



# **Enacting feminist countertopographies: Border crossing through participant led results dissemination.**

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## **Abstract**

Although encouraged by feminist and critical geographers, dissemination of research results back to research participants is seldom carried out and reported to the wider research community. Lack of engagement with these ethical and methodological issues goes against the call for responsible geographies, which materialize through bridging the divide between scholars in the Global North and researched communities in the Global South. Building upon a feminist geographical postcolonial transnational perspective, this article, co-authored by the researcher and the local research assistant, presents two episodes of active cross-cultural, cross-language disseminations that took place at the conclusion of a four-year PhD research project on smallholder irrigation farming in East Africa. We argue that by engaging with and linking two women's groups across countries with similar struggles, and triggering participant-led active dissemination activities, the researcher can use his/her privileged position to further the cause of oppressed groups. Grounded on the concepts of border crossing and countertopographies, we

contend that geographers need to heighten ethical disciplinary debates by drawing inspiration from postcolonial transnational feminist praxis.

### **Keywords**

Postcolonial transnational feminist praxis; border crossing; countertopographies; dissemination; participatory methodologies; East Africa

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### **Introduction**

Research is fundamentally an extractive endeavor (Chilisa, 2011; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Participatory, feminist, and action research, all of which are grounded in the principle that knowledge creates power hierarchies, have attempted to overcome the intrinsic extractive nature of research through a reflexive effort, which makes research advantageous both for participants and researchers (Chilisa, 2011; Nagar and Lock Swarr, 2009; Raghuram and Madge, 2006; Sundberg, 2003; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). These principles are applied during research planning, data gathering, and at times, data analysis (Caretta, 2016; Stewart and Draper, 2009). While dissemination is urged as part of the ideal of participatory research (Gibson Graham et al., 2013; Cupples and Kindon, 2003; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), it is seldom written on as a component of participatory methodologies and practices. Dissemination of results back to local participants is often neglected due to lack of funding and academic performance measurements rewarding publications and grants, as opposed to public outreach and service, which propel a local impact agenda (Shanley and Lopex, 2009; Raghuram and Madge, 2006). Those that disseminate results often write booklets where they summarize findings for local communities, sometimes in local languages (e.g. Savadogo et al., 2016; Hohental et al., 2015; Mistry et al., 2015; Sulle and Smalley, 2015; Caretta et al., 2014). There are however few scholarly publications that report these experiences in academic publications (Caretta, 2018; MacKenzie, 2015; Chilisa, 2011; Whittle et al 2011; Cahill and Torre, 2007).

Dissemination, however, is not about the activities that are carried out but rather about the process itself and how it can be a liberating, empowering, and participative undertaking. Ideally, dissemination should be the culminating point of the researcher's impact agenda; a fundamental moment in which the researcher can not only inform participants about results, but also prompt a process of reflection and potentially trigger transformative change in local communities. Such is the focus of this paper. We show how dissemination should be led by research participants, as this approach facilitates mutual learning and enhances reciprocity between researcher and participants, who can improve their self-esteem, take advantage of, and learn from a new experience (Snow et al., 2015; Whittle et al., 2011). By zooming in on participant-led dissemination and the consequent knowledge exchange among scholars, participants, and among participants

themselves, we illustrate attempts to break down the North-South/academicians-participants power divide. Accordingly, our paper contributes to the argument made by earlier feminist and critical geographical publications (e.g. Nagar, 2015; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) that participatory research can only and truly be named so if power is shared equally among researchers and participants, who are able to implement research results in their communities. However, active dissemination by participants is a topic that largely remains to be explored and debated by geographers, as part of disciplinary methodological and power reflections. Despite this lacuna, we argue that dissemination is key to reify the call for geographies of responsibility (Jazeel and McFarlane, 2009).

To further challenge the western and hierarchical dimensions of knowledge production, feminist geographers argue that tapping into local activism can help bridge the divide between academia and politics on the ground (Nagar, 2015; Peake and Kobayashi, 2002; Peake and Trotz, 2001). Accordingly, this paper is co-authored by the researcher and the Kenyan research assistant. Co-authorship among scholars and field assistants or local communities rarely happens, even in participatory research (Sarna-Wojcicki et al., 2017). We have been working together in rural Kenya since 2011 and since the beginning, Florence the local research assistant, has played a decisive role in shaping the investigation beyond translation and logistical arrangements (for a further analysis on this see: Caretta, 2015a and Caretta and Cheptum, 2017). Florence's engagement with local issues, nearness to women, and her vital contribution to the research project at all its stages should be acknowledged, not just for fieldwork but also in academic publishing. As our perceptions and interpretations of events that took place during the research process have been different (see also: Caretta, 2015a), in this article our voices intertwine and join to discuss how cross-cultural collaborative efforts impacted our research. Finally, we argue that geographers should use their privileged position to facilitate interactions between participants, particularly those that are in a subordinate position within their communities.

