Feminist Internet Research Network

Meta-research project report

Feminist Internet Research Network: Meta-research project report

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Table of contents

Foreword

As a peer advisor to two Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN) projects, the past three years or so have given me the great pleasure to experience first-hand a feminist network in the making. From reviewing proposals in order to select the participating research projects, to seeing the network truly come to life at the inception meeting at a beautiful Malaysian retreat, to reading and providing feedback on milestone deliverables, and seeing everyone again at the second convening, this time online due to the first wave of COVID-19, FIRN has become a pleasant constant in my work/life.

The meta-research dives into what it means to do feminist internet research by taking a bird's-eye view on the collective feminist methodological and ethical toolkit developed and put into practice across all eight research projects implemented under FIRN. It offers a critical insider lens on the research process and the challenges that feminist internet researchers face when designing a feminist methodology and putting a feminist ethics (of care) into practice across geographies and across research topics. Meta-research at large is a relatively young field of study. And to date, a search for explicitly "feminist meta-research" does not yield pertinent results to speak of. This project takes place at the cutting edge of its field, and perhaps it's no coincidence that its final report will form part of the so-called "grey literature" produced by research organisations other than formal academic institutions. And arguably, that's precisely where this project's greatest strength and potential lies.

The FIRN meta-research aggregates and examines feminist research from the global South focused on questions around unequal access to online participation, the implications and impact of datafication, online gender-based violence, and gendered digital economies in the global South. In doing so, it not only heightens the visibility and amplifies the reach of feminist internet researchers, but it also has the potential to productively challenge the hegemony of knowledge production from North America and Europe. And while the dominance of research outputs from the global North is certainly a point of critique across many (if not all) disciplines, it's particularly pertinent in the interdisciplinary field of internet research. After all, not only do disproportionately privileged geographies dominate internet research, but also, primarily US-based behemoths like Google, Microsoft, Amazon and Facebook exert ever-growing control over the infrastructures of access to and participation in the internet as such.

And just as feminist approaches are imperative to continuously expose and address the gendered imbalances in the digital access, participation, violence and economies that the FIRN partner projects examine, at the same time, exposing and addressing the dominance of the global North, both in terms of inquiry and in terms of infrastructure, requires increased attention to contributions from the global South to widen and decolonise our knowledge base. From that perspective, both this meta-research project and all the individual FIRN projects it analyses offer a rich contribution to what must urgently become a truly global conversation.

This meta-research engaged with the FIRN partner projects by the means of a series of in-depth interviews with researchers and document analysis. The subsequent thematic analysis explores how feminist internet researchers

across projects and geographies encountered and contended with feminist staples like researcher reflexivity, a politics of location, intersectional theory, or a feminist ethics of care. Rather than provide a play by play of the contents you will undoubtedly read for yourself in a moment, I will briefly turn to two facets of the report that I found myself particularly excited about: the messiness of feminist research and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the feminist research process.

Feminist research is always contextual, situational, transformative and compassionate. And the old feminist adage that "the personal is political" holds as true as ever. Practising feminist research therefore asks a great deal of its protagonists. It requires researchers to question the impact of their own backgrounds and identities as researchers, as well as to interrogate their research questions, methodologies and ethics at every step of the way. It asks us to grapple with difficult questions around power relations, research privilege, normativities and inclusivity – in ourselves, in our institutions, in our projects and in the field, be that online or on-ground.

And alas, there is no simple "feminist research formula" to learn and apply to navigate this apparent obstacle course. Embracing vulnerability and humility are key ingredients to a feminist approach that does justice to/for/with its subject(s). Does that feel a little… chaotic? It is. And this chaos in all its beauty is strikingly captured in one of the main findings of this report: just how messy doing feminist research can be in theory as well as in practice.

When working with research data, but also when concluding a project and preparing to report on significant findings, the common impulse is to go through rounds of "cleaning" to disentangle any cluttered aspects of our work, to make our data easier to process, to make our findings and analysis more palatable to a real or imagined audience. Spending time with seven feminist research projects while their research was still ongoing (or just concluded) provided a timely opportunity to revisit the challenges faced in the field and in the research process, and to reflect with the researchers on what we might learn from "sitting with the messiness of research" instead.

It explores how the complications and uncertainties we encounter when doing research, whether in ourselves, in the field, or as a result of imposed constraints, are an integral part of our work and output (rather than something to be tidied away). They may require us to reconsider, detour, improvise and ultimately compromise. But our feminist approach as well as our findings grow more robust by embracing and learning from those troubling moments. The recommendations on handling messiness in feminist internet research go to the core of feminist modes of knowledge production and add an additional layer to a feminist critique of objectivity in research.

Working through/with the discomfort we experience when confronted with the messier aspects of doing feminist research, for instance, feeds back into our reflexive practice. Reaching out to others to cope with challenging moments and questions together echoes feminist values like collaboration, solidarity and collective action with deep implications for feminist research, meta-research, and the growing of a feminist research network. And to reframe embracing messy research as a form of feminist care (for research participants, for the research community, for ourselves) while prioritising care over expected outcomes is a bold and transformative move that allows for new ways of contributing findings, different kinds of meaningful

knowledge, and different ways of organising research at an institutional level as well as in the field.

Potentially contributing to our collective experience of messiness at this particular moment in time, the second facet of this report I want to highlight is the global COVID-19 pandemic. It has forced us to change pace, and to prioritise the health and safety of research participants as well as researchers and their loved ones, and has presented different kinds of challenges for different research projects.

As more time passes since this pandemic became part of our lives and work, it's becoming more commonplace in many disciplines for research papers to include a section to address the impact of COVID-19 on the data and/or findings. This meta-research stands out in two ways. First, it's meta-research, i.e. an opportunity to compare and analyse the experiences of eight individual (and very diverse) feminist research endeavours, the majority of which were still in full swing when the pandemic began to affect our ways of working and interacting. And second, it emphasises the lived experience of researchers and thus teases out the "little things", the day-to-day qualitative shifts that the pandemic has brought in addition to larger (and perhaps anticipated) themes like grief, overwhelm, exhaustion or uncertainty.

For some researchers, the pandemic deeply affected research progress because travel to field sites became near impossible – be that due to travel restrictions or concern about the safety of research participants in remote areas. Others were able to continue their work while struggling with the spatial and temporal politics of working from home and maintaining work-life balance.

Feminist research can be anxiety-inducing at the best of times due to the deeply personal/political engagement with the research subject it requires. Enacting a feminist ethics of care while conducting research during a global public health crisis further exacerbates the balancing act between self-care, caring for others, and working to deadlines. For some researchers, this heightened anxiety and vulnerability was paired with concern about the regionally divergent (and sometimes inadequate) political response to the pandemic.

The two facets I drew attention to here, along with other findings presented in this report, taken together, demonstrate how multifaceted doing feminist internet research is. While the report shows how feminist theory and methodologies circulate differently in different parts of the world and communities of practice, it's also testament to a shared political conviction to challenge the status quo and work towards a more feminist internet. To that end, this report contributes to a growing body of literature that examines the internet from the perspective of communities and/or identities that are often excluded – based, for instance, on their geography, gender, race, sexuality, class or caste – from both tech discourse and dominant research paradigms.

On that note, I hope you find as much inspiration in engaging with and learning from the following findings and reflections as I did.

Nicole Shephard

Introduction

The Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN) and the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) Women's Rights Programme's knowledge building strategic team conducted a meta-research project that focused on the methodological processes and ethical practices of the eight research projects implemented as part of FIRN. Meta-research is the study of research, including its methods and how research is reported and evaluated, in order to understand and improve upon research and research processes.[1]

FIRN is a three-and-a-half-year collaborative and multidisciplinary research project led by APC and funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The project draws on the study *Mapping research in gender and digital technology*[2] carried out by APC and commissioned by IDRC, and the Feminist Principles of the Internet (FPIs)[3] collectively crafted by feminists and activists, primarily located in the global South. FIRN aims to build an emerging field of internet research with a feminist approach to inform and influence activism and policy making.

The focus of FIRN has been on the making of a feminist internet as critical to bringing about transformation of gendered structures of power that exist online and on-ground. Projects within FIRN strive to bring about change in policy, law, and internet rights discourse through data-driven and evidence-based feminist research, with a core focus being to ensure that women and gender-diverse and queer people and their needs are included in internet policy discussions and decision making. Key areas of research of the FIRN projects are access (usage and infrastructure); datafication (artificial intelligence); online gender-based violence; and gendered labour in the digital economy.

The meta-research project formed part of the broader FIRN project and created a feminist space for dialogue to explore the complexities of doing internet research. This was done through the critical exploration of the research methodological processes and ethical practices of the eight FIRN research projects. The aim of the meta-research project was to bring FIRN project partners[4] into conversation with each other through this report.

From the very beginning, the meta-research project understood that research on the internet is complex and that current methodological approaches and research tools are not sufficiently reflexive to account for "feminist thinking around dynamics of power, politics of location, relationship with participants, access to digital data and so on."[5]

As a result, the process of doing meta-research on feminist internet research is particularly complex and layered. The lines blur between literature, theories and methodologies when doing research on research. In the case of feminist internet research, sometimes the theoretical or conceptual frameworks are pieced together from different fields – much of

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[1] Ioannidis, J. P. A. (2018). Meta-research: Why research on research matters. *PLOS Biology, 16*(https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.2005468

[2] van der Spuy, A., & Aavriti, N. (2018). *Mapping research in gender and digital technology.* https://www.apc.org/en/node/34498

[3] https://feministinternet.net

[4] It is necessary to note that throughout this report we refer to the FIRN project researchers interviewed as "research partners" or "partners". At times we may refer to those they conducted research with as "participants" or in the case of some, "community partners".

[5] https://www.apc.org/en/project/firn-feminist-internet-research-network

internet research is transdisciplinary, as is feminist research and theory. As one of our partners reflected, if there is a feminist internet research methodology, "it would be in the framing of the research." (P5.1)[6]

Feminist internet research is about the framing and the processes, but what emerged in looking at the theoretical frameworks, methodologies, research designs, research principles and ethical practices was that the researchers – and their values, principles, and contexts – were central to what made internet research feminist.

The FIRN project team members along with their partners collaboratively designed the *Feminist Internet Ethical Research Practices* document,[7] which informed the research practices of the projects. Key to the development of this document was the need for a specific ethical framework that relates to feminist internet research. The document drew on "decades of feminist work in relation to ethics, care, intersectionality, positionality and standpoint, and also more recently on work in relation to internet-related and data-driven research."[8]

This document provided FIRN partners with support during their research journeys and served to ensure that ethical reflexivity would be continuous and embedded in the process of doing feminist internet research, and not only serve as something to be considered at the start of the project.

The FIRN projects were informed by concepts that emerged from the collective engagement of partners and are indicative of their shared values. The concepts that resonated with partners were situatedness, positionality, standpoint, intersectionality, feminist, consent, accountability, reciprocity, care, vulnerability, safety, connections and networks. These are grouped into the following pillars: standpoint theory (and situated knowledge), intersectionality, reflexivity, and a feminist ethics of care.[9]

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[6] The partner interview codes used for the attribution of quotes are explained below.

[7] Association for Progressive Communications. (2019). *Feminist Internet Ethical Research Practices.* https://genderit.org/resources/feminist-internet-ethical-research-practices

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

The FIRN projects

The meta-research project analysed eight FIRN projects. They are coded here below: [10]

Project A
Themes: Online gender-based violence, datafication
Region: Latin America

Theoretical framework: Feminist intersectional theory
Methodology: Ethnographically informed approach
Project design: Qualitative
Partner interview codes: P1.1, P1.2, P5.1, P5.2

Project B
Theme: Online gender-based violence
Region: Africa

Theoretical framework: African feminist thinking
Methodology: Case study, policy analysis
Project design: Mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative)
Partner interview codes: P2.1, P2.2

Project C
Theme: Economy and labour
Region: Asia

Theoretical framework: Diverse feminist theoretical frameworks (including intersectionality, standpoint theory, queer theory, Dalit women feminist theorising, African feminist thinking)
Methodology: Feminist approach, participatory approach
Project design: Qualitative
Partner interview codes: P3.1, P3.2

Project D
Theme: Online gender-based violence
Region: Eastern Europe

Theoretical framework: Standpoint theory
Methodology: Feminist ethnography
Project design: Qualitative
Partner interview codes: P4.1, P4.2

Project E
Theme: Online gender-based violence
Region: Asia

Theoretical framework: Feminist standpoint theories, feminist intersectional theory, feminist legal theory
Methodology: Feminist ethnography
Project design: Qualitative
Partner interview codes: P6.1, P6.2

Project F
Themes: Access, online gender-based violence, economy and labour
Region: Latin America

Theoretical framework: Feminist techno-science studies, intersectional feminism, feminist standpoint theories
Methodology: Action research
Project design: Qualitative
Partner interview codes: P7.1, P7.2

Project G
Themes: Datafication, economy and labour
Region: Latin America

Theoretical framework: Feminist theoretical frameworks
Methodology: Feminist action research
Project design: Qualitative
Partner interview codes: None as yet

Project H
Theme: Access
Region: Africa

Theoretical framework: Intersectionality
Methodology: Mixed methods underpinned by feminist values
Project design: Mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative)
Partner interview codes: None as yet

This information is primarily from the FIRN project proposals, but where relevant, contextual data was extracted from the interview data and included here.

Theoretical framework

The project set out to do research that placed the lived experiences of our research partners at the heart of it while being critical, intersectional and feminist. To do so, the conceptual map for the meta-research project was grounded in standpoint theory and critical intersectional feminism. The study started off from the understanding that there is no single understanding of doing feminist internet research, and so we sought out the voices of our research partners and their experiences. In conversation with our partners we also needed to be reflexive of how we may interact with partners along multiple axes of power, and how the research process would affect them.

Global South feminist researchers call for the right to tell "their own stories"[11] of their diverse and complex realities, as a means of countering the way in which some narratives come to dominate knowledge production, in particular those from the global North. Recognising concerns around how global South stories are either left out, co-opted or distorted, FIRN sought to do this work of the global South speaking for the global South. Standpoint theory provided this project with the theoretical scaffolding to navigate this process.

Standpoint theory places emphasis on the lived experiences of those who are marginalised and holds that "knowledge is always socially situated."[12] It argues, for instance, that those on the margins have a particular and rich knowledge and awareness of systemic oppression and structures of oppression.[13] Standpoint theory "enables us to understand how each oppressed group will have its own critical insights" and that each oppressed group has the potential to generate "distinctive insights about systems of social relations in general in which their oppression is a feature."[14] Feminist standpoint researchers reject the idea of neutral research, and argue that objective research tends to favour the powerful, and comes to exclude and render invisible the voices and experiences of women and marginalised identities.[15]

In starting from the lives of the marginalised, and in rejecting "neutral" research, standpoint theory is "an explicitly political"[16] theory. Wylie explains that central to standpoint is that:

> [T]hose who are subject to structures of domination that systematically marginalize and oppress them may, in fact, be epistemically privileged in some crucial respects. They may know

11 El Khoury, C., & Diga, K. (2019, 12 November). Women-circles that hold and ground community networks. *GenderIT.org.* https://www.genderit.org/editorial/women-circles-hold-and-ground-community-networks

12 Harding, S. (2004a). Introduction: Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophical, and Scientific Debate. In S. Harding (Ed.), *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies.* Routledge.

