EXTENDING WOMEN’S VOICE THROUGH INNOVATIVE METHODS
Lessons from struggles for democracy in Hong Kong

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Introduction

The struggles for democracy and justice in Hong Kong and Taiwan have driven us towards rethinking how we do research with people (Ho, Kong, & Huang, 2018). We have witnessed and participated in the Sunflower Movement, the Umbrella Movement and the latest protests against extradition law amendment bill (anti-ELAB) in Taiwan and Hong Kong. In the latest anti-ELAB movement, civilians were teargassed, beaten by batons and shot by beanbag/rubber bullets (United Nations, 13 August 2019). Amid week-on-week scenes of mounting violence and arrests, we have seen images of women protesters and passers-by being harassed by police. Women protesters’ underpants/private body parts have been exposed to public gaze (Carvalho, 2019) or have experienced glove-less strip-searching without reasonable grounds or consent (Cheng, 2019). In addition to these countless incidents of sexual assault against woman protesters, a woman first aider was headshot by the police with beanbag bullets at a protest site which has led to her permanent loss of vision (Kilpatrick, 16 August 2019).

Witnessing the pervasive use of violence against women by the police, Hong Kong protesters have adopted the anti-sexual harassment rallying cry of the #MeToo movement to raise international awareness of the issue. The Hong Kong-based Women’s Coalition on Equal Opportunities (WOCEO) organised a rally in Central on 28 August 2019 to draw attention to police use of sexual violence against female protesters in order to intimidate and silence women. Thousands joined the rally, all dressed in black and shouting the slogan ‘stop Hong Kong police’s use of sexual violence’. The rally condemned the violation of women’s rights to assembly. The women involved in the high-profile cases of unreasonable strip-searching and sexual intimidation during arrest both appeared on-stage at the rally wearing masks. Attendees scrawled ‘#ProtestToo’ on their forearms with lipstick and handed out purple ribbons (Creery, 29 August 2019).

The spectacle of cruelty on the streets and other public spaces, as well as the political crackdown on democratic struggles, has increased our awareness of the politics of ‘victimhood’, and of the researcher-researched distinction that underpins many conventional methodologies. This chapter attempts to capture some of our thinking regarding a number of questions: who...
are victims of gender-based violence and who are possibly not? How can we identify and rec-
ognise the suffering of those who cannot even claim to be victims? How can we address the
overlooked injustices embedded in marginalised victimhoods? What justifications are there for
violent resistance in the form of self-defence and retaliation? As researchers doing gender-based
violence and sexuality studies in politically turbulent times, we also resolve to transform our
academic practices for seeking ways to unsettle and challenge hierarchies and extend women’s
voice through democratic knowledge production.

This chapter will draw on the authors’ experiences and observations made during Hong
Kong’s recent pro-democracy protests to examine how violence and the gender regime inter-
relate. Informed by the concept of intersectionality, the chapter unpacks the politics of victim-
hood, making the case that constructions of ‘ideal victimhood’ can marginalise some women’s
experiences of violence. The blurred boundary between victim-survivors and non-victim-
survivors also challenges the researcher-researched distinction and mandates methodological
innovation in favour of more ‘engaged research’. At the end of the chapter, we will include
some examples of our innovative methods/methodologies to demonstrate how research can be
done ‘care’-fully (Brannelly & Boulton, 2017) to pursue situated gender justice. Throughout
the chapter, we refer to gender-based violence as ‘violence that is directed against a woman
because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately’; and domestic violence as
‘acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or
domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners’ (Platek, 2019).

Discussion and analysis: democracy and our academic practices

The function of fear in personal and public spheres

Gender-based violence is a tool that both men and states use to subordinate women, as well as
men performing marginalised masculinities, and hence profiting from it (Platek, 2019). Platek’s
work published in 2004 is useful to illustrate this point – the Polish government intention-
ally omitted Article IX of the Convention on the Political Rights of Women and Article 29
of CEDAW leading to barriers to realising women’s equal rights to political participation,
freedom from any forms of discrimination, physical and mental health and proper working
conditions. The state’s violation of women’s rights itself is a form of violence, and it con-
donates patriarchy which ‘gives a man the right to categorise and evaluate others, and exempts
him from being classified and graded and from taking responsibility’ (p. 10). Therefore, vio-
lence against women is a method of ‘doing gender’ which, through processes of structura-
tion (Giddens, 1984) at individual, cultural and institutional levels, reinforces existing gender
inequalities (Risman, 2004). In various contexts and cases, the political level is ever-present.
As Boesten (2010) demonstrates, patterns of direct state violence against women are a function
of gender structure in society, which intersects with other societal hierarchies like race and
class. Systematic state violence, in turn, helps reproduce those very structures and inequalities.
These interlinked practices and processes of state violence, everyday violence against women
and domestic violence are therefore the constituents of gender structure, which shifts from
time to time, to persistently hinder women from pursuing freedom and gender equality in a
given society.