This article is based on the dissemination activities carried out for Martina's PhD thesis among smallholder irrigation farmers of the drylands of Kenya and Tanzania. Result dissemination was organized as a complex and comprehensive set of activities across Kenya and Tanzania. Participants from Kenya travelled to Tanzania and vice versa during a ten-day trip to facilitate reciprocal learning around issues concerning smallholder irrigation farming (for more details, see Caretta, 2018). The women that participated in this trip were those that had participated more actively in the research such as Florence, the Kenyan research assistant; Helena, the leader of the Kenyan women's saving group; Catherine, the Tanzanian research assistant; and Nina, a young representative from the Tanzanian women's saving group. Although Nina was not the most knowledgeable member of the saving group, she was young, fit to travel, spoke Swahili, and had the documents required to cross the border into Kenya. These aspects were not secondary in the planning of this ten-day itinerant dissemination. None of the

community representatives or research assistants had travelled out of their own country before this trip. The travelling group also included two male representatives from each community: two that had been Martina's research assistants, and two who were active farmers that had helped Martina in developing her research and community contacts; Martina's advisors; and a Kenyan professor who had collaborated with Martina and her advisors since the inception of her PhD research.

In this article, we analyze two specific episodes of active dissemination led by research participants that demonstrate how bringing back research results to communities can drive the local impact agenda. These episodes are a drama played by women members of a Kenyan self-help group, and a dialogue between Kenyan women leaders and a Tanzanian female Maasai farmers' group. We begin by examining the conceptual groundwork for the analysis of these two episodes. The conceptual section is followed by the research background and the two community-led dissemination instances. The paper concludes by urging geographers to reflect on how to facilitate and improve the attainment of responsible geographies through dissemination in the context of cross-cultural, cross-language research.

### **Border crossing and countertopographies**

Postcolonial transnational feminist praxis is centered on the principles of interpersonal reflexivity and power sharing, which are operationalized through the conceptualization and implementation of joint endeavors between researchers and participants. Nagar refers to this methodological and practical approach as "border crossing" (2015). Reflexivity and power sharing are at the basis of feminist participatory methodologies (Caretta and Riaño, 2016; Raghuram and Madge, 2006; Peake and Trotz, 2001). According to feminist geographers, researchers also need to be accountable to participants through methodological flexibility (Nagar 2015; Snow et al., 2015). Adjusting the course of one's research methodologically means including the participants' views and needs into the research design, as well as being open to the fluidity of research roles; beyond being a researcher, becoming both learner and teacher of different knowledge systems (Nagar 2015; Snow et al., 2015). A researcher's reflexivity in contextualizing and criticizing research relationships does not provide a full account of the thoughts and demands of research participants, especially in the Global South (Nagar, 2002).

Academics who do activist work are often faced with resistance from their peers and institutions. The validity of their efforts in fully engaging with research participants and activists throughout the different stages of research is questioned and actively discouraged within the confining practices of academic performance measurement, such as annual reviews, tenure, and promotion (Riaño, 2015; Shanley and Lopez, 2009; Nagar, 2002). Conversely, feminist geographers (e.g. Raghuram and Madge, 2006; Nagar, 2002) urge scholars to move beyond theories in reflecting practically and politically on how their research can further the claims of subordinated groups through collaboration with local activists. By going beyond

reflexivity about one's positionality, researchers can use their locational, material, and institutional privilege to bridge knowledge divides and build "situated solidarities" (Nagar, 2015: 87) between local groups. These feminist research strategies are advantageous for local communities as their claims reach a wider public, but they also help academia reshape its relationship to the field by overcoming its embedded power relations (Nagar, 2015; Raghuram and Madge, 2006).

Crossing borders, thus, is a means to produce pertinent reciprocal understandings across geographical institutional and cultural borders and to open up to the configuration and critique of theory by local groups, communities, and authorities (Nagar, 2015). New spaces should be created to make knowledge and theory accessible to research actors outside academia, such as local non-governmental organizations or activist groups. Research dissemination activities at large are appropriate for this purpose. These spaces can open the door to expressive forms that go beyond the face-to-face dynamic of research interviews, giving participants the freedom of self-representation. They can, for example, share feelings and attempts of resistance against oppression and provide researchers with data that is truly the result of a participatory research process. In these instances, the research dynamic is reversed, as the researchers' analytical perspective is guided by the participants' understanding of phenomena (Enria, 2015; Chilisa, 2011).