13 Collins, P. H. (1993). Toward a New Vision: Race, Class and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection. *Race, Sex & Class, 1*(1), 25-45; Wigginton, B., & Lafrance, M. N. (2019). Learning critical feminist research: A brief introduction to feminist epistemologies and methodologies. *Feminism & Psychology, 0*(0), 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353519866058; Tandon, A., & Aayush. (2019, 1 September). Doing Standpoint Theory. *GenderIT.org.* https://www.genderit.org/articles/doing-standpoint-theory

14 Harding, S. (2004a). Op. cit.

15 Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2012). Feminist research: Exploring, interrogating, and transforming the interconnections of epistemology, methodology, and method. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, Second Edition. SAGE Publications; Wigginton, B., & Lafrance, M. N. (2019). Op. cit.

16 Wylie, A. (2004). Why Standpoint Matters. In S. Harding (Ed.), *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*. Routledge.

different things or know some things better than those who are comparatively privileged (socially, politically), by virtue of what they typically experience and how they understand their experience.[17]

Knowledge produced by the marginalised will be very different to the knowledge produced by dominant groups, and it is this position in relation to the dominant group that "enables the production of distinctive kinds of knowledge."[18] But what is important to note here is that standpoint is not a position that one occupies, and "it is no longer simply another word for viewpoint or perspective."[19] Instead, standpoint must be understood as "an achievement, something for which oppressed groups must struggle."[20]

Standpoint theory is not only concerned with knowing or understanding the effect of being an oppressed group, but is also concerned with the knowledge produced from the awareness of this position, as well as "the emancipatory potential of standpoints that are struggled for and achieved, by epistemic agents who are critically aware of the conditions under which knowledge is produced and authorized."[21]

Standpoint is thus not only about knowing the conditions of oppressed groups, but about critically engaging with these positions, eliciting key insights, and using this knowledge and understanding for the purposes of emancipation and knowledge building.

While there is value in standpoint, there is the risk of "romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions."[22] Haraway cautions that "seeing" from the position of the marginalised is not "unproblematic" and that, in fact, "The positionings of the subjugated are not exempt from critical re-examination, decoding, deconstruction, and interpretation."[23] Haraway goes on to argue that these are favoured positions of knowledge "because in principle they are least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretative core of all knowledge."[24]

Another concern is that standpoint theory risks "plac[ing] the burden on the marginalised to speak about their own experiences,"[25] as well as essentialising the identities that are centred as standpoints. This could be mitigated against by researchers considering their positionality, through acknowledging the power and privilege they have in their roles as researchers, and to trouble how they interact with or perceive their research participants' and their own contexts. In addition to this, adding an intersectional lens would assist with considering various intersecting power axes.

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Harding, S. (2004a). Op. cit.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Wylie, A. (2004). Op. cit.
[22] Haraway, D. (2004). Situated Knowledges: The Scientific Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. In S. Harding (Ed.), *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*. Routledge.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Tandon, A., & Aayush. (2019, 1 September). Op. cit.

Intersectionality shows how discrimination based on gender and race exacerbate each other,[26] and that they cannot be separated out. This important understanding of discrimination made it possible to investigate how multiple oppressions such as racism, sexism and homophobia work together to co-constitute social relations.[27] Intersectionality is not without its own challenges; one key critique is that it risks treating women and marginalised people (such as the LGBTIAQ+ community) as uniform identities or groups with a single and shared experience. To counter this, it is important to not essentialise experiences and identities but rather acknowledge "the complexities of multiple, competing, fluid, and intersecting identities."[28]

Lastly, we drew on reflexivity because it allows for researchers to reflect on their positionality, power and privilege, and to counter the essentialising risks of standpoint and intersectionality. Through reflexivity, researchers critically reflect on the research process, and interrogate their role as researcher, as well as the ways in which power is distributed and plays out during the research process.[29]

Reflexivity acknowledges that researchers are not removed from the research process and that their values, politics, personal identities and assumptions about the world come to influence and underpin the research process. Reflexivity, for this reason, "is central to enacting and enhancing feminist ethics,"[30] which we discuss in the next section on methodology and research design.

Reflexivity seeks to understand the researcher's position in relation to the research participants and research community, and to make visible issues around social location, privilege, and power dynamics.[31] It is this that we refer to as positionality. Positionality gives us the tools as researchers to understand "how and why we see things as we do" and this enables us "to understand more about the meanings others make of their (and our) lives, and to locate ourselves (and others) in more complex and meaningful ways."[32] Considerations of positionality may "include a critical examination of how power dynamics shape the research context and knowledge production."[33]

An example of this may be when a cisgender and heterosexual woman is researching transgender people and her lived experience does not enable her to understand their lived experiences. This may result in her making

[26] Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989*(1), 139-167. https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8

[27] Quraishi, M., & Philburn, R. (2015). *Researching Racism: A Guidebook for Academics and Professional Investigators*. SAGE Publications.

[28] Gringeri, C. E., Wahab, S., & Anderson-Nathe, E. (2010). What Makes it Feminist?: Mapping the Landscape of Feminist Social Work Research. *Affilia, 25*(4), 390-405. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109910384072

[29] Cooky, C., Linabary, J. R., & Corple, D. J. (2018). Navigating Big Data dilemmas: Feminist holistic reflexivity in social media research. *Big Data & Society.* https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951718807731

[30] Ibid.

[31] Hundle, A. K., Szeman, I., & Hoare, J. P. (2019). What is the Transnational in Transnational Feminist Research? *Feminist Review, 121(1*), 3-8. https://doi.org/10.1177/0141778918817525

[32] Blakely, K. (2007). Reflections on the Role of Emotion in Feminist Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 6*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690700600206

assumptions about their gender journeys, or dismissing the importance of using the correct pronouns for them, which will impact on the research participants and ultimately the knowledge produced from this process. Introducing critical reflexivity and exploring her positionality may enable her to make more careful decisions about the research process such as including transgender people in a more participatory way so that they feel they have some ownership over how they are portrayed and the way the knowledge is produced and shared.

Reflexivity and positionality allow feminist researchers to understand the meaning they ascribe to the world and to others, and to locate[34] themselves in ways which are far more meaningful, complex, and potentially messy. A research paradigm, methodology, and research design were needed to account for this.

[33] Cooky, C., Linabary, J. R., & Corple, D. J. (2018). Op. cit.
[34] Lafrance, M. N., & Wigginton, B. (2019). Doing critical feminist research: A Feminism & Psychology reader. *Feminism & Psychology, 29*(4), 534-552. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353519863075; Gringeri, C. E., Wahab, S., & Anderson-Nathe, E. (2010). Op. cit.; Blakely, K. (2007). Op. cit.

Methodology and research design

The meta-research project is a feminist research project and positioned within an interpretivist paradigm in order to explore and understand how feminist internet research make sense of doing feminist internet research. Interpretivism places emphasis on exploring research participants' meaning-making and perceptions.[35] This creates the space for acknowledging and recognising power, politics of location, and the researchers' relationships with participants. Data was collected through document analysis and interviews, and then analysed using thematic analysis.

Methodology: Feminist research

The methodology that the meta-research project drew on was feminist research, as it has as its core goal the production of knowledge that can support activism and advocacy work, or document activism to produce knowledge on social justice and/or social movements.[36] This is because feminism works "to end sexism, sexual exploitation, and sexual oppression,"[37] to unsettle, disturb, disrupt and destabilise power – especially hegemonic power positions.[38] There is no singular feminist position,[39] and while there are varying definitions and forms of feminism, at the heart of it is the dismantling of systemic oppression[40] in order to create a more equal, inclusive and socially just world. Thus, feminist research does not bother to attempt to produce objective or neutral knowledge, because it recognises that what is neutral often lies in favour of those who are privileged.[41] It does, however, take into consideration power and hierarchies that exist in research, including power dynamics between the researcher and research participants. It is critical that feminist researchers pay attention to power and hierarchies that may either exist going into the research process, or may come about during or as a result of the research process, because this will impact on the overall knowledge production of the project.[42]

At the outset of the meta-research project we wanted the process to be participatory, to include the research partners in the process. This is because participatory research recognises that everyone is in possession of a wealth of information and knowledge, and is able to use their lived experiences and situated knowledge to advocate for social change.[43] A participatory approach would allow us to challenge research hegemonies

35 Nieuwenhuis, J. (2019). Qualitative research designs and data-gathering techniques. In K. Maree (Ed.), *First Steps in Research.* Van Schaik Publishers; McKenna, S. (2004). *A critical investigation into discourses that construct academic literacy at the Durban Institute of Technology.* Doctoral thesis, Rhodes University.

36 Cooky, C., Linabary, J. R., & Corple, D. J. (2018). Op. cit.; Tandon, A., & Aayush. (2019, 1 September). Op. cit.

37 hooks, b. (2000). *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics.* Pluto Press.

38 Cooky, C., Linabary, J. R., & Corple, D. J. (2018). Op. cit.; Tandon, A., & Aayush. (2019, 1 September). Op. cit.

39 Millen, D. (1997). Some Methodological and Epistemological Issues Raised by Doing Feminist Research on Non-Feminist Women. *Sociological Research Online, 2*(3). https://www.socresonline.org.uk/2/3/3.html

40 Lafrance, M. N., & Wigginton, B. (2019). Op. cit.

41 Haraway, D. (2004). Op. cit.; Harding, S. (2004b). Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is "Strong Objectivity"? In S. Harding (Ed.), *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies.* Routledge.

42 Gringeri, C. E., Wahab, S., & Anderson-Nathe, E. (2010). Op. cit.; Hesse-Biber, S. N. (Ed.) (2007). *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis.* SAGE Publications.

43 Bonney, R., Cooper, C., & Ballard, H. (2016). The Theory and Practice of Citizen Science: Launching a New Journal. *Citizen Science: Theory and Practice, 1*(1). http://doi.org/10.5334/cstp.65 ; Harding, S. (2004a). Op. cit.

and to "work 'with'"[44] partners.[45] To a significant degree the meta-research project was participatory in that it actively involved FIRN in the process, and presented findings to research partners for comment and transparency, but the research partners were not actively involved in the design of the meta-research project, data collection (beyond being interviewed), and data analysis as would be expected of a participatory approach. This would be something to consider for future feminist internet research projects.

Lastly, a critical aspect to feminist research is that of reflexive practice,[46] which includes critical engagement with how the researchers and research partners experience the process.[47] It is through reflexivity that insight may be provided as to the workings of power in the research journey, the communities being researched, and the overall findings of the study.[48] This was something the meta-research project was deliberate about by its very design.

Research design

There is no specific method that is by definition a feminist research method, but rather a wide range of methods which may be informed by a feminist lens.[49] Data collection consisted of analysing the initial research proposals of the FIRN projects to understand the proposed methodologies, research designs, and ethical principles. Notes were kept throughout the research process as a reflective tool and for reflexive practice.[50] Interviews were then conducted with the research partners online through video calling, and later during the second FIRN convening we presented the emerging themes to research partners for their feedback and reflection. We then did a second round of interviews with research partners.

Interviews allow for a rich data set to work from, one that situates the research partners' experiences within their historical, social and political contexts.[51] Seven partners participated in the interviews. Interview questions were informed by the meta-research project's aims, as well as the initial data that emerged from analysing the research proposals of the projects.

The interviews were transcribed and then read for themes and patterns which emerged from the data across all partners' interviews. A thematic analysis approach was the most useful method for identifying patterns and themes in the research data.[52] The key themes that emerged from the thematic analysis were then used to generate knowledge on the methodological processes and ethical practices of the FIRN projects.

44 Reid, C. (2004). Advancing Women's Social Justice Agendas: A Feminist Action Research Framework. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 3*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690400300301

45 We referred to the research partners as "partners" and not participants throughout the process as a way of levelling the hierarchy but also acknowledging the relationship within the network.

46 Reflexivity has already been discussed in the theoretical framework discussion of this meta-research project.

47 Reid, C., Tom, A., & Frisby, W. (2006). Finding the 'Action' in Feminist Participatory Action Research. *Action Research, 4*(3), 315-332. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750306066804

48 Blakely, K. (2007). Op. cit.

49 Wigginton, B., & Lafrance, M. N. (2019). Op. cit.; Guimaraes, E. (2007). Feminist Research Practice: Using Conversation Analysis to Explore the Researcher's Interaction with Participants. *Feminism & Psychology, 17*(2), 149-161. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353507076547

50 Kozinets, R. V. (2010). *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online.* SAGE Publications.

51 Jayaratne, T. E., & Stewart, A. J. (1991). Quantitative and Qualitative Methods in the Social Sciences: Current Feminist Issues and Practical Strategies. In M. M. Fonow & J. A. Cook (Eds.), *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research.* Indiana University Press.

52 Guest, G., MacQueen, K. M., & Namey, E.E. (2012). *Applied Thematic Analysis.* SAGE Publications.

Ethics guiding the research

Ethical considerations were guided by the *Feminist Internet Ethical Research Practices* document,[53] in particular, feminist ethics of care. Feminist research ethics emerged as counter to traditional research ethics, which do not account for the experiences of women and marginalised identities while presenting this research as neutral or objective.[54] Feminist ethics of care still account for the same principles as traditional ethics, which include respect for persons, beneficence and justice.

Means of adhering to these principles include obtaining informed consent; minimising the risk of harm; protecting anonymity and confidentiality; avoiding deceptive practices; and giving the right to withdraw. While these principles do intend to minimise the harm a participant may face as a result of participating in research, they are treated as a checklist before the research process begins, and are rarely returned to during the research process. In contrast, feminist research ethics are informed by feminist values and emphasise "care and responsibility rather than outcomes."[55]

A feminist ethic of care is centred on concern for the research community and participants, and, as Blakely states, "this ethic of care must also, however, be extended to us as researchers."[56] A feminist ethic of care also asks that the researcher lean into the difficult questions,[57] such as whether the research is benefiting the research community or being extractive, or whether the researcher is perpetuating harms against a vulnerable community by making assumptions about the community that are informed by the power and privilege of the researcher's lived experience. A feminist ethic of care, in contrast to traditional research ethics, sees ethics as continuous practice. This can look like regularly checking power relations and dynamics; checking in with research partners and participants about research decisions; and debriefing with research partners after collecting data and/or during data analysis. A feminist approach to ethics employs continuous reflection as an instrument to assist researchers in understanding the ethics in their research work and research encounters with participants, peers and the community being researched.

The *Feminist Internet Ethical Research Practices* document,[58] in identifying care and safety as critical to doing feminist internet research, also presents key questions for feminist internet researchers to consider:

- Does our research process show enough care for the person/information/data/collective?
- Do we look after those who are vulnerable?

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[53] Association for Progressive Communications. (2019). Op. cit.

[54] Preissle, J. (2007). Feminist research ethics. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*. SAGE Publications; Gringeri, C. E., Wahab, S., & Anderson-Nathe, E. (2010). Op. cit.

