



How To: Design and Implement a Gender-Transformative Action Research Project

A guide by



Grassroots Justice Network

Authors

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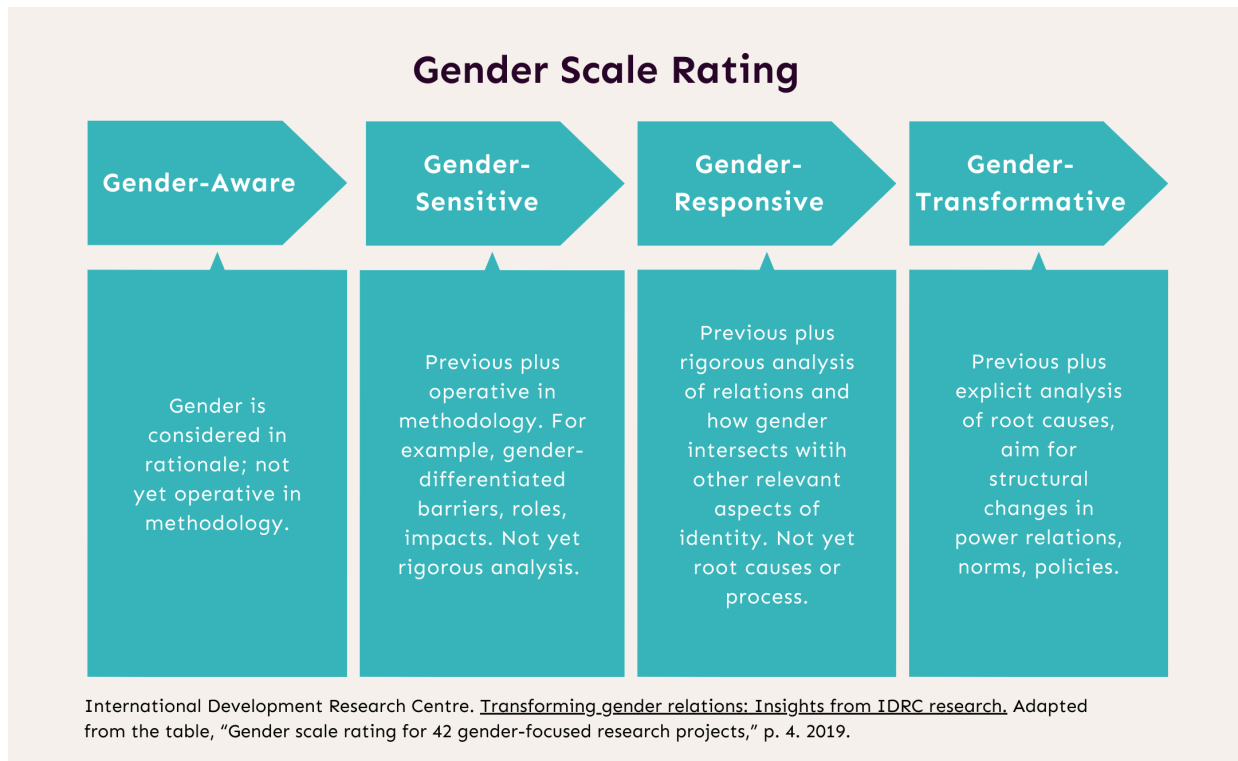
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Introduction

The purpose of action research is to bring about change. Unlike other types of research, it is intentionally designed to inform strategies for practical action. In the world of legal empowerment– which is deeply rooted in partnership with communities– the role of action research is to advance collective struggles for justice, and while doing so, empower the communities that the research seeks to benefit.

