

# Chapter 25

## The Ups and Downs of Feminist Activist Research: Positional Reflections



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### 25.1 Introduction

We are four women activist-researchers, who studied together at the Barcelona School of Ecological Economics, motivated by and interested in contributing to processes of social transformation from the perspective of research and radical and activist feminism. We accepted and undertook the challenge of writing together about our similar experiences in feminist activist-research during the middle of a lockdown for the COVID-19 pandemic. Such systemic crisis, and specifically the lockdown, has highlighted for us, particularly as women researchers, the difficulties of finding time and energy to continue our research and activism, and at the same time moved at the center the caring for life (including that of a newborn) and the care of others (grandparents, children, vulnerable neighbors).

After presenting our personal trajectories and link them to what we learned at the Barcelona School, this chapter will focus on feminist research and Participatory

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Action Research (PAR)<sup>1</sup> processes in which we have been involved. Additionally, it also provides a reflection on the “positionality” of us as researchers, the challenges and the ups and downs we have experienced, and the mutual support woven into these processes.

## 25.2 Activist and Feminist Research: Individual Trajectories

We define ourselves as activist-researchers based on Borrás’s (2016) definition, which refers to those who are mainly in academic institutions and carry out activist work (three of us); those who are based mainly in social movements or political projects and carry out academic activism from within (one of us); and those who are based mainly in independent research institutions and are activist-academics.

While studying at the Barcelona School, we have had access to ongoing discussions on research and political action. Such studies overlap with the questioning of linearity and the search for “integrative sciences,” whose epistemological basis is rooted in the weak comparability and incommensurability of values (Martinez Alier et al., 1998), which places ecological economics outside the mainstream of neoclassical economic theory. The PAR processes in which we have been involved have simultaneously included scientific research, training, and political action. They have considered critical analysis, diagnosis of situations, and practice as sources of knowledge (Fals-Borda, 1978). Furthermore, we want to highlight three aspects of PAR that emerge during the process: (a) dealing with research topics of social relevance; (b) the importance of overcoming the subject/object dichotomy in the research process to actively promote knowledge co-elaboration processes; (c) knowledge is mediated by the subjects that produce it; therefore, there is no neutrality in the way of knowing or in the knowledge that is produced.

We learned from the “post-normal science” developed by Funtowicz and Ravetz (1993) that research must recognize and include the plurality of values and knowledge through the participation of the actors in the research. This participation is justified in the first place both by a question of justice in giving a voice to those who experience the greatest impacts of environmental management decisions, and to guarantee the quality of research that supports decision-making. We also learned to be aware that the uncertain context can be analyzed from multiple angles and values; hence the importance of transparency in the research process (Munda, 2004); and the importance of integrating local wisdom, from the knowledge of ancestral peoples and peasants, and from a complex systems perspective, as political agroecology has shown us (Cuéllar & Sevilla, 2009). Such theoretical base we received at the Barcelona School was enriched by reflections from Freire’s pedagogy, who recognized that knowledge is only possible through dialogue between the social

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<sup>1</sup> We will use the term Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Activist Research interchangeably, referring to the same concept.

actors who directly suffer oppressions and the thinkers or activists committed to social change (Freire 1970). In this regard, these definitions are also close to the concept of situated knowledge elaborated by Haraway (1995). She proposes specifying from which point of view one starts, and why that perspective and not another, thus making the political position explicit. In the words of the author: “relativism is a way of not being anywhere while simultaneously pretending to be everywhere; at the same time the neutrality of positioning is a denial of responsibility and a critical search” (Haraway 1995: 329).

Finally, we also rely on the feminist concept of reflexivity, defined as the examination of one’s own beliefs, judgments, and practices during the research process. This implies the recognition of a positionality of researchers, based on the legitimate powerful position of science with respect to other systems of knowledge, and also the position of each one of us that influences the relationship within research staff, with other subjects, and the entire research process (England, 1994). We reflect on how our personal and collective research trajectory is not a process alien to our context.