One of the mechanisms by which violence can be used to reproduce gender inequality
and subordinate women is by instilling fear (Pain, 2014). As Stark (2009a, 2009b, 2013) sug-
gests, violence against women does not always involve overt physical violence, but also every-
day micro-aggressions and forms of micro-regulation that erode women’s self-esteem, sense of
control and autonomy. This has led some to refer to covert violence in their intimate lives as ‘intimate terrorism’ (e.g. Johnson, 2010). Fear can sustain men’s control over women by stopping women from making choices that reflect their interests and by pushing them towards performing gender stereotypes, such as around womanhood and motherhood. Fear can become chronic (Pain, 2012), routine and habitual (Vera-Gray, 2018) when women are subject to everyday violence. This fear is reasonable and justified when the invasion of personal body and space is experienced or anticipated in either/both personal and public spheres. This chronic, routine and habitual fear jeopardises women’s sense of control over their time, material possessions, relationships and body.

However, since fear is learned through experiences of gender inequality and uninvited invasion of personal space by men it can also trigger acts of resistance that help women identify and mitigate such dangers (Hyden, 1999; Pain, 2012; Vera-Gray, 2018). When women resist, they might not always aim to be reclaiming their autonomy (making choice free of fear) but rather seeking to reduce levels of violence or mitigate the impact of such violence. The prolonged experience of losing control in extensive aspects of life can make women feel less of themselves (Stark, 2009a), at its worst resulting in what Králová (2015) terms ‘social death’ – losses of social identity, social connectedness and a sense of bodily integration.

Fear is a cultural product in shifting social hierarchies

Fear is also cultural while culture is fluid and dynamic. Our experiences in the Umbrella Movement have reaffirmed for us how Chinese culture of paternalism holds the voices of women and youths in lower regard, at the bottom of the familial and social hierarchy. The fear of authority and the consequences of disobedience reinforces a patriarchal culture that legitimises violence against women at home and in the larger society. For example, unsettling this familial hierarchy can lead to relationship breakdown, violence and emotional blackmail (Ho, Jackson, & Kong, 2018). People in Hong Kong sometimes refer to the Central Government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as ‘grandpa’, drawing on the patriarchal lineage in the Chinese family structure to make sense of the power imbalance between Hong Kong and PRC and the crackdown on the democratic struggles in Hong Kong (Kong & Ho, 2016).

After the Umbrella Movement, young people in Hong Kong continued to seek ways to destabilise the paternalistic culture through the anti-ELAB protest movement. The anti-ELAB movement is demarcated by a shift of power from the middle-aged and older elites to young front-line valiant protesters. While middle-aged pacifist protesters remain to be a huge presence in the current protests, their participation in the movement is considered ‘useful’ only if they could join hands with the valiant camp to fight the authoritarian regime. The discourse of solidarity holds the pacifists responsible (mostly older and middle-aged citizens) for protecting and standing with the young valiant protesters despite the latter’s use of violence against pro-establishment peaceful protesters and businesses. This form of solidarity taps into the cultural notion of parental protection, leaving little space for older and middle-aged pacifists to question the valiant strategies otherwise risking humiliation for not fulfilling their cultural obligation. Is an effect of Hong Kong’s struggles for freedom to (re)produce a form of patriarchal authority dominated by young men that are honoured for their martyrdom? While some young women have become valiant soldiers at the front line fighting against the police, we wonder how women’s participation in the movement and experience of violence is shaped by their gender position, age, class and political orientation in the shifting power relations and hierarchies.
Zero-tolerance of violence in a politically turbulent time?

As a product of patriarchal cultures, tolerance of violence in the name of collective benefits is another mechanism of control over women. Campaigns for zero-tolerance of violence flourished in Canada, the US and the UK in the early '90s. These intended to challenge the taken-for-granted nature of violence against women in society, and promote a cultural and social change that would afford women more protection (Mackay, 1996; McMahon & Pence, 2003). This initiative was later taken up by governments in various countries, and yielded changes in terms of national policy on violence against women and legal changes to protect women and prosecute domestic violence (ibid.). While some feminists celebrated the endorsement of these campaigns, others became critical of their institutionalisation (McMahon & Pence, 2003). The dismissal of the relationships and contexts in which women used violence resulted in a high number of women prosecuted for using violence to resist (ibid.). For McMahon and Pence (2003), the heavy reliance on the criminal justice system to advocate for social and cultural change risks homogenising women’s experiences of domestic violence and reduces intersecting inequalities into prosecutable incidents. Goodmark (2018) further advocated for decriminalising intimate partner violence. Their approach is to emphasise the importance of seeing intimate partner violence as a multidimensional problem, entailing diverse community-based and evidence-based social and service responses to prevent it and mitigate its impact.

