

American University in Cairo

AUC Knowledge Fountain

Faculty Book Chapters

1999

Um Saber, Shadia and my Self: The Power Relationship Between the Researched and the Researcher

Iman Bibars

Follow this and additional works at: https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty_book_chapters



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Near Eastern Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

APA Citation

Bibars, I. (1999). *Um Saber, Shadia and my Self: The Power Relationship Between the Researched and the Researcher*. American University in Cairo Press. , 41-62

https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty_book_chapters/1252

MLA Citation

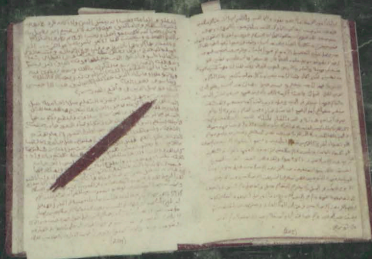
Bibars, Iman *Um Saber, Shadia and my Self: The Power Relationship Between the Researched and the Researcher*. American University in Cairo Press, 1999. pp. 41-62

https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty_book_chapters/1252

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by AUC Knowledge Fountain. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Book Chapters by an authorized administrator of AUC Knowledge Fountain. For more information, please contact fountadmin@aucegypt.edu.

Between Field and Text: Emerging Voices in Egyptian Social Science

Seteney Shami
Linda Herrera
Editors



Contributors

Nadje Al-Ali
Iman Bibars
Anita Fabos
Farha Ghannam

Sari Hanafi
Heba El-Kholy
Hania Sholkamy
Mohammed Tabishat



HN
786
A85
B48
1999

CAIRO PAPERS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE
Volume 22, Number 2

UM SABER, SHADIA AND MY SELF: THE POWER RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE RESEARCHED AND THE RESEARCHER¹

IMAN BIBARS

Introduction

It has not been customary in social science research for the researcher to write about her personal experiences in the field. The best known cases of this have been the reflections of anthropologists and sociologists who have published their field memoirs long after becoming famous. Roberts argues, however, that the problems and concerns raised by researchers while they are doing research are themselves of sociological importance and should not be limited to personal accounts (Roberts 1981a:1).

Thus, I consider it imperative as a researcher embracing a feminist research framework to share with others the preliminary results of my field experience. I believe that it highlights several methodological concerns especially relevant to female researchers. Some of the issues that I raise here may help to start a dialogue among women, especially among feminist researchers, about pre-fabricated modes and models of research. The following notes concern the process of feminist research and its feasibility.

In brief, this paper will raise the following issues:

1. Can feminist research really lead to the empowerment of the research participants?
2. Can the power relationship between the researcher and the researched reach equality?
3. How are we both, the researcher and the researched, affected by the process of the research?

Before delving into these concerns, it is important to explain the topic of my research.

¹ This paper was originally written in Arabic for a workshop held by The Women and Memory Group. This group will publish this paper in Arabic.

of Cairo. In a sense its residents shared the same feelings of uprootedness as the inhabitants of the squatter areas and did not have well-established networks or ties. However, they were resettled in a very new and much cleaner and organized location. Many of the basic services were provided to them and a major development project was implemented in the sub-district. Five years after resettlement and the beginning of the project, their lives and habits have changed and common interests have emerged among them.

Methodology

In order to obtain the qualitative answers I was seeking in my research, I had to select an appropriate methodology and tools. I selected a non-probability sampling technique described by Burgess. This technique follows the patterns of social relations in a particular setting, whereby the researcher begins with a small group of informants and after working with them is able to work with their friends and other groups through a "snowball effect." (Burgess 1988:55).

I was introduced to all the cases through the NGO staff, key informants, and national leaders. Through informants I selected *de jure* FHHs. At my request, they introduced me to widows, divorcées, deserted women, and wives of imprisoned husbands. However through my daily work with the NGOs I entered homes and got to know a lot more women who are not part of what is traditionally considered an FHH.

As a feminist researcher, I was committed from the beginning to using a theoretical framework and a methodology that are gender sensitive. Upon reflection on the research experience I am compelled to ask myself whether my research was really feminist or not, participatory or not? More importantly, I am forced to consider whether it is feasible to engage in feminist research as envisioned and advocated by Western feminist researchers.

Feminist Research: Empowerment or Liberation?

