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IDS Bulletin

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ENGAGED EXCELLENCE

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Engaged Excellence or Excellent Engagement? Collaborating Critically to Amplify the Voices of Male Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

Chris Dolan and Thea Shahrokh with Jerker Edström,
Darius King Kabafunzaki, Dieudonné Maganya,
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Abstract This article considers the Institute of Development Studies' (IDS) concept of 'engaged excellence' from a postcolonial perspective, interrogating notions of 'excellence' determined in the global North, and calling for deep, long-term and mutually constitutive 'excellent engagement' between institutions in the global South and North. It offers a case study of how excellent engagement has developed over a decade-long relationship between researchers from IDS and from a partner organisation in Uganda, the Refugee Law Project, and how incrementally these have extended to include intensive engagement with the lives and advocacy commitments of an association of male survivors of sexual violence. Engaged excellence, it argues, can only be the outcome of excellent engagement, itself a process that is challenged by structural arrangements related to funding from and academic enterprise within the global North.

Keywords: postcolonial, survivors, global North, entitlement, sexual violence, politics of knowledge.

1 Introduction

In a context of simultaneous globalisation and fragmentation and a related state of flux in state-level power balances, 'engaged excellence' has been proposed as a new frame to capture ways of working at the level of academic endeavour. The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) has defined engaged excellence as meaning that the quality of the Institute's work is dependent upon it linking to and involving those who are at the heart of the change they wish to see. But what does it really mean? Is it a 'feel-good' buzzword for IDS and its donors, perhaps one that is not always experienced in the same way by its partners in the global South?

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Or does it reflect an awareness that against the backdrop of global political change, academic work must also critically scrutinise its ways of working and how it articulates its underlying political commitments?

Such a framing must engage with postcolonial critique of global knowledge hierarchies (Spivak, Landry and MacLean 1996). Who defines 'engaged'? It might easily be critiqued as a self-legitimising tool used simply to negotiate access to 'research subjects' in the global South. Furthermore, 'excellence' is a term that is generally used to other those who are not deemed as worthy of it. In combination, the terms risk being simply fronted to donors and peers in the global North – by actors who have never questioned their own sense of entitlement to 'set the standards' (traditional academic metrics) and/or to determine the rules of engagement in what, notwithstanding the changing international relations and postcolonial landscape, remains a consistently uneven global playing field.

On the other hand, the 'engaged excellence' frame attaches particular value to collaboration, multiple subjectivities and interdisciplinary knowledge in tackling the root causes of complex and interconnected social, political and economic problems. Potentially it enables partners to think through what it means to actually do collaborative research for social change in a context of unequal power relationships and structural obstacles. Taken in this way, it is an understanding that could give rise to what we shall refer to as 'excellent engagement' for enhanced and transformative development research and practice, practice that chips away at rather than compounding existing power inequalities.

It is thus clear that all the foundations of the 'engaged excellence' approach – high-quality research, co-construction of knowledge, mobilising evidence for impact, building enduring partnerships – are laden with ambiguous potentials and political significance for the different constituencies involved. In operational terms, will 'engaged excellence' challenge a prevalent pattern in which Northern institutions believe themselves to harbour expertise and theoretical sophistication (in short, 'excellence'), while Southern partners are lauded for their in-depth local knowledge and wizardry at solving the logistical challenges confronting their Northern visitors?

This article considers what it may mean to 'do' engaged excellence and to engage excellently, both in theory and in practice. We examine the evolution over a ten-year period of collaboration between IDS as a North-based institution, the Refugee Law Project (RLP) as a South-based one, and, latterly, Men of Hope Refugee Association Uganda (from here on, MOHRAU), as a grass-roots social-political 'community'. We reflect, retrospectively, on what insights this learning partnership between researchers, civil society practitioners and survivors of sexual violence, some of whom embody more than one of these identities, offers for realising the frame of 'engaged excellence' going forward.

Taking an inductive approach, we analysed RLP, MOHRAU and IDS' individual and collaborative research reports, participatory films, academic articles, workshop reports and reflective diaries produced over the ten years of our still evolving research partnership. Drawing from principles of cooperative inquiry, we also undertook first-person reflection and group-based reflective discussion to critically engage with our shared and personal learning journeys (Heron 1996). Importantly, this analysis aims to strengthen our own ways of being and relating within collaborative research praxis, as well as provide lessons for others. The article itself involved a collaborative writing process between the different partners: IDS, RLP – with specific inputs from the Gender and Sexuality and Media for Social Change programmes – and MOHRAU.