Despite these criticisms, zero-tolerance campaigns should be promoted as an antidote to a culture of patriarchy and complicity which sustains violence against women. Notably, patriarchal norms and violent behaviours are mutually reinforcing. Some evidence shows that men who abused their children and, at the same time, endorsed patriarchal ideology and infantilised women showed more use of violence against their female intimate partners (Emery, Kim, Song, & Song, 2013). It is also well acknowledged in the literature that the use of violence against women is the means to subordinate women to a male-dominant gender regime that renders women second-class citizenship (infantilisation) (Risman, 2004). To break this vicious cycle, we not only need to seek ways to reduce public acceptability of violence against women, but to also challenge racialised, classist, ageist and gendered practices that can make women second-class citizens because of their social positions (Nixon & Humphreys, 2010).

Experiencing and witnessing the Hong Kong anti-ELAB protests, a new question emerges for us: how can we promote zero-tolerance on violence against women when state violence and violent resistance by citizens are justifying and escalating each other’s indiscriminate use of force? The Onsite Survey Findings in Hong Kong’s Anti-Extradition Bill Protests (Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey, 2019) shows that Hong Kongers are increasingly sympathetic towards radical violent resistance after months of anti-government unrest and police violence (Amnesty International, 2019). Most survey participants agree that, without government concessions, radical violent tactics are justifiable. Some respondents were in favour of protesters’ escalating use of violence, with very few expressing a desire to see the protest movement pause their actions. Doyle and McWilliams’s study (2018) on 40 years of political conflict in Northern Ireland highlights issues that could be relevant to understanding domestic violence in other politically turbulent contexts: how is women’s access to protection and justice, including the police and legal support, upset or jeopardised in the context of political conflict? Northern Ireland’s experiences suggest that male perpetrators of domestic violence use their political affiliations to threaten women, sustaining the perception that women have nowhere to go and intensifying women’s fear of violence by showing how women can be harassed in public spaces. Erez, Ibarra, and Gur (2015) realised that the journey of reporting domestic violence to the police can be coloured by the Arab–Israeli conflict in Israel. Arab abused women could feel
ashamed and an ultimate sense of betrayal for seeking help from the Israeli police, while Israeli police can uphold a stereotypical image of Arab families in doing their policing work and may hold grievances against Arabs because of the prolonged political conflicts. The intersection of the political and the private spheres in these studies suggests the possibility of perpetrators of domestic violence using everyday political violence to control their female partners. Although the experiences of Northern Ireland and Israel are not directly comparable to Hong Kong, the questions and issues raised are still critical for rethinking the legitimacy of violence and violent resistance in a politically turbulent time.

Who are victim-survivors and who are not?

‘We are all survivors (of violence).’

— Siu Ka Chung, social worker and an imprisoned democratic activist in Hong Kong, wrote in his letter to the public

Acts of domestic violence are not aberrant behaviours of individuals (e.g. delinquent behaviours, poor anger and stress management, etc.) but rather manifestations of a culture that sanctions gendered violence (Kelly, 2002; Lombard, 2013; WHO, 29 November 2017). In places where the culture tends to accept women’s subordination to men and men’s ownership over women, domestic violence against women is also found to be more prevalent (WHO, 29 November 2017).

The positive correlation between a culture of gender inequality and the prevalence of intimate partner violence has raised the question of whether only those who have witnessed or experienced explicit physical violence are ‘victim-survivors’. This classification of ‘victim-survivor’ excludes those who do not have these direct experiences of violence but are prone to violence for deviating from the dominant gender order (Ray, 2018). On the other hand, those who are deemed ‘non-victim-survivor’ might still confront certain trivialised, less visible forms of violence, such as psychological manipulation, name calling, social isolation and micro-regulation in their everyday life. The definition of violence and victims should be broadly informed by nature, dynamics, severity and consequence of a treatment.

These reflections on ‘victimhood’ highlight the importance of the continuum of violence which addresses women’s experience of multiple forms of violence in everyday life, including harassment, coercion and control, which can be equally or more detrimental to women’s well-being and agency when compared to overt physical and sexual assault (Kelly, 2002). Failing to understand violence against women as a continuum can render invisible the suffering of women who do not conform to ‘ideal victimhood’. For example, in the case of the #ProtestToo rally and the anti-ELAB movement in Hong Kong, only civilian women and protesters who have experienced explicit physical and sexual assault by the police would be regarded as victims of gender-based violence. The construction of ‘ideal victimhood’ is circumscribed by the political agenda of the anti-ELAB protests, which exclusively focuses on the brutality of state and police. The consequence is the ignorance of the violence exercised by the protesters for the sake of cementing an alliance for challenging the authoritarian regime. Women activists’ experiences of public humiliation and harassment on the street and in online spaces are rendered invisible for political expedience (Kong, Ho, & Jackson, 2018).