In order to address the root causes of injustice and inequality, we need to ensure that the action research we undertake is gender transformative i.e. it transforms the underlying power imbalances in society, and promotes the leadership of women, members of the LGBTIQ+ community and other structurally marginalized groups. It is not enough for our efforts to be aware, sensitive or responsive to gender. They need to strive for a gender-transformative approach which analyzes and seeks to understand the root causes of discrimination and inequality, and aims to drive structural changes in norms, policies, perceptions, and power relations. [1]



How to design and implement a gender-transformative action research project

Under [the Learning Agenda for Legal Empowerment initiative](#) [2], [Namati](#) and [the Grassroots Justice Network](#) are supporting a cohort of 13 action research projects across 17 countries in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa. These projects are generating knowledge and evidence about how legal empowerment can drive systemic change to guarantee access to justice for historically marginalized communities. In an effort to support projects to implement a gender-transformative approach, on July 17 2023, the Grassroots Justice Network (GJN) and the [International Development Research Centre \(IDRC\)](#), with the support of [Global Affairs Canada \(GAC\)](#), co-organized a virtual roundtable on how to design and implement gender transformative action research projects, drawing on experiences from Latin America.

Contributing experts to the Roundtable:

- Donny Meertens, Emeritus Professor, National University of Colombia
- Heidi Cristina Gómez Ramírez, PhD Candidate, National University of Columbia
- Judith Erazo, Coordinator, Migration with Rights Program, Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team
- Dr. Maria Amelia Viteri, Associate researcher, Anthropology Department, University of Maryland
- Verónica Martínez-Solares, public policy and gender specialist

Below are key recommendations drawn from the conversation that will help you to design and implement truly gender-transformative action research efforts.

1. Build honest and trust-based relationships with participants

The roots of gender transformative action research are in place well before a project starts. It draws from years of engagement and trust-building with communities and participants.

Principle in Action

As Erazo from [Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial \(ECAP\)](#), in Guatemala shares: by the time ECAP launched their [research project](#) with the Mayan women of Sepur Zarco, that ultimately led to the first trial and conviction by a Guatemalan court of military officers for wartime sexual violence, the organization had already been working with these women for more than 10 years. It was not until after 3-4 years of working with them on the exhumation of their husbands' remains, that the women started to open up with regards to the sexual violence that they had been victims of, and which is generally left as an afterthought in the recognition of crimes related to armed conflicts. This discovery, made possible through trust established over time, led to the research project and future convictions.

All action research might not be able to draw from years of prior engagement with communities, but it's still important to ensure that a process of dialogue is built into the entire life of the project, allowing the researcher to understand what is important to the communities. This does not mean that the researcher has no role to play in the implementation of a gender-transformative approach (for example, Erazo was interested in politicizing the intimate, and making human rights violations linked to sexual violence public). However, if researchers and the communities involved can co-construct the meaning of abstract concepts—like justice, and define actions (for example, taking sexual abusers to court) through dialogue that draws on their different experiences and forms of knowing, the research can be grounded in trust and respect.

Alternatively, when a textbook gender perspective is imposed with the design of the research project, without dialogue with the communities involved, the research risks reproducing stereotypes. Meertens explained, for example, how under this textbook perspective, the concept of care tends to be associated with the role of women in communities. However, in her study on land restitution claims among peasant women who were forcibly displaced by the Colombian armed conflict, she found that some women did not talk about care in relation to their community. Actually, they argued that there was no community for them in the towns they were

living in after displacement. They talked instead about taking care of themselves. In this case, if the textbook perspective had been imposed without testing underlying assumptions, the research would have imposed the “traditional” approach to the concept of care that was not applicable in the circumstances.

Open dialogue allowed Meertens and Erazo to unbuild stereotypes within the living experience of the women they were working with. It was in this process of unbuilding stereotypes through an active and open dialogue that both research projects became a resource to support the empowerment of women, encouraging them to pursue legal action against sexual offenders (in Erazo’s case) and supporting them in the process of becoming landowners (in Meertens’ case).

2. Build the capacities of your team and commit to interdisciplinarity.

Taking time to build team capacity is vital. Capacity building can ensure that team members:

- have an understanding of security and ethics. This includes knowing how to identify the risks associated with the research, and the relevant security and ethics protocols;
- are committed to gender-transformative approaches, and have the tools and support they need in order to avoid replicating patriarchal power dynamics, or re-victimizing women;
- are able to use participatory and empowering research methodologies and approaches;

Capacity-building requires a commitment to applying a multi-disciplinary lens, and in-turn may require building a multi-disciplinary team and/or partnerships. It may mean that researchers need to collaborate with psychologists, sociologists, social workers, lawyers, etc., as well as feminist and womens’ rights groups. For example, research projects can be disempowering when they expose communities to new forms of violence and vulnerability, and projects linked to circumstances of violence and trauma will require support or therapy led by psychologists. Working side by side with professionals, these therapy group spaces can generate inputs for your research while providing a healing space for participants. However, this involves time and resources. It also requires open dialogue to identify the issues, and constant communication within teams to find ways to address them.