2 Engaged research and alternative knowledges

In establishing 'What is the case?', research communities place value on their particular overarching theory of knowledge, constructions of the world and practices of research (Gergen and Gergen 2008). Institutions in the global North have faced calls for decolonisation of hegemonic disciplinary approaches and research protocols to go hand-in-hand with the invention of new ways of knowing. Concepts such as situated knowledges (Haraway 1988) suggest that essentialism can be countered if we can recognise that the knowledge we claim is conditioned by the locations we occupy. This allows for multiple and shifting perspectives and the possibility of learning about ourselves from the experiences and knowledges of others. Situated knowledges imply mosaic qualities located in time and space, embodied in specific ways, and operating as social and collective points of view.

Where different types of knowledge such as academic erudition and popular knowledge are combined or enter into dialogue, the outcome may deconstruct assumed or accepted framings, leading to the creation of alternative ways of seeing the world (Fals Borda 2013). The extent to which engagement either expands how we see the world or reinforces unquestioned prior positions is an important indicator of whether or not meaningful co-construction of knowledge in research and learning approaches has been achieved.

Robins, Cornwall and von Lieres (2008: 1085) argue that rather than 'importing normative notions with their own culturally located histories and reading people's identifications and actions through them, there is a need for more grounded forms of inquiry' that investigate how different political and historical contexts shape people's realities. Feminist and participative approaches within critical social research aim to deconstruct the given, or the 'norm', and recognise the multiplicity of 'truths' inherent in social relations. They also emphasise the value of the perspectives of those directly affected by a given issue (Hume 2007). The inclusion of this often 'marginalised' knowledge can help reveal the limits of the normativities embedded in dominant discourses, and also help to provide a more substantive basis for rethinking pathways to social justice (Gaventa and Cornwall 2008).

In the case reviewed here, a two-way exchange between practitioners and researchers thinking, framing, researching and reflecting together evolved over time to a more three-dimensional working with survivor activists as a step in challenging dominant knowledge–power hierarchies in social research. This position echoed and in a sense operationalised Freirean pedagogy in that it explicitly recognised that we are all 'subjects' of our own lives and narratives, not 'objects' in the stories of others (Freire 1970). The significance of these forms of multi-directional and multi-stakeholder engagement is amplified in contexts and discourses where people with profound insights are silenced or edged out of the process of constructing that knowledge which will be received as authoritative by those with the power to utilise it to shape policy and practice. The repositioning of three broad categories of stakeholders changes the ownership of the research process, the motivation to actively shape it, and the commitment to utilise the emerging knowledge within each stakeholder's respective spheres of influence for social (and thereby also political) change.

Our experience, therefore, suggests that in developing an 'engaged excellence' approach and frame of reference, determining what 'excellent engagement' means and looks like becomes the central focus. This politically and epistemologically positional judgement in turn plays a role in determining methodologies whose potential to contribute to transformative pathways of social change should also be taken as a key indicator of the quality of research.

3 A ten-year relationship

The partnership between IDS and RLP has grown through researcher-practitioners' shared personal and political commitments to questioning structures of gendered and intersecting oppressions. The work done to challenge reductive or essentialist gender discourse has been integrally informed for both RLP and IDS researchers, by an examination of relations on the ground as well as the balance of world power. A critical space for such work has been provided by refugee-led self-help groups which have, with the support of RLP, organised around particular shared experiences or vulnerabilities. While these groups include, among others, women, people living with HIV, people living with disability, and women and men living with specific experiences of sexual violence, the RLP–IDS research collaboration has predominantly been with the latter. From the three male survivors who came together in a support group known as MOHRAU in 2011, the group has since grown to more than 100 members.¹

RLP, MOHRAU and IDS have, independently and collectively become increasingly concerned with the marginalisation of men's experiences as victims of sexual and gender-based violence within research, policy or practice and a related tendency in dominant narratives to depict men as perpetrators of violence and women as victims. We have interacted and engaged through various symposia, research and advocacy collaborations, training workshops, and through mutual support for the rights of refugees.