This dominant discourse of victimhood further forbids people from challenging the protesters’ violence against the wives and family of the police, such as those who chanted ‘Black cop, the whole family dies!’ and ‘Police on overtime, their wives enjoying threesome’. These bullying
slogans that blame women for men’s wrongdoings or confine women to gender stereotypes can be easily trivialised or dismissed when women do not fit the image of ‘ideal victim’, constructed at the interplay of cultural, socio-political and institutional powers in a specific context (Pain, 2014). Politics of victimhood sensitises us to the limitation of using a well-accepted construction of victimhood to guide our understanding of gender-based violence. The construction of ideal victim defines what acts are counted as violence, and it inevitably renders some violent acts against women overlooked and gender injustices unnoticed.

Furthermore, the ‘worthy of sympathy’ undertone of victimhood could sometimes stop us from questioning victims’ use of violence. While violent resistance is widely accepted and justified on the grounds of self-defence (McColgan, 1993; McPherson, 2019), the anti-ELAB protests lead us to question the legitimacy of violent resistance when it is directed to family members and partners of perpetrators of abuse. We consider this question crucial for pursuing justice. It is clear to us in the anti-ELAB protests that people dare not criticise protesters’ violence against the wives of police officers since misogynistic slogans and sexual harassment serve as resistance strategies. In a politically heterogenous movement, we have observed that violent resistance can be used against women activists who hold different stances and approaches to others. Ho, an author of this chapter, organised a peaceful rally (5 August 2019) against sexual violence against women protesters weeks before the #ProtestToo rally. It took place outside the Tin Shui Wai police station, where several male police officers had exposed the private parts of a woman protester by holding her legs open and causing her dress to ride up. During that day, 70 plus people were arrested by police. Ho was subsequently blamed by activists for the arrests, verbally attacked and physically confronted by the radical pro-confrontation factions of the movement. The fear of physical attacks and online bullying forestalled us, as academics, to raise uncomfortable questions which can potentially discredit the current anti-ELAB movement. Instead of finding support in the #ProtestToo assembly or the Pacifist factions of the social movement, bullying and harassment experienced by Ho were barely acknowledged in other rallies and public platforms. For the authors of this chapter, these experiences and observations were personally shocking, and forced us to reflect on the limitations of the way we understand gender-based violence in the context of authoritarianism and civil unrest. Accepting violent resistance, simply due to the victim status of the perpetrator, can render the injustices that it creates invisible.

**Doing research as making change together**

Recognising everyone can be a victim-survivor in a culture of gender inequality forces us to reconsider the responsibility of researchers in the field of gender-based violence. Nissim-Sabat (2009), in her Marxist analysis of victimhood, argued that our conventional constructions of victimhood are underpinned by ‘individualism’ and naïve empiricism. These constructions share the understanding that victimisation is the experience of rational and self-conscious individuals who are either (1) subject to unavoidable natural disasters or social misfortune (poverty, domestic abuse and discrimination); or (2) choose to put themselves in situations of misfortune or deprivation by not resisting enough. By denying the dependencies and inter-dependencies that constitute our society, it is easy to blame the ‘victim’ for their sufferings rather than turning the gaze towards ourselves and those who allow these sufferings to take place or could have done something to mitigate these sufferings.

Focusing on ‘who could have made a difference’ speaks to a relational approach, which considers victimisation/survival as experienced and understood in relation to social context.
Victim-survivors’ agency faces various constraints (Vera-Gray, 2016) including their social positions, the power relations that they are located in and their material reality. Connell (1995) and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argued that individual males and females are granted varied resources to claim and change a set of rules for how different genders should be performed, depending on their class, ethnicity, age and sexuality in a particular cultural and political context. The relational approach not only holds accountable those who maintain, reproduce or remain silent to the power relations that make gender violence more conducive in a particular context (Kelly, 2016) but also advocates for a shared responsibility to reduce victimisation and support survival and recovery of abused women (Pain, 2014).

The relational approach further raises questions about the legitimacy of the researcher/researched distinction which often limits the space for ‘respondents’ or ‘participants’ to have ‘a voice, a vote, and a veto’ (Kara, 2017, p. 289) in knowledge-making. This distinction upholds the assumption that the researchers are objective observers of victim-survivors and their experiences without recognising that researchers themselves could be exposed to a continuum of gender violence stratified by their social positions. By contesting the distinctions of victim-survivor/non-victim-survivor and researcher/researched, we acknowledge that the social positions occupied by researchers affect how they understand, experience and dismiss the experience of gender violence, hence posing questions on research design and analysis that are based on claims of neutrality and objectivity. The relational approach also highlights the moral obligation of academic researchers for acting against and challenging gendered social hierarchies through their everyday research practices. It further justifies a feminist, participatory, reflexive and action-based approach to researching gender violence (Harding & Norberg, 2005).