Recognizing and endorsing the value of situated knowledge through activism is thus key to crossing borders. When dealing with multiple case studies or numerous study sites, the researcher can comprehend existing links across space and scale that participants might not be aware of. It becomes the role of the researcher to connect these places and these struggles in what Katz (2001:1230) defines as "countertopographies." This term refers to the relations that are built between different realities that are emerging from the feminist and critical insights produced by the researcher, who becomes a means to advance the efforts of similar groups that did not know each other. The dissemination of results across study sites is a way to produce countertopographies because it is an opportunity for participants to learn from each other through comparison and discuss reciprocal understandings with the researcher. This practice was purposely chosen in Martina's final PhD field trip in order to introduce research participants to one another and prompt a process of information exchange, livelihood improvement, and foster alliance work among participants through research dissemination. The background to this dissemination trip and to the research project is presented in the following section.

## **Research background**

Between 2011 and 2014, Martina conducted her PhD fieldwork in the drylands of Kenya and Tanzania to examine the local waterscapes of two smallholder irrigation farming systems in East Africa (Caretta, 2015b).

Sibou, Kenya, and Engaruka, Tanzania, are two agricultural communities whose gravitational irrigation systems have been dated to the 1700s (Davies et al., 2014) and have made cultivation possible in remote, potentially unproductive dryland areas (Caretta et al., 2018). These communities are inhabited by the Marakwets, a population belonging to the Kalenjin ethnic group (Watson et al., 1998), and the Maasai, a Nilotic ethnic group living in central and southern Kenya and northern Tanzania (McCabe, 2003), respectively. Although their populations are different, their modes of agricultural production are strikingly similar as they are both dependent on these gravitational irrigation systems of which, it is estimated, there are twelve similar examples across East Africa (Tagseth, 2008). Hence, these sites with their respective social differences are representative of a wider set of smallholder irrigation farming communities.

Against the backdrop of feminist participatory methodologies, one focus of Martina's PhD thesis was women's access to water, management forums and the discursive representation of their labor in the two smallholder irrigation farming communities of Sibou, Kenya, and Engaruka, Tanzania.

The knowledge that permeated Martina's PhD thesis was co-constructed through repeated cross-cultural and cross-language interactions with local research assistants that enabled the participation of local farmers in the process of shaping locally meaningful and contextually relevant research questions, which were then jointly validated by the researcher, research assistants, and participants (see: Caretta, 2018, 2016).

Data showed that strict patriarchal norms control water and practically exclude or limit women's direct access to irrigation water and irrigation management forums (Caretta and Börjeson, 2015). In recent decades, men have started engaging—although in a limited way—in the cultivation of crops for sale. Women's workloads have increased due to this recent livelihood diversification, as they have to sow, weed, and harvest produce (e.g., tomatoes, watermelons) while also farming most food crops for family consumption (e.g., maize and millet). This agricultural gender divide is visible in men and women's responses to increased climate variability. Women use intercropping as a risk aversion strategy, while men sow more rounds of crops for sale when the rain allows for it (Caretta and Börjeson, 2015). Moreover, while discursively undervalued by men, women's support is materially essential to sustaining the irrigation infrastructure and guaranteeing soil fertility, allowing the cultivation of crops for sale (Caretta, 2015b).

However, the women's situation is not one of complete subordination, nor are they victims in need of saving by western researchers. They resist ties of domination. *Harambee's*, or saving groups, are one means of practicing this resistance. They gather in weekly meetings where they collect their savings and distribute it rotationally to a member of their group. The member that receives the full amount is in charge of providing everyone with a dinner of *ugali* (African

cornmeal mush), *sukuma wiki* (vegetables), and *chai*. Their contribution can vary from 0.2 USD to a maximum 0.5 USD. Both in Kenya and in Tanzania, women's groups engage in shared activities: money saving, self-help, mutual support in agriculture, traditional dance, and beading of decorations (for a more comprehensive analysis see Webster and Caretta, 2016). In Sub-Saharan Africa, these traditional networks of mutual support have long functioned as safety nets in times of emergency—such as burial, hospitalization, or school fees payments. During the 1970s and 1980s, fueled by the *Harambee* ideology—“pulling together” in Swahili— (Johnson, 2004), they started to become formalized. Although the *Harambee* ideology formalized these saving schemes, they have existed for much longer. As opposed to external saving endeavors promoted by development NGOs, which in some cases have been shown to aggravate indebtedness and tensions within communities (Cons and Paprocki, 2010), these groups are local, self-founded, and self-managed on a rotational basis by their own, female members.

