

Academic Partnerships to Confront Gender-Based Violence in the Field

By Ana Laura Zavala Guillen, *Queen Mary University of London* and Itzel San Roman Pineda, *University of Sheffield*

In 2021, the Bartlet Development Planning Unit from the University College London partnered with the Network of Women Doing Fieldwork (NWDF) to produce a report to assess and improve mechanisms that prevent and mitigate the risk of gender-based violence against PhD researchers who are doing data collection away from their home institutions. This data collection is commonly known as fieldwork. The report, Confronting Gender-Based Violence in Fieldwork: Potential Sites of Intervention within DPU's PhD Programme, was presented on International Women's Day with the participation of PhD students, academics, management staff, and experts in gender, disabilities, and race studies. Gender-based violence refers to harmful acts directed at an individual based on gender.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, three former PhD students at the Geography Department of the University of Sheffield, Ana Laura Zavala Guillen, Itzel San Roman Pineda, and Jenny Veenstra, founded the Network of Women Doing Fieldwork. What started as an online and informal safe space for mutual support against gender-based violence experienced during research became a women activist movement across social and environmental sciences based on five continents. The NWDF envisions a world where women researchers can conduct fieldwork free from violence, with dignity and joy, and with the right support from their institutions and funders.

Before summarising the main key aspects of the report in the following sections, Confronting Gender-Based Violence in Fieldwork: Potential Sites of Intervention within DPU's PhD Programme is also an invitation for other academic and education actors to revisit their data collection policies and champion fieldwork cultures in the light of women researchers' rights as human rights in academia.

Key aspects in Confronting Gender-Based Violence in Fieldwork

There is a misconception that gender-based violence can only take place when the researcher is immersed in dangerously stereotyped remote locations in the Global South. Therefore, the report acknowledges that gender-based violence can occur at all stages of fieldwork anywhere: scoping the field, immersion worldwide, data analysis, and reporting back to the respondents. Furthermore, gender-based violence must be addressed broadly, including episodes of sexual violence and physical and psychological harm, such as threats, coercion, and manipulation. PhD students from

disadvantaged and racialised groups can experience overlapping forms of oppression, discrimination, and gender-based violence. This understanding is vital for institutions to recognise that PhD students can be vulnerable during their research and, therefore, to identify possible interventions throughout PhD programmes.

Interventions require ending a culture of silence in academia around this topic that causes shame, guilt, and inadequacy when gender-based violence occurs during data collection. These feelings get amplified when academic institutions are unclear about the location and division of duty of care and responsibility for this issue between researchers, supervisors, departments, and centralised administration. In the case of the **Bartlet Development Planning Unit**, PhD students encounter different actors and policies that will impact their fieldwork approach and preparation, including ethical approvals and risk assessments. Their fieldwork training is largely developed in guidance with their supervisor, two seminar series designed for DPU PhD students, and UCL training sessions on research methods. As described in the next section, these are the entry points to intervene and address gender-based violence in the field.

Key intervention sites for mitigating gender-based violence in the field

The first intervention site requires the preparation of guidelines for supervisors to initiate dialogues with their PhD students about gender-based violence during fieldwork. These conversations must encourage students to consider how their presence on the field may influence how research participants and the public perceive them and how these perceptions may impact their safety. Supervisors must prompt conversations around mitigating dangers in the field and identifying alternative data-collection methods and continue this dialogue throughout data collection. Additionally, supervisors should discuss ethics approvals and risk assessment forms to ensure that gender-based violence is adequately addressed. Moreover, supervisors should open conversations to establish protocols to manage the likelihood of catastrophic violence and trauma in the field. These guidelines should include tools to help students gain access to medical and legal services and leave the field site immediately if required.

The Doctorate Seminar Series is the second site of intervention. This seminar series can be enriched with workshops and discussions that prepare students for the challenges of fieldwork. These sessions should address mental health issues that may arise throughout a PhD programme and emphasise that fieldwork can be an emotionally transformative experience for which students must be prepared.

The third intervention site is the Research Methods Seminar. Discussing gender-based violence, from institutional violence to street harassment, will inform the design of gender-sensitive research methodologies. These conversations should include alternatives for housing and transportation, social and spatial isolation in the field, and the emotional labour of research. Training must emphasise the value of relaxation and anxiety-reduction activities, such as journaling, physical activity, and socialising during fieldwork.

A fourth point of intervention is the ethics approval and risk assessment forms. DPU may explore developing gender-sensitive ethics approval and risk assessment forms that require students to find allies in the field who can assist them socially and legally, plan where they would go for emergency health care, identify what sexual behaviours and health laws may affect them, and how they can modify their research in the event of danger.

Conclusions

The key intervention sites to address gender-based violence in the field require raising awareness and providing training among staff and PhD students. Training on gender-based violence during fieldwork will help staff prepare for and deal with cases of gender-based violence effectively and with care. For PhD students, assessing the possibility of experiencing gender-based violence in the field will allow them to design gender-sensitive research methodologies and implement mitigation strategies with the support of their supervisors and academic institutions, enabling them to manage violence effectively. Finally, the report's broader lessons and aspects regarding gender-based violence in fieldwork can also be applied beyond PhD programmes to any research conducted with safety, care, and the right support of employers and funders.

About the authors: **Dr Ana Laura Zavala Guillen** is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the School of Geography – Queen Mary University of London. **Dr Itzel San Roman Pineda** is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Faculty of Social Sciences – University of Sheffield. Ana and Itzel are co-founders of the Network of Women Doing Fieldwork.

Suggested Further Reading and Resources

Berry, Maya J., Claudia Chávez Argüelles, Shanya Cordis, Sarah Ihmoud, and Elizabeth Velásquez Estrada (2017) 'Toward a Fugitive Anthropology: Gender, Race, and Violence in the Field.' *Cultural Anthropology*. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca32.4.05>

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Network of Women Doing Fieldwork. 'GBV during Data Collection.' Accessed 25 September 2021. https://www.zotero.org/groups/2737349/gbv_during_data_collection/library.

Ross, Karen. (2015) "'No Sir, She Was Not a Fool in the Field": Gendered Risks and Sexual Violence in Immersed Cross-Cultural Fieldwork.' *The Professional Geographer*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00330124.2014.907705>

Tucker, F., Waite, C. & Horton, J. (2022) Not just muddy and not always gleeful? Thinking about the physicality of fieldwork, mental health, and marginality. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12836>

Consider joining the NWDF by subscribing here (women-fieldwork): <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=women-fieldwork>

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