### ***25.2.1 Activist-Research from and in the South***

I belong to a small proportion of women and have obtained a university degree in Guatemala. The options for women are limited, although in the years of positive discrimination policies the possibilities have increased. My academic career was marked by scholarship programs and the search to understand the confluence between the analysis of environmental conflicts – from a social perspective. From the beginning, employment options were linked to forestry issues, dominated in Latin America by the perception of being male-dominated fields (Rocheleau & Edmunds, 1997). The role that social movements have had, from indigenous groups in Latin America to women’s movements in India and Sub-Saharan Africa (Mies & Shiva, 1997), means that anyone who wishes to do research on this issue is obliged to engage with these mobilization processes. My engagement with the forestry sector was based on training and exchange processes with indigenous and peasant communities on forest lands. The time I spent in Barcelona was fortuitous. The basis of my study had been closer to institutional analysis and studying the commons (Monterroso et al., 2019). However, during my stay in Barcelona I sought to articulate theoretical and methodological development with a deeper problematization of power issues and the reconfiguration of social relations that frames environmental conflicts. Barcelona was key for me in my search for methodological plurality, as it recognizes the importance of addressing different types of knowledge. Perhaps, much more important to me was the recognition of the absence of neutrality in the research process and the importance of promoting a reflective process from the perspective of rights and agency. This was key to understanding my positionality with respect to research in other countries and in other contexts (Monterroso et al., 2019; Gnych et al., 2020). The process was not easy. As a woman in a field where

men predominate and the challenges are diverse: not only to ensure that the value of the contributions and proposals are recognized but also to be able to carry out research in isolated places – where the condition of being a woman is a challenging one.

### **25.2.2 *Activist-Feminist Research on Climate Change: An Epistemological Revolution***

Being a woman, a mother, and a researcher in the areas of sciences in Spain is not an easy task. According to recent statistics,<sup>2</sup> only 40% of researchers from public universities are women (and this figure has been stagnant since 2009) and only 19% of women are accepted to study in the areas of science and technology. Several feminist authors have provided evidence of the underrepresentation of women, indigenous populations, and Afro-descendants, as well as their knowledge, in environmental studies on climate change, a dominant topic of environmental policies today. In fact, climate change is studied mainly as a biophysical problem, based on predominantly positivist and technocratic knowledge and does not include a socio-political dimension. This lacuna motivated me to open my research to the multifaceted, contested, and political topic of adaptation to climate change (Ravera et al., 2016).

During the time of my doctorate at the university in Barcelona, I began to wonder about what role science and scientific knowledge play in complex issues such as climate change. Various interests are at stake and the decisions to be made are urgent, and can have repercussions for some actors more than others, those who normally have no say in those same decisions. Thus, I began to reflect on epistemological issues, legitimacy, and power in the construction of knowledge in dynamic socio-ecological systems. Guided by Roger Strand and Giuseppe Munda, I began reading “post-normal science.” Since those early years, PAR allowed me to work on research processes based on an appreciation of transdisciplinary dialogue, creating bridges with other forms of knowledge and applying inclusive methods and tools. Various action–research processes in which I was involved in my PhD and postdoctoral years have also taught me a reciprocity in the relationship with the subjects who participate in the research, as a way to reverse the privileged position of science and scientists regarding local and indigenous communities and knowledge. Along the way, this aspect has been decisive in deepening my reflections on climate change knowledge construction from a feminist perspective.

In 2015, myself and a group of colleagues from Institute for Environmental Science and Technology (ICTA) and from the Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM) began to reflect on the discrimination and violence of the neoliberal academic system in our lives as women, researchers, and activists. We understood that

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.fundacionaquae.org/mujeres-ciencia-espana/>

we first need to recognize where we were discussing these issues, since we were used to working in the academic world. In 2017, we established the collective FRACTAL<sup>3</sup> as a feminist activist-research refugia, which implies, in the first place, appropriating an agency to build another way of doing research, through networks, and taking care of ourselves and the process itself. Moreover, the reading and reflection meetings that we held together allowed me to delve into feminist studies of science and decolonial theories, focusing on how women, indigenous populations, and local knowledge systems have historically been silenced and marginalized in the construction of narratives and representations of global environmental change (Schnabel, 2014). Thus, in recent years I have been collecting life stories of women in the pastoral sector facing global environmental changes, in order to listen to their invisible voices. On many occasions, together with shepherdesses and women live-stock managers, we have reflected on multiple individual categories that create multiple relationships of power and violence. Recently, I am also reflecting on how to decolonize our language and knowledge production as well as how to be sure to include silenced voices, such as migrants or laborer. Finally, in the last years, I have been working with various feminist methods of action–research processes, including situated ethnography and work with artists. This allows for the exploration of other forms of knowledge construction through the body and multiple disciplines, as well as to communicate with greater impact the messages about challenges and barriers and overcoming these in power relations at different scales: family, community, sectors, and society.