Women in the Kenyan study site are prohibited from irrigating due to the belief that they are dirty because of menstruation. Hence, they are not allowed to handle irrigation water, let alone sit in water management meetings. Barring them from irrigation is a manifestation of masculinity, which is particularly deleterious to widows or those whose husbands are absent (Caretta and Börjeson, 2015). Savings women can get through *Harambee*'s and group collections are fundamental to pay a man to water and keep their crops alive in order not to endanger the survival of their children. Additionally, saving money allows women to gain a certain level of independence from their husbands.

Some of the members of these groups in Kenya assisted us during the research, including repeatedly inviting us to their weekly gatherings, where we could see strong activist and leader attitudes.

In Tanzania, while women are not formally excluded from the work of irrigation, their control over water for productive purposes is marginal at best. The Maasai patriarchal system in Tanzania is much more overbearing than the Marakwets' of Kenya and, coupled with the more apparent lack of material resources, limits Maasai women's endeavors. Accordingly, Tanzanian groups existed purely on a seasonal basis and were seriously hampered by the meddling of men, who obliged women to pay to register the group and who in the past had run away with the money.

The focus on women's exclusion from irrigation was a political feminist choice made by Martina at the beginning of the research, which came to be understood and supported by Florence. Towards the end of the research, it became clear that women had the means to fight against their subordination, and their weekly *Harambee*'s gathering and saving collections were the glue that kept them together and afloat.

Result dissemination was a complex and comprehensive activity (see Caretta, 2018), which was not merely focused on women. Notwithstanding this, Martina purposely decided to use her position to have two women from Tanzania—Catherine, her research assistant, and Nina, the Tanzanian women’s groups representative—travel to Kenya to prompt a process of reciprocal learning. Additionally, Florence guided and hosted activities in her home village with Helena, the women’s groups leader, in Kenya.



**Figure 1:** Florence—on the far left—translates from Swahili to Marakwet what Nina, the Tanzanian women’s group representative standing beside her, wants to share with the local Kenyan women’s group (taken by Caretta, Jan. 2015).

Having observed agricultural irrigation practices and saving group dynamics for years, Martina was confident that participants had relatively similar, yet not identical, ways of doing things and that where they differed, they could learn from each other. In the four years of research collaboration, participants had always been kind, friendly and soft-spoken; an ideal environment in which to share knowledge.

Martina knew that even though she had followed these groups for years and knew their routines, she would never be able to transmit their struggles and the solutions that they had found with the same energy, conviction, and agency. Additionally, she had spoken about these groups to each other throughout the years. Florence knew of Catherine and Catherine knew of Florence, and they were

eager to meet each other and to travel from their respective countries for an opportunity to learn new farming techniques and meet other women with similar issues. Although the local languages of Marakwet and Maasai are spoken in the study sites of Kenya and Tanzania respectively, Florence and Catherine are fluent in Swahili and English and acted as translators and cultural brokers among the group of local participants and scholars. As she had done during her research, Martina knew she could rely on them to solve any practical issue and address any language or cultural misunderstanding that might arise during the course of the trip.



**Figure 2:** Helena—on the left—shows millet to Catherine—on the right— and to Nina, partially visible on the right (taken by Caretta, Jan. 2015).

The episodes below depict the circumstances of this knowledge exchange and the different practical and power dynamics that took place.

### **Drama as self-expression and liberation**

The first episode we present is a play that women members of a saving group recited to welcome the visitors from Tanzania, Martina, her advisors, and the professor from Kenya who were all travelling on the dissemination trip. When we arrived at the compound, they were singing a refrain stating, “Group work is the best thing to live a better life.” Women were dressed in their group uniform they designed and sewed. Their uniform was completed by the traditional Marakwet

clothing, consisting of a goatskin draped around their bodies and held by a belt made with beads. They were also wearing traditional beaded decorations on their foreheads and necks.



**Figure 3:** “*Vision Women Group*” welcoming visitors (taken by Cheptum, Jan. 2015).

This reception was completely unexpected by the travelers and arranged by the women’s group themselves. We had some dissemination activities planned, such as showing the results of the research and the booklet containing these results (for more details see Caretta, 2018). The women, however, led the meeting first and we then shared our pieces at the end of our time together.