Table 1 Evolution of the RLP, MOHRAU and IDS partnership through programmes, research and learning events²

	2007	2009	2010	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Funding/ programme (Funder)	Politicising Masculinities symposium (Sida, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UNFPA, UNAIDS, DFID, SDC)		Mobilising Men to Address SGBV Programme (UNFPA)	Gender, Power and Sexuality (GPS) Programme: connecting local voices to global arenas for equality and rights (Sida)			Effective Organised Activism against Gender-Based Violence Programme (DFID)	● Therapeutic Activism Research and Participatory film- making (Uganda, DFID)
Research and reports (Host partner)	<i>Politicising Masculinities: Beyond the Personal symposium report (IDS)</i>			<i>Mobilising Men in Practice: Challenging SGBV in Institutional Settings (IDS, RLP, CHSJ, MEGEN)</i>	<i>The Bench, participatory film (MOHRAU)</i>	<i>Undressing Patriarchy IDS Bulletin (IDS)</i>	<i>Men Can Be Raped Too, film (MOHRAU)</i>	<i>Therapeutic Activism publication (IDS, RLP)</i>
Critical dialogue workshops/ processes (Host partner)	Politicising Masculinities symposium (IDS, Dakar)	RLP visiting Fellow at IDS (IDS, UK)		Men, Masculinities, Sexuality GPS workshop (RLP, Uganda)	Undressing Patriarchy GPS symposium (IDS, UK)		Sexual and Gender- Based Violence – Effective Organised Activism Programme Global Learning Event (IDS, UK)	
Global conferences and symposia (location)		Men Engage Global Symposium (Brazil)		AWID Forum (Istanbul)		Men Engage Global Symposium (India)	The Rape of Men... Seriously; A Gender Issue? Video-linked seminar and film screening (IDS, RLP)	House of Lords Committee on Sexual Violence (RLP presentation)
						'Into the Mainstream' RLP, War Child, PLAN UK and MOHRAU roundtable ahead of the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict (UK)		

Source Authors' own.

The evolution of our work together can be traced in Table 1: in 2015, it led us to design and carry out a joint study of collective action among male survivors of conflict-related sexual violence using multiple methods, including participatory film. Written up as *Therapeutic Activism* (Edström *et al.* 2016), this study, which also resulted in the film *Men Can Be Raped Too*, was a pivotal moment in our collaboration insofar as it was a logical outcome of the preceding years and opened up new possibilities for further work.

4 Engagement and the construction of critical gazes

As Table 1 suggests, the partnership between RLP and IDS over ten years has gradually built up engagement as an assemblage of multiple experiences, understandings, perspectives and interests seeking to affect social change at different levels and from respective vantage points. Within this assemblage, we have attempted to create a space for interrogating 'truths' from diverse viewpoints. Problematising our contextual, cultural and academic lenses has been essential, as it is these lenses which help to co-construct the meaning carried forward in research, and which in turn become an indicator of how those we research with should be treated in the world (Hall 1975). Acknowledging the political project that we are engaged in also helped to clarify our objectives and the ways in which our personal understandings and assumptions enter the different research and learning processes (Gillies and Allred 2002). This partnership has grown through a shared recognition that binary categories can be violent in their effects, not least when certain groups are categorised as subordinate or inferior (Wyatt *et al.* 2014), and others as inherently superior – and, relatedly, invulnerable. This recognition has in turn generated a more social and political commitment to transformation in gender and development research and practice, and shared efforts to deconstruct such mainstream gender binary framings which place men and women as two counter-posed categories.

This assemblage has also been constituted of learning and debate between masculinity theorists, feminist movements, activists for sexual and gender diversity, and human rights organisations who have made visible the importance of explicitly challenging the power inequities at the root of gender inequality, and the role of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity in oppressive gender orders and relations (Shahrokh *et al.* 2015). The Politicising Masculinities symposium in Dakar in 2007 was foundational in this journey and catalysed a methodology of dialogues across contrasting perspectives. This approach has continued throughout our partnership, strengthening and evolving our critical thinking over time.