**Engaged feminist research**

‘Whose questions are we asking? And to whom do we owe an answer? Thinking about methodology in this way puts the technical details into a social and political context and considers their consequences for people’s lives. It gives us a space for critical reflection and for creativity.’

(Sprague, 2016, p. 5)

‘Engaged feminist research’, as opposed to an ostensibly value-free and objective approach, can yield new knowledge by challenging the status quo and associated power imbalances that are embedded in contemporary institutional research practice (Harding & Norberg, 2005; Sprague, 2016). Feminist research advances its epistemological and political agenda by generating knowledge from the marginalised standpoints of women and by problematising the hierarchy of knowledge (i.e. that objective is better than subjective/intersubjective) (Sprague, 2016). Feminist research involves validating women’s labour, experiences, values and (relational) agency which dominant modes of research practice all too readily dismiss. In the field of domestic violence, for example, Hester, Donovan, and Fahmy (2010) have found that heteronormative assumptions have shaped the development of both measurement tools and sampling in prevalence studies of intimate partner violence, adding difficulty to assessing the prevalence of intimate partner violence happening in LGBTQ relationships. The authors recalled the discussion regarding how to measure intimate partner violence in lesbian relationships in the conference of ‘Violence in the Lesbian Community’ held in Washington DC in September 1983, stating that some feminists had denied the existence of such abuse. One of the reasons is that they
believed ‘lesbian relationships were a “utopic” alternative to oppressive heterosexual relationships – where lesbian relationships were likely to be egalitarian compared to the inevitability of male/female inequality in heterosexual relationships’ (ibid., p. 253). The assumption that power and control can be exercised only by men over women has created barriers in examining how power and control play out in same-sex relationships, resulting in difficulties in devising tools to capture these dynamics (in terms of contexts and impact of abuse). Not only has domestic violence in same-sex relationships had a much more recent history compared to domestic violence in heterosexual relationships, the early literature and studies on same-sex domestic violence focused mainly on lesbian relationships, partly because lesbians became a sub-group of women seeking domestic violence or rape support services ostensibly set up for heterosexual women. Studies of intimate partner violence among gay men were not present until the late ’90s and majorly linked to health research on HIV/AIDS. In addition, Ho, Chan, and Kong (2017) identify how conventional modes of knowledge production, which primarily produces textual knowledge, can hamper an understanding of women’s emotional experiences of sexual harassment and bullying. In contrast to text-based knowledge production, they recommend the use of theatre for more engaged research with women’s embodied experiences. This renewed engagement also engenders an ethics that works ‘towards more shared forms of managing power’, both within the enquiry group and in the larger social system/structure (Palacios, 2016, p. 940).

To achieve these ends, the research process itself must also be democratic and able to address the everyday as well as structural injustices as experienced by women. Methodological innovation therefore is needed for transforming everyday research practice into action that (1) creates a safe space for recognising overlooked sufferings of women and communicating socio-political differences, and (2) developing a community of care that supports non-violent resistance to gender-based and domestic violence. Methodological innovations, we suggest, are critical and radical practices in research for challenging power held by academic researchers in defining what is knowledge, for example, the culture of objectivity and the prohibition of different forms of ‘knowing’ in research (Heron, 1996; Kong, 2016). Ultimately, we emphasise a process of pursuing a situated ethics of justice (Bank, 2014), meaning that we negotiate and understand principles of justice in the contexts of our research. These principles inform our research processes where we prioritised people’s wellbeing and feelings and shared power with ‘participants’ in deciding on the scope, design, process and the use of the research.

**Use of group for creating safe space: sense of community and sense of control**

A space that people can talk freely, without fear of violence against them and the fear of negative consequence if they challenge social hierarchies, is a requirement for achieving/pursuing/realising justice. This space can be transformative for women, since it can create an emotional break from their chronic, routine and habitual fears that intervenes and constrains them from recognising their sufferings and articulating and acting upon them (Kong & Robson, 2020). Generating this space usually involves creating and supporting relationships that are caring and non-judgemental so that women come to trust that their stories will be heard and believed.

**Example 1: Cooperative Grounded Inquiry**

Cooperative Grounded Inquiry (CGI) (Kong, 2016) was developed in a project that worked with women who had separated from their abusive partners in Hong Kong. The lack of post-separation support for abused women in Hong Kong reflects a systemic failure to understand
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abused women’s post-separation lives. CGI positions women’s voice in the centre of knowl-
edge-making and social service development, with the hope of finding practical ways to address
the challenges experienced and identified by women in the post-separation context.