We had been working with the members of this group since the inception of Martina’s research. We had interviewed them several times and had been repeatedly invited to their homes. Hence, while the women had been part of the study and had seen it evolve throughout the four years of Martina’s PhD, Martina had not shared the final analysis with them yet. Martina and Florence had done in equal measure the portion of the research project that was focusing on women, but the women themselves mostly partook as interviewees, and in data validating and preliminary analysis sessions (see Caretta, 2015a). Repeated interviews and member checking sessions were time-consuming for the women, who were preoccupied with cultivating, child rearing, and home making. Thus, while it can be argued that the power of shaping the research was in our hands, it should also be

said that engaging women in a fully participative process would have been unsustainable for their personal lives and exploitative of their limited time and energies. We felt that we were already taking too much of their time with our repeated visits. It therefore was a major surprise to both of us that the women had taken it upon themselves to create a play for all the visitors and that the play actually depicted our research findings: self-help groups were fundamental in shaping women's lives and empowering them (see Webster and Caretta, 2016).

The self-initiated group called "*Vision Women Group*" has existed since 2010 and has around twenty members, mostly single women that have been abandoned by their husbands. The drama play, which was developed by the women themselves and not written down, but rather improvised, was meant to show us the reasons that made them come together as a group. The abuse of alcohol—particularly of the local illegal brew called *chang'aa*—is presented as the cause of brawls within families, economic mismanagement, and children's neglect.

The following is a section of the play.

Gladys –Alcohol dealer who is brewing and selling the "*chang'aa*" local brew and as well drinking it, states: "*How are you Makipchumba?*"

Jepkiror – A drunk woman who has forgotten to take care of her children due to excessive drinking: "*I am very hungry. I just came from my place and I met these women and they are all feeling hungry. We saw smoke and thought you were brewing changa'a.*"

Makipchumba – Senior *chang'aa* brewer and seller: "*Welcome. There is little changa'a. I am selling it because I need to pay school fees for my children.*"

Jesca – Makipchumba's daughter who is in school: "*Mom we have been sent home from school because I did not bring the payment of school fees.*"

Katee – Makipchumba's daughter's husband arrives: "*I want my share of changa'a.*"

Makipchumba: "*I sell all of it in order for our daughter to go back to school and also to buy sugar and food.*"

Katee: "*Now I am going to beat you! How come you sold my share? I am the boss of this family!*"

*All women came in and started discussing that payment of school fees and husbands' violence was a common issue and they should find alternative sources of income and give up brewing, which is illegal.*

Gladys: "*We should start a small rotating saving group and contribute 5 KSH (0.5. USD) a week.*"

Makipchumba: “*We can start selling tomatoes and save something to put into the group and then be able to pay school fees.*”

Gladys: “*We will give Jepkiror a loan and she will have to pay a small interest so that she can pay school fees for her children. And then we can do the same for the other group members that are in need.*”



**Figure 4:** Women enacting the beginning of the play and drinking *chang'aa* together (taken by Caretta, Jan. 2015).

The drama in this case was used by the women as a way to make their reality visible—a reality which is rarely expressed openly to scholars, visitors, and outsiders. By witnessing the theatrical piece, visitors could get an insight into their everyday challenges, and those who were unfamiliar with women’s circumstances could empathize with them (see also Torre, 1990). In this sense, drama can be an empowering means to give rise to a plurality of stories, while at the same time blurring one’s identity (see also Cahill, 2010; Fitzgerald 2004; Boon & Plastow, 2004). Drama, consciousness raising, and empowerment are deeply and complexly intertwined in this play. Women impersonate a fictitious character that somehow represents their past, drawing a boundary between the real and the fictional world (Cahill, 2010). Metaxis, as this process is called (Cahill, 2010), allows them not to be singled out by the public, who can relate to the characters’ dilemmas and challenges (see also Torre, 1990). The fact that women were not necessarily

representing themselves gave them a chance to fully express themselves, without having to worry about the public's judgment (see also Fitzgerald, 2004).

Although the drama was performed in the local language of Marakwet and was orally summed up to the audience in English, its focus was clear due to the expressiveness of the women's interpretation. Accordingly, drama overcame language barriers while also being an instance of embodied story telling. The women's facial expressions were vivid, their voices rose as they were trying to convince Makipchumba to join their group, and they moved back and forth while enacting the different scenes. Their arms rose to throw away the bottles that Jepkorir was drinking from. The audience was captured by this unexpected play and could grasp its underlying message when the women finally hugged each other and started dancing in a circle.