Feminism is an ideology that aims to bring women from private seclusion and silence into dialogue within the public arena. Feminists argue that women's oppression is not inevitable or natural, but that it can and must be

changed (Stanley and Wise 1983; Roberts 1981). In response to conventional research methods, feminist research is concerned with removing the male biases from social sciences and social reality (Hartung; Ollenburger; Moore, H.A.; and Deegan 1988:1-22). Traditional research typically generalizes from the experience of 'males' to people in general, in a way that would not occur with an all-female research population (Stanley and Wise 1983: 27-29). Women as subjects of research emerged only with the rise of feminist research. Thus feminist research fills in some gaps in traditional social sciences because most previous research was influenced by predominant male ideology in which the unit of study was the man (Moore 1988).

However, while there is no definite consensus over what constitutes feminist research, most researchers agree that at a minimum, it involves the deconstruction of implicit ideas of the male as the norm and female as the other. Feminist research insists upon the importance of highlighting the experience and very existence of women. Its main concern has been the method and process of conducting research (Stanley and Wise 1983: 28-30).

An important dimension of feminist research is the need to ensure that the power relationship between the researcher and the research subjects is different from what it is in traditional research, which is embedded with masculine and patriarchal norms. The researcher must realize that she is not better than or more experienced than the subjects and must build upon their experiences. It must also be clear to the researcher that the other woman being researched is not an object for scientific study. She must realize that both must benefit and learn from their relationship. This ideology emphasizes partnership and treating the researched as subjects without exploiting them. In sum, feminist research is meant to be conducted *for* and not *on* women. However, I do believe that a power dimension is present in some academic feminist research as well. Although the call is to learn from and share with the researched women, there is an elitist notion of us being the theorizing researching elite, the feminists, and them the experiencing researched women (Stanley and Wise 1983:7). We use their stories and experiences to develop abstract theories that rationalize what we believe and seek to prove.

The Research Topic

Female headed households (FHHs) constitute a significant proportion of rural and urban households in Egypt. Estimates of their prevalence range from 16 percent of all households in Egypt (Handoussa 1994), to 18 percent (Fergany 1993)². Female headship has been identified by feminists and economists as an indicator of poverty³. Handoussa (1994) has shown that FHHs are negatively affected by and have become more vulnerable as a result of structural adjustment policies. In her study of governmental policies supporting female household heads, Handoussa noted the negative economic impact of social aid programs and called upon the state to develop a more comprehensive and equitable policy.

The state is an important partner in promoting and pursuing social changes to empower women, that is, to redistribute resources between men and women (Goetz 1992). The aim of my research is to examine the impact of the state's social policy, and specifically its welfare programs, on the autonomy and the status of female household heads. The study will examine the Egyptian welfare bureaucracy's policies and programs towards FHHs that are poor and that are concentrated in low-income urban areas.

However, this study is not concerned with the association between poverty and female headship. Rather, I am interested in the vulnerability of this group and the constraints they face because they are women who bear the financial, legal, and social responsibilities for their families. The focus here is to examine if the welfare policies directed at female household heads reinforce gender inequality and female vulnerability. My main assumption is that policies of the welfare system are not haphazard, but reflect a predominant and embedded ideology that maintains and reinforces the cultural values of society. Welfare state programs, policies, and social assistance activities with a focus on female household heads are evaluated in terms of: coverage, accessibility, definitions, criteria for eligibility, and how these affect women's status and position vis-a-vis society and the

² The Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women (ADEW) found that 29 percent of all households in Manshiet Nasser, a low-income urban area, are headed by women.

³ See for example, Pearce 1990; Buvinic 1993; Buvinic and Gupta 1994.

government. Moreover the study investigates the quality of these women's experiences with the public bureaucracy and the coping mechanisms that they have developed.

Research Sites

For this study any urban area would have been appropriate. However, since population density and concentration is high in capital cities and the slums and squatter areas exhibit all types of poverty, I decided to select pockets of poverty in Egypt's capital city, Cairo, as well as in Alexandria. Since there are innumerable low-income areas and 68 squatter areas in Cairo and 56 in Alexandria, I relied on my contacts and my experience in low-income urban areas of both cities in selecting the areas of study.

The selection was based on certain criteria such as the presence of a well-established community-based non-governmental organization (NGO), cooperation from respondents and key figures in the area, accessibility to the area, and the fact that no other study was being undertaken in the same location at the time of my research nor had there been in the recent past.

I worked in seven low-income urban communities. Four of these areas were clear-cut squatter areas. They were either unplanned areas, illegal housing, or temporary government shelters that had turned into squatter areas as families expanded and started building rooms for their offspring while they waited for 20 or more years for government housing. In these areas people were gathered from different sub-districts and thus initially they were only a community in the geographic sense, without any traditional or kinship ties. However, during the last 20 years a new culture had emerged among the squatters, one that was less formal, less conservative, and less traditional than those of the more formal areas in my sample.

