

Researching Conflict and Humanitarian Contexts: Feminist Methodologies, Ethics, Dilemmas, and Knowledge Production

CLASS SESSIONS

[add start and end date and time]

INSTRUCTORS

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Introduction

This course explores the methodological, ethical, and political challenges of conducting research in conflict, displacement, and humanitarian settings, using feminist and decolonial approaches. It examines how knowledge about war, crisis, and humanitarianism is produced, legitimized, and governed, situating research within power, violence, surveillance, and geopolitical inequality. Students critically analyze dominant methodological assumptions in fields like International Relations, development, public health, and humanitarian research, especially around neutrality, objectivity, evidence, and access. Using global case studies from conflict zones in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, they explore fieldwork amid militarization, displacement, authoritarianism, and institutional breakdown. The course emphasizes feminist ethnography, insider/outsider perspectives, ethics-in-action, trauma-informed research, humanitarian data, digital insecurity, surveillance, and community-based knowledge. Grounded in the instructor's field experience with refugees, parallel health networks, human rights, and humanitarian organizations, participants will gain conceptual and practical skills to design ethically sound, politically aware, and rigorous research in crises and difficult settings.

Course Overview: Research in conflict and humanitarian settings is often seen as a technical task focused on data collection under constraining circumstances. However, this course argues that such research is inherently political, relational, and ethically debated. Main methodologies in International Relations, humanitarian policy, and global health favor technocratic, quantitative, and neutral knowledge, often marginalizing local insights, receding accountability, concealing violence and abandonment, and maintaining colonial and geopolitical hierarchies. This course responds to interdisciplinary debates on feminist, decolonial, ethical, and political approaches to evidence. It provides students with methodological tools based on both academic theory and the realities of conflict and displacement. Emphasizing interdisciplinary methods, it aims to connect debates across International Relations, anthropology, global health, and humanitarian fields. It also seeks to decolonize research practices and highlight the experiences of communities affected by conflict.

Learning Objectives: By the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. Identify philosophical, ethical, logistical, and security challenges in conducting fieldwork under conditions of political and armed violence and displacement.
2. Analyze how war, displacement, militarisation, and humanitarian governance shape knowledge production.
3. Identify dominant methodological approaches used in conflict and humanitarian research.
4. Cultivate concepts and tools to critically evaluate humanitarian evidence systems, surveys, indicators, and data infrastructures.

5. Develop reflexive approaches and tools to positionality, representation, and community engagement.

Teaching Methods: This seminar employs a dynamic blend of presentations and group-based discussions, along with pre-class required and optional readings.

Target Audience: This course is suitable for participants with a background in International Affairs, Anthropology, Sociology, Political Science, Gender Studies, Public Health, Media Studies, Human Rights, and Migration and Refugee Studies

Seminar structure

The class will meet over 10 seminars organized into three sections. Meeting each week (add weekday). The class has a flexible structure: a short lecture, followed by critical reflection and dialogue with participants, and, if a guest speaker is invited, a guest lecture followed by a Q&A.

Seminar date		Major key terms
1		Researching War and Humanitarian Crisis: Why Methods Matter?
2		Introduction to Feminist and Decolonial Methodologies
3		Ethics-in-Action: Research Ethics Beyond Institutional Review Boards
4		Research Design in Conflict Settings: Between Quantitative and Qualitative Methods
5		Interviewing Under Fire: Conducting Fieldwork in Violent Contexts
6		Humanitarianism, Data, and the Politics of Evidence
7		Entering the Field: Access, Risk, Power and the Politics of Presence
8		Digital Methods, Security, and Research Risk
9		Feminists, Participatory and Community-Centered Research
10		Writing Conflict, Representation, and Decolonial Research Futures

Seminar 1 Researching War and Humanitarian Crisis: Why Methods Matter	
	Objectives: 1. Explain why research in conflict settings differs from research conducted in non-conflict stable environments. 2. Identify the range of actors involved in producing knowledge during war and humanitarian crises. 3. Analyse how conflict, displacement, and authoritarianism shape research questions, access, and evidence. 4. Critically evaluate claims of neutrality and objectivity in conflict research.
	Required Reading: - Tuhiwai Smith, 1999. <i>Decolonizing Methodologies: Chapter Three: Establishing the positional superiority of Western knowledge (p 59-65)</i>