Principle in Action

In Guatemala, as ECAP worked with the women of Sepur Zarco, psychologists focused on the do-no-harm approach, to make sure that the research project empowered women. Doing this was crucial. However, it is also important to acknowledge that it wasn't always easy, and it led to extensive discussions within the team about the methodologies, questions, and overall dynamics of spaces in which women participated. Unveiling stories of sexual violence meant that there was a risk of revictimizing those who had suffered from trauma. To address this challenge, Erazo and her team offered elements of both therapy and input in her interactions with indigenous women. They used drawings, traditional songs, and group discussions to work with women and at the same time offer healing and emotional support. They worked constantly with community mental health care workers from the same ethnicity as the women who participated in the study.

Other issues may also require the expertise of professionals who can help communities achieve their goals. For example, when addressing issues linked to access to housing or social services, researchers may benefit from working with urban planners or social workers, and when communities want to bring their cases to the courts, collaboration with lawyers is needed.

3. Identify and address power dynamics within your teams, and between your team and the communities/participants.

It is important to devote time within your team and organization to understand how the different perspectives and approaches of each team member might be perceived by the communities or participants that you will be engaging with, how that can impact your research and the community, and ultimately, the opportunities and limitations that exist as a result of already existing power dynamics.

Principle in Action

An insight from Merteens' experience working in Colombia: As you build your research team, take into account whether the particular issues that you want to address will benefit from local team member leadership, or the opposite i.e. whether people will more likely engage when the person leading is outside of pre-existing power dynamics.

Gómez Ramírez highlighted that if we are involving community researchers - community members who will have an active role as part of the research team, but who do not come from an academic background- it is important to pay careful attention to existing power dynamics and potential imbalances in their relationship with more academic or professionalized researchers.

Sometimes, the way in which academic or professionalized researchers ask questions and collect data reproduces social stigmas impacting women. Viteri urged researchers to reflect on what they are asking for, and how they are asking for it, considering that language is also embedded in power relations that reproduce racial and gender inequities and vulnerabilities.

This process of reflection and critical assessments of power dynamics takes time, but is essential to achieve gender transformative research goals.

“[Gender transformative action] research is a transformative process both for the women [that we work with], and for the organization, and one has to be [present] in that transformation.”

Dr. Maria Amelia Viteri
University of Maryland

4. Acknowledge and center communities' knowledge.

A central principle for gender transformative research is to acknowledge and incorporate community knowledge and methods. As Gómez Ramírez pointed out, popular knowledge and

methods tend to be ignored or minimized in academic spaces. Instead, there is a tendency to opt for highly formalized strategies and methods, which are considered ‘rigorous’ and ‘scientific’. In contrast to such approaches, gender-transformative action research acknowledges and centers the communities’ knowledge, and also devotes time to understanding how academic methods and knowledge might be viewed and understood by communities.

“Knowledge dialogue doesn’t only take place in what we are interpreting, but also in how we are gathering the information.”

Heidy Cristina Gómez Ramírez
National University of Colombia

Recognizing the communities’ knowledge also means recognizing the different perspectives within a community. As Erazo highlighted, gender-transformative action research draws from the understanding of people’s intersectional identities and diverse perspectives to open up spaces for discussion around key concepts.

Principle in Action

In Guatemala, ECAP devoted a whole part of the process to discuss what women understood by ‘justice’ in a context of transitional justice. Accordingly, ECAP held several conversations with women on their interpretations of justice. Not all groups shared the same meaning; some spoke about access to education for their children, access to health, while others spoke about divine justice. It was the women of Sepur Zarco who clearly sought justice against military officers who had abused them sexually. ECAP continued to work with this group addressing stereotypes that the women were facing and helping them bring cases of abuse to court.

At the same time, gender-transformative action research also looks to clarify goals and community expectations.