[55] Edwards, R., & Mauthner, M. (2012). Ethics and feminist research: Theory and practice. In T. Miller, M. Birch, M. Mauthner, & J. Jessop (Eds.), *Ethics in Qualitative Research,* Second Edition. SAGE Publications.

[56] Blakely, K. (2007). Op. cit.

[57] Preissle, J. (2007). Op. cit.; Blakely, K. (2007). Op. cit.

[58] Association for Progressive Communications. (2019). Op. cit.

- Do we ensure not to put anyone at risk, to not (re)produce harm?
- Do we follow rituals and practices of self-care and collective care?
- Do we as individuals and as a team, in relation to various other networks and relations, establish boundaries?
- Care is feminised labour historically expected of women in particular, or specific groups based on caste, class, race, ethnicity, etc. Are we aware that care too can be exploitative and do we work against that?
- Do we have a mechanism for ensuring safety of the person/information/data/collective?

These questions call for reflexivity from researchers, to critically engage with their position in relation to the research community and participants, as well as the way that power plays out; they ensure that the researcher is considering and accounting for the possible impact they may have on their participants. This is critical to a feminist ethic of care, but reflexivity must be continuous to ensure that ethical research practices are central to the research process.

Discussion of findings

A number of themes emerged from interviews with FIRN partners, and while what was shared was all significant to the process of doing feminist internet research, we focused on four key areas that are fundamental to understand what feminist internet research is, what it looks like, and how it works in practice. The key areas are standpoint theory, intersectionality, reflexivity, and feminist ethics of care.

It is important to, once again, note the following distinction: throughout the discussion of findings we refer to partners and participants. As previously mentioned, the research participants in this research are FIRN project partners, and are referred to as "research partners" in this discussion.

Standpoint theory

For some partners, the FIRN project was their first feminist project, while others such as Partners 1, 5 and 7 had previous exposure to feminist research due to their work being rooted in gender, sexuality and rights; feminist studies; or being involved in feminist infrastructures and community networks. Some partners identified themselves as feminist but had, with regards to research, "never approached it from this feminist standpoint" (P2.1).

Standpoint theory, as already discussed under the theoretical framework, places emphasis on the lived experiences of oppressed groups and subsequently their situated knowledge,[59] with the intention of generating critical insights from the standpoint of oppressed groups. In doing so, standpoint also brings to the fore the voices of women and marginalised identities who are usually left out of conversations.[60] This discussion of standpoint theory primarily emphasises the standpoint of the research partners and their projects, and how they gave consideration to the standpoints of their research participants. It does bear noting that there lies a complexity here with the research partners, in that, on the one hand, the research partners are highly educated researchers with institutional affiliations and conduct research projects funded by an international organisation. But, on the other hand, there exists the dominance of research and knowledge building from the global North, which further marginalises feminist and other critical voices in research. It is here in this complexity that the FIRN research partners occupy that we are reminded that power and marginalisation are not to be read in binary terms, but rather to be understood as fluid and shifting dependent on the contexts they play out in.

Research partners spoke about how the FIRN project created the space for their personal interests and politics to be included, which was an aspect of the project that Partner 1 said they were the most enthusiastic about. For

59 Collins, P. H. (1993). Op. cit.
60 Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2012). Op. cit.; Wigginton, B., & Lafrance, M. N. (2019). Op. cit.

them, the primary driver for this was the nature of the project as "very directly and principally defined as feminist in its self-presentation" (P1.1).

Partner three shared this sentiment, saying that it was "very exciting to see a network that was trying to do research that was not only looking at gender but was trying to centre questions of feminism even within its methodology" (P3.1).

Feminist internet research makes this possible, for one's lived experiences, politics and values to take up space in the research process. For some partners already identifying as feminists or feminist researchers, their politics shaped their research.

Research partners: Feminist politics as a starting point

Feminist research and the associated politics and values create the space for research that is intent on "centring political action or political goals" (P3.1). One key aspect of feminist research is the presence of and emphasis on the political. The research partners engaged with the question of the political in their research projects, the implications of centring the political for feminist internet research, as well as the effect the political may have on their participants and/or their involvement in their participants' communities.

When asked about centring the political in their research, Partner 1 responded that "the feminist is political. […] The political is at the centre of our research question. Our question is political" (P1.2).

Similarly, Partner 7 spoke of how their team "from the start […] assumed that we would never be neutral and think like that. I know this seems obvious from a feminist perspective" (P7.2). But from a traditional research perspective, this is not obvious, because of the emphasis that is placed on the "neutral" and the "objective" in research, whereas standpoint theorists argue that the "neutral" and "objective" benefit dominant groups[61] and exclude the voices and experiences of marginalised groups.[62] Adopting a feminist stance toward research means that the political is present, in a way that seeks to address the exclusion of marginalised voices in traditional research.

Partner 2 shared that a core reason that they make intentional political choices is because "I want to reimagine a different future. And that's my politics" (P2.2).

For instance, Partner 2 shared that for them, their values always had an influence on their research. One way that this could be seen in their research was through the decision that "everyone who has ever touched this project has been a woman" (P2.1). They said that this was not something they were willing to compromise on, and that for them it meant that they were "openly biased [but] I'm not going to hide that. I know that I am looking for something specific, I enjoy working with women, and I prefer their energy in general" (P2.1).

61 Harding, S. (2004b). Op. cit.
62 Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2012). Op. cit; Wigginton, B., & Lafrance, M. N. (2019). Op. cit.

Partner 2's position of only hiring women may be deemed to be biased but it can also be seen to be intentional. This is because this partner had experienced in a previous research project the implications of having men facilitate a focus group and the harm this caused to participants, as well as the shaping of their responses. An awareness of the impact that people of different genders will have on the research and the research participants is rooted in an understanding of the gendered nature of social relationships.

Intention or deliberate political choice, rather than bias, is better suited in the naming of this approach, in that the researcher is conscious of their choices. In the case of this partner, they wanted to keep their participants safe, knowing about the potential for harm that exists by inviting cisgender men to projects, especially projects which may centre around addressing gender-based violence. This is about recognising the impact people have on others, and as another partner said, "not separat[ing] the personal and political" (P3.1).

This is not always obvious to those outside of feminist research who may not understand that research is political. Feminist research recognises the political in research. Partners 2 and 3 shared that centring the political in your research is about making "intentional choices" (P2.2) or a "conscious political choice" (P3.2). Partner 2 expanded on this, saying that in making intentional choices they were focusing on "who gets to touch the research, how we frame it, how we visualise it" (P2.2).

Partner 3 described their conscious political choice around who they involved as stakeholders; in their case they were working with unions. They did this because it felt like the right political choice to make. Partner 3 also spoke to expectations from various stakeholders, such as wanting to know how they would benefit from the research. For the research partners this was "a very political moment" that led them "to make that decision of making our objectives completely explicit in the sense of saying that we are trying to look at workers' experiences and highlight their concerns as they navigate the platform economy" (P3.2). In this way they were able to delineate what their research could and could not do for the various stakeholders.

While Partner 4 spoke of how in their research they were "clearly supporting the need for political rights, for gender political rights, women and LGBT+ people's political rights" (P4.2), Partner 5 spoke of centring the political in their work through:

> [W]idening our team, bringing other perspectives, […] the people we engage within the research, trying to diversify who we are talking to. Trying to go beyond what has already been established or the voices that are so normative that their opinions are a given. (P5.2)

This extended not only to their team, but also to their interview process. They said they intentionally looked for:

> [P]rofiles that were perhaps underrepresented in the whole sample which is composed mainly of cis women. And sadly, this in the other applications of the survey: we had some difficulty reaching trans people. And so, the trans respondents were, for instance, the first profile that we looked for and said we need to interview these people because we had so few opportunities of talking with them or

listening to them. Also, people of colour were a respondent profile that we privileged because we feel like the intersectionality of the research comes from trying to raise these voices above the others since they usually have more difficulty being heard. (P5.2)

This partner is speaking of an awareness of needing to consider other standpoints in their research to gain critical insights from these groups. This aligns with the work of Mohanty, who speaks of the need to ask ourselves who we consider to be our "unseen, undertheorised, and left out."[63]

Partners generally felt that it was important to account for those who are usually left out of research processes. Partner 4 spoke of how centring the political in feminist research was about "bringing different voices together" (P4.2). Partner 6 specified, "especially people with different experiences from different communities" (P6.2). Partner 2 argued that in doing so, one also avoided "making generalisations to populations" (P2.2).

Partner 6 also spoke to the idea of "surfacing these different stories and narratives that were sort of absent in the mainstream spaces" (P6.2). This partner felt that one way to surface different stories and narratives was to:

> [C]onduct interviews at different locations and not just focus on the city centre; researchers that are diverse as well so we can conduct interviews in different languages and women [participants] might feel better able to connect [in different languages] with researchers as well. […] I think it has to start with having a diverse research team. (P6.2)

Partners spoke of the importance of difference to the research process, and that it should be taken into consideration when doing research. For instance, Partner 4 commented:

> From the very start of the project, taking the notion that difference matters and that it should be taken into consideration and then should be used again as a tool, as an instrument to design research, the way you choose data, the way you choose respondents. (P4.2)

This approach will benefit research but also ensure that a project has considered multiple lived experiences, standpoints, and power. Researchers working with standpoint theory are able to do work that ensures that those who are often left out or ignored come to be included and that their "voices be heard" throughout their process (P5.2). This is a rejection of the concept of "neutral" research and instead the adoption of "an explicitly political"[64] approach to doing research.

The inclusion of the voices of those who are usually marginalised and left out of research is intentional because research informed by standpoint theory recognises that those who are marginalised will produce knowledge that is "distinctive"[65] as compared to knowledge produced by dominant groups. FIRN research partners 2, 4, 5 and 6 appear to have recognised this and set out to ensure that they actively included voices from different identities and communities in their research.

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[63] Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke University Press.

[64] Wylie, A. (2004). Op. cit.

[65] Harding, S. (2004a). Op. cit.

Partners' and participants' standpoints in relation to each other

Partners spoke a great deal about their own standpoint in relation to participants and ensuring that they were not imposing their own worldviews on participants. Partner 3 spoke to how with their fellow researchers who were also union organisers:

> [Y]ou can see that in their pieces they are thinking about their positionality or their own standpoint as they are organisers. So even in that context in both of those roles they also carry power. In a lot of places, they are reflecting on how they use that power. […] I think a lot of the data reflects the fact that there was a reflection on the standpoint that each of the researchers was entering the project through. (P3.2)

Partner 2 made a significant comment around standpoint and how in conducting research an awareness of the participants' power and privilege is needed. They provide the example of the women interviewed in their research:

> I would say that they were all definitely from an upper class. And it is people who have access to the internet and have enough access to resources that they can be loud enough in online spaces. And I think the volume that you have in an online space is related to your class and socioeconomic status.

> To say that this research applies to all women I think would never make sense anyway, but particularly in this research, that's something that we have not touched upon at all: how all these different issues play in, whether you're rural or urban, rich or poor. (P2.2)

The significance here is the need for an awareness of not only the researchers' standpoints but also the participants', and whether the participants' experiences are representative of a group's experiences and can be generalised as such – and if not, then this needs to be contextualised, as in the case of Partner 2. In addition, this speaks to the need for intersectional approaches to research to account for intersecting power axes such as gender and class.

Partners spoke of their own standpoints and how these needed to be considered in relation to participants. For instance, Partner 3 shared that in their data analysis they realised that "the questionnaire or the interview guide was actually used by all of the researchers in very different ways, so that a lot of our own positionality also ends up reflecting in the interview process" (P3.2).

This partner felt that the data collected "was not consistent across interviews" (P3.2) because of the positionality or interests of the different researchers during the interview process. However, they felt that this was a strength; that while the data was not consistent, they found themselves with "a lot more in-depth data across a wide range of fields. But it is also a weakness in the sense that we may not necessarily have comparable data of the kind that we wanted across the two contexts" (P3.2).

Partner 3 found this to be something to carefully consider when designing research projects and instruments in the future, while Partner 6 spoke of how their awareness of their standpoint made them anxious and how it would lead them to repeatedly read the interview transcripts, because for them this was:

> [H]ow I make sure that I don't make any assumptions because sometimes I realise what I remember versus what they actually say tends to differ. […] What I remember tends to be selective and based on what is important to me. So I realised that whenever I reread the transcript, every time there's always something new, that I realise, "Hey, I missed this, does it mean that I impose[d] my perspective on her?" (P6.2)

In Partner 6's sharing, we see an awareness of positionality but also power in relation to how they read the data based on their standpoint. This was something that was important for some researchers in their sharing, an awareness of their selves in relation to their participants. For instance, Partner 3 told us:

> We were also just conscious of the fact that we were entering this space as relative outsiders. Because of that, we ended up reflecting on our own position a lot more and trying to be a lot more careful with each interaction that we had. (P3.2)

Meanwhile, Partner 7 shared how for them it was difficult to "separate" themselves from the community:

> [B]ecause we are so engaged with the community and with the process and it's hard to kind of separate the activist persona and the research persona. […] It is a process that I think we have to put energy in it because we are there when we are connecting with these people, when we are doing the network together and taking coffees and interacting and laughing with the community. And then we must think about the process, documentation, make reflections, think about the literature. I think sometimes it is a hard process. But I also think that this is a huge strength of the process because somehow it's what made us research differently. (P7.2)

Here this partner sees the connectedness with the community as a potential strength for how they did their research, that it was a different approach to doing research. But they also shared that doing research this way meant that:

> [S]ometimes it's hard to keep the boundary because you get so involved with all these questions […] and you want to do so much more sometimes. But at the same time, we are not superheroes and we shouldn't even try to be or want to be. (P7.2)