### 25.2.3 *Activist in Academia*

Ever since I can remember, social justice has been an important aspect for me, and many of the paths I have taken are linked to activism. Entering academic life and deciding to do a PhD in Ecological Economics at ICTA was part of this too. I finished the PhD during a period of great changes in my life, and my motivation then was to find a job, and one that would allow me to contribute to social change. I was connected to social movements associated with political agroecology and anti-transgender struggles, food sovereignty, and feminisms, among other issues, and I wanted to continue contributing to them. So, when I went to see Joan Martínez-Alier to ask about my doctorate, he asked me to work with him, and I accepted that right away. Choosing the topic for my doctorate was a collective process. In fact, with colleagues from various social movements involved in political agroecology, we discussed the relationship and have voice within the academic world (similarly to what Heller, 2002 suggests).

At that time, despite the great social controversy around the introduction of agricultural GMOs, the scientific studies that were being published on social, ethical,

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<sup>3</sup><https://fractalcollective.org>

and economic impacts were totally dominated by the analysis of economic implications and very often based solely on mathematical models (Catacora-Vargas et al., 2018). Thus, I decided to work on the ethical, legal, and socio-economic impacts of transgenics both from the perspectives of political ecology and environmental conflicts, as well as the role of uncertainty and complexity in governance and decision-making on GMOs from science and technology studies (Binimelis & Strand, 2009).

Once I had finished my doctorate, my options to continue working in academia in Catalonia were through precarious and short-term contracts, which coincided with the birth of my first daughter. After stringing together several projects, and just when I was thinking of abandoning research altogether, I won a contract scholarship to work in Norway, where I worked for 6 years under working conditions that I would never have had if I had stayed in Catalonia. Even so, after living in different countries for a while, and a second maternity leave, I decided to return to Catalonia where myself and colleagues, who were also doing activist-research, started academic projects with a view to social transformation. I have always tried to combine the more theoretical research with practical perspectives, delving into aspects that are vital but little valued in the academic world, such as the return of research results (almost always paid for with public money) to society that has paid for it. I thus began to work on how to communicate the research using other languages and formats beyond the classical academic ones (which are, on the other hand, the only ones that are valued in a competitive academic “career,” something far removed from my values and principles).

I am currently working on projects related to the promotion of fairer and more sustainable agri-food systems, linked to local and community economies. I research from practice, with one foot inside academia and the other with the people: from different spheres, creating networks with the idea of moving towards territorialized food systems.

#### ***25.2.4 Activist-Researcher from the Global North in the Global South***

I write these reflections from the perspective of my condition as a woman, an activist-researcher, born in the European Global North, specifically in a working-class neighborhood of the city of Madrid (Spain), a fellow during all my years of university education and now also a mother (on maternity leave and without a contract).

My first activist-research reflected on and denounced the logic of human dominance over nature in zoos. I was working as an environmental educator in a zoo and I was taking a course taught by members of the Laboratory on Socio-Ecosystems at UAM, where I heard about ecological economics for the first time.

Subsequently, I received a scholarship to carry out my end-of-degree project at the UAM, and I began my relationship with the university in Barcelona as I requested

scholarly advice from Dr. Laura Calvet (at the time a PhD student) and Dr. Victoria Reyes-García, both from ICTA-UAB, on local wisdom and its potential use in the management of natural spaces (Gómez-Baggethun et al., 2010).

It was Reyes-García who endorsed me to continue studying at the school in Barcelona through the Master's in Ecological Economics. The classes and the debates in the master's degree allowed me to theorize and further evaluate some of my own concerns and to have new arguments to question theories that had been given to me as "truths" during my degree. My views broadened after learning about the foundations of "post-normal science." Likewise, I had access to different techniques and research methodologies that I was able to apply during more than 7 years of activist-research, as part of my master's and doctoral thesis in the conflictive region of the Polochic Valley in Guatemala.