Working together with partners from the Centre for Health and Social Justice (in India) and Men for Gender Equality Now (in Kenya), IDS and RLP developed a Men and Masculinities stream of work within a Sida-funded Gender, Power and Sexuality (GPS) programme. This stream created space for critical reflection on addressing men's

relationship to structures of constraint to achieving gender justice. Coming together in Uganda, IDS, RLP and partners conceptualised a symposium that was ultimately held in the UK with the purpose – and title – of ‘Undressing Patriarchy’. In bringing together global colleagues with contrasting perspectives to meet and discuss the structural realities of masculinities and gender relations within shifting political and economic conditions, we learned about changes in livelihoods and social status, homophobia and gendered dynamics around sex and work. These dialogues put into question more familiar narratives and development sector framings (Edström, Das and Dolan 2014; Dolan 2014).

RLP and MOHRAU’s experience of humanitarian sector discourse, policy, law and programming addressing conflict-related sexual violence has been that it frequently continues to depict men as perpetrators of sexual violence, and women as victims.³ These notions silence the reality that – even within patriarchal gender orders – men can be vulnerable and can experience victimisation. This silencing ultimately prevents male survivors from reporting cases, and accessing services or other avenues for support and justice (Mezey and King 2000; Refugee Law Project 2015). It also reflects a certain politics within the humanitarian system which acts to pursue women’s gender equality in ways that have tended to make invisible and marginalise the humanitarian needs and human rights of male survivors (Dolan 2015).

These realities are complicated further by the needs-based discourse of humanitarian actors that construct refugees as homogenised within broad categories of vulnerability and as passive recipients, rather than recognising the agency of refugees to assert their own interests and the importance of voice in this process. As a result, the political interests – or/and bureaucratic expediencies – of donors and humanitarian agencies are often determinative and can easily override the complexities of individuals’ needs and claims (Trad and Kagan 2008).

Our work to deepen the analysis of evolving gender orders and the power dynamics of dominant discourse and narrative has relied on the diversity and specificity of partners’ experiences with working with particular constituencies of survivors of sexual violence in their local contexts; in this case RLP’s experiences with MOHRAU. The project on the role of the support group in the recovery of individual survivors, was committed to co-constructing the framing and questions between MOHRAU members, RLP and IDS staff to ensure that those traditionally conceived as ‘research subjects’ (in this instance MOHRAU), and those frequently regarded as local logisticians (in this case RLP), were able to influence the direction and character of the research (Reason 1994), and to affirm people’s right, through research, to have a say in the decisions that affect them (Reason and Bradbury 2006).

As such, our collective challenge to dominant framings is directed from and in multiple directions. It is a challenge to the power of global institutions to determine what will be the accepted forms of knowledge

(and therefore what is perceived to be known). It is also a pushing up from the grass roots, to affect change in the lives of male survivors, by male survivors themselves. As outlined above, these two domains of change – global and local – are often in tension with each other. The purpose of excellent engagement is thus not only to facilitate the co-construction of knowledge with those at the centre of the change we (collectively) wish to see, but also to find moments, channels and opportunities for alternative knowledges to challenge and shift accepted ways of knowing and acting.

5 Extending space for knowledge construction through visual methods

In working with members of MOHRAU over the past seven years,⁴ RLP has facilitated a safe(r) space within which the group has been able to establish and evolve its identity. Integral to this has been thinking about different ways in which issues could be raised and discussions catalysed. As part of the Undressing Patriarchy symposium, RLP shared the work of RLP's Media for Social Change Programme, and their commitment to working with video as a mechanism both for people to explore and find ways to articulate experiences, perspectives and analyses, and also for communities to use the resultant outputs as tools with which to engage others on pertinent issues on which they are pushing for change. This sparked a collaboration between a media activist from Bangladesh, a member of the research staff from IDS, RLP and MOHRAU to further develop their video advocacy work with communities through the method of participatory video.⁵

Through (re-)presenting their experiences in a participatory video process, communities have the opportunity to make sense of their life worlds in new ways (Shaw 2014). In the first collaboration around video-making, male survivors shared their perspectives on the silencing of refugee voices in general, and those of male survivors of sexual violence in particular, in a short film titled *The Bench*.⁶ As explained by one of the Ugandan researchers involved, this process provided an opportunity for male survivors to 'express themselves' and 'tell their story in a way that made sense to them'. His personal experience was that the process also created space for horizontal learning relationships to be established between MOHRAU members, RLP staff and colleagues from Bangladesh and IDS.