Catherine and Nina from Tanzania witnessed this play. Nina, the Tanzanian women's group representative, could not understand English and had the content of the play relayed to her by Catherine in Swahili. We heard Catherine and Nina uttering: "*They were really smart in their group.*" "*This is what happens to us too with our husbands, we should take inspiration from these women!*" Nina was so impressed by the play and the resourcefulness of the Kenyan women's group that, as we present in the following section, when we travelled to Tanzania she shared a description and her impressions of the play with her fellow group members. During the two-day road trip from Kenya and Tanzania we had the opportunity to have several discussions with her about all the ideas she had gotten from the Kenyan group. She said she was truly inspired and was going to suggest to her group that they would replicate some of the saving strategies and goals that the Kenyan women had shared with her.

The play was a display of emotions and experiences which not only brought women's concerns to the forefront, but also their hopes and resourcefulness. The women depicted a story of redemption from brewing illegally to pay school fees, while being drunkards and suffering the abuse of their husbands, to catalysing their efforts to change their lives through common saving. In a way, the play can be conceptualized as a moment of self-celebration and self-definition, which are commonly and jointly cherished in African societies (Chilisa, 2011). Acting and reflecting over their story can additionally be a source of healing for the women, who express their feelings through creative performances (see also Jordan, 2005 in Chilisa, 2011). Drama can also be a tool to sensitize others towards women's subordinated position while debunking a portrayal of them as helpless (cf. Enria, 2015; Cahill, 2010; Boon and Plastow, 2004). By commonly enacting their story and making the invisible visible, women let the public move to another reality and get a glimpse into their collective action of change (cf. Cahill, 2010). Interestingly, the women did not deny the fact that they were victims of their husbands' abuse and perpetrators of abuse against their children but provided a nuanced understanding of the reasons behind their behavior; lack of economic resources and their partner's support led them to the illegal occupation of brewing.

From the point of view of the researchers, this instance illuminated women's resistance towards negative societal influences, including their husband's overbearing power. It provided scholars that were present with a vision of things from the women's non-western perspective that possibly would not have emerged in a usual interview (Chilisa, 2011). Drama privileges the participants' experiences, and—while not providing a fully contextualized understanding of the social phenomena at stake—can render, in this case, women's self-representation. Witnessing this play gave insights into both the women's circumstances and drama as a method that can help depict structures of subordination and attempts to break these structures (see also Enria, 2015; Boon and Plastow, 2004). Moreover, the play produced a deliverable piece of knowledge about their condition, without the researcher having to trigger this process through interviewing.

During data gathering and analysis, we had the power to shape the course of the research project and had engaged with women in numerous interviews and member checking sessions, while striving to respect their time. At the conclusion of the research project, women it took upon themselves to tell their own stories and share their process of empowerment. Again, we had no idea that the play was going to take place. We speculate that our repeated questions allowed women to see the connections between their trajectories and life stories and made them realize that their stories were worth telling personally: with their voices.

The play ended in an emblematic way. Members of the group have a uniform dress, which they all wear for special gatherings and occasions. At the end of the play, Martina was dressed up by women in that specific uniform to indicate their partnership and reciprocal support. This gesture was spontaneous, and Martina had not foreseen it. It was a deeply moving moment for Martina, but also a moment of performativity that condensed the meaning of research partnership and crossing boundaries between academia and local communities. Martina's presence and her initiative to disseminate research results was taken up promptly by the women to showcase their concerns and their solutions to the visitors and other scholars present, who had no idea of the reception they would get. Gearing and leading the dissemination activities towards their own story is an indication that participants knew that they were in control of the process and that we would have supported them in their endeavors.

### **Building situated solidarities**

One of the leaders of the "*Vision Women Group*," Helena, followed us to Tanzania to meet the local women's group there. This section reports on an excerpt of a dialogue between Martina, Helena, and the Tanzanian women, who were also part of a group, that took place on January 29, 2015, as an integral part of the ten-day dissemination activities.

Having witnessed the resourcefulness of the Kenyan group and the relative powerlessness of the Tanzanian group, Martina decided to connect them. Having

worked in the two places since 2011, she had become aware of the challenges facing each group, but also of the lessons they could learn from each other. In light of the methodological flexibility that had been applied throughout the research project, she had gained an overview of the women's circumstances and acted as a node to connect them and initiate a process of reciprocal learning (see also Nagar 2015; Snow et al., 2015). The discussion between group members went as follows:

Martina: I am very happy to meet you again! I have come with Helena and Florence from Kenya, who are going to share with you their experience on the importance of team work. I have done my research for four years both in Kenya and Tanzania and am very impressed by women's groups for the effort and the hard work that they put into their everyday lives. Helena is a member of a vibrant group in Kenya and she will share first-hand information with you so that you can apply some of the ideas for the success of your group.