Two other sub-districts were relatively old; they were both traditional and well established areas. Safety networks and kinship ties connected members of these communities together. These communities tended to be more conservative and the information system and networks among its women and men were more well established.

The seventh sub-district was a mixture between the above two types. It was a new resettlement area for people who were displaced by the 1992 earthquake; its residents were originally inhabitants of various old districts

Another unique dimension of feminist research is its empowering and emancipatory aspect. The feminist research project must lead to the empowerment of the researched and to the transformation of their lives (Maguire 1987). Women should be able to use directly the product of feminist research in order to formulate policies and provisions necessary for feminist activities (Stanley and Wise 1983; Maguire 1987). Stanley and Wise (1983) maintain that unless the research process is participatory, that is, unless the researched participate in developing the methodology and research questions, then an incomplete feminist approach has been adopted. The purpose of participatory research is not merely to describe and interpret social reality, but to radically change it. Furthermore, the intent is to transform reality *with*, rather than *for* the oppressed people (Maguire 1987:28). Thus what differentiates feminist research from qualitative and anthropological research is that it calls for the empowerment and liberation of the research subjects. There is a claim that participatory research is not gender specific and that all those who work with oppressed groups are seeking a more egalitarian and equal relationship with their subjects⁴. What is unique about feminist research is that it focuses on the experience of oppressed women regardless of race or class.

However, to be as participatory as Maguire (1987) and Stanley and Wise (1983) call for, the research subjects should be the ones asking for help. They as a group must have identified their problems and should initiate the process of action research to reach a solution to their problems. This is not the case in most academic research. In feminist academic research, the topic and tools have often already been chosen prior to commencing the study. It is true that being a feminist makes one more gender sensitive to the needs and experiences of the participants; nonetheless in most academic research, the research subjects have not called for help nor have they chosen the research methods and tools. The next sub-section is a description of the concerns that plagued me in applying the rules of the feminist methodology to my research.

⁴ Personal communication with Dr. Archie Mafeje, a former anthropology professor at the American University in Cairo.

My Experience

In my research I tried to apply the ethics of feminism and feminist research. I aimed and hoped to empower the women I chose to study. But in order for the research to be truly liberating it had to be participatory and in that sense it had to involve the subjects of research in the whole process from beginning to end.

In choosing and defining the research problematic, I did not work with the researched women; we did not generate the research problematic together. However, the assumptions I made and wanted to investigate were a result of my previous work with poor women in rural and urban areas and encounters with FHHs during the previous 11 years working with an NGO. On one hand, commencing the process was not as participatory as feminist research calls for, yet on the other it was not as divorced from actual life experience as traditional research often is.

The subjects of the research were not involved in my choice of research topic, my methodology, nor in the selection of my research sites. In fact I selected the research sites before I even met any of the women I interviewed. In addition the general guidelines and framework of the methodology of the research were established before I started my field work. In that sense I arrived at the research site with my topic and tools. Can I claim to have adopted a feminist approach to research?

The women were informed about my research but were not involved in developing the research plan. I introduced them to the general theme of my research but I did not reveal my assumptions to them in order to avoid influencing their opinions or their perception of their roles, status, and relationships with the government, their community, and the NGOs in the area.

As a feminist I respected their experiences, built a very trusting and warm relationship with the women, and made a conscious effort to break barriers of class, education, and hierarchy between us. I tried not to come to the area with any preconceived ideas about my findings. In fact, many of my observations, unexpected and surprising, redirected me toward other areas of inquiry that I had not previously considered. In addition I redesigned my interviews during the first month in response to some of my early observations and suggestions from women and key participants.

I sat with the key participants and several women from the community during the field work and discussed some of my findings with them to get their feedback. In weekly gatherings to wash clothes, in which I participated regularly, women asked about my work, my findings, and my opinion about their traditions and habits. Their comments and ideas affected the flow of my research several times and redirected me into new areas. For example, through my encounters with them I realized that the decision-making process within a household is very complex. Many decisions were taken by men although women were breadwinners; in other cases the in-laws, especially the mother-in-law, made the decisions although they were not contributing financially to the household. Such a discovery affected how I defined household headship and alerted me to the complexity of the issue.