Partner 7, here, is speaking about needing to be realistic about the role researchers can play in the community, acknowledging that they "are not superheroes" and that it is not a role they should try to attempt. In addition to being aware of their roles, partners spoke of needing to be conscious of the politics and power that they carried with them, and that they needed to be "self-reflexive about our bias and also expressing it clearly in the final result" (P4.2).
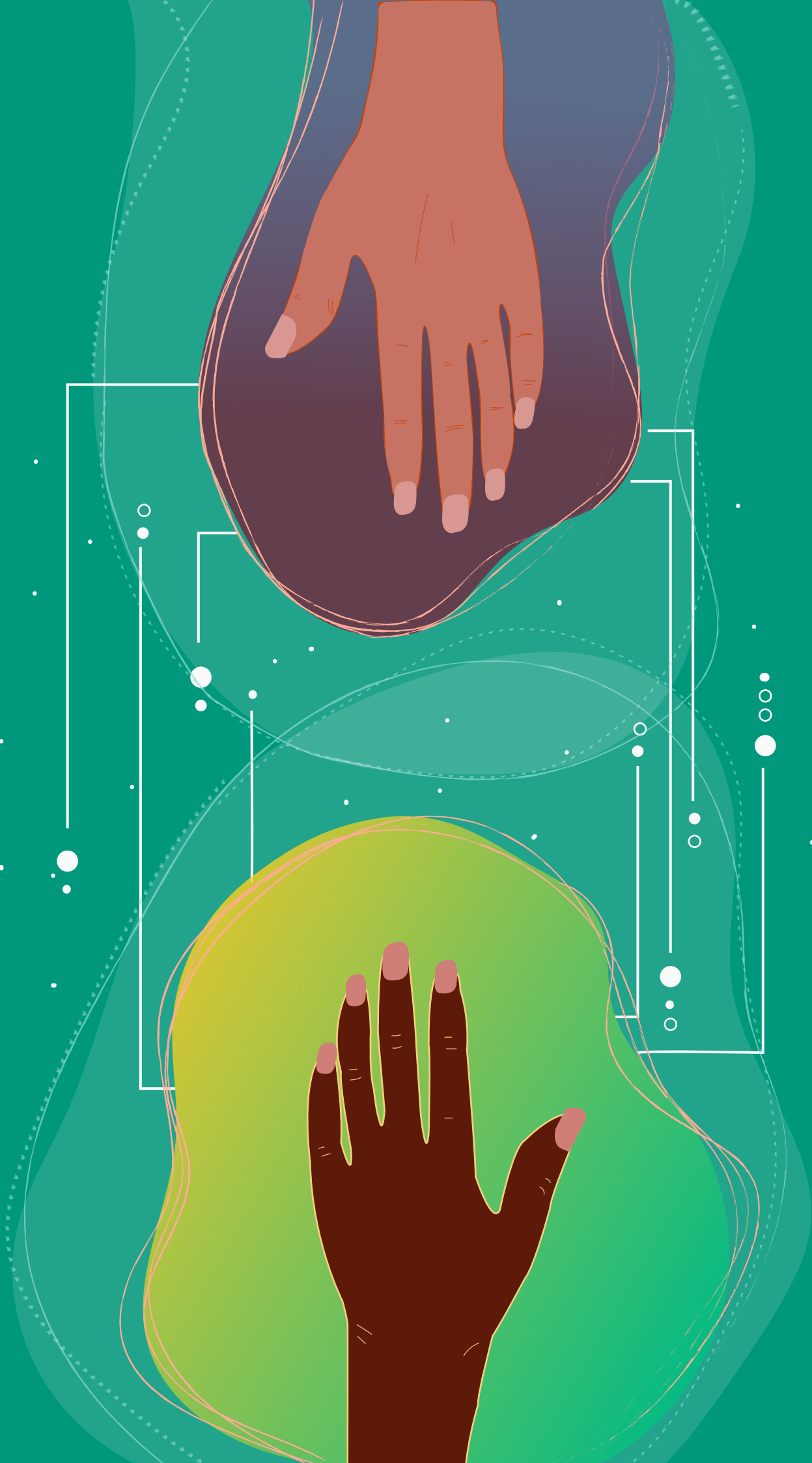
Partner 1 also spoke to this, saying:

> We are particularly sensitive about how social markers of difference, particularly gender, sexual orientation, sexual identities, and – stronger, in a more wholesome way in this research than ever before – race are playing out and are thematised, addressed. […] And so, we're looking closely at how those markers of differences are playing out in that knowledge that is being produced. […] So, in a very broad manner, looking at what's conventionally called now intersectionality is the way we do that. (P1.2)

Here Partner 1 makes the link to not only standpoints but also intersectionality by focusing on "social markers of difference". Including an intersectional lens in doing research from a standpoint theory position can also help mitigate against the risk of standpoint theory essentialising identities and burdening particular identities with the labour of "speak[ing] about their own experiences."[66] Intersectionality is the second theme that emerged as being core to doing feminist internet research, and is explored in the next section after a brief overview of the key takeaways from the standpoint theory discussion.

Key takeaways from this discussion on standpoint theory

Feminist politics and political action were core to the standpoint of the FIRN research partners and present in their research. Feminist politics were seen as a starting point for feminist internet research, as well as ensuring that political action was at the centre of the projects.

Research partners worked to account for those who are excluded from or ignored in research projects, especially those from the global South, and they did their best to bring their participants' different experiences into focus.

This also made it necessary to account for the standpoints of the research partners and their research participants and communities in relation to each other. Included here was accounting for this relationship to ensure that the standpoint of the researcher did not overshadow that of the research participants during the research journey, including the analysis of data in the final stages.

Research partners also spoke of wanting to be involved in the communities but having to negotiate their roles and consider how their involvement would impact on the research participants and research communities. In particular, partners had to think about power and privileges associated with different aspects of their identity such as gender, race and class. One means of doing so was through the use of intersectionality in the FIRN projects. This is discussed next.

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66 Tandon, A., & Aayush. (2019, 1 September). Op. cit.

Intersectionality

Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality to show how discrimination based on gender and race, and other identity-based discriminations, exacerbate each other,[67] and that they cannot be separated out. This important understanding of discrimination adds complexity to the analysis of power, oppression and identity, and makes it possible to investigate how multiple oppressions such as racism, sexism and homophobia work together to co-constitute social relations.[68] The *Feminist Internet Ethical Research Practices*[69] document asked FIRN researchers to reflect deeply and account for intersecting powers and identities and how these act on people. This is important to doing feminist internet research: the consideration of how powers and identities intersect, and the impact these may have on research participants.

Partners shared their understanding of Intersectionality. For instance, Partner 7 said, "I think about intersectionality in a very academic way, thinking about Kimberle Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins. […] I think the intersectional, it opens our lens" (P7.2).

Partner 5 shared that for them, "Intersectionality is a very theoretical concept. It's a political practice but it's a very intellectual approach to something that should be lived. We should practice that and make these experiences work, allow them to exist" (P5.2).

Partner 2 said, "I think intersectionality is like looking at an issue from many different perspectives […] looking at issues of class, of geography, of income, of where you lie on social spectrums, what privilege you have" (P2.2).

Like Partner 2, Partner 3 said that they understood the link between intersectionality and power hierarchies. This partner shared that in their research process they tried "to be cognisant of that and [tried] to tease out those dimensions of inequality wherever participants were comfortable about talking about this" (P3.1).

In our second interview, Partner 3 elaborated on this, saying:

> I think the way that I think about it is just to try and focus on the way that people themselves identify the kinds of social characteristics that they think are important when talking about their own lives. So that's the way in which we try to practice it through the project, to try and focus on as many axes of power that people were speaking about organically through the interviews. (P3.2)

Linked to these "many axes of power" is how intersectionality has traditionally been understood or used. Partner 1 speaks to this in detail:

> We usually say intersectionality, but I think we mean a feminist intersectional approach, right, not just intersectionality but feminism and intersectionality. So how can we build a feminism that is intersectional, right?

67 Crenshaw, K. (1989). Op. cit.
68 Quraishi, M., & Philburn, R. (2015). Op. cit.
69 Association for Progressive Communications. (2019). Op. cit.

So, for me, that has to do with the history of feminism and how it has been a white feminism for so long. In a lot of ways, it has to do with the question or rather the issue of race and racism especially. Trying to bring a discussion about racism to feminism and maybe even recognise what may be a racial legacy or even a colonial legacy inside many of the feminist practices that we should try to overcome maybe. So I think in a sense the issue of race is the main thing that I understand by intersectionality, but also the queerness, the other side of it is queerness, also bringing a discussion about gender and sexuality which is our focus after all and trying to include as many voices in terms of diversity of gender and sexuality.

And I would also list class as an important thing that has to do with intersectionality. And since upper-class or middle-class feminism has been the main voice perhaps, historically, and trying to bring a bit more disenfranchised voices is also an important aspect of intersectionality. (P1.2)

In this discussion from Partner 1, we see a critical reflection on how feminism has employed intersectionality in the past, and the necessity for bringing, through intersectionality, considerations around race, class, gender and sexuality, for instance, into feminist internet research. We next explored how partners accounted for intersectionality in their research.

Researcher-participant power relations

Power relations between researchers and research participants emerged from the discussion on intersectionality. Researchers occupy positions of power in that they have the power to select, interpret, assemble and edit the research, and come to construct knowledge from the position they occupy.[70]

Partner 5 spoke of the challenges of doing intersectional work when engaging with participants and their lived experiences, sharing that it was about, as researchers:

[S]idestepping the centre stage and allowing them to come forward and speak. That's challenging, allowing them to speak for themselves, but you are in the position of being heard. For instance, we write this research. The report will be written by ourselves. So how do we bring these voices and let them speak but we are letting them speak? We are selecting what they said that will be heard. This is very challenging. There's not an easy solution to the problem. (P5.2)

Partner 5 is speaking about the challenge that many feminist internet researchers find themselves presented with when wanting to do intersectional work but also finding that they are in a position of power, such as having the power to control whose voice is and is not heard. As

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[70] Bashir, N. (2020). The qualitative researcher: the flip side of the research encounter with vulnerable people. *Qualitative Research, 20*(5), 667-683. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794119884805; Karnieli-Miller, O., Strier, R., & Pessach, L. (2009). Power Relations in Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Health Research, 19*(2), 279-289. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732308329306

researchers they are in a position to determine what aspects of what participants share with them make it into the final research reports or outputs. It is important to note that "power is multifaceted and manifests itself in complex ways,"[71] and can be negotiated and reimagined. For instance, researchers may adopt a participatory research methodology to distribute power in the research process.[72]

Partner 3 spoke about intersectionality and how some of the difficulty in creating space for intersecting oppressions had to do with the participants themselves not being comfortable speaking about their experiences, and that "we didn't push on that point unless workers were themselves forthcoming" (P3.2).

Partner 3 also shared:

> I just felt like we could have done more there. I think as we progressed through the project we were thinking a lot more about how to make sure that we are able to service these intersections in the design of the project itself. (P3.2)

Partner 3's challenges with regards to intersectionality are important to note for future feminist internet research because they highlight difficulties researchers may encounter with participants who may not be comfortable speaking about their experiences. Researchers are asked to consider why this may be the case and to account for this or acknowledge this in their work, but to also recognise that research participants may have their own motivations for participating, or not participating, in a study.[73] It could also be that the lived experiences of the researcher and the participants are vastly different, and this may be influencing whether the research participant wishes to share their experience with the researcher or not.[74] Reflexivity as continuous research practice could be useful to researchers in order to explore their experiences of shifting power relations in the researcher-participant dynamic.[75]

Partner 1 shared that for them, with regards to intersectionality, when putting together their sample for interviews they found that the group from their survey was "quite homogeneous. It is very white. It is very urban. It is quite educated" (P1.2). In their interviews, to account for this homogeneity, this partner tried to balance this out by:

> [T]rying to over-represent darker, less educated, less cis identities in our interviews to compensate just a bit for that […] and we know that quote-unquote compensating for that is not necessarily the way to go about it. But you cannot avoid that. So, you have to try harder theoretically, try harder politically. (P1.2)

71 Bashir, N. (2020). Op. cit.
72 Ross, K. (2017). Making Empowering Choices: How Methodology Matters for Empowering Research Participants. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 18*(3). https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-18.3.2791
73 Karnieli-Miller, O., Strier, R., & Pessach, L. (2009). Op. cit.
74 England, K. V. L. (1994). Getting Personal: Reflexivity, Positionality, and Feminist Research. *The Professional Geographer, 46*(1), 80-89.
75 Bashir, N. (2020). Op. cit.; Raheim, M., Magnussen, L. H., Sekse, R. J. T., Lunde, A., Jacobsen, T., & Blystad, A. (2016). Researcher-researched relationship in qualitative research: Shifts in positions and researcher vulnerability. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being, 11*(1). https://hvlopen.brage.unit.no/hvlopen-xmlui/handle/11250/2481905

Here it is about an awareness of who is or is not included and working to address this. This ties back to the political nature of doing feminist research. It does need to be noted that there is an overlap here with intersectionality and standpoint: the research partner is attempting to correct who is involved and is identifying this as an issue for intersectionality, while it is also a matter for standpoint. Partner 4 shared something similar in terms of what Partner 1 had spoken to, when they said that for them:

> We used the intersectionality approach in the selection of respondents, mostly in this way. We searched for respondents that represent and that have multiple identities. I mean being representative of different minority groups. […] So we used it as an instrument mostly. (P4.2)

In this moment, being aware about who is and is not included and working to address this, we see an awareness of inclusivity. This led to the need to explore the relationship between intersectionality and inclusivity. Intersectionality troubles the multitude of identities that intersect or are in relation to each other within an individual, group, organisation and other structures, while inclusivity is the intentional inclusion of multiple identities in a way that holds them to be on equal footing. At times partners use these two interchangeably, so I asked partners to share how they distinguished between the two. This led to an interesting discussion or identification: inclusion as a means of accounting for intersectionality.

Partner 2 said that for them:

> Intersectionality is a way of thinking of different perspectives. I feel like inclusivity is more action-oriented whereas intersectionality is more thought-oriented: are we thinking from different perspectives. To be inclusive you have to do an actual thing. (P2.2)

Partner 5 commented:

> Perhaps the notion of intersectionality helps us to see who is not being included in our conversations. […] Maybe that's how you will remove a blindfold that is in place. How do you see voices are not being heard and which ones should be included in a conversation? (P5.2)

Here partners are looking to intersectionality as an analysis lens or an approach, whereas inclusivity is seen to be a practice towards intersectionality. Partners look to intersectionality and in observing the power axes and dynamics consider whose voice is currently dominating the conversation, and how more voices can be brought into the conversation, and then intentionally set about doing so.

For instance, Partner 3 said that for them:

> To my mind inclusivity […] might be more around how you practice intersectionality. So trying to be inclusive in research processes might mean that there is equal space for people in the project who design and shape it as opposed to intersectionality which is just trying to make sure that there's a wide breadth of representation. (P3.2)

Partner 5 shared that "I think intersectionality is the means of enabling inclusivity or reaching inclusivity. I think that the correlation might be that one," and then reiterated this by saying, "I think intersectionality is a means maybe of achieving inclusivity" (P5.2).

And once again we have this repeated by Partner 1, who said:

> Intersectionality is a way to always question the justice in it, right, always address it as a problem and not necessarily trying to fix it from a top-down point of view. I think that's the problem with inclusivity in conventional political talk terms. But any struggle for inclusivity is an intersectional struggle. (P1.2)

Moving from this position of intersectionality enabling inclusivity or inclusivity being the means of practicing intersectionality, it was important to explore how partners spoke of inclusivity.

Inclusivity

Inclusivity is about attempting to include as many different groups or identities as possible, with the intention of treating them all equally. When thinking about inclusivity, identities are broken up into various categories such as race, sexuality, age, class and so forth. Evans flags that this "runs counter to the very idea of intersectionality; in fact, this only serves to reinforce the difficulty with which activists might seek to consider issues of inclusion and interconnectedness."[76]

Evans reminds us that "inclusivity is not a proxy for intersectionality."[77] It begs reminding that intersectionality interrogates how discrimination based on various identity categories aggravate or intensify each other, and that these cannot be separated out.[78]

Partners were asked how they understood inclusivity, and they shared the following, starting with Partner 4 who said, "As including the voices of different groups. This is my understanding of inclusivity" (P4.2).