Group leader: We are very happy today to have visitors in our group! We have been hearing about your groups through discussions with Martina and today is the day we are going to have a feeling of each other practically. I am the leader of this group and we have come from far. We started the group some years ago with the intention of working together in our plots among other work. But this is done only during the planting and harvesting season since it is the only time when we can have seasonal income. We usually go to the local markets to sell our farm produce as our husbands do not allow us to go to the furthest markets. That is the challenge that has made us not to develop more as women here.

Group Member 1: We really support each other as members of this group, but we only get seasonal income with farming which is our only source of contribution to our group. Most of our children are at home since we lack the basic needs and even the knowledge about the importance of schooling.

Group Member 2: Women are going through various problems in families. Our husbands give us children, but they rarely participate in their proper upbringing. So it is our role as women to pull up our socks to ensure that our children get food, shelter, and clothing. Through this teaming up, some of these responsibilities are made easier since we can learn from each other through sharing. We are going to apply the advice from these women from Kenya and for sure we will be a step higher.

Nina – group member who had travelled to Kenya: I got surprised on the way people have developed in Kenya. All the children have gone to school; you won't see a child loitering or taking care of goats or cows in Kenya. Also, the women from there are really working hard.

Imagine! They travel all the way to far places just for trading purposes. Women can bring up their families alone even without the support of their husbands. Our group is still far from what I saw: we need to expand our contributions!

Helena: How are you my fellow women? I come from Kenya together with Florence. I'm a member of a group called Vision Women Group. We started our group with each member contributing a small sum of money. I am happy today because all members of my group are now self-reliant. Members can pay school fees and buy food and clothes to their children etc. We engaged ourselves in various activities: some went to farming, some have small businesses where they travel from one market to another and some ventured in small shops where they sell foodstuff among other items. Others also bought plots for themselves, like for myself, I bought a number of goats and a plot through this group. I encourage you as my fellow women and friends to apply the same, it is very important to move from one market to another, you can convince your husbands or families to allow you to be going to markets and you will see the benefit. Income from seasonal harvest is not enough to sustain your daily needs. Women are family keepers, so you have to see on how you can uplift your family's living standards by engaging in other activities such as carrying out businesses like selling of clothes, shoes, or even foodstuff.

By comparing educational possibilities from the Kenyan women's activities and autonomy to their own situations, Tanzanian women were inspired and learned about new alternatives. Helena listed several different occupations that Kenyan women would have and gave them examples of how they could deal with the resistance of their husbands. This dynamic shows two things; first, that a comparison between different realities is crucial for learning (MacKenzie, 2015) and second, that women's groups are forums for collective action that facilitate information-sharing, joint education and improve individuals' livelihoods and self-esteem through a joint routine of saving and farming (see also Singh, 2014; Andersson and Gabrielsson, 2012). Labor pooling is at the basis of learning in these homosocial groups, which grant women mutual spiritual and material support. Women find strength in each other by revealing their frustrations with their husbands, but also by discussing potential ways out from the limitations of movement or access to resources that the local communities force onto them.

The pedagogical nature of the instances that women shared with each other shows that dissemination should not simply be a passive activity, whereby the researcher reports back the findings, but should trigger an active engagement from participants (Whittle et al., 2011). The results from the research should be used to cross borders between academia and local communities, to provide food for thought and ideas for potential solutions to existing problems. That is what Martina

wanted to do by having the Kenyan women's group leader meet a Tanzanian self-help group. Building these situated solidarities was Martina's way to use her locational, institutional, and material privilege to bring forward the cause of these



**Figure 5:** Helena—the Kenyan women's group leader standing on the left—speaks in Swahili to the Tanzanian women's group while Catherine—the Tanzanian research assistant standing on the right—translates into Maasai (taken by Cheptum, Jan. 2015).

women by facilitating the sharing of their struggles and solutions. However, this process would not have been possible without Florence's cultural, language, and logistical brokering.

This discussion was not only the result of our reciprocal commitment to the field and to fight against women's oppression, but also testimony to the fact that participation is a progressive process (Sharp, 2005) that takes years to cement. The relationship between us and the research participants evolved between 2011 and 2014, from assistance to collaboration, and to finally travelling across East Africa together working to inspire another group of women.