Regarding my relationship as a researcher with the researched, I tried to overcome all barriers between us, especially the class barrier. I realized that the researched have their own life experiences, basic and practical life skills, and wisdom that can benefit me in my life. I also realized that the difference in our accumulated experience does not make one better than the other. However, I also found out that the desired equality and egalitarian power relations between the researcher and researched in their ideal forms are hard to achieve. Although I listened to all their advice about how to deal with my husband, that I should become pregnant before it is too late, and how to become pregnant, I continued to be their major source of information for a different lifestyle; their window to the sky. Did we then achieve equality? Were they my source of information on domestic matters and I their source on the 'outside world'? "The researcher and the researched are positioned differently in relation to both the production of knowledge and the kinds and range of knowledge they possess" (Maynard and Purvis 1995:6). In this situation, which knowledge held more power or potential power and gave it to its holder?

I believe that the class difference did position us differently, in addition to our different roles as researcher and researched. My middle-class values and ideas were challenged by the more realistic and adaptive value system of the poor women I have met. My moral dilemma about Shadia, whose story I will recount below, is a clear example of how my middle-class values 'won out' over my neutrality as a researcher.

Finally, I reach here the last concern raised by this paper, which is: how

do we affect the researched and how are we affected as researchers by the research process?

In order to illustrate the depth of such a relationship, I will cite here two case studies. What I will present here is my own perception of these relationships and how they affected me. In the areas where I conducted my research, women were most willing to express their thoughts and beliefs freely to another woman. My presence seemed to give them the space to judge, condemn what they see (in their personal lives) as wrong, sanction what they approve of, and express their true feelings. By talking to me, I feel that they found a means of self expression and claimed the right to speak.

The following are the stories of two women who taught me a lot and who I grew to admire and respect. Our relationships exemplify the paradoxes, challenges, and rewards of feminist research.

Um Saber⁵

She sought me out, chose me, and adopted me and became one of my most important and reliable informants in the community. She decided that I would become a member of her family and she involved me in their daily problems. I found myself involved in the selection of her son's furniture and potential grooms for her daughters. She also got involved, without invitation, in my life. She gave me advice about my sexual and intimate relationship with my husband. She told me what I should do and wear to be more appealing to him.

But who is Um Saber? She is a representation of what is known in Egyptian culture as a *bint al balad*, which literally means 'daughter of the country.' This phrase actually refers to strong, generous, helpful, and reliable Egyptian people. Um Saber is an example of a low-income urban woman who controls her life as much as any poor person can.

My real name is Hoba, not very many are called that. It is an old Arab name and I am proud of it. I have two sisters and a brother, but they have always relied on me. My father was a great man. He was a very poor man but a great father, and while he was alive we

⁵ Names used here are fictional in order to maintain the anonymity of the research participants.

never needed anyone and we always knew that he would be there for us and would protect us. My mother was a traditional woman, she loved my brother more than any of us. She was not very emotional to us, the girls.

When I got married, my father told me that he was a poor man and that if Aly wants me he will take me with the dress I am wearing and be responsible for everything else. I was married in one room with only a bed nothing else, not even a sofa or a cupboard. Whatever we got after that, and thank God we have many things now, we got it all through my savings from the little that Aly made. When we were first married he got only 50 piasters per day. It reached 20 pounds per day now. However, now he works one day and then stops working for weeks at a time.

I have two girls and a boy. Saber is the oldest and he is a very brave young man. He finished the High Institute of Engineering and he has been paying his way. He is also a carpenter like his father. But he is even more clever for he is specialized in furniture and not only doors and windows like his father.

My sister Sakina is younger than me. She has married twice, her first husband died after four years of marriage and after she had two children. Then she stayed unmarried for five years. She was happy and our father was taking care of her. When her first husband fell sick, my father was the one to stand by him and to take him to the hospital. You see my brother-in-law got the bad disease, the big C, and it was a very bad experience. My father is a very simple man, he used to sell newspapers in the big street downtown and people knew him. His customers included a lot of very important people and one of them was a doctor at that hospital. Mohammed, my brother-in-law was so attached to my father that everyone thought that he was my father's son and not his son-in-law. The doctors were too shy to tell him that he was dying but they told my father who said that he would spend any money to save him. After a whole year of misery and expense we all knew that it was the end. My brother-in-law asked to be taken to his family's house and we sent him there, and a month later he died. My sister is very naive, she is not as practical or knowledgeable as I; I am the one who really knows how to go around. My father trusted me and knew that I would be able to solve problems when they arose.

Um Saber chose the role of the matriarch, the chief of her family, by her own will. She was not only responsible for her husband and children but she also took care of her parents and her second brother-in-law when they grew old and sick. Um Saber's personality is that of a leader who taught herself to get what she wants. She is very intelligent and knows her way around.

