finally, a variety of Northern and Southern hemisphere countries are brought to the fore, including Switzerland, India, Ghana, Malawi, South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, and Canada.

**Riaño** proposes the notion of ‘marginalized elites’ to examine social integration and exclusion experienced by highly skilled migrant women in Switzerland, a group largely neglected by feminist participatory research. Her innovative ‘Minga’ methodology uses biographic workshops designed to produce inclusionary spaces, where women share and critically analyze their migration histories with other participants. Minga means ‘building together’ in Quechua; Riaño uses this name to symbolize the new knowledge that academics and their research partners can produce through collaboration. The research partnership is informed by key principles of reciprocity, mutual learning, mutual recognition, dialogic engagement, personal transformation, and access to academic spaces. Research partners who participated in Minga workshops found that the method enhanced spaces of inclusion, produced ‘spaces of personal transformation’, questioned the perceived inferiority of migrant women, and produced original scientific insights on social exclusion. Using the example of highly skilled migrant women, Riaño questions notions of privilege, power, and positionality commonly used in feminist participatory approaches. She also draws attention to how the disciplining function of academic contexts and prevailing social norms regarding gender roles limit our engagement with social justice.

**Lund, Panda and Dhal** focus on the researcher–gatekeeper dialogue in a research project on Adivasi (indigenous) women in rural Odisha, India. The authors understand a gatekeeper as ‘someone who has power and control over access to communities and key respondents in a particular location selected for research’. The power of gatekeepers is in their ability to influence problematic areas of study, access to respondents, and the scope of analysis. The authors explore opportunities and limitations in the co-production of knowledge with gatekeepers. They report on a collaboration with Manju Prava Dhal, a gatekeeper and co-author of the paper, and unravel spaces of inclusion and exclusion among partners in their research. They conclude that no matter how great an effort is made to create a relationship of equality, inequalities continue to exist among partners. Understanding the role and power of each participant as well as their contributions to creating spaces of inclusion is of great significance.

**Porter** uses the method of co-investigation with children, youth and older people as peer-researchers, and reflects on a series of collaborative studies that she led in several

African countries. The first concerns her work training young people (ages 9–18) to participate confidently as peer-researchers in a child mobility study in Ghana, Malawi, and South Africa; the second research project investigates youth and mobile phones (in which some of those young peer-researchers continue to participate); the third studies mobility of older people (ages 59–69) in Tanzania. The three case studies presented demonstrate the potential of co-investigation in the creation of new spaces of inclusion for vulnerable groups who are rarely consulted in international development research. Porter shows that while the funding brought by foreigners may have encouraged the initial interest of research participants in these projects, she assesses the sustained commitment of the in-country teams as far more crucial in building trust with peer-researchers. She concludes that if the perpetuation of colonial power landscapes is to be avoided, the establishment of ethics agreements and procedures at the start of academic/community collaborations are essential. Throughout the research process, it is necessary to monitor and reflect on the knowledge being reported and represented – in particular, by whom, from whom, and for whom.

**Caretta** questions which methods are most suitable to ensure research validity in cross-cultural and cross-language contexts. While conducting research on the gendered division of labour in smallholder irrigation farming in the dry lands of Kenya and Tanzania, she uses pamphlets written in local languages to summarize and visualize preliminary results. By means of short written descriptions and graphics, the pamphlets convey to participants – among them analphabets – their contribution to the research process, and ask for their assistance in correcting, improving, and discussing preliminary research results. The pamphlet became a catalyst for discussion and effectively allowed the creation of a space for inclusion and reciprocal learning. As misunderstandings in transcultural interviews tend to occur frequently, the pamphlet helped to establish a common ground between the academic, the research assistants, and the research participants. Overall, the pamphlet proved a useful tool for ensuring research validity and allowing a shift in the research power hierarchy.

**Enria** discusses the potential and limitations of the method of participatory theatre – designed to create shared understandings of the relationship between youth unemployment and violence – while working with economically marginalized youth in the White House neighbourhood of Freetown, Sierra Leone. Unemployed youth have been portrayed in official narratives as potential threats to stability. Public theatre performances with White House youth served as a tool to challenge this portrayal. Street theatre provided participants with an opportunity to represent themselves and interpret their realities while also sensitizing the local population towards the need for peace. Although Enria acknowledges that she set the agenda, the article shows this novel method made it possible for youth to understand the causes of violence as rooted in the structural dynamics of economic adversity.