Partner 3 responded, "To try and ensure that we had some representation across the different intersections that we were looking at so all of those were included as participants in the project as well" (P3.2).

Partner 2 said:

> I think to be truly inclusive you have to take extra measures to make certain people feel more welcome. For example, if you're hosting a webinar you have to take the extra step to have closed captions for somebody who's hard of hearing. (P2.2)

Partner 7 shared this sentiment, stating:

> We have to be inclusive; we have to think about this. And this is really important in terms of feminist infrastructure and feminist

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[76] Evans, E. (2015). *The Politics of Third Wave Feminisms: Neoliberalism, Intersectionality, and the State in Britain and the US.* Palgrave Macmillan.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Crenshaw, K. (1989). Op. cit.

technology because if you create a space that is somehow strange to some people, this is not inclusive. So when we were thinking about having some workshops we have to think if people would feel comfortable in that space, if that space is hard for people with disability to access, if we are using only writing material and some people can't read. […] So we have to think about other materials. So I think when we are being inclusive we have to kind of dislocate from our reality, our bodies, our comfort zone, and think about the people that we will be gathering in terms of gender, race, disability, and these other specifics. (P7.2)

Here, again, as with standpoint theory, we see feminist internet researchers considering what others may need in order to be included, and that key to this is that researchers imagine outside of their realities and experiences, and take into account and provide space for their participants' realities. One way to achieve inclusivity is through involving participants actively.

Some partners spoke of participation. For instance, Partner 3 spoke of working to ensure that they were "involving people who had a lot more knowledge and had a stronger base in this area" (P3.1). This partner saw this involvement of stakeholders as a channel to "building knowledge from the ground up, leveraging knowledge that they had already, and the results of the project very much reflect that" (P3.1).

This is also about an awareness of power regarding stakeholders, and the value of their situated knowledge. In this section it appears that partners have through intersectionality been intentionally inclusive in their feminist research design.

Another partner drew on participation through engaging FIRN and their colleagues in the design of their research tool. They shared how they worked with their enumerators in each country where they conducted their research in order to "localise the tool, because terms or concepts may not be understood the same way in each context" (P2.1).

The reason for this was that they had found that with online gender-based harassment, for instance, they would ask women if they knew what this was, and the women would respond saying that they did not know and that they had never experienced it. But when the researchers provided examples of online gender-based harassment, these women would then respond that it happened to them frequently. Through localising the tool, "the enumerators were then able to make the data collection tool more comprehensible for our target population, and so in that way it was participatory" (P2.1).

Partner 7 said that for them inclusivity is not something they understand "in terms of researching," but rather that it is about something "more specific" such as:

I have to be inclusive in this workshop, I have to build this space inclusive, I have to build this technology in an inclusive way. I have to build even a semi-structured interview form in an inclusive way so people will understand what I'm asking, and this will make sense to them. (P7.2)

Inclusivity is intentional, and it can be considered throughout the research process. One means of ensuring that inclusivity is present is through reflexivity. Partner 5 explains the relationship between intersectionality, inclusion and reflexivity, stating:

> I'd say that if inclusion is the endpoint of the process that intersectionality helps put in place, I think that reflexivity is maybe part of this process or even the starting point.
>
> You cannot start to look for all of these intersecting experiences and actual lives without thinking about your own place in the system of power. And how can you go on with the process of enabling inclusion or exercising this from this position of power or maybe position of privilege. […] Reflexivity is maybe part of this process or even the starting point. (P5.2)

With this in mind, we move on to discuss reflexivity.

Key takeaways from this discussion on intersectionality

This discussion showed that intersectionality and inclusivity are important to doing feminist internet research. Intersectionality, in particular, adds a complexity to the analysis of power, oppression and identity by considering how power axes exacerbate each other. Partners spoke of intersectionality being seen to be more academic or intellectual but also as political practice. Through intersectionality, researchers are able to be more cognisant of power hierarchies and can "tease out those dimensions of inequality" (P3.1).

Partners spoke of accounting for intersectionality by making space for participants' voices and lived experiences that are usually left out of research (here we see an overlap with standpoint theory). They also spoke of the discomfort that was brought about by an awareness of power inequalities, and spoke of wanting to do more, and to include intersectionality from the start of their future projects. It does bear noting that partners appeared to be far more at ease with discussing intersectionality than standpoint theory. This may be due to the manner in which intersectionality has been adopted by the NGO and civil society sector, certainly more readily than standpoint.

Even though this is the case, what emerged in partners' use of intersectionality is that they often used intersectionality and inclusivity interchangeably, and because of this it should be noted that in future feminist internet research it is important to be clear about what these two concepts mean. Because of this interchangeable use of intersectionality and inclusivity, the researcher explored inclusivity with the research partners. What emerged from this, and is a key finding of this research, is that partners spoke of inclusivity as intersectionality in practice, and as a means to be more intentional in terms of inclusivity and representation. And where necessary, to take extra measures to ensure greater inclusion and representation when doing feminist internet research.

Lastly, partners spoke of reflexivity as being key to gaining awareness of who is and is not included, and the necessity of placing the researcher in this context, to understand how power plays out between the researcher

and their participants. For instance, Partner 5 said, "You cannot start to look for all of these intersecting experiences and actual lives without thinking about your own place in the system of power" (P5.2).

Reflexivity is explored in greater detail in the next section.

Reflexivity

In the interviews with partners, reflexivity emerged as a key principle informing the research process of the projects. Reflexivity allows feminist internet researchers to critically reflect on their research and how power is present and plays out during the research process.[79] Reflexivity also makes it possible for researchers to engage with their own positionality, power and privilege.[80] Reflexivity acknowledges that researchers are embedded[81] in the research process, and bring to the process their values and politics; it asks that researchers critically consider their positionality, and how this impacts on the research process and their participants.

Partner 3 shared that for them, being reflexive in their research practice is about considering "your own position and what you are bringing or not bringing to the research process" (P3.2), while Partner 1 described it as "my job to bring this conversation to my empirical research, my writing, and my reading" (P1.1).

Later, in the second interview, Partner 1 added:

> Privilege is a term that has come to centre stage. [...] I am questioning myself personally in every step of the way. How my positionality affects what we're doing and the boundaries of what we're doing. (P1.2)

Partner 7 shared that after each visit to the community they were working with, they would go over the notes from the previous visit and have a meeting to prepare for the next visit through "think[ing] about the dynamics of the last visit" (P7.1). This partner continued to speak to how they treated reflexivity as an ongoing process because they felt the need "to be reflexive in thinking about how we would be seen by the community, how we should present ourselves, which hegemonic notions would we be carrying as we go there from a big city" (P7.1).

This resonates with what Partner 2 shared with regards to reflexivity being an act of "taking a step back and looking at what you've done and thinking critically about it" (P2.2).

Some of the means of getting to reflexive practice is done through reflection, and so at times partners used these two words interchangeably. For instance, Partner 3 here speaks of reflection but this also sounds like reflexive practice in the way in which they account for power and positions:

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[79] Cooky, C., Linabary, J. R., & Corple, D. J. (2018). Op. cit.
[80] Hundle, A. K., Szeman, I., & Hoare, J. P. (2019). Op. cit.
[81] Van Zyl, I., & McLean, N. (2021). The Ethical Implications of Digital Contact Tracing For LGBTQIA+ Communities. Proceedings of the 1st Virtual Conference on Implications of Information and Digital Technologies for Development.
[82] Hundle, A. K., Szeman, I., & Hoare, J. P. (2019). Op. cit.

> I think reflection to my mind was just about a couple of different things to reflect on, your positionality of course. And your positionality could mean the institutional affiliation that you come from, what kind of weight that carries, your own personal politics and positions, what kind of impact that might have on the project. So that's, of course, one area of reflection and what that might do or the kind of impact that that sort of reflection might have on the project is that the framing of how the research is talked about could be completely different. How you end up shaping the design of the project, how you practice the methodology, all of those I think can be shaped if there is reflexivity integrated into the project. And then the other, just reflecting about what impact your project might have or what it might do for the participants or what it might not do, in what ways it's limited as opposed to you might have a completely different idea of what you will be able to do and you find that you're actually limited by a lot of factors on the ground. I think there should be space for that kind of reflection as well. (P3.2)

What comes through is that partners speak of the two interchangeably or in ways that are similar in the task they do. Because of how these two, reflexivity and reflection, were often used interchangeably, we sought to explore this further in the second round of interviews. Partner 7 shared something quite significant in their interview around the relationship between reflexivity and reflection, when they said, "Reflection I would think of more as a word whereas reflexivity I think of as a concept and commitment" (P7.2).

This idea of reflexivity as commitment and reflection as practice is significant, and useful to hold onto when doing feminist internet research. Partner 1, positioned in a more traditional academic context, unpacked the two concepts of reflexivity and reflection in our interview, stating:

> Reflexivity is about addressing how difference, how alterity is crisscrossing experience. And reflexivity operates at different levels and in different contexts. It operates in the social life you are looking at. It operates in how individuals or communities address themselves and what they do and what they make. And, methodologically, it needs to operate in how you address the issues or the subjects you construct as your objects. [...] Whereas reflection is a much broader term. (P1.2)

Reflection does not do the core work of reflexivity, but it is a means or a starting point to doing reflexive practice. It is through reflection that one makes the space to contemplate the research process, but being reflexive requires a researcher to critically engage with issues of power and one's positionality.

83 Blakely, K. (2007). Op. cit.
84 Association for Progressive Communications. (2019). Op. cit.
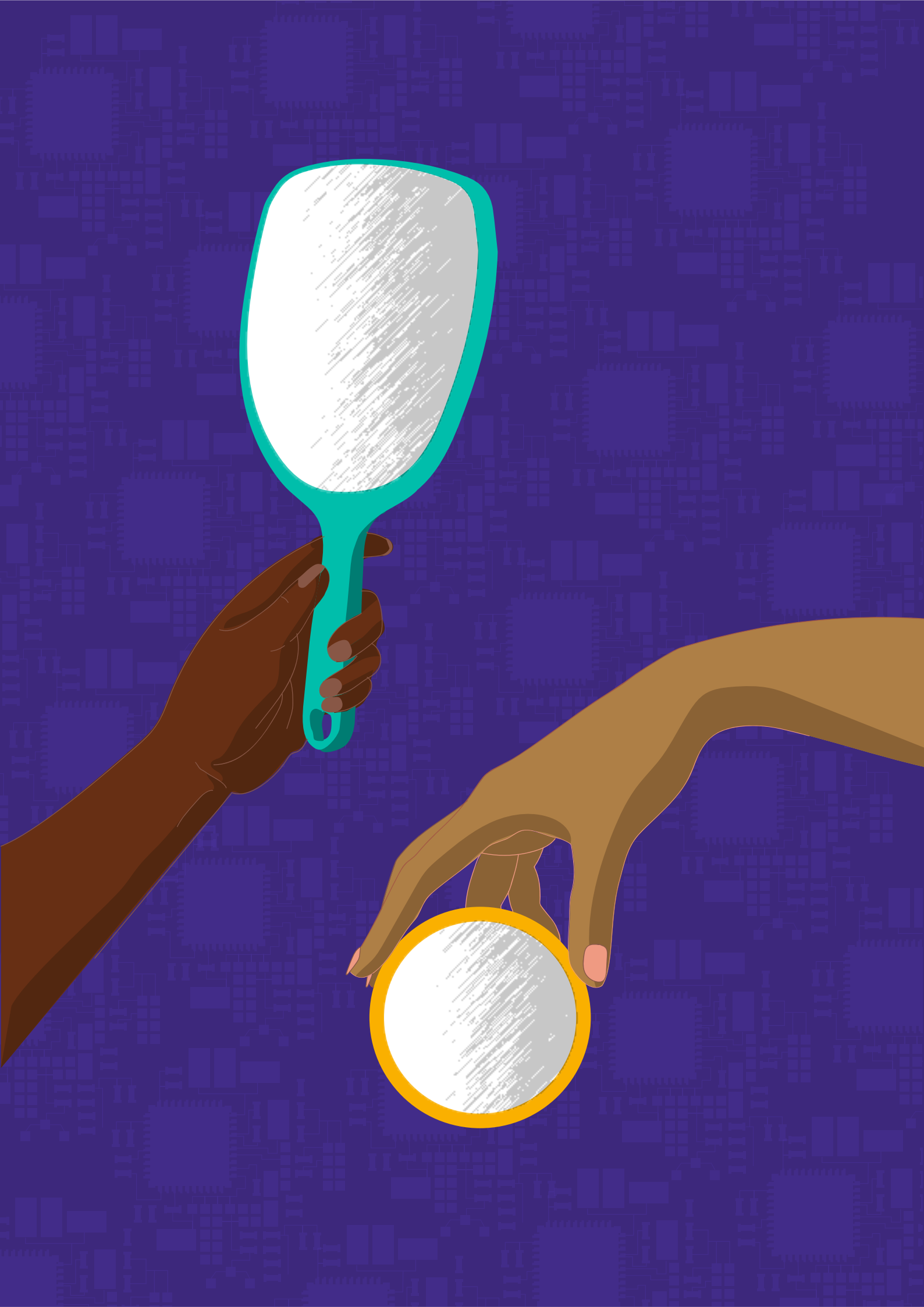
Positionality and awareness of power

Positionality, as briefly discussed in the theoretical framework, allows researchers to engage with how their social location, privilege, values and assumptions, to name a few, may influence the research process.[82] It is through considering their positionality that researchers may understand how they view things the way they do, and how this shapes their understanding of the world.[83]

The feminist action research project actively brought into consideration the hegemonic position of research, how power is distributed and how they presented to the community, and worked to be inclusive of their participants. They did this by actively:

> [Trying] to work as partners from the community because I know this is impossible to take all restraints and power relations [away] but as much as possible we tried to be in a horizontal relationship with them, and have them as part of the process, not as subjects or objects. (P7.1)

Partner 7 also spoke to the issue of power as it relates to technology, and how they did not want to come across as an external actor bringing solutions from outside to a community's local problems. This partner shared how this was a risk when dealing with digital technologies, because:

> [Technologies] have this kind of aura that they are the magic solution, the future, development, and we tried mostly to really value local knowledge and show them how they already build knowledge every day, and how this [technology] is just a different one that they don't need to use. (P7.1)

They shared how the community they were working with mostly made use of oral communication, and how for the team it was central that they honour these networks, and not only the digital, and that this is something they want to be reflected in the final report. Partner 7 also spoke to memory as key and how it ties in with power and knowledge, and the importance of "build[ing] a link between different knowledges – local knowledge, local technologies, and local ways of communication that they have been doing" (P7.1).

Technology is often viewed as neutral when it is in fact imbued with numerous issues relating to power. Or it is presented, as Partner 1 shared, "as an external magical solution" (P7.1). But it is not free from power relations. With technology there are numerous power issues that come to be rendered invisible, and it is often used without considering what informed the build of the technology.

Partner 5 shared that employing feminist theories can make visible:

> [T]his dynamic of power, especially gender, but racial, sexuality issues that become naturalised or even invisible more with regards to technology that are part of our daily routine. We just use it, but we don't really think about what's behind its conception. (P5.1)

It is necessary for future feminist internet research that researchers are reflexive in how they engage or think about technology and, as Partner 3

suggests, to "look at the social processes that shape technology and vice versa" (P3.1).