Through our subsequent collaborative project on the place of the survivor group in individual recovery from experiences of sexual violence, MOHRAU seized the opportunity to develop their participatory video approach and to create space to have direct ownership over a core element of the research methodology. The resulting film *Men Can Be Raped Too*,⁷ which was scripted, acted and filmed by members of MOHRAU, with technical support from RLP on aspects of videography and editing, narrates the under-recognised impact of men's experience of sexual violence in conflict, the complex navigation of social relations in the process of healing, and the role of the MOHRAU group within this. An RLP researcher spoke about the

power of creative expression within the video process: 'I saw something that created a way to tell their stories even when they are so challenging. Sometimes you are not able to share these experiences with each other, but in this free way it was possible.'⁸

The participatory video process was an effort to transform perceptions of accepted sites of knowledge construction within the research collaboration. The story being told was constructed through the gaze of diverse human beings who had lived through a deeply personal and isolating reality, of which key elements were nonetheless shared. The dramatisation of this, as in other methods such as participatory theatre, enabled some of these commonalities to be articulated using non-verbal expression of emotional truths that are difficult to communicate in words. The interaction between the MOHRAU participatory video group and the wider research team conducting in-depth interviews under a shared framing created new forms of interactive and critical knowledge (Benequista and Wheeler 2012); researchers gained an interactive understanding of the MOHRAU members' process of story construction, and the emotions and daily experiences informing this, whilst at the same time developing a deeper critical understanding of issues that challenge frequently held assumptions.

6 Pathways of impact and change

Our experience is that engaged and critical social research is stronger and more revealing if adopting an interactive and iterative process which draws meaningfully on partnerships that are dynamic and promote communication and learning between research collaborators, whether defined as traditional researchers, civil society partners or peer researchers situated in the realm of the 'community'. The openness to learn from – and be impacted by – others within this collaboration was central to building trust and evolving new ideas. Members of the Ugandan research team highlighted how important it was that the partnership was not established within already preconceived parameters. Instead, the listening and learning relationship between the different research partners and the community 'being researched', mattered and created a collective process. As outlined by Mehta (2007), development research can (and should) also change researchers – it is a process of engagement and it can change relationships between researchers and communities and can contribute to how both see and act upon the world and the policies within their reach. Furthermore, Edström (2015) argues for a 'pedagogy of the undressed', in that work to address patriarchal gender structures needs to challenge us to reflect on how we are a part of the structures we are aiming to change (2015: 82).

Engaged research does not happen in a vacuum. The lives and experiences of those involved come into the research environment and shape it. Equally, what happens within the research is carried forward into and impacts on the everyday lives of those involved. Our experience is that there are several ways research participants may be positively affected during the research process: through making visible

a social issue, the therapeutic effect of being able to reflect upon and re-evaluate their experience as part of the process, the experience of solidarity in knowing others are also sharing their story, and the subversive or politicised outcome that these consequences may generate.

This is not to discount the important ethical questions that should be posed when research is likely to raise issues in participants' minds that they may subsequently need to come to terms with, including the potential risk of re-traumatisation. In this regard the positioning of the Refugee Law Project as a familiar and trusted organisation that provides access to health-related, psychosocial and also legal support services, played a critical enabling role for the collaboration. This was further strengthened by MOHRAU's role in framing and shaping the research focus and approach, and the up-front discussion of individual dynamics that the process might trigger.

For RLP and MOHRAU, making common cause across geographic and cultural divides is a key political motivation for partnering with IDS, as is establishing interconnections between diverse actors from local to global levels to hold 'transformative dialogues' (Mohan 2001) and critically build a shared agenda for solidarity in the struggle to promote equality and rights for survivors of sexual violence – including men – globally. For MOHRAU, whose members are structurally constrained in where they can travel to as refugees, the connection to international organisations is significant because 'whenever they publish it means they can reach where we aren't able to reach. So, these partners, they are another hand, another voice supporting us to move forward.'⁹ Such connections also facilitate members in establishing an identity as global citizens in search of global justice – *despite the structural hurdles* – as well as in spreading recognition internationally of the issues of concern to them. This was also a motivation for the participatory video, as it helped to ensure that they could develop their own research and related communicative action. This research could be accessible and inclusive to different kinds of audiences and the approach enabled the dissemination of their narrative, including with service providers and community members whom the group was aiming to sensitise to the issue.