When my brother-in-law, Am Mustafa (uncle Mustafa), fell sick I had to take care of him. He has always been there for me and was very kind to me when my husband was away. He is like another father to me, for he is much older than me. He is married to our eldest sister. I feel he is dying and that is why I feel responsible for his wife and three girls. Reda, the eldest, is now 25 and I have decided to marry her off to the man she loves and will help them with the furniture and everything. My sister is older than me but she is very naive and will not be able to handle all that. I have asked the international NGO that works here to provide Reda with a bed and a stove. They do that for needy people. I work with them sometimes as a natural leader and they know and trust me. So their boss filled in all the forms for Reda and she will get the furniture before the small feast. I also contacted Mr. M. from the local NGO where you yourself work and asked them to help Reda in building and painting the room where she will be married and Mr. M. has agreed. I do them a lot of favors and they know that Reda deserves all this kindness. I do this because I want God to help my children when I die.

Our relationship started when I noticed in her these leadership qualities and she found in me a potential source of power and prestige in the community. It is important to see my relationship with her within such a context, for among all of my key informants and researched women, we (Um Saber and I) had the most equal relationship, although I think that in many instances she had more power.

She seemed to recognize that by spending time with me and being my link and contact with a number of women, she would be considered a *wastiet khier*, a source of good and benefit for her people. By introducing me to other women and informing me about the habits and culture of the community, she gained respect from me as well. It is important to note here that Um Saber and all the researched women knew very well that I would

not offer any material benefit in the present or in the future. However, these women felt so marginalized and neglected that having me listen to their problems and show concern was encouraging in itself. They had no mechanisms to express their misfortunes and found in me, a stranger, a neutral but sympathetic listener who would not be around for long or tarnish their reputation with any of the information they gave me. Thus Um Saber was able to carve for herself a central role and many women in the community sought her out so that she would introduce me to them.

Her position with the women was not an outcome of my research, for her family and the community at large had considered Um Saber a leader of sorts for a long time. She has been the liaison between the NGOs in the area and the community. More than that, she has been the source of information to many widows, poor, and sick people about the regular and temporary welfare programs offered by the government, NGOs, and Islamic groups. In several cases she went so far as to take the widow or needy woman by hand to the appropriate offices and introduce her to the officials or the program administrators. She was a source of information and support to all the less-advantaged women and men in her community. What she asked in return was not material gain but community recognition and acceptance of her role as a leader in her community.

I have excellent relationships with the employees of the MOSA [Ministry of Social Affairs] office of this sub-district and the employees of the two NGOs also trust me. They come to me to check if the names and addresses of applicants to their welfare and development programs are correct. When Am Fahmy (Uncle Fahmy) our neighbor died last year, and he left a wife and five children behind him, and his family came to me for help. His wife is a kind woman and he was very strict with her so she has no experience in dealing with the outside world and government procedures. I told her what papers to get, introduced her to Mr. M. and Ms. S. from the MOSA office and also went to her children's school and convinced them to exempt the children from the school fees as they are orphans⁶.

In return for all her efforts, Um Saber was the largest beneficiary of all

⁶ According to the Egyptian government, any child who has lost her/his father is considered an orphan.

available governmental and non-governmental services; she could be labeled a 'professional assistance seeker.' Yet Um Saber was not an opportunist; she deserved all the assistance she got. Her husband was an *arzoki* (a person without a steady job), trained as a carpenter but without regular employment and her three children were in school. She used her negotiation skills to build formal and informal networks with government officials in order to reach services and maintain her family. She knew all the rules and learned how to circumvent the rigid regulations. She knew what documents were required, how and where to fill out the required applications, and the time schedules of all types of grants and financial aid. She also cultivated very strong and warm relationships with the bureaucrats who administered these programs and succeeded in making them fill out all the forms for her. For Um Saber was illiterate. She relates how she survived in difficult financial times:

When things started to look bad for us, my husband thought of going to any Arab country to increase our income. Many people in the late 70s and 80s went to the Gulf countries and made a lot of money. By 1989 he thought of going to Iraq. Now just going there cost so much money. By that time we had started to be a little broke. We were always living within our means without any debts until this cursed Iraq trip. I never wanted him to go, but he was feeling very down and I wanted him to feel sure of himself again and be the man of the house. So we started selling our things, electric appliances and other things we had here. I sold the black and white TV and other things, and my father lent us 1000 pounds. Of course my sisters were very jealous and thought that my father was always giving me things and not them, but this is not true. He was generous to all of us, but Aly and I were very kind to him. We were always there when he needed us. My two sisters were not like that and my brother was always traveling.