CGI combines techniques of Grounded Theory Methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) with
Cooperative Inquiry (Heron & Reason, 1997) to enable the reflection-action-reflection cycles.
In practice, Kong worked with women victim-survivors for six months, meeting regularly at
least once a week, to create categories and themes together to make sense of each other’s post-
separation challenges. They developed role play-based learning, one-on-one support sessions
and group-based problem-solving practices to address problems identified in their everyday
parenting and the difficulties in navigating the stigmatising ‘ideal victimhood’ and ‘ideal survi-
vorhood’ that underpin social care support.

Underlying the knowledge-making processes was the ethic of care that helped cultivate
a family-like community of practice (Kong & Hooper, 2017) for solving problems together.
The ethic of care enabled women to talk about power imbalances and personal biases that sur-
faced in the group process. With the use of a reflective diary, diagrams, self-portrait for docu-
mentation of experiences, and constant comparative analysis for making sense of each other’s
behaviours, interactions and observations, the enquiry group contested the ‘either victim or
survivor’ dichotomy that created power differences among themselves (Kong, under review).
They also interrogated the impact of domestic violence on their mother-child relationships
(Kong & Hooper, 2017).

Example 2: Collaborative Focus Group Analysis

Collaborative Focus Group Analysis (CFGA) (Kong, Ho, & Jackson, 2020) was developed to
make sense of the impact of Hong Kong’s protest movement on people’s intimate lives. The
purpose of doing so is to expand the space for dialogue and subvert the conventional knowl-
edge-making hierarchy. In developing this approach, we aimed to explore how we could use
focus groups in more democratic and participatory ways. CFGA is operationalised through a
focus group and reflecting team, both of which take it in turns to observe and analyse each
other. The focus group is formed by participant-researchers from the community, diversified
in terms of age, gender, sexuality and political orientation; meanwhile, the reflecting team is a
group of academic researchers. It differs from the design of a conventional focus group by giving
participants the opportunity to influence how their experiences, values and views are described,
derstood and disseminated.

CFGA is also a process that can help mend the broken relationships that arose from politi-
cal differences between people in the post-Umbrella Movement context. CFGA creates a
space for communicating political and social differences, reducing antagonism and generat-
ing a sense of solidarity among academic and community co-researchers. CFGA involves
four stages: (1) a planning stage in which the reflecting team and focus group are formed;
(2) reflecting team observing the focus group discussion; (3) a focus group observing the
reflecting team discussion; and (4) dialogue between the focus group and reflecting team.
Researchers in CFGA are facilitators of conversations among co-researchers and need to
help set ground rules, such as mutual respect and confidentiality. They also agree to enable
communication of similar and different experiences in the conversations. This methodologi-
cal design recognises the situated and contingent nature of knowledge (Davids & Willemse,
2014), considering data as being generated in the interactional encounter among co-research-
ers in a specific setting rather than simply collected by objective, politically neutral researchers
(Ellis & Berger, 2003; Nencel, 2014).
Democratising research practices entails validating different forms of knowing. It responds to the reality that people make sense of the world not only through building theories, propositions or concepts but also, and majorly, through their experiences in and reflection on problem-solving. The approach embraces Heron and Reason’s (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 1997) ‘extended epistemology’ (i.e. experiential knowing, practical knowing, propositional knowing and presentational knowing) for guiding our knowledge production practices and methodological decisions and directions. An extended epistemology poses critical questions about the value of theories, the purpose of knowledge (know what, know that or know how) and the nature of human consciousness. The implication for academic research is that we have to reflect on how far theories/propositions/conceptual understanding are the best form of knowledge and what are their limitations in exploring emotions, embodiment, memories and intelligibility that characterise social life (Schatzki, 1996).

Example 3: labouring women: a devised theatre (辛苦女協作劇場, 2016)

Devised theatre (Ho, Chan, & Kong, 2017) is a critical Arts-Based Research (ABR) methodology employing collaborative focus group analysis to understand women activists’ experiences of sexual harassment and public humiliation during the protest movement in Hong Kong in 2014. While these violent incidents are often trivialised or dismissed as sacrifices ‘for the bigger game (of democracy) 為大局犧牲’, we seek ways to use theatrical performance to provide a democratic space for women activists and academics to collaboratively generate an understanding of personal political trauma.

Inspired by Boal’s (1979) Theatre of the Oppressed, our approach views theatrical performance as bringing to the foreground our own and others’ reflections on the difficulties facing women brave enough to participate in public and political spheres of life. Drawing out the complexity of people’s life stories, especially the ignored and subjugated aspects of their experiences, enables theatre members and the public to see what could not previously be seen. If social science interviewing is a task of allowing participants to find words for what has previously not been said (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992), critical arts-based performance allows participants to actualise what has been previously felt but repressed (Saldaña, 2016).