Similar to this is the notion of research itself, which is presented as neutral or objective, but it is, too, imbued with its own power dynamics and exclusionary politics. In doing research on technology, this creates, as Partner 7 describes, "a double problem [because both] the research side and the technology side are seen as objective. It's an all-male framework, it's all invisible" (P7.1).

A task for feminist internet researchers is to be clear of the power that is present in both the research process and in technology, and in doing research on technology. As the ethical practices document states, there needs to be a clear acknowledgement that "the materiality of the technology cannot be separated from the politics of our research inquiry."[84]

Returning to the matter of positionality, Partner 2 shared that their way of accounting for their position of power was to ensure that they did not interact with research participants, because they felt that they were not someone the participants could relate to. Instead, Partner 2 had other researchers who were relatable to the participants collect the data. Maintaining distance, for this partner, was a way to create space for "people to be open and to feel like they were in safe spaces" (P2.1).

For instance, Partner 2 spoke of how the person conducting the research or facilitating focus groups would influence participants. Here Partner 2 is linking their position and power as potentially restrictive. It is not only a matter of potentially influencing participants, but also a matter of comfort for participants so that they may be "open" with researchers. This leads to another theme that emerged with regards to positionality: discomfort.

Discomfort

Key to reflexive practice and tied to positionality is the acknowledgment of what makes the researcher uncomfortable. Discomfort emerged from the interviews as a theme that needed exploring because partners frequently mentioned experiencing discomfort or acknowledged being uncomfortable during the research process.

Partner 3, for instance, shared that within their team, they are all from the upper class and hold positions of power, and that:

> [W]hile trying to do the project, there would be points of discomfort where, for instance, I would be sitting and typing up and my cleaning lady would be cleaning there around me and that is just extremely uncomfortable to be saying that researchers going out and sort of bringing voices of people into mainstream discourse while also very much using that labour on a day-to-day basis. (P3.1)

Here this partner finds themselves in a state of discomfort through doing research on labour as a person of a particular class status while also relying on the labour that they are researching.

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[85] Blakely, K. (2007). Op. cit.

Another partner shared, when asked about reflexivity, that:

> It's a lot easier when it's a point I can relate myself to, but it's actually a lot more challenging when encountering an experience that really discomforts me. And I think that is what I try to process a lot more throughout this research. And that's where I took my time to really unpack my politics and my biases as well. (P6.2)

Identifying points of discomfort can be a first step to a researcher understanding their positionality and thinking about this in a critical and reflexive manner. We explored discomfort in more detail with the research partners. Some points of discomfort that partners pointed to included discomfort regarding violence, and discomfort around being in disagreement with their participants.

On the matter of discomfort regarding violence, partners shared that for them, "Other spots of discomfort, I think sometimes the data, hearing what happened to people, can be difficult to read through" (P2.2).

Partner 4 spoke to how to keep participants comfortable, saying:

> When talking with people that have experienced gender-based violence, I had some points of discomfort in thinking how to start the conversation and how to approach them so they would feel most comfortable. (P4.2)

Partner 5 also spoke to this challenge, and commented:

> Since one of the topics of the research is about experiences about violence and these are very delicate issues and sometimes people narrate to you experiences of trauma. And that's always challenging to sit there and try to be rational or clinical about how you follow up the question, trying to follow your interview guide. But how do you follow up with a history of abuse or trauma? So that's discomforting but part of the whole process. (P5.2)

It can be difficult as researchers to engage with violence and to be at risk of asking that someone recount their experience or potentially trigger someone with a question. This is explored in more detail under the next section on ethics of care, when discussing safety.

Partners also spoke about the discomfort of doing research with participants that they disagreed with. This can be another point of discomfort, when one's politics and values do not align with those of participants. For instance, Partner 3 shared that "we found in some interviews that there are patriarchal opinions being expressed. [...] I think that also made us quite uncomfortable in some interviews" (P3.2).

Partner 7 shared something similar:

> I think in terms of the relationship with the community, the hard part is like because there we have mixed groups. It is not only women groups. And sometimes the men are being somehow oppressive in terms of gender roles. And at the same time, we have to respect them because of course, they have the male dominance, but we also are people from outside, as much as we try to unbuild this they see us as someone that has the digital knowledge and the technology's the future, this kind of stuff that came with digital technologies. So,

we have our own power relation with these men and sometimes it's tricky. (P7.2)

Meanwhile, Partner 6 told us:

> It is in my interview with two trans women and they both spoke about when they are attacked, the two of them would employ the strategy of fighting back, of using the same trolling tactic. And that really discomforted me because a year ago I did not believe that you should fight fire with fire. And I think subconsciously I kind of felt a lot of rage in the way that they described the violence to me, because as a cis woman I don't have the embodied experience so I couldn't quite locate where the rage was coming from. (P.6.2)

It is not enough to state discomfort. It must be critically explored. For instance, Partner 6's reflexivity also revealed to them the privilege they have, as well as gaps in their knowledge. This partner reflected on their response to a transgender woman, and the rage she was expressing, to which the partner shared that they could not relate. They felt that the rage was violent, and it caused them discomfort thinking about the rage of the participant. In this instance, the partner said that they wondered why this moment bothered them so much, and raised it in a workshop where in discussion they were able to realise:

> [T]he gaps in my understanding and my knowledge when it comes to discrimination that is experienced by the other person different from me. I think investigating and understanding my discomfort really helps to unpack my inherent biases. (P 6.1)

This is important in feminist internet research: asking why there are points of discomfort, and being open to having a conversation about this. In this partner's case, it is not only about reflexivity but also about being vulnerable and leaning into the discomfort. There is an opportunity here to go beyond exploring what may be described as inherent biases but also to consider how their work may be informed by cissexism, and to complicate this – to challenge what they may have taken for granted at the start of the research process, and to critically read their work with this in mind.

This work of challenging one's understanding, position and discomfort is critical to doing feminist internet research. As Partner 6 shared on discomfort:

> I think it's needed. And I think right now more than anything it means that you are actually bringing up new insights. […] And I think discomfort is core especially for feminist research because we are all so different and we all have so many different experiences. (P6.2)

While Partner 7 shared that "I like the discomfort" (P7.2), Partner 4 referred to discomfort as "an open chance" (P4.2), an opportunity for greater self-awareness of yourself as a researcher and your research process. Here we can see discomfort as constructive and even productive to knowledge building. Partner 1 spoke to discomfort as having "great potential if you're up to it. And it's interesting: you can only be up to it reflexively" (P1.2).

When partners were asked about how they engage with discomfort in their research processes, Partner 7 responded:

We don't try to hide it or run over it. And sometimes it takes time to deal with it and we try to respect this process of assimilating the discomfort, to be able to think about it in a constructive way and not just react from the top of our minds. (P7.2)

Meanwhile, Partner 3 commented:

If you don't decide to engage with that discomfort during the interviews, just in the outputs of your research project, then you can try and reflect on that discomfort. I think that's useful learning for other future work as well. (P3.2)

Engaging with discomfort can be productive to the research process, whether during the collection of data or in the analysis stage. What is key to this engagement with discomfort, and with one's own positionality and power, is reflexive practice. As Partner 7 shared, reflexivity "is a feminist commitment of always thinking through the process and always reflecting about ourselves and the relations that we are building" (P7.2).

Another feminist commitment is a feminist ethics of care, and this is the final theme and pillar to be discussed after a brief discussion on the key takeaways on reflexivity.

Key takeaways from this discussion on reflexivity

Reflexivity asks researchers to critically consider the research process and their involvement in it, including their positionality, and how this may impact on the research participants and community. For the partners, this brought up issues of power and privilege and how this and their positionality "affects what we're doing" (P1.2). One can reflect on one's day in conducting research and not think critically about one's role with regard to power and engagement with participants, whereas reflexivity asks that the researcher engage critically with their positionality and achieve an awareness of power.

Some partners spoke about feminist internet researchers needing to be aware that technology is often viewed as neutral but, like research, it is not free from power relations. It is necessary for feminist internet researchers to be reflexive in how they engage and think about technology and understand that it is imbued with its own power dynamics and exclusionary politics. Researchers need to be clear of the power present both in the research process and in technology, and in doing research on technology.

Partners understood reflexivity to be an ongoing process. At times partners used reflexivity and reflection interchangeably. We explored this further and what emerged from this discussion was that they saw reflexivity as a "commitment" (P7.2), and reflection as the means of practicing reflexivity. This is a useful understanding for future feminist internet research; however, it is important to note that reflection cannot do the core work of reflexivity, but it is a means or a starting point to doing reflexive work.

Discomfort emerged as a major theme in this discussion, and the importance of researchers acknowledging what makes them uncomfortable during the research process, and the potential this has for knowledge production and new insights. Discomfort is often ignored or dismissed

during research, but feminist internet research can create the space to explore discomfort. Identifying points of discomfort can be a first step for a researcher in understanding their positionality and thinking about this critically, as we saw with Partner 6's point on their cisgender identity in relation to transgender identities.

Discomfort can emerge when hearing about violent experiences that research participants have endured, in interacting with participants from different positions of power (e.g. class dynamics), or in not agreeing with a participant's worldview (e.g. interviewing a homophobic or racist participant). It is not enough to state discomfort; critically exploring it should be encouraged, as it can reveal to a researcher where there may be gaps in their knowledge or inherent biases they may not have been aware of. This work of challenging oneself is critical to doing feminist internet research.

Partners spoke of embracing discomfort, even liking it, because it provided them with an opportunity for greater awareness of themselves as a researcher. In this discussion, discomfort was spoken of as constructive and productive in knowledge building – but as Partner 1 stated, "you can only be up to it reflexively" (P1.2).

In addition to reflexivity, because of the nature of discomfort, and holding space for difficult experiences that participants may experience, an ethics of care is recommended for holding such a space. This was the final theme that emerged from the interviews with partners as being key to doing feminist internet research.

Feminist ethics of care

Research partners cited a feminist ethics of care as informing their practice, either through directly naming it care, feminist care, or ethics of care, or indirectly in how they spoke about the research topic, their participants, co-researchers, and/or the research process. Feminist ethics of care is centred on concern for the research community and participants,[85] and asks researchers to consider whether their work benefits participants or is extractive and perpetuates injustice.[86] Ethical considerations were guided by the *Feminist Internet Ethical Research Practices* document.[87] Feminist research ethics emerged as counter to traditional research ethics, and are informed by feminist values with an emphasis on "care and responsibility rather than outcomes."[88]

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[86] Preissle, J. (2007). Op. cit.; Blakely, K. (2007). Op. cit.
[87] Association for Progressive Communications. (2019). Op. cit.
[88] Edwards, R., & Mauthner, M. (2012). Op. cit.

Partners spoke of working to achieve a feminist ethics of care as being "there from the very beginning" (P4.2) and "part of the whole process" (P3.1). Or, as one partner put it, "care ethics should always be there, it shouldn't be once-off, interviews and then just data analysis" (P6.1).

Partners shared that their thinking around the ethics of care consisted of "[being] as careful about safety and particularly about our respondents and their security and their comfort" (P4.2).

Partner 2 commented:

> We wanted consent from people, we let people know that everything was anonymous, we didn't have any identifiers of any kind, and then we always gave people the choice to skip questions they were not comfortable with or to totally stop the interview if they were not comfortable with it. (P2.2)

Partners also spoke about giving participants the choice to participate or to withdraw. Partner 6 noted:

> First it was really the part on consent where we really explain the purpose of the research and their right to revoke consent at any point. Second, I think it was in anonymising everybody's name and any other identifying information because it's so personal. (P6.2)

And Partner 7 commented:

> Of course, there is this whole framework to explain the research, don't treat people as objects, have good relations, have transparency, have consent. [...] We tried to incorporate all of this and translate this to the reality that we're living in. (P7.2)

Consent and privacy are understood to be traditional research ethics principles. Partners spoke of how they felt that consent was a key principle, but that it was not a universally understood concept among those outside of research. They spoke of the ways that they tried to convey consent to their participants (P7.1). For instance, Partner 3 spoke to the matter of informed consent and the importance of translating concepts in ways that could be easily understood by participants because English can create "a barrier", so it was important for them to consider "how to bring about informed consent in a way that is meaningful" (P3.1).

Partner 2 also spoke to the matter of translation and how they translated the written informed consent forms into different languages, and then made use of a mobile app for data collection. They explained that researchers would read the consent form to participants who would then "press okay" on the mobile app to consent to participating in the research (P2.1).

Partner 5, meanwhile, troubled the occurrence in research where researchers gain consent from participants in a way that may not have them fully aware of what they are consenting to. This partner posed the following question: "Do they understand what you just read for them or what that means in fact?" (P5.1)

This partner argued that consent forms often protect the research and not the participant, and they were very critical of how some practices have become protocol in such a way "that they don't really mean safety" (P5.1).
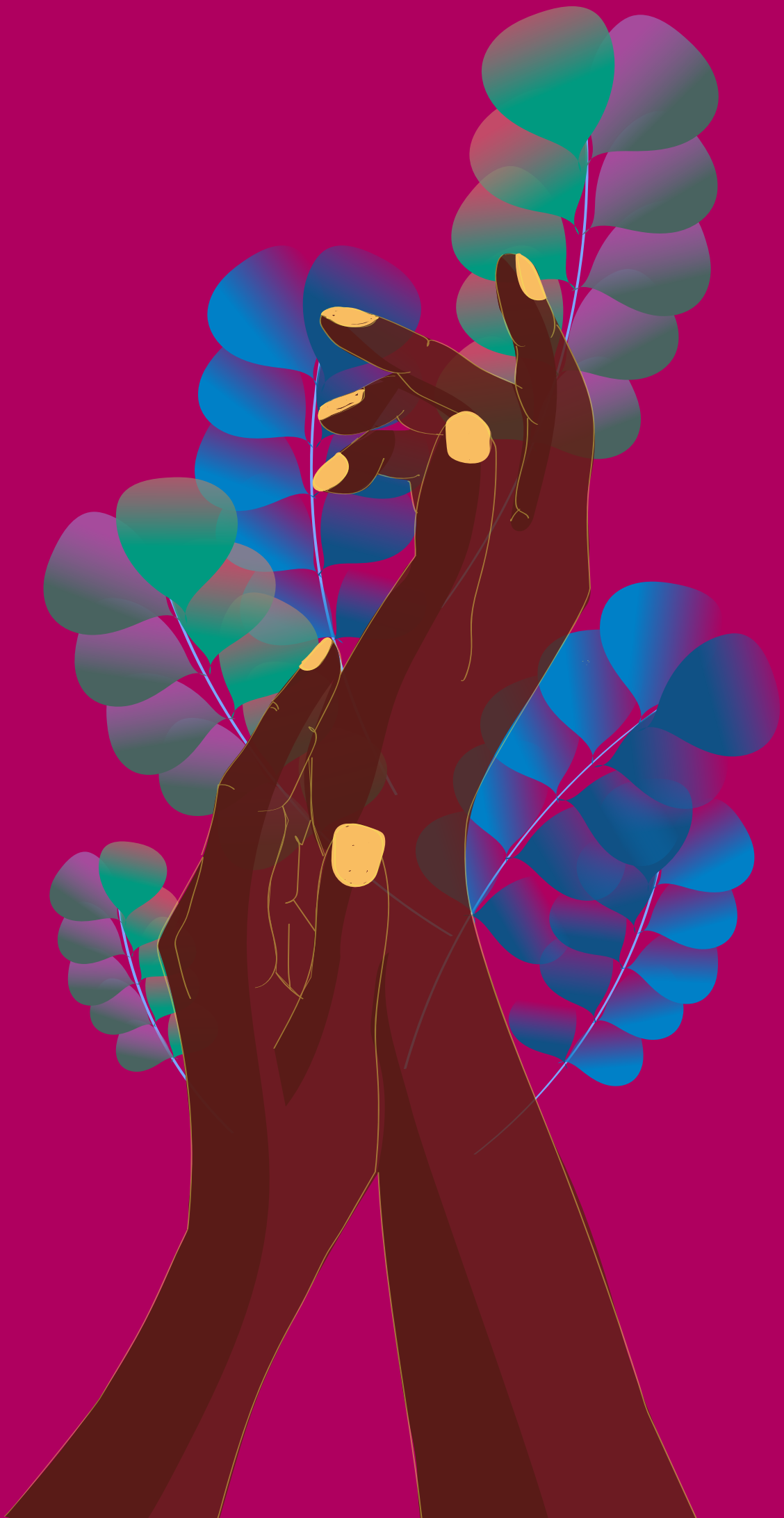
Here we see a clear understanding of ethics as entailing the core ethics requirements of consent, anonymity, doing no harm, and allowing withdrawal from the process. But we also see care coming through with regards to comfort, security and safety.