So Aly went to Iraq and for 8 months I heard nothing from him. I started borrowing money from everyone hoping that when he returns he will have money and we can repay everyone. It is very normal here to borrow from your neighbors for we trade places. One day I borrow from one neighbor and maybe another day when her husband is not working she will borrow from me, too. Of course, my father used to help us very much at that time, and also Am Mostafa, the husband of my eldest sister. He also helped and

so did many other nice people. They used to come and visit us bringing things with them as gifts, maybe a meal, bread or something like that so that we would not feel embarrassed.

I was also able to go to the school and tell the social worker there that my husband is not around and I have no source of income. So he wrote me an application which I took to The Islamic Bank of Faysal and they gave me 30 pounds for my son. This is not an easy task. I had to fill out all the papers with the social worker at school, and then I went to the Bank in one area downtown. They said that I have to go to the other area (an hour and half away) but of course I had to go there another day for their working hours are very short. Then when I went to their branch in the Giza area, beside the Pyramids, they gave me another paper and asked me to go the MOSA branch in my district to stamp it. I could have waited for them to use their mail, but I would have waited forever. I have a friend who had to prepare the necessary papers three times because it was lost between all these offices. Anyway, I went to our branch maybe three times before the employee was there, and she was very nice and helpful and stamped them immediately. Now one has to do this exercise every six months in order to get 30 pounds. This year I missed the time when the Zakat committee meets to agree on the applications so maybe I will apply again by the end of this year.

All these talents and abilities increased my respect and admiration for Um Saber. She is an example of a woman who has overcome all obstacles facing the poor, especially poor women in Egypt, and who is able to turn all situations to her advantage.

But has my relationship with Um Saber affected either her role in the community or her way of thinking? Did I in any way contribute to her liberation or empowerment? What seems apparent is that Um Saber used our relationship to gain prestige in her community and with her family members, especially with her new in-laws. She brought them with her when she came to visit me at my house. She was showing off and using me to gain more power over the new in-laws and increase the power of her daughter.

Three months after I left this area, Um Saber's niece got married. Um Saber insisted that they carry out the traditional deflowering ritual, the *dukhla baladi*, on the wedding night, a traditional practice which I view as oppressive and dangerous to women. She had also accepted a suitor for her

15 year-old daughter. I was very disappointed in Um Saber for I had spent many evenings on the roof of her house discussing the negative impacts of such traditions. I explained to her repeatedly, when were alone and in groups, the negative health and psychological implications of female circumcision, *dukhla baladi*, and early marriage. I thought that I had influenced her and that she as a community leader might play an important role in making women resist and reject such oppressive rituals. However Um Saber's continued support of oppressive cultural practices on women in her community has not changed. I had not made the impact I had hoped for.

Shadia: The Lost Soul

My name is Shadia. I have 8 brothers and sisters, three boys and five girls. One of the five girls in addition to myself worked as a maid in private homes. However, she worked in a house in our town but I came all the way to Cairo and worked for an upper class family in Masr El-Gedida. I went to work for them when I was six years old.

Oppressed and marginalized all her life, Shadia found in me a chance to dream. She told me tales about herself that were made up, she told me her fantasies for herself, and also told me facts about her life. She placed herself as the center of her story, thus overcoming her life-long marginalization. Through the use of fantasy she constructed an identity that enabled her to subvert traditional limitations imposed on her due to her gender and poverty, and allowed her a more egalitarian, just, and central social existence.

Armed with the freedom to say what she pleased, as I was non-judgmental and did not contradict her lies, she revealed to me not only her ambitions and aspirations but a great deal about the social and emotional dynamics of being a woman in a low-income urban area. From her fantasies and real life stories I learned many things about Shadia that I would not have learned if our relationship had been limited to that of a researcher and a research participant.

However, my relationship with Shadia is very complex. She confessed to me that she was miserable with her husband, that she was sexually unsatisfied, and that she had been looking for love and warmth in other men. Shadia was transformed before my eyes from the subservient and oppressed

woman working as a low-paid maid to a lover, and then, I fear, to a whore. This transformation took place during the four months that I knew and interviewed her. We used to meet regularly three times every week at the NGO's office and stay for hours talking; or rather, she talked and I listened.

During that period Shadia took off the old scarf that covered her hair, colored her hair blonde, wore make-up, and started wearing colorful Western dress instead of her shabby *galabaya*. The skinny little woman was completely transformed and my sleepless nights began.

In the beginning, Shadia told me the story of her childhood and how her father threw her away to work as a servant when she was a little girl, six years old. She told me about how and when she learned to drink beer and smoke cigarettes at the house of her employers, the upper class people of Masr El-Gedida⁷.