At the beginning, we worked collaboratively with women activists to identify the barriers to women’s political participation. Specifically, we focused on the intra-movement stigmatisation, and their experiences in the Umbrella Movement and its ensuing consequences for their body image, self-presentation, performance in the media sphere, and intimate relationships. These experiences were documented and shared in the group, and later informed the collaborative script writing. Women activists were involved in the design and development of the theatre performance to ensure authenticity and anonymity in the storytelling. Academics were involved as reflecting team members for responding to women activists’ stories. Rather than offering conceptual analysis, they were encouraged to create a mini performance. When understanding was not limited to discursive practice, reflecting team members responded emotionally as they recalled how personal experiences affected their analysis of other people’s stories. These emotional exchanges between academics and women activists fostered a sense of solidarity as they began to see more similarities in their experiences of gender inequality than differences in terms of researcher/research and scholar/activist distinctions (Hale, 2008).
Example 4: ‘The Shape of Me’: an arts-based approach to understanding coercive control

‘The Shape of Me’ (Kong, 2019; Kong & Robson, 2020) is a pilot project that uses art to enable abused women to have more control over the ways they tell their stories. Women who have experienced coercive control, when involved in social care or legal systems, often feel the pressure to tell formulaic stories to justify their needs for social care and legal support (Guthrie & Kunkel, 2015). Proving oneself to be the ideal/pure victim, a competent mother (despite coercive control against themselves) and a credible witness in the court is hard and can be tremendously disempowering (Creek & Dunn, 2011; McDermott & Garofalo, 2004). These institutionalised stories of domestic violence restrict us from seeing the full spectrum of impacts of coercive control on women. These narratives continue to undermine women’s freedom and credibility in giving an account of themselves. How can art serve as a language, alternative to institutional languages, for describing experiences of coercive control? How can we create a safe space, in terms of control and anonymity for women to explore and express the impact of coercive control on themselves? These questions informed the development of an artistic tool, ‘The Shape of Me: Walking the Line, Mapping Oneself’ (ibid.).

‘The Shape of Me: Walking the Line, Mapping Oneself’ was collaboratively developed by a number of people: an academic researcher, a creative facilitator, women who have experienced coercive control, their social workers and a counsellor. Through this artistic tool, women represent their experiences in symbols of their own choosing, at their own pace and to their chosen audience. This approach has two components: an art workshop for producing a self-portrait and a follow-up reflective conversation. In the workshop, women participants were encouraged to ‘take the line through the experiences of coercive control’ (see Figure 49.1) and then extend the line to create the shape of themselves (see Figure 49.2).

The ‘line’ does not refer to a timeline but rather a tool for revisiting the hard-to-talk-about experiences of living with coercive control. The flexibility that a line can offer, such as drawing peaks and dips, spirals, loops and shapes, enabled women to revisit different time points of their life all at once and to create suitable symbols to represent their experiences without compromising their anonymity.

The self-portrait is created by extending the ‘line’ to provide the visual spaces for women to reflect on how they have been shaped inside and outside their experiences of coercive control. The simultaneity of inside and outside of coercive control, as laid out on the body map, helped with exploring the connectedness between the embodied experiences of coercive control and the relational-social-historical-political context from which coercive control is performed and

![Figure 49.1 Examples of ‘walking the line’ exercise](image-url)
resisted. In the follow-up reflective conversation, the researcher did not refer to a set of pre-formulated questions but rather sought invitation into women’s experiences. The researcher asked whether the participants would mind ‘taking me through the line’. This approach seeks to redress the power position that academic researchers hold to excavate people’s experiences, and to ensure that women take control over how they would like to explore the (un)represented experiences in the conversation.

The use of ‘The Shape of Me’ successfully created a safe space for translating the highly embodied experiences of coercive control into symbolic/pictorial forms (presentational knowing) and provided the dialogical space for co-creating narratives (propositional knowing) about the represented and unrepresented experiences. Women’s marginalised stories about ‘Dreams’, ‘Ghost of the perpetrator’ and ‘Moments in life’ shed light on the impact of coercive control on women’s concepts of self, time and relationship. These stories problematise linear temporality for organising experiences of coercive control, visualise fluidity of (relational) self and identify social relationships that can support women’s resistance against coercive control (Kong, 2019).

**Conclusions**

Our experiences of protesting against police violence in Hong Kong have led us to re-examine how state violence, everyday gender-based violence and domestic violence against women may work together to control and subordinate women in a patriarchal gender regime. We suggest that long-term exposure to violence against women, carried out at both the state and interpersonal levels, normalises fear and increases acceptability of violence against women. In a context of political conflict, perpetrators of domestic violence could also use their affiliation, either actual or fictitious, with violent groups as tools to threaten and control women. By reflecting on our encounters with political conflicts, we suggest that more research be conducted on the interrelations between political conflict on gender-based violence and domestic violence. It is especially important for research of this type to be carried out in colonial and post-colonial contexts, such as Hong Kong, to challenge the whiteness in theorising everyday and global terrorism (Pain, 2014).