Safety

Given the nature of some of the projects in researching sensitive issues such as gender-based violence and hate speech, partners were asked if at any point they were concerned about their participants' safety. Partner 6 shared that this was the case "especially for many women that were from more vulnerable communities, women with disabilities, queer women that are not out to family members yet" (P6.2).

Partner 3 shared that they were not worried about the safety of their participants, but they did flag that "some of the participants were concerned that what they revealed to us or any information that they give us could go back to the companies or that their names shouldn't be revealed" (P3.2). This partner said that they addressed this by reassuring them of their anonymity, and that "nothing that they don't want us to write would be written" (P3.2).

Partner 4, on the other hand, said that they found that their participants were not as concerned about their safety as they, the researchers, were, sharing that the participants "didn't care about anonymity, they wouldn't bother if we put their names in the report, but we're still protective. We double-checked that no one could be easily recognised at all" (P4.1).

In the second round of interviews, Partner 4 further elaborated:

> We felt that we were more conscious about their security than [they were] themselves, because they didn't worry much about it. They are used to being verbally attacked. At least some of them, mainly the activists, they know how to cope with it. They have their own instruments. (P4.2)

In addition to anonymising their participants' details, Partner 4 also included the option of sending their participants a draft to read. Participants were encouraged to let the researchers know if there was any information about them that they would like to have removed from the report (P4.1). The matter of anonymising someone's details when they wish to be named is a complex issue, because there is a risk that researchers may be patronising or dismissive of someone's wish to be named and going against this wish disregards the participants' agency. This is an ethical issue that needs a critical feminist dialogue in order to explore it further. In the case of the FIRN projects, the research partners believed they were acting from a space of care that extended beyond the interview process and took into account potential long-term effects of participants being identifiable.

In the above discussion, we see partners expressing an understanding that participants were not simply data, and that the consequences of the researchers' interactions with the participants and the project should be considered. One such instance occurs when partners speak of the risk of revictimisation through participating in their study.

Partners were worried about the possible retraumatisation of participants, especially those who were participating in the research projects focusing on online gender-based violence. Partner 6 and Partner 2 spoke specifically to this issue and shared how they would consider their interaction with participants, as well as the kind of questions they asked to ensure that they would not harm their participants.

Partner 6 was also concerned with whether the interviews were too personal and invasive, and whether in the future "if there's a way for me to sort of prepare them a bit more, so that they know that the interviews are personal, and they could choose another space rather than at a coffee house" (P6.1).

They gave thought to the email invitations for interviews, and how to participants they may read as distanced and disengaged, and that they should rather frame their emails differently in the future to be more reflective of the nature of the research. Partner 6 was also concerned with having resources and support structures that they could refer participants to when "we open up these wounds" (P6.1).

Meanwhile, Partner 4 spoke of the importance of showing empathy and holding space for the sharing of the participants' experiences as victims of hate speech. They shared that it was important to create this space even "if the respondent would not reveal much of the personal story, then that would be okay for me" (P4.1). They added, "I was listening with understanding. I tried to be as careful as possible. I tried to respect their own traumatic experience and leave them to share as much as they want" (P4.1).

Feminist principles and values of research stress careful attention around power dynamics at the very beginning when establishing a research relationship. Partner 6 shared how they were concerned with the venues for their interviews with participants and how those that were public, in coffee shops for instance, had a different response to those done in private, such as at the participants' home. Partner 6 felt that participants were more aware of the space they were occupying in public, whereas in a private space, participants were "more emotional, they open up, and they are more relaxed" (P6.1).

This does create an interesting tension, because as researchers, we may speak of the safety of meeting in public spaces versus meeting in a private space such as the participant's home. But in the case of Partner 6 and their participants, we see a shift occur here where the private is seen as more comfortable for participants than in public. This is a matter of space, and something that ought to be negotiated with participants. The concern Partner 6 highlighted speaks to what the *Feminist Internet Ethical Research Practices* document spoke of with regards to the care of participants but also the need to practice care to avoid (re)producing harm. This applies to both participants and the researchers themselves.

Researchers, especially those doing research on traumatic experiences such as gender-based violence, are exposed to the trauma and the participants reliving the trauma. Partner 2 shared how they were reading over detailed notes from their co-researchers, and that the notes had captured not only what the participants said but also when they were crying during the interviews. Partner 2 shared that "it was really disturbing, and I was just reading it, I wasn't even the one who did the interview and the stories were really horrific for me" (P2.1).

This partner drew attention in the interview to the idea of "vicarious trauma" (P2.1), and how it may have been difficult for the researcher interviewing the person as well as the participant to speak about their experiences of violence. They said that it was important to give consideration to "protecting the people doing this kind of research" (P2.1).

Feminist ethics of care in this case extends to not only the safety of research participants but also the researchers themselves. Partner 6 spoke to the burden of the research on partners. They shared how they had to consider developing a system of care for themselves because of the emotional toll on themselves when researching gender-based violence. They said that it was a case of needing to take care of themselves and setting boundaries or strategies in place to ensure that they managed their exposure. For instance, with regards to the data analysis, they shared that they "limit[ed] myself to two [or] three transcriptions in a day. I think that is my way of caring for myself" (P6.1).

This shows an understanding of needing to strike a balance and limiting one's daily exposure to potentially traumatic or traumatising content. Some partners, like Partner 4 and Partner 5, worked within their research teams and organisations to "provid[e] a safe environment within the team" (P4.1).

Partner 4 spoke of the importance of ensuring that their co-researchers felt safe and comfortable enough to express their concerns (P4.1). Partner 5, speaking to explicit hate-based content, shared how their team had created the space to "stop to talk about it, and say 'that's really scary, should we go on, how do we view this?'" (P5.1).

Partner 5 added that this made them feel "safe and validated" (P5.1) by their team, and that the space that was created was one of care. In these instances, this is a case of feminist politics creating the space for researchers to feel that they can share their experiences with each other.

I asked the partners about their own safety. Partner 1 said that they were concerned about their safety, yet not so much as a result of the research itself, but rather because of the context in which they find themselves living, as their government is "openly anti-intellectualist" (P1.1). In their case, they are speaking to the socio-political context of their country, and that being a researcher and an academic put them at risk even if, as they said in their example:

> [W]e are exposed for what we are, not necessarily more for what we are doing in this project. Although we could study the life of amoeba, right? And we don't. We study political violence. We study hate speech. We study anti-rights discourse which is where the danger would be located. That puts us in a more vulnerable position. But that's what we do. That's part of the definition of our job, of our way of engagement. (P1.2)

These are ethical concerns that need to be accounted for when planning and doing feminist internet research. It is important to come from a space of care not only for the research participants but also the researchers and their teams. Partners brought into the conversation on ethics of care the issue of digital security – for both participants and research partners – as being about care.

Digital security as care

Researchers have access to information about their participants, participants who may be more vulnerable than they are. Partner 5 shared that because of this, the digital security and safety of participants is the responsibility of the researcher. In addition, researchers have a responsibility to themselves, and their team. Partner 5 spoke of how it was through the FIRN project that they became aware of the need to take their own security into consideration, because they "might not be safe online always, or the very issue I am studying might not make me safe" (P5.1).

Partner 4 also spoke of their concern for their digital security should their published report draw attention, saying:

> Maybe we could be publicly attacked. […] But what would worry me is if they try to get into my personal environment. This is what some of our respondents shared: that they searched for digital traces of them and their families. I mean the human rights activists. And they would threaten them. I mean not direct threats – for some of them direct threats like threatening emails. But yeah, if they try to hack your computer and your personal stuff and trace where you live, who you are, some personal details, that can be really ugly and serious. Yeah, I hope that would not happen. I don't know what to expect. (P4.2)

With regard to the concerns raised by Partner 4, we discussed the training they had received from APC/FIRN[89] and how they could implement these strategies to protect themselves. Partner 5 also brought up this training in our interview, sharing that for them it was as a result of the training that they implemented digital security practices. For instance, both Partner 5 and Partner 1 spoke about how they concentrated on small important steps like the use of passwords. Partner 5 said, "I became more careful about the passwords, about the antivirus that I used on the computer and we also had some concern for the storage of data and how that would be done" (P5.1).

In collecting data, not only in the publication of findings, there is a need to consider security, to have a constant awareness of risk, and to practice care with the data of participants, especially for those partners in more conservative and far-right countries. Partner 1 shared how it was important not to take things for granted – for both their participants' safety and their own – and that they ensured that they "evaluate[d] the risk at each stage, not only by ourselves but consulting with colleagues, consulting with our respondents" (P1.1).

In conducting feminist internet research, a feminist ethics of care that accounts for digital security and understands care to be beyond the physical or tangible safety of participants, as well as research partners, is needed. Feminist ethics of care is not only about putting measures in place to begin the research process, a checkbox of sorts, but about the entire process, even after the research has been completed.

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[89] The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and its Women's Rights Programme have done extensive work in highlighting digital safety and security, and it is thus central to most discussions on research and advocacy work. More examples of their digital safety and security focus can be found in the Feminist Principles of the Internet (https://feministinternet.org) and Take Back the Tech! (https://takebackthetech.net).

Key takeaways from this discussion on feminist ethics of care

Feminist ethics of care was key to the research process for most of the partners, speaking of it as being something that should be there from the beginning and ever present throughout the research process. They spoke of an ethics of care as being about the safety, security and comfort of participants. This also included traditional ethics principles of anonymity, consent and the right to withdraw, for instance. But they spoke of these as needing to be meaningful for participants, emphasising the need to ensure that participants are fully aware of what they are consenting to, and to not simply treat ethics as a check box as is often done with other forms of research that do not prioritise care.

Safety emerged as key in this discussion with partners speaking about their concern for participants. They shared that if participants were concerned about their own safety, they reassured them of their anonymity, and also included the option of sending them a draft to read and the option to request the removal of information they felt uncomfortable having shared before.

Anonymising participants' details when they don't wish to be anonymised emerged as a tension, and was seen to be something that could be dismissive of a participant's wishes even if researchers feel they are acting in the best interests of the participants at the time. This critical issue requires further feminist dialogue and exploration.

Partners raised the issue of the risk of revictimising or retraumatising participants when doing research on sensitive topics such as hate speech and gender-based violence. One partner flagged the need to prepare or better inform participants of what participating in the research may bring up for them, and to provide them with resources and support structures. The same partner, Partner 6, also flagged issues of space, and how space needs to be negotiated with participants to make sure they feel comfortable – and to give them the option of meeting in a public or private space depending on their levels of comfort.

Researchers also spoke of experiencing "vicarious trauma" (P2.1) through being exposed to the experiences of their participants. There is a need to account for this in the research process by creating systems of care for researchers, such as debriefing within their research team. Partners such as Partner 5 spoke of the need to create an environment which ensures that researchers felt safe to express their concerns about their safety. Partners spoke about their own safety in doing research on issues that may be frowned upon in more conservative countries. This discussion raised the issue of accounting for the safety of researchers as well as research participants when doing feminist internet research.

Lastly, partners extended the discussion on ethics of care to include digital security as an issue of care. This was a key finding in this discussion: that feminist internet researchers must consider digital security and safety when thinking about ethics of care. Partners shared how they ensured the safety of participants through secure storage of data, the use of passwords, and using an antivirus, for instance.

A feminist ethics of care approach is a necessary component to doing feminist internet research because it creates the space for a deeper commitment to ethical practice that is centred not only on the research participant and community, but also on the researcher.

COVID-19
and FIRN

The COVID-19 pandemic occurred in the middle of the meta-research project, and as we are all well aware, it dramatically impacted our lives globally. COVID-19 and the ensuing lockdowns saw a shift to remote work through digital platforms, such as Zoom. This shift to the digital revealed the continued global digital divide,[90] and reminded many, including feminist internet researchers, of the large structural and ethical issues in research. For instance, many activities such as work or education moved online, and for those who prior to COVID-19 had poor internet access, this shifted from being "inconvenient to emergency/crisis."[91] It is crucial that we remember that the digital divide is not only a matter of access to technology, but that it is a far more complex issue that "has roots in social inequality,"[92] such as class, gender and education.

Given the disruptive nature of COVID-19, we thought it was important to include research partners' experiences of the pandemic in the meta-research project. Partners were asked about the impact of COVID-19 on themselves as individuals and their projects, and lessons that can be learned from a moment like this. What arose from the interviews with partners was that the recurring themes around care and reflexivity were central to their experiences. Issues around the digital divide or digital inequalities did not emerge strongly at all in this discussion, but it is important to note that here, as it is perhaps revealing of the positionality of the research partners and their ability to access the internet. We encourage future feminist internet research to take into account the digital divide and associated inequalities.

Research partners shared that with COVID-19, "Everything changed, and it's been exhausting mainly" (P1.2). As Partner 3 shared, there was a "constant risk" (P3.2) of exposure to COVID-19. Partner 7 shared that their experience of COVID-19 left them "really distressed because my country was one of the most impacted countries as we have a poor public response to it. And we had so many deaths. And people around me were grieving" (P7.2).

Partners seemed to find working from home to be a challenge, and that the shift for them was "kind of unexpected, how hectic everything has become in terms of work because of the home office" (P1.2). Partner 5 found working from home challenging because of needing to track the time they were working. They also spoke to how housework and work got caught up in each other, and that this affected the way they concentrated work and home tasks in different ways, producing in them "a cognitive split in thinking from one context to the other" (P5.2).