However, tensions exist in relation to the question of representation in engaged research. For example, written reports shared within international arenas tend to position and see international researchers as translating knowledge on behalf of the research communities who are metaphorically and physically furthest from decision-making spaces. As one MOHRAU member outlined, although they place value on the collaborative research approach and the skills learned through this, 'when the reports are ready for dissemination, and when presentations are being made in given places about the outcomes of the study, MOHRAU members should be present to supplement on these presentations'. The political and personal perspectives of researchers inform the intentions we have for the research. They also inform how we evaluate the impact (Gillies and Alldred 2002). The

multiple subjectivities within our research partnership mean that there are different positionalities on what change should look like and where this should happen. One important question is the extent to which the North-based researcher has any automatic legitimacy as an interlocutor of grounded knowledge within global research collaborations.¹⁰ Another is whether or not North-based institutions are able and willing to challenge their own governments over highly exclusionary visa practices. It is not insignificant to the broader challenge of North–South knowledge–power dynamics that these visa practices effectively prevent South-based researchers from representing themselves and their work in conferences and workshops that take place in the global North, and the absence of their voices has the inevitable effect of re-inscribing the very power dynamics that excellent engagement is seeking to undo.¹¹

This latter example points to how the analysis of ethics and power in critical social research must not only pay significant attention to imbalances in researcher/researched relationships, but also give more explicit focus to broader questions about the political role played by research findings and the relations set up by knowledge claims. Our reflection is that a shift is needed in order to situate matters of power in research to include the political aims, uses, dissemination and effects of ‘knowledge’, in addition to relations internal to the research process.

For many South-based institutions such as RLP, links to a Northern research institution have specific value and utility insofar as such relationships enhance the credibility of findings with donors and other institutions. It is a strategic and shifting judgement as to whether these benefits ultimately outweigh the costs of reinforcing the notion that excellence only exists in – or is, at any rate, judged in – the North, and can only be enjoyed vicariously by institutions in the South. An important factor in this judgement call is the extent to which institutions in the North and South respectively are able to access and use academic ‘technologies’ to generate products that resonate with the expectations for international policy audiences. The extent to which these mechanisms, even as they enhance visibility for otherwise silenced people, also reproduce power imbalances in development knowledge construction and dissemination, is an important consideration for the engaged researcher.

It is also the reality that any research project (even within a long-term partnership of this nature) is a temporary engagement in comparison to the long-term social change processes that partners engage around. In Uganda, there are very real obstacles to an effective response for male survivors – in terms of recognition of the issue, the provision of services to address their needs as survivors of violence, and the multiple challenges regarding their marginalisation as a result of their refugee identity. The organisations working to address change on the ground also face complex, contextualised sociopolitical barriers to working with this group. Equally, when engaging around such issues, North-based researchers may have a structural position that allows them to come in and out of the discussion, and a certain flexibility to intervene in a

system of power relations that they are free to leave after the project, but this does not extricate them totally from power inequalities within the 'development encounter'; North-based partners often face deep resource constraints in their attempts to sustain engagement with South-based colleagues, as donors show scant interest in issues perceived as 'marginal' or in the kind of long-term funding required to sustain relationships and thereby build momentum for change. These tensions highlight the importance of ethicality in the way engagement happens and the importance of decision-making, starting with the interests of those who have the potential to be impacted the most by the research. This takes us back to the questions of what excellent engagement looks like and how issues of ethical practice and sustainability are considered.

7 The structural arrangements of excellent engagement

The above analysis presents a process of engagement and collaboration that is interpersonal, and that involves mutual learning in both directions that is also acknowledged by all parties. It takes time because all the above inevitably rest on trust that is built through success in the above, over time, and in success at working through the differences that inevitably arise through joint activities (whether research, symposia, participation in policy spaces, and the like). In aspiring towards excellent engagement, however, it is essential that the concrete institutional arrangements between the research partners, not least the disbursements of money and the management, analysis and write-up of data, model the commitment to achieving new power balances within these collaborations.