When I was six years old I used to stand on a small chair in order to reach the sink and wash the dishes. My father used to come every month to collect my wage from the mistress and he never bothered to check on me or tell me a kind word. I continued to be a major source of income for my family and continued to suffer neglect. My father cared more about money than about me. This suffering made me feel lost, and I started to drink and smoke cigarettes.

Shadia felt that her father had abandoned her and that he did not love her, but only wanted to use her.

"A'bouya dah ragil a'si maloosh a'lb," she said, 'my father is cruel man, he has no heart.' He cared much more for the money that I brought him and not about my health and well-being. I learned how to drink alcohol and smoke because I was lonely. I used to cry and the mistress of the house gave me cigarettes and beer so that I can forget how my father and my family threw me like a dog. The family that I worked for were upper class and

⁷ Drinking alcohol in a conservative society, and especially among Muslims (for whom drinking alcohol is a sin) is considered improper behavior. The reputations of women who are known to smoke and drink are damaged; they are considered loose women. In this case Shadia was, in fact, presenting to me how low-income people perceive the rich and Westernized upper class. They believe that drinking, smoking, and having liberal sexual relationships are the characteristics of the upper-class.

civilized people. Not like the barbarians here, so smoking and drinking was natural to them.

When she reached 19 years old, her father tried to marry her off to a 60 year-old man who owned land and a store. But Shadia refused and ran away. She had acquired upper class habits and values and began to regard her family as vulgar and barbarian.

My parents called me back to live with them but in reality they wanted to marry me off to a rich old man who was 60 years old. After I refused him they, my family, started treating me very badly, insulting and beating me for the slightest reason. As if I was not their daughter, their own flesh and blood. So I ran away.

She stayed away for a couple of months; she worked in tea and coffee shops where she got to know a man. He took her to Upper Egypt with him and promised to marry her, but he let her down. She went back to her parents, who nearly killed her. They got the local midwife to check if she was still a virgin.

They got the midwife (daya) who proved that I was still a virgin and she shouted at them for ruining my reputation like this. However, they all continued to be mean to me and insult me. For two months they watched me, expecting my stomach to grow, not believing the daya.

Finally, she could not take this treatment any longer and ran away again. She married the first man she found in the streets. Fawzi, her husband, whom she sought for protection, was nonetheless like all the other men in her life. He let her down.

I found Fawzi, I thought: 'he will be my protector and my haven.' I was lost and all alone. I wanted a shelter and a man to defend me. He was a mechanic and he told me he would take care of me. But as all men, as my father before him and my brother, he let me down. He turned out to be a gambler who forced me to borrow money for him from all the neighbors and the people in the community. He even beat me up when I could not get him the money he wanted. All I wanted was love and tenderness, something

I never found except in my dreams.

After she gave birth to her son, Shadia went back to work as a part-time maid and as a worker in a local clinic. She was forced back to work because no one wanted to lend her money anymore, and her husband had left his job and would beat her if he had no money for his gambling.

All he does everyday is ask me to give him 10 or 20 pounds and he never asks me about the source of this money. He forced me at the beginning to borrow money from the neighbors and now that I work he expects his pocket money every day. I married him to feel like a lady and not to be forced to be a servant and to be humiliated. I now earn the money, so I, not him, must be the man of the house.

To Shadia there is no longer a basis for marriage as her husband no longer provides for her. She described him as having become useless.

A man becomes useless if he doesn't perform his main job in life, which is to provide for his wife and children. What is his use if he depends on his woman to work and bring the food to his home? Men can not be in control of their homes and families if they no longer provide for them, they are no longer men. They really become useless.

When we reached this part of her story, our relationship had strengthened and she started telling me that her husband was inhuman with her and she did not enjoy his sexual advances and tried to avoid them as much as she could. She then told me about the two other men in her life; the man who had been nice to her at work and showed her kindness and warmth, and whom she thought was in love with her, and his friend.

The first man was a physician at the mosque health clinic where she worked as a janitor, the second was another physician who worked in another clinic. When she found me to be an apt listener voicing no objections, she started telling me about her sexual fantasies about this first man and her desires for him.

As time passed, an affair began and Shadia was transformed in the way I mentioned earlier. I began to worry about her and had many a sleepless

night. Did I encourage her by my silence? Did Shadia turn into a loose woman by Egyptian standards? She started affairs with two men who were friends, and who, in my opinion, were using her. I learned later when she disappeared and stopped coming to our weekly meetings that she had taken her son and left her husband. Was I responsible for the changes that came over her? Should I have played a more advisory role? Did she turn into a loose woman because of my silence and my research? Shadia used me as a sounding board to test out her dreams and hopes and once they were off of her chest, she carried them out. She used me to justify her eventual rebellion and to justify her non-traditional actions.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the relationships between me, the researcher, and the researched women such as Um Saber and Shadia, were not one-way, hierarchical, but fluid and complex. Both women used me to gain grounds in their own worlds but I used them too, to get the information I needed to finish my project and hopefully to get my doctoral degree.