Another partner shared that they were living with their family, and that increasingly they needed their "own space to work" and that "space is suddenly political and it's important because without space I can't work" (P6.2). For instance, sharing space with others resulted in delays in their

90 Turianskyi, Y. (2020, 14 May). COVID-19: Implications for the 'digital divide' in Africa. *Africa Portal.* https://www.africaportal.org/features/covid-19-implications-of-the-pandemic-for-the-digital-divide-in-africa

91 Lai, J., & Widmar, N.O. (2021). Revisiting the Digital Divide in the COVID-19 Era. *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy, 43*(1), 458-464. https://doi.org/10.1002/aepp.13104

92 Zheng, Y., & Walsham, G. (2021). Inequality of what? An intersectional approach to digital inequality under Covid-19. *Information and Organization, 31*(1) https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infoandorg.2021.100341

project not only because they "couldn't find a time and space to work" but also because:

> [I]t affects the way I think and process data as well. […] I was really stressed and I didn't realise how I think it's like the little things that really accumulated and I didn't know where and how to process all that stuff. (P6.2)

The "little things" and the "stuff" to be processed was a common aspect of COVID-19 and its impact on people who were needing to isolate and be in a state of lockdown. In addition, the pandemic illustrated negotiations of home space and understandings of labour – the distinction between professional work and housework, and how these two blurred or intersected, and required added negotiations that research partners may not have necessarily experienced prior to the shift to "working from home" that the pandemic asked of people.[93]

Partner 2 was the only partner who spoke of not feeling any anxiety around working from home because their team was "well-positioned to deal with a pandemic" since the organisation was "built to be a remote-first team" (P2.2).

Partner 4, like Partner 2, did not find the adjustment to working from home difficult at all because they work remotely. But what they did feel caused changes was the inability to see friends, to go to public spaces, and the ability to "spend better time to relax", explaining that it affected them "not as researchers but as human beings" (P4.2).

COVID-19 complicated the research process for partners. Some of the projects experienced delays due to COVID-19, while some were complete and at the stage of sharing findings. Partner 2 spoke of the impact of the pandemic on their research project, sharing that initially they were meant to launch their project report at the end of March 2020 but ended up releasing it in July 2020. They continued to work on the report and found that with the time that COVID-19 afforded them, they were able to refine their final report:

> So that was a positive-negative thing, because we couldn't do any dissemination [at] in-person events as we had planned, but then that ended up giving us time to make a better product which we then ended up releasing in July. (P2.2)

To account for the uncertainty of COVID-19 and the challenges the pandemic introduced, the FIRN team negotiated with the donor for a deadline extension, while also issuing letters of support to research partners, and providing support informed by a feminist ethics of care.

Partner 3 spoke to the issue of doing research during a pandemic, and how they needed to consider:

> [T]he ethics of doing research in that moment where the people that you might be speaking to, their concerns are just around survival, and whether it's even ethical to be doing research at that moment where people may not be able to participate in research without opening themselves up to more vulnerability. (P3.2)

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[93] Ibid.

Partner 3 also shared that the impact COVID-19 had on their project was primarily with regard to travel, and where they would share their research; as their country entered into a national lockdown, like many other countries, they too had to cancel all in-person events. At this stage they did not have any further work to do on the research project, but with some additional funds they had, they opted to "document some of the severe impact that the demographic that we were working with through the project, the set of workers, were facing" (P3.2).

In this case, we see a partner shift their focus to be responsive to the context (COVID-19) and the needs of their participants. If the conditions, including institutional or donor support, allow for this, it is worth considering doing so in times of crisis.

Partner 7's project, a participatory action research project, suffered some severe delays due to COVID-19. They shared that this was primarily:

> [B]ecause we had built this methodology really based on being there with the people in the field. [...] And so [we] built the methodology being there for five-six days in each visit and making a lot of visits, trying to be there every month or every two months. [...] And, well, this all stopped suddenly. We could not go there. We could not put the people at risk. And I think in the beginning we felt a bit lost, overwhelmed. (P7.2)

They continued to share that they were unsettled by COVID-19 and unable to think initially of a way around this. They eventually did come up with a plan for the continuation of their research, discussing with FIRN and planning a way around this, and ensuring that they shared their experience, saying that "we tried to think about that if we incorporate our experience this could be helpful to others, this could be a finding in research terms" (P7.2).

They shared that they intended to reduce the number of remaining visits, and to get the researchers tested before returning to the community, while also monitoring the status of COVID-19. They said they wanted to find a way to finalise the work they're doing with the community, and spoke of trying to find a way to "keep the commitment that we made with the community" (P7.2), while also bearing in mind the potential risk they would expose the community to, saying, "We are really concerned about going there and getting people infected" (P7.2). This ties back to the ethics of doing research, of doing no harm, but in particular practicing an ethics of care.

One partner was frustrated with themselves because they wished they had been able to "address it in the quick way our network works in terms of publishing short pieces and that kind of thing" (P1.2). I then asked the partner if this wasn't an aspect of hindsight, because at the time of the early moments of the pandemic, many were in shock and in survival mode, and to be on top of things academically or as a researcher was so far from our minds. They replied that while I may be right about this, "that doesn't take away the fact that it's still a challenge" (P1.2).

Considering the last comment, we asked partners what were the lessons they had learned as a result of COVID-19.

Lessons learned

Partners were asked to share some of the lessons they learned in light of the previous discussion on their experiences of COVID-19 in their personal lives and how it impacted their research. We thought that asking partners to share some of their key lessons could be useful to future feminist internet researchers who may also find themselves at any given point in the midst of a crisis.

Some of the lessons that partners learned included managing and "gaug[ing] our expectations better" (P1.2), while giving thought to timelines and deadlines and how to manage them in the future. They also spoke of supporting partners within networks (P3.2) and working to ensure that in the future we are "building resilient organisations" (P2.2).

Partner 4 suggested taking "time for self-reflection and self-evaluation" (P4.2), and being gentle with oneself, while Partner 5 spoke of the need to "giv[e] myself time, maybe not be able to do something right now or everything that I must do in a week and maybe not doing everything but more focused. Because the pandemic and the social distance has been a time where focusing has been very difficult" (P5.2).

Lastly, partners such as Partner 7 emphasised what working with a group involved in feminist research provided them with, and that because of the feminist principles they were able to process and manage the crisis "because we already have some awareness of care" (P7.2).

Key takeaways from this discussion on COVID-19 and FIRN

COVID-19 presented a significant challenge globally, and it is not surprising then that research partners found themselves in a space of distress as the pandemic had implications for their personal lives and their research. Some partners found themselves exhausted by the constant risk of living with potential exposure to the virus, while others struggled to navigate home as a space of both work and rest. Research projects were delayed as a result of the virus, and partners needed to strategise how they would complete their projects by either changing their approach or reducing what they wished to achieve with the project, or how they wished to share their findings by moving events from offline to online.

COVID-19 brought a strong reminder of an ethics of care towards participants by not putting them at potential risk of exposure. However, in response to one partner's statement that they wished they had been able to respond more quickly to the virus by publishing work in response to it, it begs reminding that researchers need to account for themselves as well from a space of care. A global pandemic is a stressful experience, and while in hindsight it may seem that researchers could have been more responsive and produced more, that sort of view disregards the very human nature of reacting to a crisis, and how simply surviving overrides the need to produce research outputs.

Before moving onto the concluding discussion of the meta-research project report, it is important to note that COVID-19 was also a reminder that

research is not linear and that processes can be messy. This was another key finding of the meta-research project, that research is messy. Mess or messiness[94] can be broadly understood as that which we clean up, hide, discard or ignore in our writing up of our research processes. For instance, when needing to adjust a research design or research questions; it can be a moment of pause or delay in the research due to a pandemic, or the researcher's own positionality impacting on the project. Messiness in research is all of that which does not follow a clear and linear path, and which we often as researchers clean up so that the final research report may be presented as clear, rigorous and legitimate. Messiness in research is often treated as something negative or even a failing of the research, whereas it should be thought of as something which could be positive and productive, and should be actively encouraged.[95]

Feminist internet research can benefit from engaging with the messiness of doing research. In fact, embracing messiness ought to be considered as fundamental to doing feminist internet research. This is because it is through accepting and embracing a state of mess that we are able to embark on new directions in our knowledge production that can be truly transformative in challenging the way we do research, and what we deem to be neat and clean processes. I make recommendations in another piece titled "Feminist Internet Research is Messy"[96] for embracing and engaging with the messiness of doing feminist internet research.

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[94] Bloyce, D. (2004). Research is a messy process: A case study of a figurational sociology approach to conventional issues in social science research methods. *Graduate Journal of Social Science, 1*(1), 144-166; Cook, T. (2009). The purpose of mess in action research: building rigour though a messy turn. *Educational Action Research, 17*(2), 277-291.

[95] Eldén, S. (2013). Inviting the messy: Drawing methods and 'children's voices'. *Childhood, 20*(1), 66-81. https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568212447243

[96] McLean, N. (2022). Feminist Internet Research Is Messy. In N. Aavriti, T. S. Hussen, & M. Fossatti (Eds.), *Feminist By Design, APRIA Journal Issue 4* (forthcoming).

Conclusion

Feminist internet research has up until this meta-research project not been clear cut in terms of its guiding approach. It still is not clear cut, but through the meta-research project's exploration of the eight FIRN projects' methodologies and ethical frameworks, it is a little clearer. What emerged from the meta-research project was an understanding of four critical pillars to doing feminist internet research: standpoint theory, intersectionality, reflexivity, and feminist ethics of care.

These may not be the only pillars in future feminist internet research, but they can be considered to be core and catering to the fundamental aspects of feminist internet research. Namely, accounting for positions of the researcher and participants (standpoint theory); considering intersecting identities and oppressions, and how they may exacerbate each other (intersectionality); thinking critically about one's work, positionality and power in relation to the research participants, research project and research partners (reflexivity); and practicing an ethics of care to ensure the safety of research participants, their communities, and oneself as researcher (feminist ethics of care).

Other projects may require additional pillars to support their intended work, such as participatory design or community-based research. Indeed, throughout the process, we have encouraged further exploration of pillars that can support the work of feminist internet research.

This meta-research project not only sought to explore the FIRN projects' methodologies and ethical frameworks, but also sought to bring the projects into conversation with each other. The way this was achieved was through exploring the data for common themes that arose. It was from these common themes that the four pillars for doing feminist internet research emerged. This concluding section will briefly revisit the four pillars, as well as the discussion on COVID-19.

Standpoint theory provided the space for researchers to consider the lived experiences and subsequent knowledge positions of people who do not usually find themselves featured in research. It also emerged that feminist politics and political action were core to the standpoint of the FIRN research partners and present in their research. Research partners took their feminist politics as the starting point for their research.

Research partners set out to include those who are often ignored, and sought to bring their different experiences into focus. They also took into account how their own standpoints interacted with the standpoints of their participants, and worked to ensure that they as researchers did not overshadow their participants. What was key here and elsewhere in the discussion was the need to think critically and carefully about the role of the researcher and the kind of power and privileges associated with the researcher's identity and role as they relate to research participants. Partners felt that an intersectional approach was necessary to ensure that intersecting power axes of identity were also accounted for when considering power and privilege.

Research partners spoke of the importance of intersectionality, as well as inclusivity, in doing feminist internet research, and how intersectionality creates an opportunity to add a more complex analysis of power. Partners spoke of accounting for intersectionality through creating space for

different lived experiences, especially those that are left out – and here we saw an overlap with standpoint theory in accounting for different standpoints.

Partners, at times, used intersectionality and inclusivity interchangeably, and because of this we noted that in future feminist internet research it is important to be clear about what these two concepts mean. Because of this interchangeable use of intersectionality and inclusivity, we explored inclusivity with the partners. A key finding from this exploration was that partners saw inclusivity as intersectionality in practice, and as a means of being more representative of different lived experiences. Partners also brought our attention to the need to be reflexive when considering who is present and who is absent from the research, and to consider the implications of this for feminist internet research.

Reflexivity emerged as the third pillar to doing feminist internet research because it asks that researchers critically consider the research process and their involvement in it, including their positionality, and how this may impact on the research participants and community. This brought up issues of privilege and power, including the implications of doing research on technology which in itself has its own power dynamics.

Reflexivity was seen as an ongoing process, and seen to be a commitment within the research process. Partners spoke of reflection as a means of achieving reflexivity; this emerged because partners were using reflexivity and reflection interchangeably. In exploring the use of the two terms as substitutes for each other, researchers spoke of how reflection was the means of practicing reflexivity. As stated within this discussion earlier, it is important that future feminist internet research notes that reflection cannot do the core work of reflexivity, but it is a starting point to doing reflexive work.

In the discussion on reflexivity, discomfort emerged as a core sub-theme. Discomfort was flagged as being a potential first indicator of a researcher needing to engage with their positionality and to think about this critically. Partners also spoke of the need to embrace discomfort because of the potential it has for new insights, and being productive in knowledge building. The discussion on discomfort also raised the need for a feminist ethics of care when doing feminist internet research; this was the final theme that emerged from the interviews with partners.

Feminist ethics of care was mentioned by all research partners, and many spoke of the necessity of an ethics of care to be present throughout the research process. From this discussion, safety emerged as a core sub-theme. Some of this discussion included an overall concern for the safety of their participants and protecting their identity. In this discussion an item for further feminist dialogue and exploration emerged, that of wishing to protect a participant's identity when they wished to named, and the implications of anonymising their identity against their wishes. In addition to safety, digital safety and security emerged as a matter for an ethics of care. This was a key finding in this discussion: that feminist internet researchers must consider digital security and safety when thinking about ethics of care. Partners shared how they safeguarded their participants through secure storage of data, the use of passwords, and using an antivirus, for instance.

Another core sub-theme was the issue of revictimisation of participants and vicarious trauma experienced by researchers working with sensitive issues like gender-based violence. Partners flagged the need to better prepare and inform research participants of what their involvement in the research would entail, and what it could bring up for them. The issue of vicarious trauma raised concerns around the safety of research partners, and the need to enable systems of care within research teams so that research partners could express concerns about their safety and/or debrief with their research team after a particularly difficult experience.

As stated earlier, a feminist ethics of care is vital to doing feminist internet research because it allows for a deeper commitment to ethical practice that centres not only participants and their communities but also the researcher and research team conducting feminist internet research.

After the presentation of the four key pillars of doing feminist internet research, this report also discussed the impact of COVID-19 on research partners, as well as the researcher's reflections on the messy nature of feminist internet research. Research partners shared their experiences of COVID-19, and the impact it had on them both in their personal lives and their research. They spoke of the challenges the pandemic brought to their FIRN projects and how they worked with these challenges, and from this they also shared some of the lessons they learned. One thing that became clear in the discussion on COVID-19 was the necessity for an ethics of care for both research participants and research partners.

As a parting remark, it is important to bear in mind that what is presented in this meta-research project report is in no way exhaustive of how to go about doing feminist internet research, but it is the start of a much-needed conversation on what a feminist internet research methodology and ethical framework could look like.