Given the sensitivity of the topic of sexual violence, the importance of designing a partnership that would work for MOHRAU as well as the wider research team was clear. As one of the Ugandan RLP researchers outlined 'given the perceived risk of furthering the stigma and the problem, you need to work with them to hear how they want the stories drawn out and how to address the problem'. This working relationship was made possible by the trust and reciprocity experienced in the historical relationship between RLP and MOHRAU. Those that have worked closely with MOHRAU from the Ugandan team also highlighted that the time IDS researchers took to build rapport with the group and build the structure of togetherness in the project was critical: 'For Men of Hope to see IDS as like a colleague or a counsellor to their ears, and someone that is trying to understand them meant that they could build trust with you and you could slowly begin to understand them'.¹²

Our articulation of excellent engagement establishes that all members of a collaboration should have the space to engage with external organisations, and determine the initial purpose for this. In considering this, the delicate and intricate relationship between funding and engagement is significant. The direction of funding through IDS over the course of our partnership has led to opportunities and constraints. There has been an ongoing productive tension regarding the demands

of a particular grant and underlying interests which are being pursued as best they can within its strictures. As outlined by RLP's director, there was a sense that one earlier project 'pushed us into someone else's agenda, we pushed back in the sense that we worked with both women and men on the [Mobilising Men] project, and from then on we were also more assertive about what we wanted to do'.¹³

Engaging in smaller streams or projects within the framework of larger scale programme funding (within IDS) seemed to better facilitate a joint process as the budget lines were less specific and enabled greater creativity and joint determination of activities. Coming further into the collaboration this also meant that the way that the partnership was positioned was driven by the questions (and realities of researcher capacities and interests) generated through these ongoing engagements. As critical conversations continued and a shared agenda grew, we found that the collaboration also grew in strength to direct the focus of research in line with our increasingly shared critical position. The Therapeutic Activism study discussed here aimed to find out how male survivors of conflict-related sexual violence have sought support and recognition, and did so within a broader research programme on the 'Empowerment of Women and Girls' under the theme of working with men to address sexual and gender-based violence through collective action. To a certain extent we were able to push the boundaries of what was expected ('expected' in that some only recognise the topic when framed as 'violence against women'). This was facilitated by IDS having decision-making power over the use of the grant, by having a leading gender researcher at the organisation as a member of the project team and by the long-term relationship between IDS and RLP strengthening the credibility of the proposition. This highlights the importance of funding arrangements that provide space for the emergent explorations of a collaboration, as opposed to grants that establish a project agenda that simply reinforces certain pre-set agendas.

The sustainability of engagement and what is important to those involved in the collaboration over the longer term also cannot be assumed. MOHRAU in their evolving identity as an activist organisation have ambitions to receive training in human rights education and advocacy that will enable them to build further on the work achieved through the RLP-IDS-MOHRAU collaboration. Instead of undertaking additional research activities, they see that such training would contribute to their capacity to mobilise the knowledge generated in the research and their capacity to be able to drive change. The sustainability of engagement is thus to a certain extent determined by whether our shared commitment to action or political change can be realised across diverse and intersecting spheres and through activities that may not always involve research, but that reinforce the vision and purpose of our work together. The relevance and appropriateness of the type of engagement therefore need to be considered, and IDS needs to reflect critically on the extent to which partners themselves can direct what engagement looks like, and how this contributes to their own interpretation of excellence.

8 Conclusion: collaborating critically for excellent engagement

Research is inherently political, structured in hierarchies of power among researchers, between sponsors of research and researchers, and between researchers, intermediary service providers and those traditionally positioned as the subjects of research (Bell and Roberts 1984). These political relations present an array of counterforces to the development of empowering or liberatory research practices, including relations of control and dependency, privileges of the researchers, and the influence of institutional interests. Given these counterforces, the engaged excellence approach risks re-inscribing the researcher into a position of power, as one who has the power to create engaged excellence where others do not. This allows possibilities for exploitation that subvert mutuality, and constrain efforts towards a collaborative or reciprocal quest for knowledge and a practice that models the change we wish to see.