The Polochic is one of the regions of Guatemala with the greatest conflicts over land, where the State and oligarchic families use direct violence against indigenous communities to maintain their interests (Mingorría, 2018). Throughout this research, myself and other researchers, organizations, and communities reflected on the dynamics of these conflicts while also attempting to define and/or strengthen new mobilization strategies. I followed the PAR framework and carried out transdisciplinary and multiscale analyses adapting research questions to the changing context (Mingorría, 2016). This experience compelled me to learn to manage the intersections between experiences, activism, and the production of academic knowledge in contexts of direct and structural violence. In addition, I continue to grapple with and reflect on other issues not discussed at the Barcelona School such as the demands and conditions in European neoliberal academia; the changes in roles throughout research; ethics in research; the intersections between my condition of being a young, white, European woman with university degrees in the activist contexts of Latin America and academia of the Global South and Global North. I was also a co-funder of the FRACTAL collective, which was created to provide a safe space for such reflections.

At the end of the doctorate and during the post-doc, in addition to continuing to carrying out activist-research, especially in Indonesia, on environmental conflicts through the EnvJustice<sup>4</sup> project directed by Joan Martínez-Alier, I continue looking for tools to work in academia without neglecting my self-care or my activism. I continue to broaden my views and investigate new schools of thought and approaches such as feminist political ecology or research from the south, or how to create bridges between art, education, activism, and research (Mingorría & Heras, 2019), and I reflect on my own research processes with other academic colleagues, activists, and community members (such as writing in this book with co-authors)<sup>5</sup> (see, e.g., Johnson et al., 2020).

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<sup>4</sup><http://www.envjustice.org>

<sup>5</sup>These reflections are also the result of a series of discussions within the project entitled "Social sciences and organized political subjects. Methodological implications for collaborative work" in which Latin American academics and activists from different disciplines participate.



## 25.3 Ups and Downs in the PAR Processes

In this section, we reflect on the difficulties and challenges posed by conducting Participatory Action Research (PAR) and the importance of reflecting on the privileges and oppressions we face.

### 25.3.1 *The Demands of Neoliberal Positivist Research Versus Activist-Research*

When we refer to the impacts that neoliberal academia has on our lives, we refer to how it promotes a competitive *modus operandi*, which is based on an intense accounting of results (Mountz et al., 2015), with a focus not on content but on the count (Öhman, 2012). This promotes business management practices in universities, urging the mobility of researchers and that they endure highly precarious working conditions. Women in many cases have suffered impacts on our own bodies, evident in our health, with effects such as stress, shame, a sense of guilt, health problems and exhaustion, and a feeling of isolation and disconnection (Mountz et al., 2015). Many of us have experienced it. The impacts can vary depending on the context of each one, and are heightened in researchers with racialized conditions, are non-English speaking, and/or are socio-economically disadvantaged.

There are also many criticisms of and opposition to how neoliberal research excludes and makes it impossible to develop activist-research, within the academy. We will focus on discussing two elements that were key in our activist-research, and that collided with what was expected/established in the neoliberal academy: (a) the constant change of objectives, reflections, discussions, proposed results, and roles versus the fixed and linear research proposal necessary to maintain the role of a university researcher; and (b) decisions about publications.

PAR requires you to adapt to a constant swing and change of objectives, reflections, discussions, proposals, phases of fieldwork, and publications. In research, as in real life, events are uncertain and complex. In most cases, the research proposal is modified by the participation of other subjects in the research, by the uncertain context itself, by the lack or search for funding, or by the times set by political agendas and the movement to or from the university. These changes in roles that we experience, as well as all those shifts that we have often made in projects, were on many occasions judged negatively by university evaluators or in the request for funding.