Principle in Action

In Guatemala, the Sepur Zarco women were firm in their idea that they wanted to see ‘them’ in jail. When ECAP opened up the space to unpack what the women meant by ‘them’, what they discovered is that they were not referring to high level leaders who had overseen regimes of violence and brutality, but specifically to the perpetrators who lived in their communities and still harassed them.

Finally, working with marginalized communities usually involves working around structural inequalities, violence, and patriarchal and restrictive societal norms. Researchers should avoid assuming that women, girls and or members of the LBGTIQ+ community are gender-aware.

5. Identify ways to involve the community/participants in different stages of the action research project.

Acknowledging the knowledge and capacities of the women, girls and members of the LBGTIQ+ community who will be affected by the research, researchers should strive to involve them in all stages of the process. This includes for example:

Before the research project has even started

Communities can be involved as the research project is being designed, and as decisions around objectives, methodologies, approaches, timeline, etc. are being made. As Gómez Ramírez shares, as you envision such a project, it can be useful to ask yourself the following questions to make sure that communities remain at the center of your project:

1. whose voices?
2. whose perspectives?
3. whose theories?

During the implementation stage

Communities can be involved in data collection and information generation efforts, engagement with key stakeholders, and providing feedback to adjust project design and methodology.

During analysis

Collective reflection spaces, where researchers and communities are able to make sense of the information gathered together, result in a richer and deeper analysis.

Participatory action research aims to transform realities, including the roles played by the community within a research team– from being ‘subjects’ of research to being partners. By drawing on the knowledge that communities have, the research promotes a sociopolitical awareness within communities, and as such, the research itself becomes a tool for empowerment.

“That experience (of communities reflecting on findings collectively) allows us all to learn how to understand and analyze what we are finding. This is tightly linked to the immediate contexts of the people whom we are working with. This is why sometimes it is a liberating process for everybody, because we start to see reality from more diverse or open perspectives.”

Heidy Cristina Gómez Ramírez
National University of Colombia

Translating research into action

Communities can be involved in decision-making about how the information and evidence gathered will be used (both internally and externally). They can also implement community-led advocacy actions to bring such information to decision-making spaces in order to shape current practices, norms, and policies, and make their demands heard.

Gómez Ramírez points out that a participatory research process can be intimately related to political activism and can play an important role empowering women once they are fully included. In her own work, she has included women in the research process through community-generated maps, videos, and artistic exhibitions, and sought their input and active collaboration at all stages of the research process.

Principle in Action

Viteri has worked with women's organizations to connect with women in the community, as well as open the door for questions and concerns to shape new research questions. In Washington DC, women from an LGBTQI group asked why it was so difficult to access housing in a political district that was known to have progressive policies. Viteri's team used this question to gather information about the obstacles faced by these groups, and used the findings to inform service providers and funders why specific groups are not able to access housing services.

As Gómez Ramírez remarks, gender-transformative research is not a project, but a process. It doesn't yield results in months, but years. It involves learning, but also a good deal of unlearning on all sides; the communities, the organizations and the researchers.

6. Prioritize security and ethics above research results.

"No [research] results are above security."

Verónica Martínez-Solares

Independent public policy and gender specialist

Gender-transformative research has the do-no-harm principle as its north star, putting in place mechanisms to mitigate risks and avoid re-victimization. There are some guiding principles that researchers can follow in this regard:

Be aware of your own biases, and those of your team members.

For example, as Gómez Ramírez says, when we address issues of violence against women in urban contexts, there is a structural bias to assume that women are responsible for what happens to them in those contexts. Be aware that each person on the team brings their own biases, shaped by their own lived experiences, and that they will interpret information accordingly. To manage this, it is important to establish a dialogue between the research team and the community, to be able to understand the place that each person is occupying with regards to what they are observing.

Develop a research ethics protocol.

The protocol should elaborate on the kind of research that will be implemented, relevant regulations or sanctions, as well as outlines clear guidelines for how research should be conducted and how people will benefit from the research. In gender-transformative research, ethics protocols must go beyond what is required by traditional ethics protocols, such as those imposed by regulatory bodies. Lines between “research subjects” and “researchers” are blurred in participatory research, and the objective of the research is not only to generate knowledge but also shift power relations. In practical terms, for example, ‘informed consent’ cannot be limited to the beginning of the project alone, but something that is examined and reaffirmed throughout the research process.