Recognising that violence can be used at different levels as strategies for reinforcing a gender regime, we re-examine the distinction of ‘victim-survivors and non-victim-survivors’. Rather than seeing just ‘the few of them who are battered’, we can now see many of us are victim-survivors of the patriarchal gender regime, and can be variably vulnerable to violence depending on our social positions. It is also in light of this relationality that a democratic methodology...
is needed to map the force field of power relations and to sensitise us to the problems and politics in defining victimhood – no one can be a pure victim/perpetrator. This awareness not only fosters a sense of solidarity between those who are socially constructed as ‘non-victim-survivors’ and ‘victim-survivors’, but also helps researchers to recognise their moral obligation to transform their everyday research practices. There is a need to create safe research space that is fear-free and communicative for validating women’s experiences of violence. These stories are often dismissed or marginalised by ‘ideal victimhood’ and other formula stories of women’s victimisation, used for informing political actions and legal and social care support.

Methodological innovation, therefore, supports action-oriented research that can empower women through the democratisation of knowledge-making. As academic researchers in the field of gender-based violence and sexuality studies, challenging the hierarchy of knowledge and the hierarchy of knowledge-makers is part of the process of validating women’s experiences of gender-based violence and to represent them in ways that engage the community to act to respond to violence against women more sensitively and ‘care’fully. The least, we seek to avoid reproducing the gender regime that undermines women and where their experiences are not believed.

**Critical findings**

- Violence against women is a method of ‘doing gender’ which, through processes of structuration at individual, cultural and institutional levels, reinforces existing gender inequalities.
- One of the mechanisms by which violence can be used to reproduce gender inequality and subordinate women is by instilling fear. Fear is both deterrent and resource to women’s participation in shaping intimate and political lives; meanwhile, fear is mediated through culture and social hierarchies where women are often disadvantaged.
- Tolerance of violence in the name of collective benefits is another mechanism to exercise control over women. The heightened acceptability of violent acts, as a result of prolonged political conflicts in a society, can normalise women’s experience of violence and have impact on abused women’s willingness to seek help. Women might then lose their ground for request for protection and justice when violence becomes a ‘necessary evil’.
- We need to address women’s experience of violence and abuse from a relational and intersectional lens (see also the continuum of violence by Liz Kelly).
- We have to be sensitive to the politics of victimhood and how a well-accepted construction of victimhood might render some violent acts against women overlooked and gender injustices unnoticed. Individual women’s experiences and understandings of violence and abuse are influenced by their intersecting social positions, including gender, age, class, ethnicity and political orientation.

**Implications for policy, practice and research**

- Victimisation/survival is experienced and understood in relation to social context. Recognising everyone can be a victim-survivor in a culture of gender inequality forces us to reconsider the responsibility of researchers in the field of gender-based violence.
- The relational approach raises questions about the legitimacy of researcher/researched distinction which often limits the space for ‘respondents’ or ‘participants’ to have ‘a voice, a vote, and a veto’ (Kara, 2017, p. 289) in knowledge-making.
- The relational approach also highlights the moral obligation of academic researchers for acting against and challenging gendered social hierarchies through their everyday research.
practices. It justifies a feminist, participatory, reflexive and action-based approach to researching gender violence, namely ‘engaged feminist research’.

• ‘Engaged feminist research’, as opposed to an ostensibly value-free and objective approach, can yield new knowledge by challenging the status quo and associated power imbalances that are embedded in contemporary institutional research practice.

• Methodological innovation therefore is needed for transforming everyday research practice into action that (1) creates a safe space for recognising overlooked sufferings of women and communicating socio-political differences, and (2) developing a community of care that supports non-violent resistance to gender-based and domestic violence.

Notes

1 The Umbrella Movement was one of the biggest pro-democracy movements in Hong Kong’s history. It took place in 2014 and developed into a 79-day occupation of main roads in the city. Five years later, in 2019, numerous protests broke out in Hong Kong against the proposed extradition law bill amendment which would allow extradition of Hong Kong citizens and foreign nationals to China for trial. Unprecedented police violence was observed, reported and recorded by international organisations, leading to more than 100 days of civil unrest in the city.

2 The terms ‘useless elders’ 廢老 and ‘useless middle-aged’ 廢中 have been used by the young protesters to criticise the older generations for not making enough effort to advocate for democracy; meanwhile, these terms are also widely adopted by the elders and middle-aged protesters to justify their unconditional support for the younger generations, especially the valiant camp, due to their political indebtedness to them.

References


Extending women's voice