Furthermore, one of the great dilemmas that anyone who works as a researcher in the framework of academia has to solve is what, how, and where to publish. In academia, publications are not only the only cover letter in your CV, they are also the main evaluation criterion in the PhD program, how your scientific quality is valued and, according to the research ethics protocols, one of the criteria to judge/evaluate your research ethics. According to the Ethical Commission on Animal and



Human Experimentation (CEEAH in its Spanish acronym), the code of good scientific practices of the Autonomous University of Barcelona,<sup>6</sup> one of the ethical rules is that the person carrying out the research has the obligation to publish all the results. This point is often critical; nevertheless, during an activist-research process it is not an arbitrary topic. Sometimes, much of the information collected cannot be published due to security issues, or a decision of the people involved in the investigation, or the lack of time and prioritization of other activities or forms of communication. Another issue is the format of the publication. Although formal academic centers prioritize indexed publications, these usually require waiting for an advanced process in the investigation with concrete results. However, in practice, social processes require information in the short term to make urgent decisions in highly dynamic contexts. There is nothing better than the example of the COVID-19 pandemic to illustrate this idea, where the need to discuss responses coincides with the urgency of having the necessary information to deal with its impacts, as well as to address the pandemic's deepening social differentiation (Gausman & Langer, 2020).

### 25.3.2 *Intersections as Activist-Researchers*

Haraway (1995) proposes specifying from which point of view someone starts the research process and why that and not another, thus making the political position explicit. Thus, by reflecting on our research process, we seek to raise awareness about the multiple intersections that condition privileges and oppressions that we live as activist-researchers as key elements of the research process. According to black feminist thoughts on intersectionality (Davis, 2004; Crenshaw, & Bonis 2005), these intersections have been influenced by multiple categories, such as gender, race, and social class age, and origins and cultural background. Most of us have lived through these intersections as researchers, beginning with the selection interviews to participate in research projects, especially when we were students, for being women and young as well as foreign origin. In these processes, intersections of class, ethnicity, and place of origin also intervene and question the spaces and places where each one decides to investigate.

In addition, our appearance as young women conditioned our research both in activist spaces and in academia itself. In both spaces, we are constantly evaluated and questioned, having to demonstrate the validity of our reflections and contributions. These conditions have prevented us from going into depth in some interviews with members (men) of social organizations and participating more actively in assemblies and meetings, although on other occasions they were useful when dealing with topics considered “adequate” to be discussed with us, such as those related to health. To avoid these biases, we have resorted to various strategies: in some cases, the interviews were repeated by men.

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<sup>6</sup>[www.recerca.uab.es/ceeah](http://www.recerca.uab.es/ceeah)

We are also aware of our privileges as academics, as well as those that come from our class and origin. What does it mean to do research as white, highly educated, middle-class women in countries of the Global South? What does it mean for a woman from countries of the Global South to do research in countries in the Global North? In some cases, these privileges may have made it easier for us to obtain information and interviews with institutional representatives with influence and power. However, on the other hand, this condition of privilege also keeps us from understanding and talking about the reality we wanted to approach. In feminism, the suggestion is that by breaking the dichotomies of reason/emotion and body/mind, we can find some window to collaborate in co-producing another type of knowledge. Thus, adding the language of emotions and the body to our research can allow a dialogue to continue doing research to denounce or transform social and environmental injustices.

## 25.4 Final Thoughts

Ecological economics and political ecology are spaces for reflection that connected us, as disciplinary references and as colleagues. In addition, they allowed us to problematize from the point of view of academic feminism, as other colleagues in different fields and geographies have done (Nightingale, 2011). However, the influence of feminist thought in ecological economics has been limited to a few authors (Mies & Shiva, 1997) and the discussion of gender, feminisms, and rights in ecological economics has also been limited, with the exception of some specific proposals coming from feminism (Hanaček et al., 2020). Additionally, our own experiences have shown that in order to be radically transformative in our research on strong sustainability and social justice, we must first challenge the ways of doing science, deviating from the rules of the neoliberal academy, as activist feminism teaches us. This invites us in the coming years to fill this void of reflections.

Also noteworthy is the final reflection on the research process itself (see, e.g., Johnson et al., 2020), in that it invites us to assess and co-construct initiatives that promote PAR from a feminist approach, in both academic and activist spaces. Some recent examples question the current model of neoliberal academia and also suggest ways in which PAR and feminisms have a place, for example, feminist laboratories, Great Lakes Feminist Geography Collective (Mountz et al., 2015), and a feminist collective FRACTAL. We also propose the facilitation approach (Mindell, 2004) to work on conflicts that are generated at multiple levels during the PAR process and create spaces where we collectively and consciously share remedies, emotions, results, and proposals among those who participate in the process of investigation.

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