**Bain and Payne** critically examine the play of power in the co-production of knowledge in the context of a feminist participatory action research project with queer youth in Toronto's (Canada) West-Central neighbourhoods. At the invitation of a queer youth programme's director, Bain and Payne collaborated to facilitate two arts-based workshops using maps and photographs to create dialogue with queer youth about the forces that drive the evolution of the places where they live. Through these workshops,

the authors sought to build bridges between the queer community and the university, and to inspire young people to think critically about making and claiming queer space in urban areas. By unpacking the power relations that surrounded a co-produced conference and journal article papers, the authors argue that an accelerating process of de-participation and exclusion is on-going and eroding the progressive, inclusive politics of feminist participatory methodologies. While they remain convinced of the value of participatory approaches, they also recognize that scholars are disciplined by their contingent contexts.

## **Pointing to new paths and persistent challenges**

Feminist geography and participatory research have disproportionately focused on vulnerable and uneducated populations, leaving the potential of co-producing knowledge with less disadvantaged groups insufficiently explored. Contributors of this special issue encourage academics to pursue new directions by working with groups such as queer youth in Toronto or highly skilled migrant women in Switzerland, who can engage in critical and collective thinking about the forces that shape their environments and daily experiences.

Ensuring fewer exploitative and hierarchical research relationships is the central goal of feminist participatory research. The contributors of this issue further this understanding by showing that academics do not exclusively hold the power in a research partnership. In fact, each partner has a different form of power that can be used for different times and spaces. Gate-keepers and research participants have the power to deny access to the studied community, refuse a research partnership, negotiate the conditions of their participation, and/or control the dissemination of research results. Hence, it becomes important to understand when, where, and with whom the power lies in a research partnership.

While recognizing that it is important for academics to share their power during the research process, the contributors of this special issue also uncover the inevitable ‘tensions and messiness’ that arise during feminist participatory projects (Reid et al., 2011: 94). The contributors acknowledge the occasionally overwhelming expectations that feminist researchers face in creating a level playing field for all research participants (see also Reid, 2000). They also acknowledge that despite their efforts to create more democratic spaces of knowledge production, inequalities persist among research partners. Moreover, contributors also warn that academics must be aware that collaborative processes can also lead to de-participation and exclusion. Finally, the contributors bring to light how unsupportive academic environments, as well as traditional understandings of the role of women and men in society, limit academic engagement with just methods.

Despite their challenges, the contributors also acknowledge the benefits of using feminist participatory methodologies. Academics have gained new scientific insights on a variety of issues, such as the patterns of gendered labour division in smallholder irrigation farming in Africa, the link between youth unemployment and violence in Sierra Leone, the forces that drive the evolution of the places where queer youth live, and how traditional gender values and ethnic imaginaries shape the professional

exclusion of highly skilled migrant women in Switzerland. Most importantly, spaces of inclusion have been created whereby highly skilled migrant women in Switzerland, indigenous women leaders in India, smallholders, marginal youth, children and the elderly in Africa, and queer youth in Canada have gained confidence, acquired new skills, sharpened their views on their lived spaces and realities, and enriched their social networks.

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## Author biographies

Martina Angela Caretta holds a PhD in Geography from Stockholm University. She will start as an Assistant Professor at the Department of Geology and Geography at West Virginia University

in the fall term of 2016. She is a feminist geographer investigating the human dimensions of water in the global south. Her doctoral dissertation investigated gender contracts in small holder irrigation farming systems in Kenya and Tanzania. Her work has been published in *The Geographical Journal*, in *Climate & Development* and in *Qualitative Research*, among other journals.

Yvonne Riaño is a Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Geography and a Research Fellow at the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research On the move – The Migration-Mobility Nexus, both located at the University of Neuchâtel. She is considered a leading scholar on issues of skilled migration and gender. She writes on migrant women and economic citizenship, professional trajectories of couples and inequalities of paid work, transnational marriages and love migration, undocumented migrants and return experiences, participatory research, and Latin American migration. She has extensively published in international books and journals.