We call for a critical reflexivity within engaged excellence that is alert to the processes of knowledge assemblage in which researchers are themselves enmeshed, as well as to the politics of knowledge that is made possible by the inherent incompleteness, performativity and social construction of research endeavours (Sriprakash and Mukhopadhyay 2015). Through 'transformative dialogues' (Mohan 2001) and across levels and spaces, we can perhaps instead have 'excellent engagement' and enable collaborations that prevent any new 'tyrannies' (Cooke and Kothari 2001), buzzwords or slogans that reify rather than reform research for social change.

The value and weight of such a concept comes in its capacity to create research and learning that is part of a bigger sociopolitical project that challenges orthodoxies, contests established norms or truths and works to make visible knowledge–power and its related oppressions and emancipations. It must recognise the political nature of research and research for social change. Research collaborations across diverse subjectivities should be looking to develop excellent engagement, for which values and principles of critical consciousness, reflexivity and transformation should be core.

The RLP–IDS–MOHRAU research partnership does not hold a blueprint for such an approach, indeed it has, perhaps necessarily, been tentative at times and laden with tensions at others. Nonetheless, we have learned and continue to learn from our praxis, and hope that this expository article supports others to pursue 'engaged excellence' as the possible outcome of a process of excellent engagement, rather than a status that can simply be invoked. Our experience is that without linking research to a shared and deep commitment to social change for equal human rights and recognition, and without openly discussing our intentions for research in the light of our political, professional and activist hopes, we miss the opportunity to develop more effective, ethically responsible research (Gillies and Alldred 2002). For our collaboration, this commitment has and continues to involve challenging the invisibilising hand of patriarchal male order in knowledge–power, in

the politics of the international gender and development sectors, and in complex and marginalising global and national contexts. For this to be possible, any ‘engaged excellence’ claimed by North-based institutions has to be based on the mutually perceived excellence of the engagement; that is, on a collaborative and open yet critical togetherness across diverse research partners that is able to provide support and solidarity in driving change. As outlined by one of our Ugandan researchers:

I learned that being together gives you more strength to handle anything ahead of you, that togetherness really helps you a lot. That you need to involve your team mates, I learned that from Men of Hope, that they are together as a support group and are not trying to cope with things as an individual.¹⁴

Notes

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- 1 This number is not fixed and not entirely stable, given that some members have been resettled to third countries while new members are joining in an ongoing fashion.
- 2 All reports, publications and films are listed in the references of this article. All acronyms are given in full in the glossary of this *IDS Bulletin*.
- 3 These experiences reflect very much Sivakumaran’s writing of 2007, 2010.
- 4 The work with individuals preceded the establishment of the support group.
- 5 As explained by Wheeler, ‘Participatory video (PV), as a digital and visual medium, acts as a lens through which the power relationships, identities, and perspectives of the people involved are projected, reshaped and made legible to others’ (2011: 48). PV ‘shifts the perspective of who is the “expert” away from the researcher and towards the researched as those who hold the most knowledge about their own realities’ (*ibid.*: 50). Facilitators use video activities to mediate group discussion inclusively, establish collaborative relationships and catalyse group action. Video production provides a powerful way for participants to explore their situation, and reflect on experiences together, in order to deepen understanding about reality and forge ways forward based on the knowledge that emerges (Shaw 2014).
- 6 View *The Bench*: www.refugeelawproject.org/component/allvideoshare/video/latest/the-bench.
- 7 View *Men Can Be Raped Too*: www.refugeelawproject.org/component/allvideoshare/video/latest/men-can-be-raped-too.

- 8 Pers. comm., 13 August 2015.
- 9 Pers. comm., communication by a member of MOHRAU, 12 August 2015.
- 10 The language that distinguishes the 'international researcher' from the 'local' one itself implies a hierarchy rather than a simple description of geographic location. For this reason, we use here the term 'North-based' rather than 'international' researchers.
- 11 In the lifetime of the RLP–IDS relationship there have been several instances in which participants from RLP have been blocked from participating in events at IDS (e.g. the Undressing Patriarchy symposium) due to failings on the part of the British authorities.
- 12 Pers. comm., communication by a member of MOHRAU, 12 August 2015.
- 13 Pers. comm., 14 August 2015.
- 14 Pers. comm., 14 August 2015.

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