Although Martina had worked with these women for years, she did not want to instate once more her epistemic privilege as knower and knowledge producer by leading the discussion between the women. She introduced them to each other partly in Swahili and partly in English and then let them talk freely. Even though

Martina speaks Swahili, she sat in the back and never intruded in the women's dialogues. She had envisioned many times how these discussions would go, and she knew in her mind that she wanted the women to share some specific activities and ideas with each other that they could make use of to improve their livelihoods and economic status. All of these issues came up naturally without her chipping in. For instance, Martina had identified a clear difference in schooling and literacy, and Nina—who had travelled to Kenya—came to the same conclusion autonomously and took it as an illustration of how things should be improved in Tanzania.

Finally, a new space was created that connected the women's groups, but also connected knowledge production ethics and the political imperative of responsibility through the north/south divide (see Jazeel and McFarlane, 2009). Countertopographies evolved as the researcher and research assistant became a node around which women's groups connected and shared their experiences. Pedagogically, they reciprocally propelled each other further in their fight against oppression and men's control over them.

### **Concluding discussion**

In recent years, there has been a strong call within human geography for disciplinary knowledge and praxis to become more public and to bridge the Global North academic—Global South public divide (Jazeel and McFarlane, 2009). This article offers some examples of how this aim can be attained through active dissemination and a combination of knowledge exchange and reciprocal learning among researchers and research participants - of research results back to originating communities, particularly subordinated groups within these localities. Although encouraged by feminist and critical geographers (Gibson Graham et al., 2013; Cupples and Kindon, 2003; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), dissemination is seldom carried out. When it is carried out, it tends to be passive, with for example the researcher presenting findings to a generally silent public, which yet again reproduces a hierarchical dynamic of power in the field. The article provides two examples of how dissemination can be active, with research participants appropriating the process themselves or leading it. Few such examples exist in the disciplinary literature so far (MacKenzie, 2015; Chilisa, 2011; Whittle et al 2011; Cahill and Torre, 2007). This leads us to plea for a heightened debate on participatory methods, particularly reporting back and the dissemination of research results to study sites, be it in one or more locations.

Specifically, this article centers on postcolonial transnational feminist praxis, showing that the researcher can use his/her privileged position to foster a process of reciprocal learning among scholars and local participants or among participants themselves. By introducing two women's groups to each other, facilitating their dialogue, and relinquishing dissemination activities to a women's drama play, the researcher and the research assistant attempt to put feminist theories of unequal power geometries into practice. Co-authorship, that is to say,

giving full recognition of the research assistant's work throughout the whole research process until the stage of scientific publishing (see also Sarna-Wojcicki et al., 2017) is another example of how this praxis can be carried out.

Witnessing the drama played out by the women is testimony to crossing borders between local entities and the academy. Scholars and community members from Tanzania became the audience of participants own self-representation. Women, normally marginalized, could assert their identity by playing their often-overlooked accounts. This new power configuration was possible because the research was grounded in the belief in and support of situated knowledge, which opened possibilities of reciprocal understanding between researchers and local research participants. Women's enactment became knowledge for the public as they crossed the reality-fiction boundary in the safe space of drama (Cahill, 2010). Accordingly, the performance demonstrates that drama can be used to address issues of social injustice and oppression, question the roots of societal issues, and let people gain self-esteem by illustrating a process of change without being judged by the audience (Boon and Plastow, 2004).

Partnering with Kenyan group leaders is another example of cross-cultural efforts to shape the impact agenda towards subordinated groups. In this case, Tanzanian women, materially dependent on their husbands who limit their petty trading opportunities, were pedagogically guided by Kenyan women group leaders through options of resistance against their husbands' oppression. In the discussion among women about the challenges they face in their subordination lies the crux of countergeographies (Katz, 2001): linking places and people with similar struggles to further their cause. Again, here the researcher and research assistant acted as a link between the two groups, but then sat in the back and relinquished control over the dissemination process while reciprocal learning was happening among participants and researchers.

Feminist geographers have long tried to implement participatory research, but this article shows that this modality of investigation should not stay confined within a sub-discipline. We argue that geographers at large should take to heart the ethical concerns of informing and reporting findings back to research participants, who must be given the opportunity to re-appropriate the data they generated with the researcher. This practice will gear our discipline more consistently towards a heightened sense of responsibility towards the public.

### **Acknowledgements**

Our deepest appreciation goes to the women that shared their knowledge and time with us, particularly Catherine, Helena and Nina. We would like also to thank the two anonymous reviewers who helped us to improve the previous versions of this manuscript.

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