This includes centering the idea that the community owns the research findings. It may mean that certain information generated in the project cannot be published or shared widely, but is only available to research participants.

Principle in Action

As Meertens explains, during the preparation of a national level report on historic memory in Colombia, there was a great amount of information that was shared among participants through storytelling. However, the research team understood that although it was valuable material, a lot of that information was not going to make it to the report, because participants didn’t authorize it.

Martínez-Solares argued that often, given the pressure to achieve quick results, researchers may end up raising the communities’ expectations, which is ultimately harmful. Researchers also need to pay attention to backlash that may be brewing, which could negatively impact communities. To address this challenge, every research project she has been involved with has a risk management component that includes strategies to provide psychosocial and emotional support, as well as a safety and ethics protocol.

Principle in Action

Martínez-Solares shared the experience in which women presented illegally obtained evidence in court and then accused the involved judges of not using it. This case, she points out, is an example of the researchers failing to manage expectations of the community regarding what would be acceptable as evidence.

“Sometimes, in the pursuit of results we don’t see what is happening with the territories and the expectations that we are generating”

Verónica Martínez-Solares

Independent public policy and gender specialist

Develop security protocols that outline measures to keep the researchers and the communities safe.

Security protocols should include detailed explanations about how, when and why research teams go to the field, basic guidance on how to intervene in situations of psycho-emotional crisis and referral pathways, basic instructions about where to stay and how to keep yourself safe, and scenarios under which the researcher should stop the study because of risk factors.

In some cases, security protocols can involve guidance on strategies to mitigate risk, for example, framing activities in terms that draw less attention or are considered ‘safer’, such as food security rather than land dispossession. However, this approach also needs to acknowledge the risks that are involved if the actual content of the activities were to become public.

In Conclusion

We hope that these recommendations and real-world examples are useful as you envision and implement an action research project that is truly gender-transformative.

When undertaking gender transformative research, it is useful to hold Gómez Ramírez's reminder that each process is different, as the communities with whom we work are different. Therefore this isn't an established format or an exercise to replicate, but only a reference. The path toward achieving a gender-transformative participatory action research project is lit by the dynamics, environments, and communities themselves.

Experts featured in this publication:

Donny Meertens

Donny Meertens is a Social Anthropologist with a PhD, retired professor from Javeriana University, and emeritus professor at the National University of Colombia (Bogotá), where she co-founded the School of Gender Studies.

Heidy Cristina Gómez Ramírez

Heidy Cristina Gómez Ramírez is a PhD student in Urban and Territorial Studies at the National University of Colombia with a master's degree in social sciences from the National University of La Plata, Argentina. She is a specialist in Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law.

Judith Erazo

Judith Erazo holds a master's degree in Social Psychology and Political Violence and a Bachelor's degree in Psychology from the School of Psychological Sciences, University of San Carlos of Guatemala. Currently, she is the Coordinator of the Migration with Rights Program at the Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team.

Dr. María Amelia Viteri

Dr. María Amelia Viteri holds a Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology from American University, Washington D.C., with a concentration in race, gender, and social justice. She also has a master's degree in social sciences with a specialization in Gender and Development. She is an associated researcher at the Department of Anthropology at the University of Maryland.

Verónica Martínez-Solares

Verónica Martínez-Solares holds degrees in Law and Public Management and Administration, and a master's in Victimology, with specializations in public policy and gender. Currently, she leads a project to harmonize laws protecting women against gender-based violence in Mexico, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Colombia, collaborating with over 30 legislators in the four countries.

References

[1] International Development Research Centre. [Transforming gender relations: Insights from IDRC research](#). Adapted from the table, “Gender scale rating for 42 gender-focused research projects,” p. 4. 2019.

[2] [The Learning Agenda for Legal Empowerment](#) is supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Global Affairs Canada (GAC). It aims to generate learning and evidence about burning questions for the legal empowerment field.

[3] The virtual roundtable on, “How to design and implement gender transformative action research projects,” was possible thanks to funding by [Global Affairs Canada \(GAC\)](#) and [IDRC](#).