	- Nordstrom and Robben, 1996. <i>Fieldwork Under Fire: Introduction: Ethnography of Violence</i> (p 5-10)
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	Seminar 2 Introduction to Feminist and Decolonial Methodologies <u>Objectives:</u> 1. Explain the core principles of feminist standpoint theory and decolonial methodologies. 2. Compare feminist and decolonial approaches with conventional social science methodologies. 3. Analyse how colonial power relations shape research agendas and knowledge production. <u>Required Reading:</u> - Cueva et al. 2024. <i>A Decolonial Feminist Politics of Fieldwork: Centering Community, Reflexivity, and Loving Accountability</i> <u>Optional Reading:</u> - Patricia Hill Collins, 2000. <i>Black Feminist Thought. Part One: Black Feminist Thought as Critical Social Theory</i> (p8-12) - Greenhough, B. 2024. "Situating knowledges, making kin and telling stories: Geographical encounters with Donna J Haraway." <i>Journal of Historical Geography</i>, 85, 58–61.
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	Seminar 3 Ethics-in-Action: Research Ethics Beyond Institutional Review Boards <u>Objectives:</u> 1. Identify ethical dilemmas commonly encountered in conflict and humanitarian research. 2. Evaluate the limitations of institutional ethics procedures in contexts of violence and authoritarianism. 3. Analyse ethical decision-making using a relational ethics framework. <u>Required Reading:</u> - Ratnam & Drozdowski, 2022. <i>Research ethics with vulnerable groups: ethics in practice and procedure.</i>
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	Optional Reading: - McGowan, W. 2020. <i>If you didn't laugh, you'd cry': Emotional labour, reflexivity and ethics-as-practice in a qualitative fieldwork context.</i> - Fujii, Lee Ann 2012. <i>Research Ethics 101: Dilemmas and Responsibilities.</i>
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Seminar 4 Research Design in Conflict Settings: Between Quantitative and Qualitative Methods	
	<u>Objectives:</u> 1. Compare qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches to conflict research. 2. Evaluate the strengths and limitations of different research designs under conditions of insecurity. 3. Analyse how access, violence, and political constraints shape methodological choices. <u>Required Reading:</u> Martín de Almagro, M., Zulver, J. M., Anctil Avoine, P., Tapias Torrado, N. R., & Berry, M. (2024). Doing Feminist Research on Conflict, Violence and Peace: Ethical and Methodological Dilemmas. <i>Millennium: Journal of International Studies</i>, 53(1), 249-275. <u>Optional Reading:</u> - Bilgili, Ö., Haagsman, K., Etzold, B., Godin, M. (2026). Doing Translocal Research Amid Violent Conflicts: Methodological Reflections. In: Etzold, B., Godin, M. (eds) <i>Translocal Lives in Times of Conflict</i>. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-25426-9_21

Seminar 5 Interviewing Under Fire	
	<u>Objectives:</u> 1. Identify challenges associated with interviewing participants affected by conflict and displacement. 2. Analyse how fear, silence, memory, and surveillance influence research data. 3. Evaluate how researcher positionality influences relationships in the field. <u>Required Reading:</u>

	- Schulz, P. 2021. <i>"Recognizing research participants' fluid positionalities in (post-)conflict zones."</i> Qualitative Research, 21(4), 600–618. - Martin de Almagro et al. 2024. <i>"Doing Feminist Research on Conflict, Violence and Peace: Ethical and Methodological Dilemmas"</i>
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	Seminar 6 Humanitarianism, Data and the Politics of Evidence <u>Objectives:</u> 1. Explain how humanitarian organisations produce evidence during crises, and to assess the strengths and limitations of humanitarian indicators and metrics. 2. Analyse how data systems may obscure structural inequalities and political violence. 3. Evaluate ethical challenges associated with humanitarian data collection and governance. <u>Required Reading:</u> - Squire, V. & Alozie, M. 2023. <i>Coloniality and frictions: Data-driven humanitarianism in North-Eastern Nigeria and South Sudan.</i> - Nandi, Sarah, 2026. <i>Making Gender-Based Violence Count: Objectivity, Expertise, and Humanitarian Data Collection in the Refugee Regime.</i>
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	Seminar 7 Entering the Field: Access, Risk, Power and the Politics of Presence <u>Objectives:</u> 1. Analyse how access, power and positionality shape fieldwork in conflict-affected settings. 2. Identify and critically assess risks to researchers, participants and research teams. 3. Develop ethical strategies for negotiating access, relationships and researcher presence in the field. <u>Required Reading:</u> - Krause, J. 2021. <i>The Ethics of Ethnographic Methods in Conflict Zones.</i> Journal of Peace Research. - Jansen et al 2025. <i>Real ethics has dirty feet: data collector perspectives on risk exposure during data collection in conflict-affected Eastern DRC.</i> Conflict and Health . 2025 Apr 1; 19:21. doi: 10.1186/s13031-025-00658-0
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	Seminar 8 Research in the Digital Battlefields: Surveillance, Security and Research Risk <u>Objectives:</u> 1. Analyse how digital methods reshape risks and power relations in conflict research. 2. Critically assess tensions between data security, privacy and human security. 3. Develop strategies for conducting research safely in digitally mediated environments. <u>Required Reading:</u> - Guntrum et al. 2023. <i>Using digitally mediated methods in sensitive contexts: a threat analysis and critical reflection on data security, privacy, and ethical concerns in the case of Afghanistan.</i> - Chonka, Ali & Stuvøy, 2022. <i>Eyes on the ground and eyes in the sky: Security narratives, participatory visual methods and knowledge production in 'danger zones.</i>
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	Seminar 9 Participation or Extraction? Feminist, Participatory and Community-Centred Research <u>Objectives:</u> 1. Critically examine the possibilities and limits of participatory research. 2. Analyse how participation can challenge or reproduce extractive research practices. 3. Develop principles for more reciprocal and community-centred research. <u>Required Reading:</u> - Lokot, Hartman & Hashmi, 2023. <i>Participatory approaches and methods in gender equality and gender-based violence research with refugees and internally displaced populations: a scoping review.</i> - Lykes, Bianco & Távara 2021. <i>Contributions and limitations of diverse qualitative methods to feminist participatory and action research with women in the wake of gross violations of human rights.</i>
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	Seminar 10 Writing Conflict, Representation and Decolonial Research Futures <u>Objectives:</u>
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	1. Critically examine the ethical politics of representing violence and lived experience. 2. Analyse how writing, translation and representation shape knowledge about conflict. 3. Develop approaches to research writing that are reflexive, responsible and attentive to power. <u>Required Reading:</u> - Teresa Macías, 2016. <i>Between Violence and Its Representation: Ethics, Archival Research, and the Politics of Knowledge Production in the Telling of Torture Stories</i>. - Kaur, Kipins, Costa & Lombard 2022. Identity, Violence, and the Uncomfortable Necessity of Categorization.
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