However, did I empower these women? Could I, in the short period of my contact with them, be able to or have the courage to claim that I contributed to empowering them? Shadia's rebellion, her attempt to defy traditional patriarchy by having affairs with several men and leaving her husband could be interpreted as a form of empowerment. A form of empowerment that is rejected by my middle class values and has created worry, fear, and anxiety inside of me. On the other hand I do not think that I have affected Um Saber as much as she affected me.

Thus I go back to initial question: is a participatory and liberating feminist research really feasible? Are we serious when we claim that it can be carried out, given the time limit, class and knowledge base difference, and the ultimate and actual different positioning of the researcher and the researched?

Our experience of our research affects our lives outside the research and also affects the lives of those we research. This experience has definitely affected me in various ways. Not only has it affected my theoretical understandings and perceptions of the nature of women's oppression, but also my recognition that I could not have been a neutral, detached researcher

but am a potential agent of change in the lives of the researched women, as they are in mine. In writing about someone else, we become emotionally and personally involved with them. Writing about other women's lives calls for an active stand, not a neutral one, from the researcher. Inherent in that stand is the willingness of the researcher herself to recognize and respect the specificity of the subjects' lives and experiences and to learn from them.

I believe that I have changed and have become more tolerant of conduct and value systems outside of middle-class morality. I have gained a deeper and more insightful understanding of what poverty really means and how it affects people. I have come to realize that the poor, and the women among them in particular, in low-income urban Egypt live in a vicious and unsympathetic cycle of poverty that leaves little room for hope. Thus this research has changed my perspective on issues of right, wrong, and justice. I have also come to view my own life differently and made major changes in it as a result of this research. Inspired by these poor women I have decided to leave the rat race of full-time work to become a full-time mother and PhD student. The women in the field and their survival mechanisms to maintain their families in the worst conditions caused me to change my priorities and value my family as the greatest gold bar I have in the bank.

Bibliography

- Burgess, R.G. 1988. *Conducting Qualitative Research*. Greenwich: Jai Press.
- Buvinic, M. and G.R. Gupta. 1994. "Targeting Poor Women Headed Households and Woman Maintained Families in Developing Countries: Views on a Policy Dilemma." Paper presented to The Population Council - International Center for Research on Women Joint Program on Female Headship and Poverty in Developing Countries, pp. 1-58.
- Buvinic, M. 1993. "The Feminization of Poverty?: Research and Policy Needs." Symposium on Poverty; New Approaches to Analysis and Policy; Geneva.
- Fergany, N. 1993. *Research Notes: Characteristics of Women-Headed Households in Egypt*. Cairo: Almishkat Center for Research and Training.
- Goetz, A.M. 1992. "Gender and Administration." *IDS Bulletin: New Forms of Public Management* October, pp. 7-13.
- Handoussa, H. 1994. "The Economic Dimension to Policies Affecting Women-Headed Households in Egypt. Paper presented at the Conference on Women-Headed Households." Cairo: Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, March 1994.
- Hartung, B., J.C. Ollenburger, H.A. Moore, and M.J. Deegan. 1988. "Empowering a Feminist Ethic for Social Science Research: Nebraska Sociological Feminist Collective." In *Feminist Ethic for Social Science Research*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press.
- Maguire, P. 1987. *Doing Participatory Research: A Feminist Approach*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Maynard, M. and J. Purvis, eds. 1995. *Researching Women's Lives From a Feminist Perspective*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Maynard, M. and J. Purvis, 1995. "Introduction: Doing Feminist Research." In *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*, edited by M. Maynard and J. Purvis. London: Taylor and Francis.

- Maynard, M. 1995. "Methods, Practice and Epistemology: The Debate about Feminism and Research." In *Researching Women's Lives From a Feminist Perspective*, edited by M. Maynard and J. Purvis. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Moore, H.A. 1988. *Feminism and Anthropology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Pearce, D. 1990. "Welfare is Not for Women: Why the War on Poverty Cannot Conquer the Feminisation of Poverty." In *Women, the State and Welfare*, edited by L. Gordon. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Roberts, H., ed. 1981. *Doing Feminist Research*. London: Routledge.
- Roberts, H. 1981a. "Introduction." In *Doing Feminist Research*, edited by H. Roberts. London: Routledge.
- Stanley, L. and S. Wise, eds. 1983. *Breaking Out: Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.